A Case Study of
Linder Elementary School

Austin Independent School District
Austin, Texas

The University of Texas at Austin
Principalship Program
2009 Cohort
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Executive Summary

The 2009 University of Texas Principalship Cohort conducted a case study to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and barriers for Linder Elementary School in Austin Independent School District (AISD). To collect qualitative data, the cohort interviewed administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and community members. The cohort also reviewed quantitative data, including district and state reports. Three major themes emerged: Systems, Culture and Climate, and Community Outreach. The data also revealed the consistent impact communication had throughout those themes. The cohort then proposed suggestions for improvements in each area.

When asked about the systems currently in place at Linder, respondents spoke positively of the progress in systems over the past few years. Positive Behavior Support, cafeteria and dismissal systems were named as areas of growth, and quantitative data from climate surveys support these sentiments. Linder staff also spoke to difficulties with communication, clarity, and consistency within many current systems. In order to improve the functioning of systems, the cohort suggests increasing training in systems, creating timelines to improve accountability, and using teacher leaders and mentors to support the use of school-wide systems.

Data collected for the theme of culture and climate showed high levels of teacher commitment towards Linder students, contributing to rising TAKS scores and positive relationships between teachers, parents, and students. However, communication, collaboration, and distribution of resources at both the campus and district level were identified as areas for improvement. Suggestions include developing better communication and Professional Learning Communities, conducting campus equity audits to address distribution of resources, establishing transparency in the campus budget, and advocating for Linder at the district level.

The Community in Schools representative, Parent Support Specialist, and counselor successfully provide community outreach for the Linder campus. They work closely with the community to provide these services through many programs but struggle with communicating how stakeholders can be effectively involved. The cohort suggests a formal system to publicize who is eligible, the purpose of the programs, and the availability of services to all stakeholders. It also suggests that Linder extend community outreach to increase resources at the school.

Communication flows through the themes of Systems, Culture and Climate, and Community Outreach. Parents surveyed responded positively about Linder’s ability to communicate with them including translation of information into Spanish. Weaknesses were identified as inconsistent and unclear expectations for staff, dissemination of information to faculty and staff, and a lack of a widely communicated school vision. Suggestions for improvement are developing protocol for written expectations, detailing systems and procedures, and communicating a school vision.

Like numerous urban schools, Linder’s population consists of many students who are economically disadvantaged and for whom English is not the native language. In addition to these challenges, Linder faces the barriers of overcrowding and high student mobility. For the past several years Linder has been at or above 130% capacity, creating a strain on resources, services, and school climate. Student mobility at Linder is consistently 12 to 15% higher than the AISD annual averages. Overcrowding and student mobility adversely affect student achievement. While Linder has done well to overcome some of the effects of these barriers, it cannot reach its full potential without additional district-level support.
Introduction

Austin became the capital of Texas in 1839, and like many great cities and civilizations of the world grew along the banks of a river. When Austin was first settled, the citizens were largely Swedes, Germans, and Hispanics. Following the Mexican Revolution, the Hispanic population grew rapidly. According to the Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau website, the population in Austin is doubling every twenty years. “Long regarded as a cultural, political, environmental and educational center of Texas, Austin attracts a diverse mix of writers, musicians, politicians, teachers, environmentalists and average citizens” (Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau, n.d.)

Austin Independent School District (AISD) has served the city of Austin for more than 125 years. The district currently “serves more than 82,500 students on 113 campuses” (Austin Chamber of Commerce, 2008). AISD dedicated Linder Elementary School, located in East Austin, in 1972. The school was named in honor of Dorothy A. Linder, who had worked in education as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal during her 38-year career. When she became a principal in 1965, she was the “only female secondary school principal in the Austin school system” (Program from Open House Dedication as cited in Austin City Connection, 2006).

Beverley Odom has been the principal and Paul Perez has been the assistant principal at Linder for the past four years. Lina Villarreal joined the administration team in January 2009. Ms. Odom is the first standing principal to welcome The University of Texas Principalship Program into her school to complete a school study.

Much as the Colorado River flows through the middle of Austin bringing beauty and life to the city, Linder Elementary School serves as a nurturing force for its community. The people who are invested in the success of the Linder’s children act as a guiding force for the community like the currents that guide the Colorado River. It is through their communication that systems, culture and climate, and community outreach are created and thrive.

Campus Context

Demographics

Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) data for Linder reveals that the school’s Hispanic population has grown steadily since 1988. In addition to the large Hispanic population, Linder also has a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Shifts in the demographic and socio-economic status can be seen in Figure 1.
Academic Achievement Data

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), “in 1993, Texas legislation enacted statutes that mandated the creation of the Texas public school accountability system to rate school districts and evaluate campuses” (TEA, 2008, p.7). The four accountability ratings for schools from highest to lowest are Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable. In 2003, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) became the state-adopted assessment tool for this purpose. Linder’s campus ratings are based on the performance of students in five groups: All, Hispanic, African American, White, and “students designated as economically disadvantaged” (TEA, 2008, p. 1). Following these guidelines, Linder Elementary School has earned an accountability rating of Academically Acceptable for the past three testing years (2005-2008). Thus far, the campus has been unable to attain Recognized status according to the state of Texas. A concerted effort to improve academic achievement has become the focus of the campus in order to achieve this goal. As a campus, Linder also received gold performance acknowledgments for comparable improvement in mathematics (2006-2007) and reading (2007-2008). Using the latest data available, Figures 2-5 show an overall TAKS breakdown for the past three years.

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![Graph showing demographic data for Linder Elementary School in intervals of five years from 1992-2008. Data from Texas Education Agency.](image)

**Fig. 1** Demographic data for Linder Elementary School in intervals of five years from 1992-2008. Data from Texas Education Agency.
Fig. 2 Reading TAKS met standard by subgroups from 2006-2008. Data from Texas Education Agency. Blank columns indicate results are masked due to small numbers to protect student confidentiality.

Fig. 3 Math TAKS met standard by subgroups from 2006-2008. Data from Texas Education Agency. Blank columns indicate results are masked due to small numbers to protect student confidentiality.
Fig. 4 Writing TAKS met standard by subgroups from 2006-2008. Data from Texas Education Agency. Blank columns indicate results are masked due to small numbers to protect student confidentiality or data reporting was not applicable.

Fig. 5 Science TAKS met standard by subgroups from 2006-2008. Data from Texas Education Agency. Blank columns indicate results are masked due to small numbers to protect student confidentiality or data reporting was not applicable.
Methods

Study Design

In the study researchers primarily used qualitative data to analyze current areas of strength, areas for improvement, and barriers at Linder Elementary School. Researchers gathered a variety of information about the school through interviews with teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and community members. Additional data were collected from state and district reports as well as other school and community resources.

Data Collection Process

This research study received approval from The University of Texas’ Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all 16 researchers completed IRB training. Linder teachers and staff were originally contacted and asked to participate by University of Texas representatives during a Linder staff meeting in May. Potential participants filled out a sign-up sheet that was used to schedule individual interviews and focus groups during a one-week period in June 2009.

Prior to conducting any interviews, researchers gathered more information about the community surrounding Linder by observing the neighborhood and taking field notes at four separate times (morning, noon, afternoon, and evening) on a single day. Also, researchers collected additional information from the Austin History Center, AISD press releases, and other newspaper sources.

Next, researchers developed a set of questions to find out more about Linder from the administrators’ perspectives and to identify questions to guide further research. The Linder principal and two assistant principals participated in semi-structured, individual interviews with all 16 researchers present. Based on administrator interview responses and other information collected, the researchers developed different sets of questions for teachers, staff, parents, and community members. Copies of these questions are available in the appendix.

Over the period of one week, researchers worked in five teams of three to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups at Linder. The researchers utilized focus groups based on the research techniques suggested by Krueger and Casey (2000), who note, “the ingredients of a focus group: (1) people who (2) possess certain characteristics and (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest” (p. 10). In each focus group and interview, three researchers were present who fulfilled the following roles: moderator, co-moderator, and typist (Krueger & Casey, 2000). All interview and focus group participants signed waivers of informed consent and were given the option to deny the digital recording of the interview. To ensure participants’ privacy, pseudonyms were used. Participants were also given the opportunity to request copies of their transcript(s). In addition to the interviews and focus groups, community walks were conducted where participants engaged in curbside
conversations with researchers. These participants did not sign consent forms and the interviews were not recorded, but field notes were taken. Table 1 shows the type of interview, number of interviews by type, language in which the interview was conducted, and the total number of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Interview</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Individual Interviews</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Focus Groups</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Individual Interviews</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>English</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Spanish</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent Focus Group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Walk Interviews</td>
<td>6 4 English 2 Spanish</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>35 42</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Interview Data. Note: Two teachers participated in both a focus group and an individual interview, but are only counted once on participant total line.

Another consideration the researchers noted is that a member of the cohort is currently employed at Linder. In order to provide anonymity to the participants, this researcher did not conduct any teacher interviews, focus groups, or community walks. In addition, this researcher did not transcribe teacher or staff interview data. However, this researcher was an integral part in soliciting and scheduling additional participants as the study progressed.

Participant Selection

All participants were selected through convenience sampling techniques, meaning that each participant volunteered or happened to be in close physical proximity to the school during the time allotted for research. Participants were asked to sign up for individual and/or focus group interviews and only two teachers overlapped by agreeing to take part in both types of
interviews. Faculty and staff participants represent a range of backgrounds, grade levels, and levels of experience. In all, there were 35 interviews conducted, representing a total of 42 participants.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the qualitative data the researchers transcribed the recorded interviews and also translated the transcripts of Spanish interviews into English. Next, the researchers evaluated the data using the four steps that Morse and Richards (2002) identify, which include descriptive coding, topic coding, analytic coding, and theme-ing. Through much deliberation and discussion, three themes emerged: Systems, Culture and Climate, and Community Outreach. Communication was also identified as a critical current that impacts the other themes. Researchers analyzed the data related to each of the four areas and utilized triangulation techniques (Patton, 2002) to interpret the qualitative and quantitative data.

Quantitative data reviewed included reports from the Texas Education Agency’s (TEA) Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports. Also, the researchers focused on Linder’s Campus Improvement Plan (CIP), Staff Handbook, and AISD’s Parent, Staff, and Student Climate Surveys.

