

PREPARING FOR CHANGE: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW STATE EDUCATION LEADERS  
PLAN AND EXECUTE SYSTEMIC CHANGE FOR IMPROVED OUTCOMES IN  
EDUCATION

by

Cristina Lizette Ridgeway

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Committee Members:

Rolf Straubhaar, Chair

Barry Aidman

Denise Collier

Melissa Martinez

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## **DEDICATION**

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my fantastic wife, Tosha, and our beautiful children, Harper and Hudson. The unwavering support and sacrifices you have made to help me on my journey do not go unnoticed. Your steadfast belief in me has been a source of strength and inspiration. I promise to always be there for you, cheering you on as you pursue your dreams. Together, we can accomplish anything we set our minds to. Thank you for being the light in my life and a driving force for my success.

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## ABSTRACT

Change is a constant. At the same time, change can be hard for everyone involved. How do change leaders do it well? In this research study, I explored the planning and execution of state-level change initiatives within the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) strategic plan. I designed my study to identify and uncover the strategies change initiative leaders at the TEA employed in leading large-scale change efforts in K-12 education. I used a phenomenological approach, combining Schein's (2010) model of change/learning and Kotter's (1996) theory of change, viewed through the lens of a crosswalk framework. The use of phenomenology allowed me to document and describe my participants' lived experiences, resulting in actionable findings for future state leaders. I incorporated my own autoethnographic field notes to provide an insider's view and enhance the understanding of the change processes used. By conducting interviews with six change initiative leaders and analyzing them for thematic trends, I identified a number of common themes and processes, including intentionality of planning, leveraging past experiences, fostering collective learning, and involving early partners, to name a few. Additionally, the results highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement, continuous analysis and adjustment, and qualities like humility, vulnerability, and lead learning for successful change leaders. My findings provide valuable insights for change leaders on how to plan for, approach, and lead statewide change initiatives. The findings have practical implications for organizations facing similar challenges, emphasizing the need for stakeholder involvement, flexibility, and a culture of continuous improvement. The research has significant implications for leaders in Texas and other states related to the development or revision of policies, procedures, and practices for planning change initiatives. It also serves as a valuable resource for those responsible for leading systemwide change efforts and provides a foundation

for future research. Based on the findings, recommendations for change initiative leaders, organizations planning change, and future research are also provided.

## I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Leaders initiate change in schools and in school systems each year as a way to improve schooling for students. A focus on high-stakes accountability and standardized testing in the United States has raised school improvement as a topic of discussion for years (Zavadsky, 2012). Yet many individuals, even those in the field of education, do not comprehend the complexity surrounding school improvement (Baroody, 2011) and fail to allow for the time necessary to plan for sustainable change efforts. The concept of improving schools is not a new or novel idea, but its achievement has eluded public education leaders and officials since the emergence of the nation's public education system. Despite making annual attempts at school improvement, leaders often find their actions, unfortunately, yield fruitless or unsustainable outcomes (Mintrop & Sundermann, 2009).

School systems are constantly evolving in order to stay current with education laws and the ever-changing landscape surrounding education. To that end, state education agencies are also in a constant state of continuous improvement in order to better serve the school districts in their respective states.

Leading school improvement change efforts, whether on a campus or in a larger organization, is no small feat. "By any objective measure, the amount of significant, often traumatic change in organizations has grown tremendously over the past two decades" (Kotter, 1996, p. 2). A question raised by those outside of the field of education may be, where does this impetus for change come from? The answer may be that it comes from several different directions, including the focus of the current study—state education agencies. This research study involved looking at the practices used by leaders of the Texas Education Agency (hereafter

referred to as TEA) as they plan for and execute systemic changes to improve schools in the State of Texas.

## **Background**

Every year, educators in the State of Texas face new challenges as they work to improve achievement outcomes for all students while adapting to state-level changes brought about by new or revised legislation that arises from the biennial state legislative sessions. The TEA, under the leadership of the Commissioner of Education, does the work of adapting to new policy conditions at the state level. Specifically, the TEA implements and oversees educational functions pertaining to state and federal funding, state assessments and accountability, instructional material adoption, school district data collection, educator certification, and compliance with state and federal guidelines (TEA, n.d.-c).

Appointed by Governor Greg Abbott, Mike Morath took office as Commissioner of Education in January 2016 and was unanimously confirmed by the Texas Senate (85th Legislature) in March 2017. As Commissioner, he is the head of the TEA, which oversees pre-kindergarten through high school education for more than five million students enrolled in both traditional public schools and charter schools. The TEA's mission is to ensure every child in the State of Texas who graduates from high school is prepared for postsecondary success, whether in college, a career, or the military (TEA, n.d.-c).

For those of us in the field of education, the academic achievement of all students is consistently top of mind at all levels. At the state education agency level, pressure to focus on academic achievement comes from the federal government. For those in local education agencies (LEAs) or school districts, that pressure comes from state education agencies. At the campus level, this pressure is felt by principals coming from their district superintendent or central office,

and at the classroom level, teachers can feel this pressure from their students’ parents. The challenges remain the same as in decades past and include ensuring we are using appropriate high-quality assessments, determining the most effective processes to measure growth in student performance, and recruiting and retaining quality teachers and principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

When the current Commissioner began his appointment, he engaged in efforts that resulted in an updated strategic plan for the TEA that was presented to the Governor and state legislators and ultimately served as a grounding document to outline and carry out the vision and goals of the agency. The 2019–2023 TEA strategic plan introduced four strategic priorities, each including a purpose, a goal to be achieved by 2023, and a list of change initiatives to support and strengthen the likelihood of achieving each goal for that strategic priority (TEA, 2018). Each change initiative was then led by an employee at the agency whose responsibilities encompassed planning, developing, and executing a statewide change effort. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the TEA’s four strategic priorities.



**Figure 1.** TEA strategic plan. Adapted from “TEA Strategic Plan,” by Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b (<https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/welcome-and-overview/tea-strategic-plan>).

For the purpose of this dissertation, I narrowed the focus to the change initiatives under strategic priority four, which relates to low-performing schools. Figure 2 captures the change initiatives found in strategic priority four within the TEA’s strategic plan (TEA, 2018).

<p><b>Strategic Priority Four: Improve Low-Performing Schools</b></p> <p>Attending a low-performing school has a long-lasting impact on student achievement, and the Agency will reduce the number of D or F rated campuses by half by 2021-2022.</p>
<p><b>Specific Action Items to Achieve Strategic Priority Four</b></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. By June 2019, finalize the redesign of school improvement processes, which will result in an innovative approach to school turnaround known as the Effective Schools Framework (ESF). The ESF seeks to revamp the foundational systems, actions, and processes currently in use by improving internal technical assistance capacity and aligning external partners (ESCs) to support the continuous improvement of Texas school districts and campuses.</li> <li>2. By August 2019, execute the final phase of the Instructional Leadership Initiative (ILI) initiative. The ILI initiative will achieve its vision of improving the classroom experience of all students – and thus positively impacting student achievement – by 1) building the Education Service Center’s capacity to deliver effective professional development on instructional leadership skills, 2) introducing models of on-campus follow-up and fidelity of implementation to support on-going job-embedded professional learning in instructional leadership, and 3) developing great instruction in every classroom by partnering with school districts, particularly those that are struggling with student achievement.</li> <li>3. Over the next five years the agency will continue to build out the System of Great Schools (SGS) network by adding additional cohorts of districts. The SGS network supports districts to develop a locally designed system-level innovation and problem-solving strategy with the goal of increasing the number and percentage of students in top-rated schools and reducing the number and percentage of students in low-rated schools. Districts that pursue this goal will design and implement a plan to continuously improve how they empower educators to lead high-quality schools, support families with best-fit school options, and focus the central office on school support, innovation, and oversight.</li> <li>4. By August 2019, institute a competitive process to award innovative grants, known as School Redesign Grants (SRG) to support the replication of high-quality schools. Districts that are awarded SRG receive best-in-class technical assistance and consulting support to pursue actions to replicate successful schools or replace struggling schools with successful models.</li> <li>5. By August 2019, identify districts and award grants to those districts that meet the requirements to be considered a Transformation Zone. Transformation Zones are school- and community-driven groupings of district schools. These schools form a Zone so that they can collaborate and access flexibilities and supports that enable them to empower educators and thus better serve their students. Transformation Zones have a shared governance model that gives Zones the best district leadership and community voice.</li> <li>6. Over the next five years the agency will continue to monitor and encourage the implementation of Senate Bill 1882 (85th Texas Legislature). SB 1882 seeks to dramatically improve student outcomes and drive local innovation by incentivizing and overseeing partnerships between districts and charter schools or other non-profit entities that provide opportunities for the replication of high-performing schools. SB 1882 schools can access additional per-pupil funding and an accountability intervention pause.</li> <li>7. Over the next five years the agency will continue to promote a continuous improvement model for governing teams (School Boards in collaboration with their Superintendents) that choose to intensely focus on improving student outcomes. Lone Star Governance (LSG) operates through an intensive in-field coaching model that works directly with elected school boards to provide tools and resources to make high-performing boards even better and provide additional support to governing teams that are struggling to focus on student outcomes.</li> </ol>

**Figure 2.** Overview of strategic priority four change initiatives (TEA, 2018, pp. 8–9).



## **Statement of the Problem**

Leading change within any organization is difficult and requires leaders who possess the ability to influence others to work toward an intended purpose (Jian, 2011). Within the educational community, the near-constant focus at the state and federal levels on student achievement means change happens much more frequently. “By any objective measure, the amount of significant, often traumatic, change in organizations has grown tremendously over the past two decades” (Kotter, 1996, p. 2). The Texas state education agency (i.e., the TEA) is not the only entity that experiences a need for change every other year after the legislative session—the trickle down effect ripples through every district, every campus, and every classroom. It is safe to say frequent change is often the rule rather than the exception. So other than legislative changes, how are large-scale change initiatives executed?

The TEA supports over 1,200 districts; over 8,600 campuses; and over five million students. In 2016, as the newly appointed Director of School Improvement, I immediately became immersed in the strategic plan. I felt overwhelmed and underprepared to successfully lead a systemic change effort that would affect a significant number of districts in a state as large as Texas. Taking on a new responsibility was exciting, but came with the challenges of minimal direction in how to go about leading change, a lack of a unified process for leaders planning for and leading change, and a culture in which organizational members struggled to find time to collaborate. It was a hard realization that the opportunity to hear what others had done before, how they had successfully planned for statewide change efforts, and ultimately, how they had fared in the process would likely not present itself. Instead, I would have to rely solely on my own past and present lived experiences and research to navigate the process.

### ***Researcher's Reflection***

If I had been told 20 years ago that I would have left the classroom and would be working at the state education agency, I would not have believed it. Not because I did not see myself eventually pursuing a path in educational administration, similar to others in my family, but simply because I had such a vastly different understanding of the role of a state education agency. The TEA is the arm of the state government of Texas that is responsible for the oversight of public education. It was founded in 1949 and has headquarters in Austin, Texas, within two blocks of the state capitol building. One of the duties of the TEA is to oversee public primary and secondary education provided by LEAs or districts and specifically to ensure districts are meeting the educational needs of all students (TEA, n.d.-c).

I came into education a few years after graduating from college after a brief career in investments and financial planning. After only a few months into my second career as an educator, I felt a new sense of excitement slowly emerging. I was driven not just by a passion for teaching children and positively affecting individual students' trajectories, but a feeling of excitement to be a part of change that could result in better outcomes on a larger scale. I felt a desire to find a new way of doing things in an attempt to see different outcomes. I wanted to try different approaches, to challenge the status quo, and to create in ways that had not been done before. I, unlike many others around me, was invigorated by the idea of change and excited about the possibilities change could bring. I held the belief that we never know if there is a better result out there unless we try. Eventually, I felt the desire to broaden my circle of influence, and I pursued opportunities to do so through various leadership positions, which led me to the TEA.

The TEA is very different from what I, and likely many other educators in this state who have not previously worked at the state agency, might assume. Though the TEA has regulatory

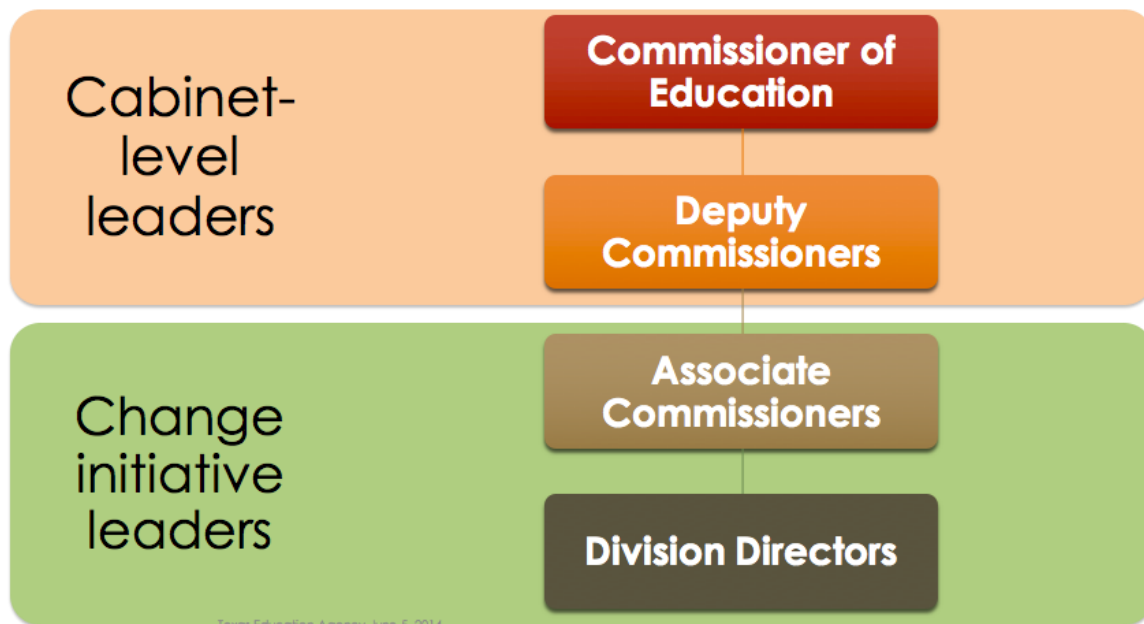
functions to ensure state and federal education laws are followed, it does not create law. State laws (or statutes) are written and passed into law through the state-level legislative process. Then, carrying out those statutes (or creating guidance and clarification on how to carry them out) becomes the responsibility of the TEA. Because of the nature of this work, the TEA is sometimes unpopular among LEAs because TEA officials are seen as the creators of change, rather than the leaders or implementors of change that has been assigned to them.

I have been at the TEA for over 10 years and, in that time, I have served in various roles and under three different Commissioners of Education. With each change in Commissioner comes a subsequent change in vision and personnel, as each Commissioner brings in a new cabinet to assist in carrying out their vision for public education in Texas. In my time at the agency, I have seen countless cabinet members come and go, each of them leaving their mark on public education before pursuing their next career step. As I reflect on my own leadership practices and my work in my current leadership position, I realize all those who came before me shared my desire to achieve meaningful change. As a current leader at the TEA, I desire to build systems and programs that will promote positive change, and my focus will always be to ensure all public-school students in Texas, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity, receive a high-quality education.

My focus in this study was on the lived experiences and perceptions of leaders within the TEA who were leading statewide change efforts toward school improvement as identified in the TEA's strategic plan. Attention was given to the processes used to plan, lead, and ultimately execute large-scale systemic change efforts for improved student outcomes in education.

### *State Implementation*

With a state as big as Texas, how are changes planned for and implemented to ensure accurate messaging and understanding of the change reach all pertinent stakeholders? A challenge for many leaders is the need to decide whether or not to engage in large-scale change. Research indicates that when leadership introduces change, more often than not the change is unsuccessful (Gilley et al., 2008, p. 153). The focus of this study was on the processes used and factors considered by change initiative leaders (see Figure 3) to plan, lead, and ultimately execute large-scale systemic change efforts (see Figure 2) for improved outcomes in education.



**Figure 3.** Researcher-created explanation of organizational levels and roles in leading change at the TEA.

Organizational change can be unplanned or planned. “Planned change is the systematic attempt to redesign an organization in a way that will help it adapt to significant changes in the environment and to achieve new goals” (Stoner et al., 1995, p. 412). As Song (2009) suggested, “The effect of planned organizational change on organizational behaviors depends on the institutionalization of planned organizational change” (p. 209). Organizational leaders who

anticipate and plan for change are even more prepared when the plans must be adjusted for the actual change. There is never a guarantee that planned change will be successful. “Even well-designed changes fail in some organizations and succeed in others” (Song, 2009, p. 200).