The Student Climate Survey, the Parent Survey, and the Staff Climate Survey are distributed by AISD annually and participants are asked to answer on a four-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4) with the option of don’t know/not applicable and the option to skip any items the participant chooses. Austin Independent School District considers any score above a 3.0 to be desirable and those falling below 2.5 to be areas in need of improvement.

After the initial findings were evaluated, the researchers conducted a member check with the principal of Linder, Ms. Odom. The main objective of this member check was to inform Ms. Odom of the findings, share crucial quotes and pieces of data, and provide Ms. Odom with an opportunity to clarify information related to the research.

Limitations

Although researchers attempted to collect as much information as possible, there were several limitations that may have impacted this study. The interviews were conducted over a period of one week during the school’s summer vacation. The short time frame and lack of availability of potential participants may have impacted the data. Specifically, due to scheduling conflicts, district representatives were unavailable, teachers were away on summer break, and parents were not on campus since school was out for the summer. Since school was not in session, the researchers were not able to observe classrooms or other areas of Linder in operation. Additionally, parent, teacher, and student surveys did not give a complete picture of the school due to limited participation levels. Based on the proposal submitted to the IRB,
researchers were unable to interview individuals under the age of 18, including Linder students. Also, due to the convenience sampling techniques used by the researchers, some grade levels may have been over or under represented in the qualitative data.

In addition, qualitative interviews can represent personal biases that individuals may hold due to their positions. Another potential limitation was that there were two participants who were interviewed both individually and in focus groups, thus potentially over representing their views in the data. Since not all participants agreed to be recorded and there were a few technology issues where tape recorders did not operate properly, not all written transcripts reflect the exact content of the interviews. Researchers relied on field notes from these interactions. Also, one of the members of the research team is employed at Linder and will be returning to work there in the fall. While this researcher did not participate in any of the teacher interviews, her presence may have influenced some of her colleagues’ responses to interview questions. Finally, because the study took place so close to the end of the 2008-2009 school year, there were several pieces of quantitative data, such as state assessment results, that were not yet available.

Results and Findings

The researchers evaluated qualitative and quantitative data using a four-step method for coding and theme-ing in order to identify three major themes: systems, culture and climate, and community outreach (Morse & Richards, 2002). The Systems theme encompasses all informational and behavioral systems used by Linder to communicate information, define procedures used on campus, and provide guidelines for appropriate behavior. The Culture and Climate theme examines Linder through the lenses of Organizational Structure, Professional Orientation, Quality of the Learning Environment, and Student Centered Focus (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). The Community Outreach theme refers to all partnerships and services that exist between the school and the surrounding community.

In addition to the three themes, a current of communication was found throughout the data. Communication addresses the sharing of information between all members of the school community through the Systems, Culture and Climate, and Community Outreach themes. Because communication plays such a vital role in all of the themes, its role on campus and importance to Linder’s operations will be discussed prior to the introduction of the themes. Before presenting the findings, however, it is important to examine the barriers faced by Linder and recognize that although they are outside of the control of the school, they impact every facet of the school community.

Barriers

Through analysis of the data, researchers found four main barriers that influence the success of Linder Elementary School. In this research, barriers are defined as factors that are beyond the control of the campus. The barriers that repeatedly emerge throughout the research are school size, high rates of student mobility, a high percentage of students who are recognized
as economically disadvantaged, as well as a large percentage of students for whom English is not the first language. Each of these barriers presents a unique set of challenges for the campus, which are discussed in the following sections.

**School Size & Overcrowding**

“Linder Elementary continues to be the district’s most over-crowded school” (AISD, 2008). According to AISD, Linder was constructed to serve 600 students; however, Linder has experienced increased enrollment that has led to overcrowding (AISD, 2008). For the past several years Linder has been at, or above, 130% capacity. Figure 6, below, depicts the discrepancy between enrollment and the capacity of campus facilities.

![Fig. 6 Student enrollment from 2006-2009. Data from Texas Education Agency.](image)

Overcrowding creates a strain on resources, services, and climate, which in turn adversely affects student achievement. Throughout the interviews, overcrowding was mentioned consistently as a barrier to providing students with resources and services. The campus is staffed with one counselor and one Community in Schools representative. One respondent claimed, “I know we’ve got the counselor, but she is overwhelmed; our numbers are so large here at Linder that she can’t accommodate everybody.”

The overcrowding of Linder Elementary School has led to the addition of 12 portable buildings that house 24 classrooms. According to the research data, respondents who teach in the portables believe they are alienated from the rest of the campus. This exclusion also leads to communication breakdowns on the campus. One teacher stated, “I’ve been teaching out in the portables for a long time so there are a lot of things inside the building that I just don’t see or don’t know…we’re just isolated out there.”

Over the years, attempts have been made by the district to alleviate the overcrowding at Linder. Relief efforts included a recent boundary change in 2008 and a bond package to build a
separate early childhood center for students in the Linder area. Austin voters approved the bond package on May 10, 2008. The center, proposed to serve 400 students in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, is projected to open at the start of the 2010-2011 school year (AISD, 2008). As of the date of publication, AISD has not presented details regarding construction of the facility.

Mobility Rate

Linder Elementary School has consistently experienced high rates of student mobility in comparison to the mobility rates of AISD and Linder’s campus group, which is a group of 40 similar campuses from across the state (TEA, 2008, AEIS Glossary). Student mobility at Linder has been as high as 41.9% in 2005-2006 and is consistently 12 to 15% higher than the AISD annual averages. For the 2007-2008 school year, student mobility at Linder was 36.7%. According to TEA, “a student is considered to be mobile if he or she has been in membership at the school for less than 83% of the school year (i.e., has missed six or more weeks at a particular school)” (TEA, 2008, AEIS Glossary). The mobility of Linder’s students presents multiple challenges to the campus. According to Engac (2006), students who are highly mobile are more likely to repeat a grade, experience behavioral problems and be lower achievers than students who remain in the same school. Implications of these challenges for Linder may include lower accountability ratings as well as a strain on resources due to the “difficulty in identifying and meeting the academic and social needs of those students” (p. 2). Figure 7, illustrates the high rate of student mobility occurring at Linder. Though mobility rates have dropped in the past three years, mobility rates at Linder still exceed those reported for its campus group and the district.

![Fig. 7 Student mobility data from 2005-2008. Data from Texas Education Agency.](image-url)
Economically Disadvantaged Students

According to TEA, students are categorized as economically disadvantaged based upon a number of criteria, including eligibility for free or reduced meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program or belonging to a family with an annual income at or below the official poverty line (TEA, 2008). Under these terms, over 90% of the students who attend Linder Elementary School are considered economically disadvantaged (Figure 1). According to Morales and Guerra (2006):

It may be that the lowest income families in poor neighborhoods experience the greatest amount of disruption as they struggle to make ends meet and must struggle to survive rather than to thrive, impeding their ability to facilitate their children's learning, particularly for children who may slip behind and need additional attention. Furthermore, children who witness violence in the context of high stress and low-resource environments may experience additional emotional turmoil that further interferes with their ability to concentrate and do well at school (p. 918).

Throughout the data, participants cited the effects of students’ home environments on student achievement. Respondents often referred to the fact that due to economic pressures, many parents are working more than one job in order to provide for their families. Many families also have younger children at home and are unable to attain affordable childcare. These factors limit the ability of the parents to support their children’s education at home. Economic struggles faced by families also minimize the amount of time available for parents to be involved in school committees and functions.

Students with Limited English Proficiency

Historically, Linder Elementary School has been a campus with particularly high percentages of students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), as depicted by Figure 8. In fact, over the past three years the percentages have grown every year.
The high number of LEP students at the Linder campus presents challenges. First is the language barrier, which creates an obstacle to effective parent-school communication. One participant discussed that interacting with staff at the school was a challenge because not all staff members spoke Spanish. In reference to monolingual Spanish-speaking parents, one respondent said, “I think that they are intimidated just because of language barriers to speak up for better conditions for their children.” Other respondents remarked on the length of school meetings. For example, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings were seen as too long due to the need for translation. Lengthy meetings are seen as a possible deterrent to parent participation. One last important implication in regards to the language barrier is the limitations it places on the availability of support that students can receive at home in regards to their academic studies. The data reveal the struggle of both English-speakers and Spanish-speakers as they attempt to increase communication in order to better serve the students of Linder Elementary School.

The fear associated with the question of legal residency is another challenge that often arises. While it cannot be assumed that monolingual Spanish-speaking parents or students are undocumented residents, an issue that often is coupled with the language barrier is that of legal residency status. One person interviewed commented, “Because they are undocumented, getting them to a PTA meeting, or a school board meeting is [difficult]… I spend all year building trust with them.” The respondent stated further that many parents are worried about deportation, claiming, “They don’t have safety, or there’s not a bridge to kind of get them in.”

According to Bajaj (2009), “LEP students are the fastest growing segment in U.S. public schools” (p. 7). In light of these projections for growth in the LEP populations, it is imperative that educators become aware of the challenges that exist for this group of students. This seems to be especially significant for Linder and other schools with high percentages of LEP students.
Communication

As Hauser states (1996), “nothing would work in the absence of communication” (p. 1). After a review of Linder Elementary School’s quantitative and qualitative data, a current of communication emerges and runs throughout the findings of the study. For the purposes of this study, the researchers adopt the following definition of communication: “a process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding” (State of Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Communication Overview). To continue, effective communication is essential for members of a school to work proficiently and increase success (National Communication Association). Research shows that the campus leader sets the tone for effective communication by establishing systems and procedures that increase the faculty’s collective understanding and positive interactions (Cerra & Jacoby, 2004; Giandomenico & Schulman, 1991). Successful schools must have a “leader who is organized and has established procedures and routines . . . to set the tone for the success of the school” (Cerra & Jacoby, 2004, p. 82).

This section will discuss findings that specifically revolve around communication in general. Communication data that connects directly with the three main themes of the study are addressed in their respective sections. Suggestions specific to the area of communication will be offered at the conclusion of the discussion section.

Results and Findings

The AISD Climate Survey provides the following data regarding student, parent, and faculty responses to questions provided by the district.