Regardless, the benefits of preparation typically outweigh the challenges that arise from a lack of planning. It is up to the leaders of each organization to determine how and at what level they will plan for change to occur in order to minimize the potential for an unsuccessful outcome.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to shed light on statewide systems change planning processes through the eyes of those tasked with planning and leading these processes, in this case within the TEA. The goal was to describe the moves, actions, and behaviors of state change initiative leaders as they approached leading statewide change efforts under strategic priority four of the TEA’s strategic plan (TEA, 2018). I grounded my study in phenomenological theory and also incorporated autoethnography to best capture the lived experiences and perceptions of the state leaders who served as participants. Literature supported the use of phenomenology for this type of study because it allowed the participants to share their experiences with me so I could begin to gain a better understanding of the common themes in the phenomena they experienced. Through the use of autoethnographic field notes, I was able to capture my thoughts, as well as commonalities and differences between what the participants experienced and what I experienced also being a change initiative leader. This allowed me to isolate my experiences in the field notes and reduce the likelihood of biases when capturing the interviews and analyzing the participant transcriptions. This method required me to allow the data to transform my own understanding of how similar experiences are often addressed, internalized, and executed very differently based on individuals’ mindsets, past experiences, and intentions. I explored the

change process the change initiative leaders experienced, identifying factors considered, patterns, and trends as they planned for their particular change initiative under strategic priority four. I also noted what these leaders were thinking, feeling, and doing when planning for these change efforts and what reflections they had that might be useful to others. I limited the study to the planning through initial implementation phases, focusing on how the change initiative leaders identified the change components, acquired resources, considered and prepared the implementation drivers, identified and prepared critical stakeholders, and managed and prepared for the initial implementation (Fixsen et al., 2009). This study did not include the full implementation or any aspects of managing the analysis or impact of the change once implemented. Because change happens so often in education, there is a need to identify how to go about the planning and leading the initial implementation of planned organizational change. My hope was that through the interview process, my findings would capture themes and commonalities around the processes these state leaders used that could serve as a path for policymakers and state leaders in the future (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

### **Significance of the Study**

The objective of this study was to identify the change management processes used by change initiative leaders at the TEA and the key elements they used to potentially uncover replicable behaviors that could be useful to others in the future. The aim of the study was to inform change leaders about ways others have thought about, planned for, and led statewide and large-scale change efforts in education. This study may prove to be quite significant for future leaders in Texas and other states as results can be used to inform the development or revision of policies, procedures, and practices in planning for change initiatives, capturing the attention of

those who carry the responsibility of leading and planning a systems change effort, and serving as a foundation for future research.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were derived from Kotter's (1996) eight stages with a concentration on the first six, which center on planning and implementation, as well as the first two steps of Schein's (2010) "Lewinian-inspired" model for change. Schein's model is based on the work of Kurt Lewin (1947) and builds upon his work. Therefore, these three change frameworks were crosswalked to ensure specificity of coverage in research-based best practices for the initial and foundational stages of leading change. Because the success of a change initiative or the likelihood of the sustainability of change can be largely tied to the initial planning and introduction of the change, I chose to focus on how state leaders are leading large-scale change. It was important to focus on these areas during the analysis to surface the themes that may be most helpful in order to strengthen or continuously improve on the processes state leaders use to plan and lead change that has statewide impact for the purposes of improving the student outcomes. The research questions that drove this study were as follows.

1. How did state leaders plan for and approach leading statewide systemic change efforts?
2. What resources, tools, and guidance did state leaders reference or use during their process?
3. What moves, actions, and behaviors, in relation to thinking, feeling, and doing, did state leaders engage in when planning for statewide systemic change efforts?
4. What are state leaders' reflections regarding their processes for planning and leading a statewide systemic change effort?

## Brief Overview of Theoretical Framework

I engaged in a phenomenological experience study to analyze the change process through the lens of a crosswalk framework of three change models. I used a combination of Schein’s (2010) “Lewinian” model of change/learning which is an expansion of the work of Lewin (1947) and Kotter’s (1996) theory of change to analyze how initiative owners approached leading a planned change (see Figure 4).

Lewin (1947) Schein (2010)	Unfreezing: Creating the motivation to change -Need for change -Strong support -Managing understanding			Change: Learning new concepts -Communication -Empowering actions -Involving stakeholders			Freezing: Institutionalizing new concepts -Anchored in culture -Sustainability -Support and training	
Kotter (1996)	Create a sense of urgency	Form guiding coalition	Develop a vision and strategy	Communicate vision	Remove obstacles and Empower Action	Create short-term wins	Consolidate gains	Institutionalize into culture
Questions to explore	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What leadership approach was used to lead this statewide change?</li> <li>2. How did they plan their approach to lead this statewide change?</li> <li>3. What key actions or initiatives were used to gain acceptance to change across the state with stakeholders?</li> <li>4. What do they believe were the highest leverage actions used to gain acceptance to change across the state with stakeholders?</li> <li>5. What lessons were learned in this process?</li> </ol>							

**Figure 4.** Crosswalk framework of selected change models. Adapted from “Unfreezing Change as Three Steps: Rethinking Kurt Lewin’s Legacy for Change Management,” by S. Cummings, T. Bridgman, and K. G. Brown, 2016, *Human Relations*, 69, p. 52. Copyright 2016 by Sage Publishing.

## Methodology

In this qualitative study, I used a phenomenological approach through interviews to best capture the experiences and perceptions of individuals at the TEA who served as leaders of change initiatives found in strategic priority four of the TEA’s strategic plan (TEA, 2018; see Figure 2). This research approach gave the change initiative leaders the opportunity to reflectively share about their lived experiences through individual interviews.



## **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

I held the title of Division Director within the Division of School Improvement at the TEA for 4 years before serving as the Executive Director of District Systems and Strategies for 18 months before leaving the TEA. Prior to that, I was a manager within the Division of Program Monitoring and Interventions, also at the TEA. Both divisions have or currently oversee the improvement efforts of campuses formerly rated as Improvement Required and now rated as a letter grade of F in the state accountability system. During the 85th Legislative session, House Bill (HB) 22 was passed that established a statute in Chapter 39 of the Texas Education Code (TEC) regarding methods and standards for evaluating performance for all campuses and districts in Texas (Texas Education Code Section 39.054). The TEA provides accountability ratings to its public-school districts, charters, and schools on an annual basis. The ratings are based on student performance on state standardized tests; graduation rates; and college, career, and military readiness outcomes and are examined in three domains of student achievement, school progress, and closing achievement gaps (TEA, n.d.-a).

Because of the nature of the work I led within the TEA, I was given the responsibility of serving as a change initiative leader for one of the change initiatives within the TEA's strategic plan as described in Figure 2. As I, the researcher, have experienced leading a statewide change initiative, one limitation to this study was the possibility of my having preconceived ideas of what others in similar positions may have experienced and allowing my own beliefs about the process to cloud the findings. My approach to lessen this possibility was to focus on the field notes I took during the interviews and then revisited them during data analysis and as to not insert my own experiences into what the participants shared.

Additionally, it was important to note that my positionality can be seen as a strength. Being a current employee of the agency during the data collection portion of my study, I had access to TEA employees that most researchers do not and have had the opportunity to build rapport with those employees and work side by side with many of them on various projects. These relationships not only provided me with access to leaders within the agency, but the established rapport allowed the participants to share their experiences more freely and honestly. Finally, and most importantly, I have lived through leading an initiative process as an initiative owner myself and could speak firsthand about my experiences.

This study was also limited to the change initiative leaders in the agency who led or lead change initiatives found under strategic priority four of the TEA's strategic plan. The study was limited to those initiatives because they are the most closely aligned to school improvement. Therefore, the findings of the study do not capture the entirety of what the change management planning processes entailed for change initiative leaders at the TEA.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter I provided an introduction that outlines my personal background and journey and why this topic and is important to me as an educator. It then outlined background information on the topic of change management followed by the purpose and significance of the study, research questions, a brief overview of the theoretical framework and methodology used, limitations and delimitations of the study, and the organization of the study. Chapter II provides the literature review for the study and is organized in sections by the emerging themes that surfaced in the literature. The themes covered include leading change, communicating change, planned organizational change, resistance to change, operationalizing change, managing change, and an overview of significant change theories. Chapter II concludes with a summary. Chapter III

presents details of the qualitative research design and phenomenological approach I used to conduct the study. Specifically, it outlines the site and participant selection, the data collection procedures, and the data analysis processes and concludes with a chapter summary. Chapter IV presents the themes that emerged during the study and how they align to the research. Chapter V includes a final summary and conclusion and recommendations for future change initiative leaders, organizations planning change, and future research.

## II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Leaders in organizations may learn something from this study about key issues to take into consideration when determining the critical actions and moves they will make as they seek to initiate change toward state-level education goals. In this chapter, key aspects of the change process and research supporting those key aspects are outlined. Also included are the significant change theories aligned to the theoretical framework.

### **Reform-Minded Change Efforts in Education**

Educators live in a state of constant flux as change initiatives and reforms have become synonymous with school improvement. The “education reform movement” of the 1980s saw the publication of numerous influential reports calling for reforms, most notably *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These reports cited the underperformance and achievement of students in the United States, sparking a nationwide education reform movement. By the late 1980s, many new reform initiatives were developed, including high-stakes testing.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and mandated specific components of a test-based accountability system. These mandated components included annual reading and mathematics testing of students in Grades 3 through 8, as well as an accountability system that would track the annual changes in school performance. NCLB contained some major breakthroughs for education. First, the system was designed to identify differences in student performance by race and student groups. These new criteria began to show the long-standing inequalities and forced attention to the needs of students neglected in many schools. Second, the law increased recruitment efforts in states where low-income and “minority” students experienced the hiring of

new and untrained teachers. Studies have shown teacher quality is the most critical influence on student achievement, yet teachers have become the most inequitably distributed school resource (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Students' right to qualified instructors became historically significant in education reform.

### **Leading Change**

Successful leaders understand the change process and embrace opportunities to lead their organizations toward a positive outcome. "Organizational behavior recognizes that organizations are dynamic and always changing" (Greenberg & Baron, 2003, p. 8). This presents the leader with continual opportunities to lead in times of change. "Leadership is an intentional change process through which leaders and followers, joined by a shared purpose, initiate action to pursue a common vision" (Laub, 2004, p. 5). Leaders embrace the reality that change will require that followers move through the process of innovation and entrepreneurship. The process of change may not always lead to the intended outcome. Planning for change does not guarantee that the new processes being introduced will be used and embedded as new practices. Innovative leaders and perhaps those with an entrepreneurial spirit view the journey of change as an opportunity to develop new processes along the way to achieve an overall benefit. People are essential to change and planning for the human element necessary in implementing change is the pinnacle. Change cannot be successfully accomplished if those leading the change are simply looking to check off the actions of a to-do list. Change frameworks cannot be seen as checklists to those leading change as that removes the human element that is necessary for change to be successful (Banutu-Gomez & Banutu-Gomez, 2007). Understanding the many aspects of change will provide leaders with the confidence they need to be successful in leading change. Leading change requires impeccable communication with stakeholders. "Leadership is essentially a

process of social influence in which individuals want to feel included, supported and reinforced, especially in change” (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006, p. S88).

### **Communicating Change**

Leaders who desire to achieve positive change recognize “communication is the cornerstone of successful change” (Griffith-Cooper & King, 2007, p. 14). Communicating messages of change to followers is the sole responsibility of the leader. “Effective leadership is the product of the creation and delivery of inspiring and compelling messages” (Hackman & Johnson, 2009, p. 336). Leaders can influence followers toward a desired outcome by engaging in effective communication throughout the change process.

### **Planned Organizational Change**

The effect of organizational change can be predictable if the intended behaviors of the change become institutionalized (Song, 2009). A leader who anticipates and plans for change toward an outcome is even more prepared when the plan needs to be adjusted according to the actual change. “Planned and predictable organizational changes do not always produce the expected results. Even well-designed changes fail in some organizations and succeed in others” (Song, 2009, p. 200). Regardless, the benefits of preparing for change outweigh the challenges of not planning for change. It is up to leaders in an organization to determine how change will be planned to minimize negative experiences for stakeholders. “Change resistance is one of the most prevalent characteristics in an organization” (Banutu-Gomez & Banutu-Gomez, 2007, p. 77).

### **Resistance to Change**

People are resistant to change for a variety of reasons that include “habit, security, economic factors, fear of the unknown, and selective information processing” (Banutu-Gomez &

Banutu-Gomez, 2007, p. 74). Change can be challenging and individuals naturally gravitate toward what is familiar and are often content with the status quo. The possibility of their security or comfort being threatened by change naturally creates resistance (Song, 2009). Leaders are required to manage change and its opposition.

The difficulty in managing change resistance is when it is implicit and subtle . . . loss of loyalty to the organization, loss of motivation to attend organization rallies, and increased absenteeism are more difficult to identify . . . make it tough for leaders to find the source of resistance and provide a remedy for it. (Banutu-Gomez & Banutu-Gomez, 2007, p. 74)

Even the most loyal staff in an organization may feel betrayed during times of change.

Innovative leaders use existing relationships and the trust present among colleagues to discover unique ways to communicate the reasons for the change and its benefits to the entire organization. Leaders must identify the most effective ways to make connections with stakeholders to ease anxieties and inspire hope for a new way forward.

### **Operationalizing Change**

“The challenge is to select a set of actions that are achievable within the capacity of the organization to absorb change and resource constraints” (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006, p. S81). The landscape and environment for change might never be ripe or perfect and instead should be viewed as unpredictable. “Leaders must operate in conditions of uncertainty, and that reality implies the need for even more careful analysis and ultimately for some faith and courage” (Clawson, 2003, p. 6). Change leaders must not fear the unknown and should find inspiration for the faith and courage necessary during times of uncertainty while the organization is experiencing change. This is especially true when the unpredictable occurs throughout the change process.

“Leadership is never put to the test more strongly than when the unplanned for happens, or when those in leadership positions have to navigate the rough seas of organizational change”

(Seijts, 2004, p. 2). Leaders are often under extreme scrutiny during times of change and will have others forming opinions of them and how they respond in challenging times. However, those people will also depend on the same leader to lead them through the change to the outcome. The ultimate goal is for the result of the change process to be that people believe they were led with authenticity.

### **Managing Change**

Change is constant, and in order for organizational leaders to begin to make sense of the various change models that exist, it is important to first understand the influences from the research on change management and organizational change. Organizational change can be defined as the movement or focus of an organization from its current state toward a more desirable future state for the purpose of continuous improvement and effectiveness (T. G. Cummings & Worley, 2005).

Research on change can be loosely categorized into four stages of (a) identifying the need for change, both externally and internally; (b) planning for the implementation of change; (c) leading the implementation among stakeholders; and (d) evaluation and continuous improvement of change management. A need for change must be identified and can occur as a result of factors found both externally and internally within the organization. External factors that lead to change often include threats and opportunities that motivate the organization's leaders to respond to economic and political changes, advances in technology, and alterations to demographic and social structures (Kotter, 1996; Lawrence, 1990). Internal factors that lead to change can encompass staffing reorganizations; structural transformation; changing organization dynamics; competitive advantage; or a review of strategy, culture, or processes (Kieffer, 2005; Miller, 1982; Miller & Friesen, 1982, 1984). Once leaders have identified the need for change, they



must then focus their attention on intentionally planning for the implementation of their desired change, “the content of change management is reasonably correct, but the managerial capacity to implement it has been woefully underdeveloped” (Ashkenas, 2013, para. 3). This is a critical stage in planning for change, yet there has not been a research study dedicated to planning and implementing a large-scale educational change at the state level that is intended to have an impact at the campus level in Texas. Supporting research that could be related to this stage includes a focus on understanding how change occurs (Beer et al., 1990; Kanter, 1983, 1989; Quinn, 1980). Moving into the third stage in the area of leading change, Bandura (1986) used social learning theory to express the concept that change leaders need to be able to model the change so others can glean expectations through observation. Change leaders also must institute reinforcement to support the change. Without reinforcing the change with stakeholders, the behaviors necessary for the change to take place will not occur (Robbins, 2005). The final stage of change is evaluation and continuous improvement. Leaders must analyze the impact of the change to identify whether the goals of the change were met and the intended outcomes were produced and, if not, they must identify the causal factors that led to failure (Lok et al., 2005). Conversely, research highlights the contributing factors to successful change management (Caldwell et al., 2004) and the determinants of long-term sustainability (Nohria et al., 2003).