The Student Climate Survey scores in items concerning praise for good behavior and good work, from 2006-2007 through the present, consistently rate in the acceptable range, scoring at least a 3.0. The item *I know how I am doing in school* receives consistent scores of 3.3 and higher from years 2006 to the present. The survey shows increasing scores for the item, *everyone knows the school rules*. The students also respond with scores ranging from 3.4 to 3.58 that they *know there are consequences for breaking the rules*. The scores from the students fall in the desirable range showing no immediate need for improvement at this time.

The Parent Surveys, sent home with the students, received a response rate of 34%. Those who responded reported positively about Linder’s ability to communicate with them. Parents scored Linder with a 3.3 subscale average for *Support of Parent Involvement*, which includes their perception of how the staff values input and two-way communication. Table 2 shows data from the *Respectful School Community* scale of the Parent Survey. Parents’ scores for the staff’s ability to assist them with the complaint process have decreased slightly over the last three years, but this item is still considered by the district to be a school strength based on its current score.
Table 2 Respectful School Community data from the 2008-2009 AISD Parent Survey. *EL means all elementary schools in the district. Note: AISD considers areas with scores above a 3.0 to be strengths.

The faculty scores show progress overall. The faculty reports that the principal lets faculty members know what is expected of them with scores above 3.0 in years 2006-2007 and again in 2008-2009. They also report that the principal maintains definite standards for performance in 2006-2007 and 2008-2009. In 2008-2009, the faculty and staff feel that the principal is approachable and friendly exhibiting a 3.06 and feel that the goals of [their] school are made clear.

Areas for Improvement

In spite of the strengths in communication noted above, effective communication was referred to as an area for improvement throughout the data. Respondents reported mixed messages, poor planning, and lack of consistency tend to be weaknesses in conveying the expectations and policies on the campus. Linder Elementary School’s communication systems were described by one respondent to be “a little loosey-goosey.” The respondent commented further that “the planning. . . the logistics” are “off the cuff a lot of times.” This type of planning leads to mixed messages and unclear expectations. Regarding administrative communication, one teacher stated, “tell me what you want or tell me what it is you need . . . don’t be so vague… just be clear about what you’re wanting, or needing, or expecting.” The inconsistent communication and lack of clear expectations are reported to have negative impacts on the campus.

An additional area for improvement revealed in analysis of the data is in effective and appropriate dissemination of information to faculty and staff. Linder’s large faculty and its larger student population have caused many teachers and students to move outside of the main building and into portable classrooms. To disseminate information, teachers state that the administration uses the intercom or public address (PA) system. When asked about a change they would like to see occur at Linder, one teacher reported, “I would like to see…less announcements on the PA
system.” The teacher also claimed that some of the announcements consisted of messages that may be more appropriate for email or one-to-one communication. The intercom usage has been faulted for causing missed messages because reportedly “half the intercoms don’t work or [teachers] are always walking outside, so then [they] miss things.” These statements were indicative of multiple responses found throughout the data.

Just as a current in a river encounters rocks, boulders, and dams, so too has the communication process at Linder Elementary School. If the challenges, or boulders, cause the current of communication to slow or even stop, its absence will result in stagnation of school progress.

Theme 1: Systems

A review of the prevailing research divides school systems into two major categories, school information systems and behavioral systems. School information systems are systems within a school that contribute to effective processes, programs, and communication between administrators, teachers, and staff (Pegler, 1992; Telem, 1999). Effective information systems allow for clear and direct communication between members of the school community and support those members with the completion of their duties and in solving problems (Telem, 1999). Inefficient systems, however, often create or add to problems within schools. Visscher and Bloemen (1999) find that insufficient information adds levels of stress on managers and teachers. When schools provide education on systems, levels of stress decrease, teachers report being more motivated, and are more likely to adopt the school’s vision (Visscher & Bloemen, 1999). Some information systems discussed in Linder interviews included professional development, teacher mentoring, bilingual transition, referral processes, and general school processes.

Behavioral systems, which include referral and discipline procedures and Positive Behavior Support (PBS), are a critical element to the operation of a school. In the school setting, effective behavioral systems allow teachers to facilitate student learning. School behavioral systems are comprised of four interdependent parts: school wide, school building, classroom, and individual student (Sugai & Horner, 1994). School wide behavioral systems create a school culture through the development of “rules and expectations, teaching desired academic and social behaviors, and organizing and standardizing the activities of all building staff members” (Walker, Horner, Sugai, Bullis, Sprague, Bricker, & Kaufman, 1996, pp. 194-209). Walker et al. (1996) identify that school building systems involve setting expectations for common areas in the school like hallways, the cafeteria, and dismissal procedures. Classroom behavioral systems that teachers develop and use to manage their classrooms help uphold the school wide system. Meanwhile, teachers utilize individual student behavioral systems to manage severe student behaviors (Walker et al., 1996).
Educational Relevance

Current literature supports the use of effective informational and behavioral systems in education. The literature focuses on communicating the benefits of schools’ working systems, including: teacher support and development, information management and dissemination, and behavior systems. Bolman and Deal (2003) state, “if a structure is overlooked, an organization often misdirects energy and resources” (p. 67).

Informational Systems

Teacher support and development, including professional development and mentoring, is a school informational system. Research reveals that both professional development and mentoring programs, when strategically planned and implemented, positively affect a campus. Matthews & Crow (2003) suggest that effective professional development is voluntary, considers the employees’ needs, and is not used as a tool of correction. In addition, the amount of professional development provided to staff is important to consider. A study conducted by Knight (2009) reveals a decrease in teacher motivation due to introducing multiple practices simultaneously. This research also finds that participants express reluctance to engage in professional learning when the district’s initiatives are implemented and abandoned frequently. Successful mentoring is systematic (Matthews & Crow, 2003). The support mentoring programs provide change as the needs of the person being mentored change. Strong mentoring systems include career development, accountability, and teachers receiving guidance from multiple mentors (Matthews & Crow, 2003).

Research on bilingual education supports a need for a clear understanding on the expectations of transitioning students from their native language into English. Changes in educational policy at the federal level affect deliverance of the bilingual education program. The English Acquisition Act of 2002 replaces the former bilingual instruction with a focus on English only instruction (Farver, Lonigan, & Eppe, 2009). In addition research studies by Betts, Bolt, Decker, Muyskens, and Marken (2009) show that “it takes ELLs [English Language Learners] 5 to 7 years to develop CALP [Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency] and to reach ‘average’ achievement levels in their new language” (p. 4). Districts and schools are charged with the task of creating a bilingual transition program while adhering to the federal systems. Bolman and Deal (2003) communicate that expectations, methods, and guidelines restrain uncertainty and attempt to create consistency. Therefore, the development of a detailed system for bilingual transition can result in campus and/or district alignment.

Schools are effective when systems are in place for information management and dissemination. Latham (1988) suggests that research-based processes and large-scale programs risk becoming unsuccessful after two to three years because system-level factors are not anticipated. When a school anticipates and establishes systems to approach these obstacles,
programs will have a greater chance of success. Bolman and Deal (2003) reveal that when employees are uncertain about their responsibilities they often mold the unclear expectations into what they interpret best for the particular situation. A school’s explicitly defined systems and processes will help to prevent misinterpretation of system procedures.

**Behavioral Systems**

Behavioral systems create alignment and cohesion between school staff and students. A 2002 Illinois study indicates that beneficial systems that support behavior at the school-wide level can result in campus groups creating systems for productive interventions for students with more demanding behavioral issues (Atkins, Collins, Devine-Johnson, Eber, Pacchiano, Palmer, Robbins, 2002). Staff commitment is necessary for school success with behavioral systems. Muscott, Mann, Benjamin, Gately, Bell, and Muscott (2003) reveal that investment from administration and faculty determines the success of the behavioral program. The research indicates that proper time dedicated to providing information and allowing discussions to occur is essential for a successful and effective behavioral system.

Organizations can establish a specific system, in a variety of ways that is unique to the group it serves. Bolman and Deal (2003) state, “successful organizations employ a variety of methods to coordinate individual and group efforts to link local initiatives with corporation wide goals” (p. 50).

**Strengths**

**Informational Systems**

The first informational system in place at Linder is professional development. Several teachers and support staff members noted that strengths of the professional development system in AISD are the variety of sessions offered and how easily accessible the sessions are through the online system. One teacher noted, “[in] every subject area there is professional development.” Another teacher recognized that, “the ones [professional development] the last couple of years have been, for me, a learning experience and developed me as a professional.” A member of the support staff described administrators modeling instructional techniques in classrooms. Another strength teachers commented on is the amount of support for professional development the administration provides. A teacher stated, “If we’re interested in something and [the principal] sees that it’s valuable to our teaching [the principal will] approve it.” The final aspect of professional development that Linder faculty positively received is the Wednesday professional developments that were implemented during the 2008-2009 school year. An administrator commented, “I know something that’s gonna stay in place that just needs to be tweaked, is our Wednesday trainings with our teachers. It’s had other effects that I didn’t really foresee. It’s created better relationships between us and the teachers.”
The second informational system that supports teachers at Linder is the mentoring system. An administrator identified mentoring as a strength of the school and complimented another educator on their support of the system. The administrator remarked, “She said she would mentor me through the program, so I applied for it and got in and she’s been very encouraging.”

The third informational system in place at Linder is the process of transitioning bilingual students from their first language, which is most frequently Spanish. The main area of strength is that teachers noted how they share information with each other regarding how and when to successfully transition students from Spanish to English.

The fourth informational system Linder utilizes involves the referral processes that provide potential interventions for students. Recently the IMPACT process, AISD’s system for identifying students in need of additional services, became available online and teachers responded favorably to being able to submit requests electronically. Also, according to the Staff Climate Survey, 77% of the staff responded positively to 
staff know how to refer students to campus resources using processes and procedures. These processes and procedures include how to refer a student for IMPACT, to the behavioral support specialist, and to the school community liaisons. Of the faculty and staff, 55% also respond positively to I know how to refer students to external agencies such as Communities in Schools, Safe Place, and other support programs.