There is quite a bit of diversity found in the research on organizational change and studies have been conducted on organizational change from different perspectives. Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) found in their review of theoretical and empirical change literature that four research themes emerged as commonalities among all change efforts: (a) content: focusing on the substance of the change; (b) context: focusing on the internal and external environments; (c) process: focusing on the actions of enactment of the change; and (d) criterion: focusing on

common outcomes assessed when enacting change. These four themes are also the foundation for many other change models and theories (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). It is necessary to examine the works of current theorists and their thoughts on organizational change and leadership to gain a more robust understanding of the research.

### **Significant Change Theories**

Several prominent change models have been developed that I build upon in this work. In this section, I briefly describe each of these theories and models of organizational change that are most aligned with the theoretical framework I used in my study and to highlight the similarities and differences in each.

Kotter (1996, 1998) developed an 8-step approach to change management that supports change leaders at the strategic level of managing and leading change. The eight steps outline the key concepts that should occur within an organization during each phase of the model to subsequently instill the change and transform the organization (Kotter, 1996, 1998). The 8-step approach includes (a) establishing a sense of urgency, (b) forming a guiding coalition, (c) creating a vision, (d) communicating the vision, (e) empowering others to act on the vision, (f) planning for and creating short-term wins, (g) consolidating improvements to produce more change, and (h) institutionalizing new approaches (Kotter, 1996, 1998). Kotter (1996) argued, “Major change is usually impossible unless most employees are willing to help, often to the point of making short-term sacrifices” (p. 9). Throughout the initiated change effort, individuals may find themselves making sacrifices to reach the desired outcome. The need for individuals to stay abreast of the new practices determines the desire and behavior to make sacrifices. Kotter further argued, “People will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they think the potential benefits of change are attractive and unless they really believe that a

transformation is possible” (p. 9). Therefore, “New insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting” (Senge, 1990, p. 174).

Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in change management, first attempted to address how change occurs by developing a three-step model in which actual changes are preceded by “unfreezing” and followed by “refreezing” (T. G. Cummings & Worley, 2005). T. G. Cummings and Worley (2005) asserted that Lewin’s change model has a middle step in which the change is actually happening or moving. The framework of the three-step process of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing is used to accomplish change. Unfreezing is a process of reducing or eliminating whatever is contributing to the present state (T. G. Cummings & Worley, 2005). Moving is shifting and intervening with changes designed to “develop new behaviors, values, and attitudes” (T. G. Cummings & Worley, 2005, p. 23). Refreezing is stabilization at the new state (T. G. Cummings & Worley, 2005).

Robbins (2005) argued that in dealing with resistance to change, “The status quo can be considered an equilibrium state . . . To move from this equilibrium – to overcome the pressures of both individual resistance and group conformity – unfreezing is necessary” (p. 530). Robbins suggested “driving forces,” which direct behavior away from the status quo, can be increased “when intentionally planning for movement has occurred” (p. 530). In addition, “The restraining forces, which hinder movement from the existing equilibrium, can be decreased” (p. 530). Robbins argued that both forces can be effective in unfreezing the status quo that is considered resistant to change. Decisions or changes in practice that move an organization toward a new approach or way of doing result in “refreezing” to stabilize the new norm or state. Frantz (2004) provided another view of Lewin’s process:

Unfreezing can be understood as those processes designed to break up the status quo. Changing is the transition process from the old state to a new state. Refreezing is cementing the new changes in place, creating a new state of equilibrium. (p. 154)

Lewin's model has been adapted throughout the years and is rooted in action research, which includes the changing of behaviors and attitudes with the testing of a new change method, which is also a common thread among some other models (Argyris, 1968, 1970; Lewin, 1951; McShane & Von Glinow, 2005; Schein, 1980).

Lewin's model was expanded by Lippitt et al. (1958), who focused more on the roles and responsibilities of the change agent than the actual progression of the change. They introduced a seven-step theory that expanded on some of the discrete actions and highlighted the need for information to be continuously shared by the change agent throughout the process. The seven steps are:

1. Diagnose the problem.
2. Evaluate the motivation and capacity for change.
3. Assess the resources and motivation of the change agent, including the change agent's commitment to change, power, and stamina.
4. Select progressive change objectives for developing action plans and establishing change strategies.
5. Identify the role of the change agent (e.g., consultant, cheerleader, facilitator, expert) and communicate expectations so they are clearly understood by all parties.
6. Maintain change by including the essential elements of communication, feedback, and group coordination.
7. Gradually terminate the helping relationship of the change agent. The termination of that role occurs when the change has taken permanent hold in the organization's culture and practices (Lippitt et al., 1958, pp. 131–142).

Schein (1980, 1985, 1992) built upon Lewin's change model by providing an extension to the three-step approach and instead describing them as three distinct stages of change. In the first stage of Schein's model of "unfreezing," stakeholders or people in the organization must understand the need for change before embracing the change. Once they are able to see the need for change or the move from the status quo, they will be able to see the gap that exists to get them from their current state to the desired state after the change has occurred. This phase introduces the concept of stakeholders or people in the organization feeling psychologically safe during the process of change (Schein, 1980, 1985, 1992).

The expansion in stage two, the move or actual change, incorporates the concept of "cognitive restructuring" to allow stakeholders to begin to observe the change firsthand through new role models in the organization (Schein, 1980, 1985, 1992). By observing the new behaviors demonstrated by their role models and acquiring new information, they begin to develop the skills necessary to implement the change (Schein, 1980, 1985, 1992).

Stage three in Schein's model is expanded by being divided into two sections, a focus on the self and a focus on relations with others. For a change to be made permanent, individuals must feel personally accountable for changing their own behavior and making permanent changes in the present and in the future. Additionally, they must align their behaviors and attitudes to support the new system and its impact on their relationships with others (Schein, 1980, 1985, 1992).

Rogers (2003) also expanded Lewin's work by creating five phases of planned change. The five phases are awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption. Similar to the theories of Lippitt et al. (1958) and Schein (1980, 1985, 1992), the theory is grounded in Lewin's (1951)

three-step model but accounts for additional steps with the incorporation of calling out discrete actions.

Jick (2001, 2003) took a more tactical approach to change through the development of a 10-step model for implementing change that reinforces that change is an ongoing process of discrete actions and questions that should be ongoing and not limited to a sole step in the process. Mento et al. (2002), like Jick (2001, 2003), built on the research of others to identify 12 steps that lead to transformational change. Shields (1999) took a much more nuanced approach compared to others by focusing on business strategy and being explicit in highlighting the human and culture aspects that can lead to success or failure in leading change. Shields outlined five steps necessary to accomplish change: (a) define the desired business results and change plans, (b) create capability as well as capacity to change, (c) design innovative solutions, (d) develop and deploy solutions, and (e) reinforce and sustain business benefits. This model posits that failure to accomplish change occurs when insufficient attention is given to the alignment of critical components by organizational leaders. Shields asserted that organizational models do not incorporate the integration of human resources management with business innovations and often lead change efforts without clearly communicating the changes in business strategy to the workforce that will be responsible for implementing the change. When organizational leaders do not take the time to communicate the change with others and do not define the critical success factors that will result from the change, the change effort will be experienced by those affected by the change as a series of unrelated change initiatives instead of components of an aligned transformational change.

## **Summary**

Though the research on change is significant, this chapter reviewed the relevant literature in relation to the key aspects of organizational change relevant to this research study. The key aspects discussed were leading change, communicating change, planned organizational change, resistance to change, operationalizing change, and managing change. Additionally, this chapter surfaced the significant change theories that led to the selection of the theoretical framework that provided a foundation for this study.

### **III. METHODS**

Qualitative research is conducted when a deep understanding is sought regarding a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In this study, I primarily used phenomenology with autoethnography to best capture the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals at the TEA who served as leaders of change initiatives under strategic priority four of the agency's 2019–2023 strategic plan (TEA, 2018). This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the social, political, and historical contexts these leaders thought through and planned for related to their change initiative. Van Manen (1990) stated, “Various thinkers have noted that lived experience first of all has a temporal structure: it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence” (p. 36). This phenomenological approach gave the change initiative owners the opportunity to reflectively share about their lived experiences through individual interviews and allowed me to better capture their lived experiences in the change management process. Field notes served as the autoethnographic elements that enabled me to share my own experiences serving as a change initiative leader. In this chapter, I include the participant selection criteria, processes for data collection and analysis, and limitations of the study.

#### **Qualitative Research Design**

“Qualitative research is concerned with the quality or nature of human experiences and what these phenomena mean to individuals” (Draper, 2004, p. 642). The focus in this study was on how change initiative leaders made meaning of their experiences and to describe and explain the social phenomena they all experienced in their own individual ways.

During the interviews, I attempted to understand each change initiative leader's distinct challenges and processes to uncover any common themes and critical elements that can be used



as best practices for leading large-scale successful change efforts. In this qualitative study, I engaged in an in-depth analysis of interviews that served as sources of data on the processes these change initiative leaders implemented. The findings from this study resulted in rich data that can be used by policymakers and state officials in the decision-making process when determining the requirements for planning and leading a change initiative with a statewide impact.

### **Phenomenological Approach**

I chose phenomenology for my research study as I intended to document and describe the lived experiences of change initiative leaders with the same phenomenon of leading large-scale statewide change initiatives. This research approach enabled me to gain deeper knowledge by reflecting on the participants' past experiences to uncover common themes (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Creswell (2013) stated, "Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon . . . the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (p. 76).

In planning for the study, I examined two types of phenomenological research, hermeneutical and transcendental. Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on the researcher's interpretations of the participants' experiences and transcendental phenomenology relies on the researcher describing, rather than interpreting, the lived experiences of the research participants. Hermeneutic phenomenology enables a researcher to explore experiences; in this case, I explored the experiences of leaders of change initiatives within the TEA. The ethnographic principle of interpretation enabled me to provide an insider's view of the group's understanding to inform why and how the participants perceived their experiences (Wolcott, 2008). By using the themes

that surfaced from the participants' responses, I was better positioned to describe and document the findings in a way that was more actionable for future state leaders planning for and leading change efforts. Moustakas (1994) described the researcher's role in phenomenology as one who:

Engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies – to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. (p. 22)

Van Manen (1990) asserted the role of the researcher in phenomenological research and writing being to primarily “construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (p. 41).

By using a hermeneutical phenomenological approach for the investigation, I, as the researcher, had the ability to capture a deeper understanding of the firsthand lived experiences of the participants. I used my own field notes to include the autoethnographic elements that provided insight into the change processes used (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Van Manen's (1990) research further supported the use of the phenomenological approach to my study, as “the task of phenomenological research and writing [is] to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (p. 41).

In addition, and to incorporate the interpretations of my own experiences, most closely aligned to hermeneutical phenomenology, I used field notes as part of this phenomenological study. Field notes allowed for the autoethnographic element to come through in this study. Ellis (2004) asserted that autoethnography is a form of qualitative research in which an author uses writing to explore a personal experience and connect that experience to other social meanings and understandings.

My intent within this research was to inform current and future state leaders as they plan for and lead change efforts. I described and documented how state change initiative leaders approached leading statewide change initiatives. What were they thinking, feeling, and doing when planning for these change efforts and what reflections did they have that can be useful to others? Moustakas (1994) illustrated seven qualities to guide a well-planned investigation.

1. Recognize the value of qualitative designs and methodologies through the studying of human experiences.
2. Focus on the wholeness of experiences rather than measurements and explanations.
3. Search for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations.
4. Obtain descriptions of experiences through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews.
5. Regard the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations.
6. Formulate questions and problems that reflect interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher.
7. View experiences and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and parts and whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21)

This research can benefit leaders within the State of Texas or in other states who could soon be embarking on leading large change initiatives. As Van Manen (1990) stated, “The interpretive examination of lived experience has this methodical feature of relating the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality” (p. 36).

## **Site and Participant Selection**

The participants for this study were past and present employees of the TEA, the state education agency responsible for overseeing the public education of students in the State of Texas. I chose this site as it is the only agency that oversees public education and education initiatives that affect 5.4 million students; approximately 1,200 districts; and over 8,600 campuses in the State of Texas. I limited this study to Texas based on geographical proximity and my current experience and interest in large-scale education change efforts. The study included six participants, selected through convenience sampling, who served or were serving as leaders of change initiatives under strategic priority four in the agency's strategic plan (see Figure 2; TEA, 2018). The participants were all colleagues, and I did not serve in a supervisory role for any of them. Each participant had the responsibility of planning for or leading the initial efforts of the change initiative but did not need to be in that role currently. Using a small participant group enabled me to gather much more information regarding the lived experiences of these initiative owners. According to Creswell (2013), when determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research, it is important to consider the intent, which is "not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied" (p. 157).

## **Participant Profiles**

The participants for this study were past and present employees of the TEA, the state education agency responsible for overseeing the public education of students in the State of Texas. The study involved six participants, selected through convenience sampling, who served, or continued to serve, as leaders of change initiatives under strategic priority four (improving low-performing schools) in the agency's strategic plan (see Figure 2; TEA, 2018). I conducted

interviews with the following six individuals; the names used are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

***Participant 1 – Richard***

Richard had been at the agency for a total of 7.5 years at the time of the interview. He had classroom instructional experience and had served as a chair of an English department of a high school in Central Texas prior to joining the agency. Richard had a master's degree in public affairs and had taken classes in public management but mentioned that his prior experience and education did not include concepts specific to planning and leading large-scale change management. While at the agency, he had the opportunity to serve in various roles and capacities that informed and prepared him for his most recent senior leadership role. His previous roles included leading the redesign and rollout of the teacher appraisal system in Texas. Through that previous work, he was able to gain support and learn from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), which had just merged with the American Institutes for Research (AIR), which supports states in the Southwest region to improve student learning outcomes by strengthened connections among research, policy, and practice. Additionally, he developed a mentor-like relationship with a colleague who had previously led large change efforts at the TEA and in the nonprofit sector.

***Participant 2 – Chris***

Chris joined the agency after over 15 years of serving in leadership roles in the tech sector and leading startup companies in various different states. His educational experience focused on board governance and he had most recently served for several years on a school board in an urban school district in the Midwest. Chris was recruited by the agency based on his proven track record on how effective board processes can lead to improved student outcomes.

Chris used his previous experiences to shape the agency's approach and initiative surrounding strengthening the support for developing and sustaining effective school governance in Texas. Though Chris had not led a large state agency initiative in his previous positions, he used his experiences of planning for and leading adults through change as the foundation for the work he led at the agency.

### ***Participant 3 – Steve***

Steve joined the agency after several years of supporting school district leaders in planning for and executing significant change efforts to redesign their school systems. Steve served as a funder for the technical assistance support and vetted and sourced the providers to serve in that capacity. Steve used what he had gleaned in his previous 8 years, along with his observations of successful school district leaders as they embarked on systemic change efforts. The purpose of this initiative was to develop a framework that replicated and systematized the process of developing and designing an innovative performance management approach to benefit school districts. Steve's work was rooted in the belief that leaders of school systems must have a perspective and driving vision for how schools will be managed and the level of autonomy each campus will have in order to operate most efficiently and in alignment and in pursuit of attaining the district's vision for student success. Though Steve could not name specific and formal support and training provided by the agency for embarking on leading a large-scale change effort, he relied on his past experiences and the support and sharing of best practices and lessons learned from colleagues who were leading or had led large initiatives at the state level.

### ***Participant 4 – Cooper***

Cooper had served as the superintendent of a small school district in Central Texas prior to joining the agency and embarking on his journey of co-leading a large-scale state initiative for

the agency. In his role as superintendent, Cooper had the opportunity to lead his school district through several change efforts locally and had experienced much success in managing the people side of change management. Additionally, he had been on the receiving end of several agency-led change efforts and had seen the impact of agency initiatives that had been rolled out and implemented previously. Cooper brought a unique and well-rounded perspective to the agency as he joined the school governance initiative and Chris in the work that had been started about a year and a half before his arrival. His approach to planning for and leading change was to think through it from the perspective of the stakeholders, having just recently left a school district, and being very intentional in reviewing and reflecting on where the initiative was and had been before making recommendations of where it should go next.

#### ***Participant 5 – Sarah***

Sarah joined the agency in 2018 and her state agency experience was much more robust than that of the other participants as she had previously held executive leadership roles in two other state agencies before joining the TEA. In one of her previous roles, Sarah was the founding Executive Director of a charter authorizing board and was charged with developing a statewide charter performance framework and implementing new charter school policy, so she was primed for her new role of launching a state initiative focused on implementing bold school actions. Sarah took a strong performance management stance in shaping her initiative and anchored in planning in establishing clear outcome goals, progress milestones, and actionable project plans. She relied on setting up the structures for strong reflection and data analysis to drive adjustments to the initiative in the future.