The final informational system, general school processes, includes the organizational structure of the campus faculty and processes such as daily announcements and dismissal. Several teachers discussed feeling supported by their teams and working collaboratively. One teacher said, “when we meet for our team meetings or we meet on Thursdays when there isn’t a faculty meeting, our meetings are very productive, we help each other, we share, so I find those meetings to be very, very helpful.” Another teacher stated that the “math specialist [has] constant communication [with me], so whatever the instructor was teaching would go along with what I was teaching.” This communication allows for pull-out programs to be systemically successful. Also, a teacher commented about several school processes that help Linder operate:

Dismissal is a system that is in place and it works well. I’m sure that there are many systems that I take for granted and are kind of just inherent. Oh, the morning announcements as of this third year are now consistent and in place.

Another process that an administrator cited as successful is the role teachers play in helping to coordinate and administer standardized tests. Finally, one system that many interviewees commented positively upon is the cafeteria system. Ms. Odom, the principal exclaimed, “We have great systems for the cafeteria! You ought to see the cafeteria! Oh, it’s beautiful now!”
Behavioral Systems

The first behavioral system is the process for discipline at Linder, including the disciplinary referral procedure. Much like the IMPACT system, teachers responded favorably to the process of submitting discipline referrals electronically. One teacher said, “the referrals are done online and you can check a box to send it to the principal. The administration has always been there if I have a problem.” Another strength is the decreased number of referrals in recent years. An administrator stated, “The year before I came here they had 590-something documented referrals. My first year here we had 400-something documented referrals to the office. I was basically, next, come in, next. This year, we had 56. The year before we had 35.” Additionally, the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) shows a decline in the number of suspensions and ACES (Alternative Center for Elementary School) placements. In the 2009 Staff Climate Survey, teachers cite a lower instance of undesirable student behavior and a score of 3.11 out of 4.0 in the category of behavior management at Linder. Moreover, students score feeling safe at school 3.61 out of 4.0. One parent described the improved student behavior by saying, “I think they are learning more respect and they are nicer.”

The final behavioral system is PBS. One teacher commented, “I think we made some strides in the Positive Behavior Support thing too, because it’s a whole new world at Linder than it used to be.” Also, in the Staff Climate Survey, classroom management and common area management are both rated above 3.0. Administrators credited PBS as a factor in the decreased referral rates.

Areas for Improvement

Informational Systems

The first informational system is professional development. Though some respondents identified professional development as a strength, other respondents noted it as an area for improvement. A teacher mentioned, “[the principal] never really requires us to do that kind of stuff, she encourages it but doesn’t say you have to do it.” Although some teachers mentioned that a variety of professional developments are offered, a number of teachers stated that there are a lack of professional development opportunities in their specific areas, such as Pre-kindergarten, Gifted and Talented and the content areas of math and science. In addition, several teachers mentioned that they are not engaged by the professional developments that are offered. A teacher stated, “of course we have to go to the staff developments, and the ones in the past have been so boring, and just so why are we doing this kind of thing.” Also, with respect to the Wednesday staff developments that administrators provide, several teachers noted this is not a support their grade level receives. In addition, the grade levels receiving this service noted that Wednesday staff developments are not provided throughout the entire school year. The final area for improvement in terms of professional development is a lack of development opportunities
addressing topics such as working within teams, cultural responsiveness, and improving communication skills.

The second informational system mentioned for improvement concerns mentoring. One teacher stated that the provided mentor does not fulfill the role and the teacher has to look elsewhere for support. Another teacher commented, “I see new teachers that, they’re so willing to work with you and they’re so excited and they’re not being supported. And even though they give them a mentor, well nobody follow[s] through.” Meanwhile, another teacher spoke about a mentor not performing his/her paid role, “Well that new teacher’s with me after school every day until 5:30 or 6:00 and [the teacher’s] real mentor is not being a mentor, is not here. I just felt that there was a little bit of unfairness in that.” Finally, a teacher discussed other attempts to find support, “I’m going to push a little bit this year to go out and see some other teachers at other schools at my grade level.”

The third informational system in place at Linder is bilingual transition. According to the 2008 AEIS report, the population of Linder is comprised of 89.9% Hispanic students and 60.3% of the population is LEP. One teacher noted a lack of communication between middle schools and elementary schools. Also along those lines, a teacher commented, “Right now transitioning kids varies from campus to campus in the district and also classroom to classroom here on campus.” This poses problems in creating a bridge for students to move from a bilingual classroom in primary schools to all English classrooms in the secondary setting. Another teacher stated, “Since AISD doesn’t really have a transition program that’s very clear, I think we are just taking it on this year and try[ing] to do it on our own and I think we have been successful.” In addition to these issues, an administrator commented that sometimes parents want to begin transitioning their student before Linder feels the student is ready to begin the transition process. A parent questioned, “What kind of education are they [Linder] giving my child? The support that she needs [is] in English to be bilingual. I fought so that my daughter would be taught in English, in English, in English.”

The fourth informational system is referral processes, including IMPACT. The Staff Climate Survey shows that at least 23% of the teachers either do not report a response or feel they do not know how to advocate for their students in these areas. In addition, 45% of the faculty and staff do not affirm that they are knowledgeable about the process to refer students to programs such as Communities in Schools and other external agencies. One teacher assessed that “[IMPACT is] probably one of the worst systems.” Several teachers indicated that once the initial electronic referral is submitted to the online IMPACT system, the response time is too long and therefore students are not getting the services they need in a timely manner. “It takes forever and forever, and forever,” stated a teacher about the IMPACT process. Teachers noted they need more training on how to use the online IMPACT referral system and follow-up support once the process is initiated.

The final informational system in place is general school processes. Interviewees expressed several times that although some teams benefit from working together, other teams do not work as a cooperative unit. In one instance, a teacher described how her team leader does not
have the same planning period as the rest of the team and thus is unable to disseminate pertinent information to the team.

Behavioral Systems

The first behavioral system is discipline and the referral procedure. A few teachers expressed concerns about students’ perceptions concerning being sent to the office for disciplinary action. One teacher commented, “you have a kid that gives you trouble and you send him to the office and he’d come back to your class 20 minutes later with treats.” Another teacher expressed frustration about the referral process by stating,

So if I’m filling out a referral I want that referral to be processed. If I’m writing one there is definitely a reason and I’ve taken all the steps to get to that point. And I had a huge handful of them that didn’t get followed through on.

Other teachers noted a delayed response time by administrators in processing referrals that are submitted online. A teacher said, “The administration obviously is not dealing with their referrals in a timely way and it just makes me feel like a fool if I’m writing the referrals and they’re sending them back.” Another teacher described handling discipline in the classroom, but needing additional administrative support, “there are times when a child is really acting out and either needs to be removed or there needs to be consequences from an administrator and sometimes there isn’t.”

The final behavioral system at Linder is PBS. A teacher said, “We work so hard to put the PBS programs in place and then you know, the next year, we don’t follow through. And I think if we put systems in place we have to be consistent.” Also, according to the 2009 Staff Climate Survey, only 32% of teachers say that there is consistent reinforcement of commendable behavior on campus. One staff member described the initial implementation of PBS at Linder, “when I was trying to recruit teachers to join me, they didn’t want to because they didn’t feel like there [were] going to be any changes.”

Theme 2: Culture and Climate

Researchers vary on their definitions of culture and climate and debate the ways in which the two are related and are different. For Linder, culture can best be defined as shared beliefs and values that closely knit a community together (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, 1983). In regards to climate, Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp (1991) state that schools have personalities of their own. Creemers and Reezigts (1999) delineate elements of school climate in their model. These elements include the physical environment of the school, the social system (relationships, interactions and agreements concerning behavior), an orderly school environment, and the expectations about teacher behavior and student outcomes.
Linder’s climate is an integral part of their culture and is particularly affected by their physical environment due to overcrowding. Linder’s culture is affected by strong relationships and an increasingly ordered environment, as well as, growing expectations for teacher professionalism and student outcomes. Finally, when looking at Linder’s overall culture, four dimensions are highly useful in analyzing strengths and areas for improvement: Organizational Structure, Professional Orientation, Quality of the Learning Environment and Student-Centered Focus (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008) (Figure 9).

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Fig. 9 Four dimensions of culture (Schoen and Teddlie, 2008).

Educational Relevance

The culture and climate of schools are unique to each school and are important in creating a positive environment. According to research, culture and climate are interwoven and inextricably linked to school effectiveness and student achievement (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Athos, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Schoen and Teddlies’ (2008) four dimensions of culture show that organizational structure and professional orientation by teachers and administration affect the quality of the learning environment and student achievement. Collaboration is a crucial part of the process involved in creating the relationships that support an environment which nurtures staff, students and families (Harris & Chapman 2001; Maden & Hillman, 1993; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004).

Stability, high expectations and consistency in teaching are imperative because Linder serves a population of low socioeconomic status (Brown, 2004; Mortimore, 1991; Muijs et al., 2004). Clear communication among and between faculty, staff, and administration fosters an environment that supports high student achievement (Lein et al., 1996; Stoll 1999; Muijs et al., 2004). Communication plays a vital role in the creation and maintenance of a school’s culture by ensuring that all members of the school community are aware of the various aspects of the school culture. In fact, Halawah (2009) asserts that “creating a collaborative environment and open communication has been described as the single most important factor for successful school
improvement initiatives” (p. 339). A key component of school culture is the level to which teachers perceive support from administration. According to Ingersoll (2001), one of the most common reasons leading to teacher attrition is lack of support by administrators.

Along with clear communication and trust, research shows that strong Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that help faculty continuously seek further development of skills to improve student learning are also essential to prevent teacher turn-over and burn-out that occur in urban settings and schools with high-need populations (Muijs et al., 2004). Finally, the role of trust between school leadership and faculty is important in raising teacher professionalism, which results in increased student achievement. The literature supports using distributive and democratic leadership involving teachers (Muijs et al., 2004) and advises administration to use a professional orientation, rather than a bureaucratic one, to build trust and professionalism in their staff and faculty (Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

**Strengths**

**Organizational Structure**

Schoen and Teddlie (2008) define organizational structure as “the style of leadership, communication and processes that characterize the way the school conducts its business” (p.140). Many strengths of this dimension were identified in the qualitative data analysis of the Linder staff interviews. “Our children have changed, and I think it’s not because of them. We changed. In regards in how we speak to them, how we talk to them, the culture of the school has changed.” The interviews revealed that the faculty perceives themselves as hard-working and dedicated. They also spoke positively about their administration. A respondent said, “They have the best interests of the children at heart,” a sentiment expressed many times throughout the interviews.

**Professional Orientation**

Schoen and Teddlie (2008) define professional orientation as “the activities and attitudes that characterize the degree of professionalism present in the faculty” (p.140). Through the qualitative data, Linder’s professional orientation strengths in their PLC system were evidenced by the following quote: “Oh, my team is fantastic. We interact all the time. We eat lunch together. We are always constantly talking. We validate everybody’s ideas.” The campus has several strong and cohesive teams, groups, and teacher leaders that collaborate very effectively. Many of Linder’s faculty are seeking higher education and professional development opportunities to promote professional growth. The administration is perceived as keeping abreast of current research and supporting teaming through weekly meetings and discussions. The mindset of the effective teams can be summed up best through the words of a staff member,
“…no one saw themselves as successful, unless everybody was successful in their grade level, and I saw veteran teachers really working with the new teachers.”

**Quality of the Learning Environment**

Schoen and Teddlie (2008) define quality of the learning environment as “the intellectual merit of the activities in which students are typically engaged” (p.140). Linder’s strengths in this area are evidenced by qualitative and quantitative data. One staff member made an observation, “If you want the children to learn, you as a teacher have to adapt to the child, not the child adapting to you.” The staff perception that TAKS scores are increasing in most student populations is validated by the quantitative data. Instructional coaches and specialists, small-group interventions, and guided reading are being used by the school to increase achievement. Another strength in reading that was mentioned consistently in the interviews was implementation of the Reading First program. Also, math and science tutoring and science field trips are available to students. Finally, there is increasing vertical alignment between some of the grade levels to better prepare students academically.

**Student-Centered Focus**

Schoen and Teddlie (2008) define student-centered focus as “the collective efforts and programs offered to support student achievement” (p.140). The student-centered focus reflects the collective efforts and attitudes exhibited by Linder’s staff which the researchers named “kids first.” The qualitative data were rich with quotes and stories that exhibited Linder’s devotion, energy, and concern for its students. A respondent commented: “I think that there’s a collective sense of these are our kids and I want to help.” This attitude was reflected throughout the interviews. Students and parents reported in the school climate surveys that they had good relationships with teachers and administration and were satisfied with the education they were receiving. The following quote summed up the student-centered, “kids-first” attitude of the staff: “I tell people, we are only poor in terms of economics, we are not poor in terms of spirit. My saying is we only let the cute ones in. They are really cute and they are really smart.”

**Areas for Improvement**

**Organizational Structure**

Linder’s areas of needs in this dimension are centered around issues of trust, perceptions of equity and relationships. Some voices from the qualitative data desired more trust from administration in their professional abilities. Consistency and clarity in communication were also referenced. Some grade levels perceived inequity in resources and attention paid to them. The lack of support available to these grade levels in terms of coaches and other support staff also
affects the school culture. The pressure of the TAKS test was mentioned consistently in interviews as affecting climate and distribution of attention and resources. Participants also mentioned that administrative and faculty consistency in student discipline is an area needing improvement. Finally, some teams described having conflicts due to personality issues and a lack of trust.

**Professional Orientation**

Two issues that appear most in Linder’s areas of need in professional orientation are consistency and accountability. Teachers mentioned that the PLCs need strengthening in some teams in the areas of collaboration and equity in teacher workload. The mindset of some of the faculty were specifically referenced as inhibitors to collaboration. There is also a perception that people are held to different levels of accountability for contributing to their PLC. Administrative attention and attendance at planning meetings was specifically mentioned concerning professional orientation. Finally, some grade levels mentioned a lack of structure and consistency that act as impediments for team functioning. Another concern in response to collaboration is the lack of vertical alignment occurring on campus. Most interviewees reported that very little collaboration happens between grade levels. A degree of contention between grade levels when discussing student expectations is also mentioned. One teacher said she was asked, “Well, what did you guys do last year?” referencing a lack of student achievement, during a meeting between grade levels.

**Quality of the Learning Environment**

The issues affecting Linder’s areas of need in quality of the learning environment are equity and instruction. There is a perception expressed in the qualitative data that the use of instructional coaches and specialists was not equitable. In addition, the data reveal perceptions that math and science interventions occur too late and for too short a time period. Once again, the TAKS test is mentioned as an influence in decisions made about instructional assistance and tutoring. Finally, there are concerns voiced about the clarity and timing of bilingual transitioning for students and the effectiveness of pull-out programs for special populations.

**Student-Centered Focus**

Linder’s largest area of need in the student-centered focus dimension has to do with the issue of equity towards students from staff and equity towards the school from the external factor of the district. The qualitative data reveal the perception that there is a small pocket of people that may not be as child- and family-oriented as the vast majority of the staff. The greatest barrier in this dimension is created from overcrowding, which is outside of Linder’s control. This barrier affects resource allocation, such as a deficit of available books and a lack of technology.
Community outreach is the interaction that Linder develops, promotes, and maintains between itself and the surrounding community. It involves providing services to meet the needs of Linder’s parents, students, and community. Educating Linder’s stakeholders relies upon ensuring that effective communication is in place, not only within the classrooms and the building itself, but also within the surrounding community. The importance of communication is emphasized by the National Communication Association, which says in order for a school to become successful, highly effective communication should be a central focus. Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007) state:

Recognizing that schools cannot realistically meet all the needs of the families they serve, schools need to take the lead in rallying community resources to assist families in obtaining health, nutrition, employment, and adult educational services. Likewise, schools can act as a liaison to community resources such as libraries, museums, zoos, and theaters so that parents can help children learn outside of school (p. 494).

Schools can serve as facilitators, helping the community and its members work together so that they use community resources to their fullest potential. All community members have an investment in the school. Bagin and Gallagher (2001) explain:

Citizens in the community hold the status of part owners in the school. They own stock, so to speak, in the schools by virtue of the fact that it is their taxes that support the schools. The dividends received are formal education for themselves and their children and the indirect benefits that flow to society from a literate and well-prepared population in such fields as art, science, industry, and agriculture (p. 9).

Effective schools and communities collaborate with each other to create stronger schools. “It is imperative that schools network with other organizations—both within and outside the school system—in order to provide a comprehensive web of services that is readily available to families” (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001, p. 257). Linder Elementary School’s strengths abide in its relationships and existing programs. The data also identify two opportunities for improvement: communication concerning services and the need for continued development of the PTA.
Educational Relevance

In Brandt’s (1989) published conversation with Joyce Epstein, Epstein identifies five types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, and representing other parents (p. 26). “The five types of involvement occur in different places, require different materials and processes, and lead to different outcomes” (p. 24). She further explains, “The point is that any one practice—parent-teacher conferences or PTA activities or public relations efforts—can’t cover the full range of ways parents and teachers need to work together for their children’s education” (p. 24). “Schools in general still tend to limit parental involvement practices to the more formal activities that ignore the culturally specific perspective of minority populations” (Lopez et al., 2001, p. 257). Lopez et al. find that schools who successfully worked with migrant families had an emphasis on “getting to know each family’s ‘life story’ . . . This emphasis helps them assess the multiple needs of families, and allows them to understand first-hand the hardships migrant families face on a daily basis” (p. 262).

Linder does not have a large migrant population; however, it does face similar challenges due to its high mobility rate. Nicolau and Ramos (1990) report that some first and second generation Mexican-American parents studied believe there are two separate roles. One is the role of the parents to take care of the needs of their children, including teaching them respect and proper behavior. The other role is that of the school to educate the child. As Nicolau and Ramos (1990) state:

In their countries the role of parents and the role of school in relation to education are sharply delineated and divided: Parents have a serious duty to instill respect and proper behavior in their children. That is a parent’s job. It is the school’s job to instill knowledge. Teaching is not the parents’ business (p. 16).

In addition to working with parents, schools work with the community in which they are located. Through their relationships within the community, schools provide “needed volunteer and financial services that would be difficult to obtain otherwise” (Matthews & Crow, 2003). When the staff is more involved as Bagin and Gallagher (2001) state, “with the social and civic life of the community,” citizens’ attitudes and concerns for education change and opportunities for open discussion of the school increase (p. 181).

Strengths

Relationships

At Linder, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators expressed the importance of relationships and how those relationships play a role in the school community. Respondents said that parents have respect for Linder’s teachers. Such respect is evident throughout the data and is
identified as a school strength. A teacher respondent said, “The majority of parents have a lot of respect for me and what I have to say, and they try to help their students always be respectful… in school.”

According to the qualitative data, Linder intentionally focuses upon communicating with the surrounding community. Several teachers utilize newsletters to inform parents about activities, curriculum, and other events going on within their individual classrooms or grade levels. The school sends newsletters, flyers, and other forms of media home. Since Linder is made up of a high percentage of Spanish speakers, the school translates these documents to assist in the successful sharing of pertinent information.

Three of the strongest relationships mentioned in the interviews are the relationships created by the school counselor, the Communities In Schools (CIS) representative, and the Parent Support Specialist. One respondent said, “They are a trifecta, smart, dedicated Linder people who will take the parents, and if they can’t find the answer or get them that resource right there, they will show them the way.”

Teacher respondents praise the efforts of the school counselor. In fact, they note her positive contributions to the school, expressly through her confidential efforts with students and parents. CIS is another identified strength at Linder. The data reveal the CIS representative is well liked by parents and teachers. She is known for her contributions to the campus, including “working with mothers of families that tend not to be as stable” and for encouraging more parent involvement during the school day. A parent respondent shared the CIS’ efforts to increase parent involvement include “doing dance/ exercise class, nutrition classes, [and] a walking club.” The Parent Support Specialist also emerges as a strength throughout the data. She is credited for her positive impact on the campus. One respondent said, “Our parent [support] specialist, if you have an issue, will go out to parents’ homes.” Another stated, “She remembers every child’s name and talks to every parent that comes in.” These efforts led to one teacher’s statement, “I think the lines of communication have really opened up this year between parents and the school.”

Another form of positive communication comes from the administration’s passion to know all students by name. One administrator described how knowing the kids’ and parents’ names helps interactions and connections with parents as they come to the school to drop off and pick up their children. The administration is also available before and after school to speak with the parents and community as needed.