### ***Participant 6 – Henry***

Henry, the final participant in this research study, was only at the agency for 2 short years but played an integral role of co-leading a state initiative with Steve, listed above. Henry started his time at the agency as a contractor who was recruited to join the team because of his previous school system work as a consultant and a central office administrator in a small district in Massachusetts. As a consultant, Henry worked for a nonprofit consulting company out of Boston that allowed him to participate in various projects that gave him a bird's eye view of what different school systems could look like. He was able to support different size school districts in various states with multiple types of demographics that were all trying to achieve the same goal of pursuing more innovation in their school performance management. These experiences allowed Henry to assume his role at the TEA with confidence that, together with Steve, he could plan for and prepare for the launch of the initiative.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The primary sources of data collection for this study were (a) participant interviews and (b) autoethnographic reflections captured before, during, and after the interviews in a field note journal. I describe my process for going through both of these procedures below.

Each participant in the study engaged in one Zoom video conference interview lasting at least 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and involved asking predeveloped interview questions. These interview questions were derived from my field notes and were an integral part of the documentation and analysis in this qualitative research process to facilitate critical reflection (Straubhaar, 2014). Each interview was video and audio recorded via Zoom, and the participants had the ability to stop the interview at any time.



As I also fit the criteria for participant selection, I captured my own lived experiences through the use of field notes that I used in data collection and analysis. Field notes are descriptive, thick, deep and rich descriptions that can be categorized into three areas: description, analysis, and interpretation (Wolcott, 2008). I created a field note journal to capture responses to the interview questions and to describe my own experiences. The field note journal provided me the opportunity to document my experiences and add to the data collection of this study.

The process I used for data collection was Creswell's (2013) recommended steps for conducting research. Creswell provided insight on the type of interview questions to ask and the conditions for the interview to be successful. I coupled this with Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interviewing model guidance to focus on the phenomenon being examined and the participants. I conducted all interviews after work hours or during times that were most convenient for the participants. The participant interviews were completed via web-based video conferences, where the interviewees could speak freely and I could ensure maximized convenience and minimized interruptions.

Protocols for the interviews included asking no more than 15 predetermined questions with two to three additional clarifying probes for each (see Appendix A). At the start of the interviews, I provided an introduction to the study and thoroughly introduced and explained consent and confidentiality. After obtaining consent (see Appendix B), recording of the interview commenced. I took descriptive and anecdotal notes during the interviews as an additional method of capturing data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) for me to refer back to during the data analysis process.

## **Data Analysis Process**

During the data analysis process, I reviewed my notes from observations of interviews as pertinent data that I coded and analyzed to support the emerging themes in other data collected (Crabtree & Miller, 1992).

Upon completion of the interviews, I began the transcription process. I reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy and to provide an opportunity for further review and reflection (Agar, 1980). I also reviewed raw data captured in the transcripts by following Lichtman's (2013) process for data analysis that includes six steps that form the three "Cs" of data analysis: codes, categories, and concepts (p. 252). The six steps are as follows:

1. Initial coding: going from responses to summarization of ideas in the responses.
2. Revisiting initial coding: breaking down the initial codes assigned to the data and assigning new codes.
3. Initial listing of categories: involves the initial organizing of codes into categories.
4. Modifying the initial list.
5. Revisiting categories.
6. Categories to concepts: allows the researcher to "identify key concepts that reflect the meaning you attach to the data you collect" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 254).

Lichtman also highlighted that the purpose of Steps 4 and 5 is to help organize the data into important concepts and themes.

I used descriptive codes during and after data collection to identify patterns and emerging themes from the interview transcripts. The purpose of this technique was to be purposeful and create labels that linked the data to the idea to make connections between what was captured in the field notes and the data pertaining to the ideas and findings (Saldaña, 2015). I used Stake's

(1995) direct data interpretation strategy to make meaning of the interviews to make this process more meaningful. Creswell (2013) stated that within a phenomenological study, the researcher pursues how to “describe the common meaning for several individuals” (p. 76) even within a larger context. Change initiative leaders who are planning and leading change initiatives in strategic priority four as outlined in the TEA’s strategic plan had similar experiences but their understanding was based on their individual experiences (Creswell, 2013).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the qualitative research design and phenomenological approach for this study that included autoethnographic elements to provide a more robust depiction of the phenomenon that the change initiative leaders at the TEA experienced while planning for and leading change. This chapter also included the process for site and participant selection as well as the methods for data collection and analysis.

## IV. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

School systems are constantly evolving in order to stay current with education laws and the ever-changing landscape surrounding education. To that end, state education agencies are also in a constant state of continuous improvement in order to better serve the school districts in their state. In this study, I investigated how state leaders in Texas plan for and execute state-level change initiatives found in the agency's strategic plan (see Figure 2; TEA, 2018). I grounded the study in phenomenological theory and also incorporated autoethnography to best capture my own lived experiences and perceptions, as at the time of the study I was also a state-level leader in the same agency. Through the interview process, my findings captured themes and commonalities around the processes the participating state leaders used that can serve as a path for policymakers and state leaders in the future (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). In this chapter, I present and explain the findings by theme, first documenting the themes that arose in response to the research questions and then exploring other emergent themes that arose during the analysis process.

### **Participant Profile Summary**

As mentioned in Chapter III, I selected the participants for this study through convenience sampling. All participants were past and present employees of the TEA, the state education agency responsible for overseeing the public education of students in the State of Texas. The study involved six participants who served (or continue to serve) as leaders of change initiatives under strategic priority four (improving low-performing schools) in the agency's strategic plan (TEA, 2018). I conducted the interviews in December 2020 to uncover the lived experiences of change initiative leaders engaging in large-scale change.

## **Research Questions**

As previously stated, I combined three change frameworks to develop research questions that encompassed Kotter's (1996) eight stages, with a concentration on the first six stages that center on planning and rollout/implementation. Additionally, I used the first two steps of Schein's (2010) "Lewinian-inspired" model for change which expanded on the work of Kurt Lewin (1947). I focused on the earlier stages of planning and leading change to expose the themes that may be most helpful in strengthening or continuously improving on the processes state leaders use to plan and lead change that will have a statewide impact on improving overall student outcomes. The research questions that drove this study are listed below:

1. How did state leaders plan for and approach leading statewide systemic change efforts?
2. What resources, tools, and guidance did state leaders reference or use during their process?
3. What moves, actions, and behaviors, in relation to thinking, feeling, and doing, did state leaders engage in when planning for statewide systemic change efforts?
4. What are state leaders' reflections regarding their processes for planning and leading a statewide systemic change effort?

## **Review of Data**

The primary source of data collection for this study was participant interview transcripts. Secondary sources of data for this research included a review of my field notes that were collected before, during, and after the participant interviews.

Upon completion of the interviews, I reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy and to provide an opportunity for further review and reflection (Agar, 1980). I then used Lichtman's

(2013) process for data analysis to code the transcripts. I triangulated the data to check for accuracy of interpretation and validity through member checking. Through the process of member checking, participants received copies of their transcript and provided additional clarification of the data for further reliability.

## **Themes**

My findings from the data collection, analysis, and coding process are presented in the following sections. I have organized this section of this chapter to unpack the findings related to each of the research questions and discuss the themes that emerged. Research Questions 1 and 2 referenced how state leaders approached leading change initiatives, Research Question 3 focused on what they did as they initially led the initiative, and their reflections on these experiences were referenced in Research Question 4. I have organized the findings in that same order. I conclude by highlighting two overarching emergent themes that were threaded into many of the responses from the participants: investment and mindset.

### ***Research Questions 1 and 2: Planning the Approach***

The first research question for this study aimed at uncovering how state leaders planned for and approached leading statewide systemic change efforts, and the second research question asked what resources, tools, and guidance were used during that process. The process of planning and leading change is no small feat, and the scale that statewide initiatives in Texas are expected to reach only increases their complexity. These research questions served as a way to identify participants' individual processes and approaches to these challenges, surface the tools and resources they each used, and get a sense of how they tackled the sometimes daunting task of pushing forward a change initiative. The interview process allowed me to begin seeing the

commonalities and differences in their experiences and to determine the themes across the study participants.