**Existing Programs**

Numerous programs exist at Linder that offer services for parents and students. The data uncover extensive efforts by teachers and other support staff going beyond their traditional roles to meet needs and provide services as well. Several grants that supported special programs came to Linder because of teachers and staff who took the initiative to advocate for what they felt was needed to improve the quality of educational services Linder has to offer.
Linder Elementary School provides several programs for parents. The school works together with the community to assist families in need through food and clothing drives and meals for the holidays. The Coffee with the Principal program is an opportunity for parents to sit and communicate with the principal. Another opportunity for parents to collaborate and to remain connected to the school exists in Linder’s PTA. One respondent said, “We have PTA, and PTA is strong. We had several events that encouraged parents to come out. Keeping in contact with parents is huge.” Some respondents concluded that the increase in turnout at Linder’s PTA meetings is partially attributed to the addition of student performances.

Another program cited by teachers, staff, and parents as supporting students and parents is the Austin Learning Academy, an English language program for the parents where childcare is provided. One parent explained, “It’s important; this is very important. I like to help my daughter but without the English this is difficult.” She further explained that she helps her daughter with math, but as the work becomes more advanced, the parents need English in order to help them. A staff member stated that she would love to see the program continue because in addition to it being successful, it “builds up the community and [creates] an inroad to the community, and I think that’s gonna pay off big time.”

Linder offers a host of programs to support their students academically. The school encourages student leadership through peer mediation and safety patrol. Linder provides academic interventions through Saturday writing and science camps as well as through math and literacy family nights. In addition, University of Texas students visit the campus to teach math and science classes during the school year. The music teacher works with Zachary Scott Theater to bring in arts programs throughout the year. Reading is Fundamental supports student literacy by providing students with free books three times a year.

Some of the student programs provide after school activities. Among these programs are Extend-A-Care, Child, Inc., Prime Time, Born to Run, and Kids' Cafe with Dell. One teacher respondent said of the Prime Time program, “They [the student participants] get stability; they get learning.”

Student support programs include Seedlings, a program that provides mentors for children of incarcerated parents, and Americorp, which provides volunteers who come to the school to work with students. The school sponsors food drives and gives clothing to students through Operation School Bell. During the holidays, teachers participate in the Angel Tree program, which allows them to donate gifts to students.

Areas for Improvement

Communication

An analysis of the data concerning communication and community outreach suggests a gap in communication. The data supports that parents and teachers are unclear of programs, of
who is eligible, and how individuals become involved in them. Respondents noted that in addition to not knowing information, they are unable to access it with ease.

The study finds from interviews that the degree of parent-teacher interaction varies. According to one parent, there is a lack of feedback from teachers, and many teachers shared challenges faced when trying to communicate with parents because of language and cultural barriers. Respondents continue to find difficulties in getting parents engaged in discussions and meetings. The lack of parent communication with Linder and its difficulty to reach the parents leads to a disconnection between these two vital stakeholders.

Many respondents claimed that Linder’s parents, feeling a lack of empowerment, shy away from the learning environment and its events. One respondent stated,

Our parents aren’t nearly as involved as they need to be to make it successful and somehow I think we close the door to our parents instead of reaching out to them and sucking them in somehow . . . I don’t think we’ve figured out how to get our parents involved.

One teacher said, “It’s not that they don’t want to support us [teachers]; it’s that they don’t know how sometimes. They don’t understand the homework. I’ve gotten so many notes . . . and it [the note] said, ‘I don’t understand.’” On the district survey, the parents score themselves more favorably in the area of School-Focused Achievement Press for discussions with their children about academic priorities as opposed to discussions with school staff (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“I talk with my child about...”</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26. The importance of doing well in school.</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. What he/she is learning in school.</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Future college and career plans.</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Focused Achievement Press Average</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“I talk with school staff about the importance of having...”</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23. High standards.</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Good teachers.</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-Focused Achievement Press Average</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Parent Achievement Press data from the 2008-2009 AISD Parent Survey. Note: AISD considers areas with scores above a 3.0 to be strengths.

Relationships

Qualitative data show that not all relationships contribute to the school community. During interviews parents spoke of negative experiences when interacting with school personnel.
The new district-installed identification system was mentioned as a concern multiple times throughout the study. Linder’s data reveal that some parents do not have valid identification. One parent respondent reported that after years of coming to eat lunch with their children, they were rudely denied entrance to the school for not presenting their IDs at the door. The lack of a valid ID, being turned away from the school, and the treatment received from school staff contribute to a feeling of not being welcome at the school. In addition, teachers and staff said that a previous Parent Support Specialist did not work with the families as often, so the new Parent Support Specialist is having some trouble building a relationship and sense of trust with parents.

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) data indicate a perception that PTA is a work in progress. A teacher said, “I think [the school has] their vision of what they want, but I don’t think they’re really listening to what the parents need to bring them more into the school.” According to one staff member, “Sometimes I think we build more walls than bridges.” Other respondents claimed that parental attendance at PTA meetings increased with the addition of grade-level performances; however, teachers and parents only attend when their children are performing instead of attending on a regular basis.

Discussion

Theme 1: Systems

A review of literature demonstrates that having effective systems in place can improve the efficiency of organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2003). In the case of schools, the implementation of both informational and behavioral systems is key to overall success. These systems help to define roles, eliminate redundancies, and ensure that members of organizations are working towards common goals. Qualitative and quantitative data from Linder Elementary School identify that there are currently a number of systems in place and that the effectiveness of these systems has grown in recent years. The analysis also identifies that while there has been growth in many of the systems at Linder, there are still areas in need of improvement for the school to run more efficiently.

Currently there are barriers in place at Linder that make the job of implementing systems a difficult task. The first of these barriers is school size. In schools with similar numbers of students, teachers, and staff members as Linder, it is difficult to ensure that all groups are aware of the systems in place and know how to use them appropriately. Communication of critical information in a timely manner can be a daunting task.

The second major barrier facing Linder is the high rate of student mobility, which primarily impacts student behavioral systems. As students arrive from different schools, districts, states, and countries, they lack knowledge of the systems that other students have been following since the beginning of the year and, in some cases, for several years. The large number of students arriving throughout the year without knowledge of school-wide and classroom systems presents challenges to establishing behavior systems at Linder. With an understanding of these
barriers and a clearly defined set of systems in place, Linder can decrease many of the effects of these barriers.

Interpretations

An analysis of data from Linder demonstrates a number of strengths. When asked about successful systems at Linder, many teachers, staff, and administrators commented on systems that have been implemented or improved within the last few years. Many teachers pointed out positive changes in behavior with the use of the PBS system. This sentiment is reflected in the quantitative data with a reduction in the number of behavior related referrals and suspensions over the last three school years. As teachers use student behavioral systems more effectively, improvements in student behavior are seen consistently in many areas of the campus.

Another area of strength is the administrative support and development of teachers through district professional development. Teachers commented that administrators act as mentors by pushing them to achieve personal and professional goals by providing support and guidance in those efforts. Many teachers at Linder expressed great interest in professional development and a desire to continue taking advantage of these opportunities. Efforts by administrators to improve informational systems help teachers understand common goals and work towards them together.

Linder staff stated that the movement to use more technology helps improve school systems. Many see the convenience and reliability of online tools as an advancement over older, paper-based systems. Effective use of technology leads to a reduction in redundancies within current systems.

The review of data from Linder Elementary School also shows areas where improvements in current systems could be made. One such area is teacher and staff awareness of current systems. Another comment that is heard across a number of systems is a lack of clearly defined roles and a lack of follow through within some current systems. A final area for improvement at the school level is in school-based professional development. Linder can focus attention on improving systems to further develop all of these areas. The following section provides suggestions on implementing and improving systems.

Suggestions

An administrator spoke to the unique challenges of dealing with an overcrowded school by saying, “Just due to the size of the school, the amount of people that you talk with, the amount of students you have, you have to be very particular about how you organize your systems.” Based on observed strengths and areas of need, there are several areas where Linder could focus its efforts in order to improve the functioning of its current systems. While focusing on these efforts, Linder would benefit from evaluating and attempting to replicate the processes used to
implement their current successful systems. According to Knight (2009), the implementation or restructuring of systems will be more effective if the focus is on one system at a time.

The first and most critical area is communication of how each system works and the roles and responsibilities of students, teachers, administrators, and staff. An important step in that process is to clearly define and express to teachers and staff what systems are and the expectations for each system. A lack of clarity in communication of the use of systems can lead to a wide range of teacher practices, as is currently the case with bilingual transition, where teachers express confusion about the goal of bilingual transition and how it is supposed to be implemented at Linder.

Fullan (2009) describes the importance of including teachers, particularly teacher leaders, in the implementation and restructuring of systems. Bryk, Thum, Easton, and Luppescu (1998) find that the more teachers were involved in systematic change, the more invested they are in their work which results in better collaboration. As Linder looks to improve its communication of the proper use of school systems, the school could consider clearly defining the roles of teacher leaders on campus. When roles are defined clearly and teacher leaders are provided with information pertinent to their jobs, they can then help communicate crucial information regarding systems from administration to teachers. Furthermore, teacher leaders will be able to support other teachers in their learning and use of school systems.

In addition to clearly defining what systems are and their use by staff members, timelines for how systems will be carried out could be created and shared with the staff. This would serve to ensure that parties responsible for carrying out parts of a system complete those tasks in a timely manner and that others know what to expect when using a system (Bolman & Deal, 2003). For example, administrators could specify timelines for responses when teachers are submitting behavioral referrals. That way, teachers would know the timeframe for hearing from administration on the results of the referral and could follow-up with any questions or concerns.

Another possible way to improve communication of systems is to expand teacher and staff training on systems beyond the beginning of the year by adding periodic trainings throughout the year. Latham (1998) emphasizes the importance of continuing to focus on system level factors in order to ensure the long-term success of programs. As an added support, the Linder Staff Handbook could also be expanded to include further details on the functioning of systems. Additionally, teachers new to Linder and AISD will need further support in the use of systems. This support could be provided by administration directly and/or through the support of teacher-to-teacher mentors on specific systems throughout the year.

Theme 2: Culture and Climate

Culture and climate give schools their unique personalities, are linked to school effectiveness and student achievement, and are woven together in much of the research (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi, 1981; Pascale & Athos, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982). According to the literature, physical environment can also play a role in creating climate (Creemers & Reezigt,
Staff and faculty perceptions of accountability, equity, and consistency influence the climate and trust level between administration and faculty on a campus. In Professional Learning Communities, strong relationships are necessary for collaboration and can affect the issues surrounding trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2009; see also Mujis, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). Equity is an important area for school leadership to evaluate in order to promote a positive culture to better serve all students (Skria, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). Finally, the research shows that a professional orientation by administration creates trust and professionalism among faculty (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). All of these factors act as supports for a healthy school culture to serve students and families.

Interpretation

An analysis of Linder through Schoen and Teddies’ (2008) four dimensions of culture (Organizational Structure, Professional Orientation, Quality of the Learning Environment, and Student-Centered Focus) reveals strengths, areas for improvement and barriers to success. The organizational structure of Linder has strengths in its hard-working faculty and positive climate which have led to increasing stability in teacher and administrator retention and improvement in the school’s TAKS scores. Collaboration within the PLCs and growth in the professional orientation dimension of Linder’s culture are strengths that can continue to be built upon. Instructional specialists, tutoring, field trips, and increasing vertical and horizontal teaming enhance the quality of Linder’s learning environment.

These strengths are strained by the inequitable situation concerning facilities and resources due to overcrowding, high student mobility, and challenges inherent in working with an at-risk population. The student-centered focus of Linder is perhaps its greatest strength in the “kids first” attitude exemplified by the staff. In light of the overcrowding and challenges faced by many of the students of Linder, the contributions of the staff are admirable. Throughout all areas of need, trust, accountability, equity, and consistency appear frequently. It is believed these affect the relationships and collaboration that are essential for student achievement. The 2009 UT Cohort offers the following research-based suggestions in order to assist in Linder’s continuing efforts to serve students and families.

Suggestions

Clear, open communication and trust are necessary to creating Professional Learning Communities. Effective PLCs are essential to developing environments where low socio-economic status (SES) students thrive (Mujis et al., 2004). Early research on PLCs identifies five critical elements that underpin effective PLCs: reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms and values. (Kruse & Louis, 1995). This research also finds that the culture of PLCs influences their effectiveness and suggests that for PLCs to be most effective, the teachers in the PLC need to be accountable for
their own participation and practices. Hourcade, Anderson, and Parette (2003) suggest evaluating accountability within collaboration by considering the desired outcomes and how they will be measured. They also suggest developing processes to measure outcomes and to ensure an evaluation of ongoing collaboration (Hourcade et al., 2003). Based on this research, the 2009 UT Cohort researchers suggest that Linder build upon their PLC practices by increasing accountability for participation in team meetings. To assist in this process, team members may consider creating group norms, setting agendas, having sign-in sheets, and encouraging common lesson plans. The PLCs might also define and set goals for the year and agree to work together to achieve these goals. Finally, professional development days could be used to strengthen horizontal and vertical collaboration between and among teams to strengthen communication and professionalism between teachers.

In terms of equity on campus as it relates to the decisions concerning allocation of support and resources, the researchers suggest that the administration team considers conducting its own equity audits (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). Equity audits could assist in the evaluation of programs and services to assess concerns over TAKS specifically. This could also address inequities between grade level access to instructional specialists and programs. In looking at the effects of high-stakes testing on school decisions pertaining to instruction and resources, reports from the 2005 No Child Left Behind Conference in a collection by Sadovnik, O’Day, Bohrnstedt, and Borman (2007) find that:

Norms of collective responsibility and collaborative teaching practice develop slowly, yet high-stakes accountability systems demand fast, significant improvements in student achievement. The press for immediate gains in test scores pushes a pace of change that can undermine the development of school learning communities (p. 194).

Evaluating the long-term consequences of resource allocation and investing in early grade levels could pay dividends for Linder’s accountability and promote trust among and between faculty and administration (McClelland, Acock, Morrison, 2006). To further promote trust on campus, it is suggested that administration define and share with the staff, the utilization, budgeting, and funding for programs and resources in democratic and distributive manners (Matthews & Crow, 2003; Muijs et al., 2004).

Overcrowding is repeatedly mentioned during interviews with administration, teachers, support staff, community members, and parents. This affects the climate and culture of Linder; however, these external barriers are out of the hands of primary stakeholders. In order for Linder to be relieved of overcrowding and to attain equal opportunities and resources as other campuses in AISD, it will be important for all vested individuals to advocate for Linder with the school board and superintendent.
Theme 3: Community Outreach

Communicating with the surrounding community enhances the school’s perception held by others. The National Communication Association (2009) and the Harvard Family Research Project (2009) discuss in their newsletters the importance of communication with all stakeholders, including parents, businesses, and other community organizations. According to Shannon and Bylsma (2007), “families, as well as businesses, social service agencies, and community colleges/universities, all play a vital role in this effort” (p. 35). This lifeline of information establishes the ability to enhance the Professional Learning Community at the school by providing resources that may otherwise not be accessible. Expressing the needs and wants of the school to the community creates a rapport that allows for improved student learning.

Interpretation

Dietz (1997) states, “Researchers have shown that parent involvement in school activities improves student attitudes and performance, enhances students’ self-esteem, improves academic achievement, builds positive parent-child relationships, and helps parents to develop positive attitudes toward school and the educational process” (p. 97). Linder offers a wide-range of programs to its students and parents; however, staff members are unaware of the existence of some programs and many of the staff and teachers interviewed struggle to explain the purposes of these programs. In addition, knowledge of some of the programs appears to be limited to teachers of specific grades. Due to a lack of knowledge, Linder’s staff struggles to effectively use its existing programs. A lack of clarity concerning the job roles of the CIS representative and the Parent Support Specialist causes confusion. When teachers and staff are unsure of who is responsible for various programs on the campus, they randomly attribute the program to either the counselor, the CIS representative, or the Parent Support Specialist.

In reaching out to the community, language and literacy are frequently discussed. Several staff and community members reported the large amount of newsletters and flyers being sent in both English and Spanish as strengths in parent-school communication. However, even with all of these positive activities, the research data show that communication with parents is still an area for improvement. There are many unanswered questions concerning school communication gaps: Are parents really getting this information? Is it being stuffed into backpacks and never taken out? What is the reality of why the messages are not reaching the desired receiver? Can the newsletters, flyers, and other mailings be read and understood? Further examination of these questions could determine the focus of communication in regards to community outreach.

Some of the interactions experienced by the parent respondents have left them feeling unwelcome on the campus. Teachers and staff comment on and question the school’s efforts to validate family needs and listen to their thoughts. Some of the comments made during interviews imply that the teachers and staff members may not have a clear understanding of cultural differences. These cultural differences lead to conflicting expectations, where both the teachers
and the parents are left frustrated because their needs are not being met. For example, teachers believe parent involvement equals attendance at PTA meetings or volunteering during the school day. However, parents believe they fulfill their involvement role by holding their children accountable to meet behavioral expectations and maintain respect for authority. According to Allen in the Harvard Family Research Project’s newsletter *FINE* (2009),

> When we listen to and learn from families, incorporate their cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge in curriculum, and develop with families ways they can be actively involved in their children’s education at home, we go beyond the good intentions of school-to-home communications and enter into meaningful dialogue that can lead to student learning.

While Linder has many programs to support its students and its parents, it has very little to offer in the way of community involvement. This lack of partnerships with community members other than parents restricts the school from capitalizing on potential resources.

**Suggestions**

Allen (2009) suggests three keys to effective home-school communication. The three areas encompass providing families the chance to learn together at home, creating methods for two-way communication, and seeking out methods where all stakeholders can learn together. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) reveal that “overall studies suggest interactive homework that requires parent-child interactions can (a) create a line of communication between parents and teachers, (b) increase family involvement, and (c) help improve student achievement” (p. 197). These studies find that learning at home activities, such as discussing the skills with a family member, consistently lead to increased mathematics achievement.

Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman (2007) conducted a study of academically high achieving schools with demographics similar to Linder. The authors attribute parent involvement to these schools’ successes. Parents in this study want clarification on homework policies, along with helpful hints on how to assist their children. In addition, parents also want encouragement and assistance on educating children outside of school and help obtaining community resources with parenting, employment, and educational and personal goals, which lead to community involvement.

Moving toward establishing more effective communication with the community, Allen (2009) indicates that schools need to add awareness to the underlying messages of information being communicated and need to take the next step past translating into the native language. Being cognizant of the audience will allow more meaningful conversations to become common practice. In order to achieve more effective communication, which includes listening, Allen offers four suggestions. The first suggestion is to “invite dialogue.” In this process, the faculty opens conversation and invites the community/parents to become involved. At Linder, a
participant credited increased involvement to the ability to create a two-way communication piece with the parents through the class newsletter. Allen’s second suggestion is to “monitor the tone of face to face interactions,” so that parents understand that the faculty and staff enjoy their children and are interacting with the children to facilitate learning as well as “listening to [the parents] insights about their children.” In part three, the faculty empathizes with the families to show that they understand the demands occurring within the families’ lives. And last, Allen suggests that we all become aware of what is called “ghosts,” our previous school experiences that we carry with us as it may affect the way we perceive situations. By following these processes, schools show their investment in the children they teach through actions. This message conveys commitment and a desired trust from the parents may be created. Through these improved communication opportunities and awareness between stakeholders, Linder can use its programs to their fullest potential.

Programs are most effective when the school community knows the availability of programs, their purposes, and eligibility requirements. Therefore, a system for publicizing available programs to the entire school community, including the administrators, teachers, students, and parents, could benefit the school. This system could include contact information so that the stakeholders know where to turn for additional information regarding specific programs. In addition, the system could also include location and scheduling information.

To improve community involvement, Linder can examine its current partnerships to see how those partnerships can be developed to better meet the needs of the campus and the community. These existing relationships may already be able to meet some of the current needs of the school. In addition, these current partners may be able to provide connections or direction to other community organizations that would be willing to work with Linder. The school can also search out new partnerships. Potential partners could include local community resources such as area churches, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Hispanic Scholarship Consortium (HSC), the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). These organizations work with populations similar to those of Linder and may be able to support them in new ways.

Sanders (2006) presents readers with a sample agenda for building community partnerships and includes a handout listing types of community partners and examples for each type. In addition, Sanders identifies a four-step process for developing existing partnerships or for reaching new partnerships. These steps include:

1. Explore the area within a one-mile radius of your school; Identify the names and addresses of businesses, organizations, and agencies with whom you might partner;
2. Think about the school improvement goals that these partners might help you to achieve; and contact the partners that you have identified as most promising” (p. 105).

According to Sanders, school leaders seeking community partnerships must be able to clearly articulate their goals and they must be open to two-way communication. School leaders
could delegate the responsibilities of these community partnerships back to the parents. Parents could then serve as liaisons between community organizations and the school.

Adding to the strengths of community outreach, the remaining suggestion is a literature study. As a means to improving school communication and community outreach, research frequently references three pieces of literature: *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* by Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies (2006), *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers can Learn from Each Other* by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), and *Creating Welcoming Schools: A Practical Guide to Home–School Partnerships with Diverse Families* by Allen (2007).

**Communication**

Successful schools rely heavily upon open and honest communication. This type of communication is created by a school in “which there is trust, shared expectations, and positive interactions among students, teachers, and administrators” (Stewert, 2007, p. 190). Clear communication ensures that all parties are working towards a common goal or vision. Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, validates the work of an organization by pointing out areas of accomplishment and improvement in a constructive, non-threatening manner.

**Interpretation**

According to the data, effective communication has emerged as a major area for improvement on the Linder Elementary School campus. Despite the report of progress indicated by the Staff Climate Survey, qualitative results show that clear expectations are not understood by all. While the reasons for inconsistencies in the findings cannot be known with certainty, many factors may have played a part. For example, it is possible that the technique of convenience sampling may have affected the data, or conversely, the manner in which the Staff Climate Survey was conducted may have influenced the results. The qualitative data noted a lack of clarity in the areas of collaboration, availability of programs, and the use of systems. Additionally, teachers report that at times they are not receiving critical information in an effective and appropriate manner.

**Suggestions**

The data collected from the Parent Survey showed 34% participation. As a result the true beliefs and feelings of all stakeholders may not be represented. It is suggested that further study be performed to uncover a greater percentage of parent voices. Within this research to receive greater communication and results, the school may find more ways in which they can reach their stakeholders.
The study shows the dissemination of information on Linder’s campus comes through a variety of channels such as face-to-face conversations, emails, and intercom messages. Poor communication causes teachers to become less informed and increases their anxiety which has left some respondents feeling unequipped. Therefore, it is suggested that information be distributed as much as possible through written forms to avoid confusion. Possible ways to inform staff members are: emails followed by intercom messages that inform teachers to check for an important message, newsletters, or notes in the teachers’ mailboxes. Those needing to share information must do so in an effective manner to eliminate further confusion and problems that occur when only some members of the school community are informed.

While administration strives with greater attempts to equip the faculty with information, the teachers’ and staffs’ accountability for receiving messages via email and other forms is necessary as well. By checking email and mailboxes regularly and filing important messages, less confusion may occur. It is also necessary for all faculty and staff members to be aware that because information may have been disseminated previously, at times it will be necessary to seek the missing information on their own. If teachers feel that they are regularly missing information, they may work to create a communication system using models of systems that have been successful for their school, such as those used at dismissal and in the cafeteria.

According to McQuade and Champagne (1995), “The central purpose, philosophy, or mission of the school should be written and circulated throughout the school community. Everyone must know it and subscribe to it” thereby creating a common expectation for the campus (p. 9). Linder’s mission statement can be found on the AISD website and states:

We believe that through its dedication to excellence, the Linder Elementary School Community will promote student success in a way that recognizes individual needs and multicultural backgrounds so that the students will become life-long learners and productive members of society (n.d.).

Research suggests that a mission statement alone is not adequate to move a campus forward in achieving its goals. A common vision is also needed. Throughout the study, it became evident that the school does not have a widely communicated vision statement, which is described as “a compelling, attractive, realistic future that describes what they [the school community] hope their school will become” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006 p. 24). Many of the inconsistencies in regards to expectations may be a result of this lack of a school vision.

Thus, the faculty may consider creating a common vision statement. Daft (1999) explains having a clear vision fulfills many functions such as creating a purpose and setting standards. In order to be effective, the vision must be communicated in writing and through the actions of those in the school (Matthews & Crow, 2003). It is this type of communication that will lead to an improvement in the cohesiveness of the school. There are many useful resources available as a guide to creating and implementing a successful common vision, including Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work by Richard DuFour, Rebecca
DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many and *Failure Is Not an Option: Six Principles That Guide Student Achievement in High-Performing Schools* by Alan M. Blankstein. It is suggested that campus leaders research resources such as these, and, as a campus, use them as a guide in setting a clear course for Linder as a learning community.

With the incorporation of a system of communication, Linder will find that the boulders and dams created in the absence of effective communication will give way and the currents of efficiency will run like the great rivers that feed civilizations.

**Acknowledgements**

A consistent current of communication along with the themes of Systems, Culture and Climate, and Community Outreach flow across and through the data collected at Linder. All organizations, educational or otherwise, strive to achieve balance between these global, interdependent themes in order to reach their goals. Despite the barriers of school size and high mobility, Linder has been able to keep its focus on educational outcomes for its students. As shown in the study, there are many strengths such as a highly dedicated staff, a “kids first” attitude, and a willingness to reflect upon current practice that contribute to Linder’s growing success. These strengths interact to make Linder what it is, much like the many droplets of water that merge to form a river. According to a Liberian proverb, “A little rain each day will fill the rivers to overflowing.”

The 2009 University of Texas Principalship Program Cohort would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the entire Linder Elementary School Community for their openness, support, and cooperation with this research study. It has proved to be a seminal learning experience for the cohort members, and it will have an impact on each member’s future as an educational leader. It is our sincere hope that the findings of this study will be helpful to Linder’s community as it remains fluid to change and continues on its path towards fulfilling the academic and social development of children that prevails at Linder.
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References


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Appendix

Questions for Linder Administrators:
1. Tell us about yourself and the path that led you to Linder.
2. What is/are the main ideas that you want to learn from this study?
3. What are you most proud of about Linder?
4. What do you see as the three most challenging issues at Linder?
5. What is currently in place as a means to address these challenges?
6. How would you describe the school culture?
7. How would you describe the community culture?
8. What community resources and organizations are currently available to the campus?
9. Do you have any advice for us, as a cohort, as we go through this process?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about Linder?
11. Do you have any questions for us?

Questions for individual teacher interviews:
1. How long have you been a teacher? At Linder?
2. What brought you to education?
3. Are you seeking higher education at this time?
   a. If yes, in what and what are your reasons to pursue further education?
4. Tell us about how you perceive the climate at Linder?
5. What systems are in place at Linder that are successful?
   a. Where do you see a need for improvement?
6. How is discipline handled on campus? In your classroom?
7. What does Linder do to include parent and community involvement in school activities and functions?
8. What services are available for students and parents on campus?
9. What do you do to take responsibility for including parents?
10. What interventions are in place at Linder to address math and science?
   a. Do you use them?
   b. How many kids? How often? Just you? Team effort?
   c. Do you feel that they are successful?
11. Talk about the collaborative processes that your grade level uses?
   a. Are they beneficial? Please explain.
12. How do you perceive collaboration across campus?
13. What kind of professional development is offered?
   a. Is it helpful?
   b. What kinds of professional development would you like to see offered?
14. Have any of your beliefs about education or your role as an educator been confirmed, challenged or changed since you have been at Linder?
15. Taking into consideration student mobility, what do you do to assess where arriving students are academically?
Questions for Office Staff Interview:
1. What is your role and responsibilities at Linder?
2. How long have you been at this campus?
3. What is the most rewarding part of your job?
4. How does enrollment affect the way you do your job?
5. How does the student mobility rate affect the way you do your job?
6. Tell us about the school environment.
7. Describe interactions between the office staff and the community.
8. What are the greatest challenges that Linder faces?
9. What are some of the improvements that you have seen since you started working here?
10. How approachable is campus leadership in regards to receiving suggestions and feedback?
11. What community resources and organizations are currently available to the campus?
12. How long has your child/children been attending Linder? If yes, what school(s) did your child attend before?

Questions for Parents of Students at Linder:
1. How many children do you have?
2. How do you perceive Linder in the community?
3. What changes would you like to see happen at Linder?
4. What do you think about the safety at Linder?
5. How approachable do you think the teachers are?
6. How approachable do you think the principal is?
7. What programs are available at Linder?
8. Which of those programs are you or your child involved in?
9. How does the school invite you to be involved and what more can the school do to get parents involved?
10. How have the boundary changes affected your family?
11. Have you ever been involved in selecting your child’s teacher? Can you explain the process?
12. What can Linder do to improve your child’s education?

Questions for Custodial Staff Focus Group:
1. To start, would you like to say something about yourself? Where are you from?
2. How long have you worked at Linder?
3. Do you have children that come to Linder?
4. What are some responsibilities you have at Linder?
5. How would you describe the students and faculty of the campus?
6. How would you describe the school environment?
7. How do you think the students and faculty treat the building?
8. What ways have you been included in the school environment? What ways have you not been included?
9. How are you involved in school decisions?
10. If you could change one thing at Linder what would it be?
11. If you could keep one thing at Linder what would it be?
12. Is there anything else you would like us to know?
Questions for Focus Groups of Teachers:
1. Please share your pseudonym, role, how long have you been in the teaching profession and how long have you been at Linder.
2. What are you most proud of at Linder?
3. What improvements would you like to see at Linder?
4. Describe the professional learning community at Linder.
5. Describe the student population. What areas are successes and what areas have room for improvement?
6. What programs are currently in place at Linder to support students and families?
7. Describe the community involvement at Linder.
8. What systems are currently in place that impact the school?
9. Describe the school climate at Linder.
10. Describe the staff interactions with each other.
11. Tell us about the campus administration team.
12. Is there anything else you would like to share with us today?

Questions for Residents without Linder Students (Community Walk):
1. Do you live in the area?
2. Do you have any children who go to Linder, either now or in the past?
3. When did your child attend Linder?
4. How long have you lived in the neighborhood?
5. What changes have you seen during that time?
6. Are you involved in any community organizations?
7. What do you know about Linder?
8. Have you ever been to Linder, either to use the playground or for any other reason?
9. What are your impressions of Linder?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?
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