Four common themes emerged across my analysis of the responses to these two research questions: intentionality of planning, influences of past experiences, learning together, and establishing early adopters.

**Theme 1: Intentionality of Planning.** Participating state leaders acknowledged the importance of having a plan. Intentional planning emerged as both a need and a best practice among the participants. The intentionality of planning represents the amount of time and purpose state leaders invest into mapping out all of the aspects of their initiative and how it will be introduced to the school systems and stakeholders in the state. A common theme for the state leaders in this study was to intentionally spend time designing their approach and having a systemic strategy in place for how they were going to lead the change. This kind of systemic strategy development addressed many of the components that Kotter (1995) and Schein (2010) included in their research as key factors in the change management process. These factors included the need the change addressed, how urgency was centered on the initiative, and the vision for the rollout and implementation.

A majority of the participants referenced having a systemic strategy to drive their change initiative. When asked, participating state leaders defined the term “systemic strategy” as the approach state leaders use to intentionally plan their initiative, including the process of identifying and mapping out all of the critical aspects necessary for the execution of their initiative.

As Cooper began the process of leading his initiative, he remembered asking himself:

How could you try to guarantee a much greater opportunity for success? Because it will not be nearly as successful as it could be with proper planning, thinking through the

rollout, and proper engagement with the field. We coupled the research with a project plan that laid out the different phases of implementation and the milestones and checkpoints to reflect progress along the way.

Chris shared, “As an agency we spend so much time designing frameworks and supports to implement and we needed to have that same degree of intentionality put into designing the deployment strategy.” The approaches detailed by Cooper and Chris speak to a greenfield approach where they developed their initiatives organically, with few constraints. They wanted to ensure they dedicated time to the proper planning of not only what the change would encompass, but how the change would be executed and experienced by others.

Richard shared a different approach in which he pulled from what he had done before and tried to make it replicable. In doing so, he was able to spend time on only those sections he wanted to redesign. Richard said, “We didn’t recreate it exactly as it is, we had to shape it and tweak it and adjust it so that it fits the Texas context and we focused our energy on building out what would work for us.” Richard’s approach was to take what he knew had already been successful when his change model had been implemented elsewhere, and then dedicate more time to the areas that had not worked or that were specific to this new Texas-based initiative. Both of these approaches, though slightly different, were purposeful and intentional in designing their systemic strategy for initiating their change effort.

***Researcher’s Reflections.*** In leading the Effective Schools Framework (ESF) initiative, I was working with a tight turnaround time. We had spent the last year and a half engaging in a needs assessment process and designing a framework that was rooted in best practices and addressed the needs our Texas stakeholders had told us were the biggest challenges to improving schools. I spent a lot of time with the team mapping out our strategy and thinking through the timelines and milestones we needed to hit along the way. Reflecting on the process now, I can see I took a slower and more traditional project management approach initially because I felt the



stakes around the rollout and initial introduction to the field were really high. Based on the sheer number of districts that this change would affect, it was important to ensure the effort was aligned, coherent, and ready to be clearly communicated. I felt I needed to intentionally plan for and tightly manage each aspect of the change as much as possible to mitigate the risks along the way. One particular aspect I remember planning for quite intentionally was communication on the purpose and the vision for the framework. We wanted to mitigate the risk of the ESF being labeled as a framework for only low-performing or struggling schools, rather than an aspirational continuous improvement framework that could benefit all schools. As I reflect on the research questions a bit more, I can acknowledge that in my experience, planning has always been a key driver of my success, especially when the planning incorporates established best practices in leading others through change. What I found a bit surprising when listening to the responses of my participants was not hearing any of them mention that their planning and approach included elements of performance management early on in the process. To me, it has always been important to share the vision of the destination and paint the picture of what success will look like when the destination is reached early in the process as a way to then determine what steps need to be taken to reach that destination.

**Theme 2: Influenced by Past Experiences and Best Practices.** Every participant in the study came with their own individual background and set of experiences, and also came equipped with a body of research upon which their individual change initiatives were built. Engaging in the interview process with each of them really highlighted for me how they used their past experiences and the knowledge and skills they had learned along the way, along with the established literature of best practices related to their change model, to craft and develop their personal approach to their change initiative. All participants shared that they crafted their

approach based on previous training, resources, and tools they had acquired or developed through their lived experiences prior to coming to the agency, along with literature-established best practices related to their change model. Richard acknowledged,

With instructional leadership, we recreated what we did with the appraisal initiative work in Texas. We felt like that past approach was effective and it provided us with a really strong starting point. We were like, hey, let's just recreate that.

Cooper and Chris leaned more on the research behind their initiatives and field-established best practices to help them craft their approach. Cooper shared,

Yeah, I think that the resources and tools that we relied upon to launch the program were rooted in the body of research that substantiated the work, so essentially it was governance-related research that drove the way that we planned for it.

Sarah and Henry shared that they brought in their experiences from their previous roles along with self-created resources based on those experiences, feeling a deep sense of responsibility to figure things out on their own. Sarah had been at two previous state agencies and had embarked on leading change efforts several times. She shared, "My experiences of starting the charter authorizing sector in Mississippi and also being with the Louisiana Department of Ed gave me insight on how I could approach this work." Henry felt a sense of ownership in ensuring he was capable and knowledgeable of developing his own best practices for planning his approach to leading change. He shared, "Wherever I go, I'm going to be responsible for my own professional development. It was just something that I personally came to terms with long before coming to Austin." Though Richard pulled from his past experiences in state work in Texas, Sarah and Henry leaned on their experiences outside of Texas in planning similar large-scale change efforts.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** My experiences as a change initiative leader were much more similar to that of Richard in that I grounded my approach in what I had done before at the agency. Unlike Sarah and Henry, I had not worked in other state agencies and I really did not

have that many past experiences from which to pull. Earlier in my career at the agency, I had assisted in the rollout and training for the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS), which was the framework the ESF was replacing. The TAIS did not include a very formalized approach to address the change management processes in the field. It is likely that at the time, the leaders in charge of that past initiative did not feel it was as necessary because the TAIS was actually in response to a gap in the intervention process that was making it difficult for school leaders to know what they needed to do. Because I was making a significant change by removing one framework (i.e., the TAIS) and replacing it with another (i.e., the ESF), I felt it was so important that we take a stronger change management approach. Due to my limited experience in planning and leading a change initiative of this size, I relied heavily on two things: I first looked to the team of people working on the ESF alongside me to share their previous experiences that could support the work we were embarking on, and I began doing some research of my own into what the literature said about best practices in this model. At first, I was drawn to something that was simple and could easily be incorporated into the existing planning processes. Kotter's (1996) 8-step model was my initial go-to and I referred to it quite frequently. Early in the process, I felt that by using Kotter's 8-step model as a milestone tracker, I would be more mindful of also planning for the change that people would be experiencing.

**Theme 3: Learning Together.** The theme of learning together was voiced by all participants. There was a common belief among them that they were not trying to be the expert on the topic of their change initiative—rather, they saw themselves as facilitators of learning for themselves and others. This belief gave them some grace and cut down on the pressure to make their change initiatives perfect. By approaching the change as a learning journey for all involved,

participants were able to create a lower-stakes environment and a more inclusive space for the other members of their teams to join in and be a part of the change.

Richard talked about how he invited the Education Service Centers (ESCs) across the state to learn alongside them for his initiative:

We didn't try to figure things out on our own but instead, we chose to learn together by watching people who had been doing this for a long time. Like, let's do that again. And our thinking was great. It created a community of learning and we were committed to all learning together. It was effective in being normed with our ESCs and creating a common language and understanding of what the best practices in instructional leadership were. It didn't feel like it was top-down because the ESCs saw the training that we saw and agreed with us on a particular approach that was most effective. So this concept of getting buy-in from the ESCs was created by sort of being co-learners with them from the beginning.

Chris brought in stakeholders who were skilled in governance practices to learn and design alongside him: "The intention was to really bring together all of the various governance practitioners into one space and to co-create a governance continuous improvement model."

***Researcher's Reflections.*** Seeing the learning together theme emerge from various participants' responses in my coding workbook was honestly a bit surprising, because I am not sure if these themes would have surfaced as strongly had the interviews taken place at the beginning of participants' change initiatives, during the time of actual planning and rollout, rather than later on at a time when the change initiative leaders had time to reflect on what worked well and what did not. I found myself wondering whether this theme was intentional or an unintended consequence of having very inclusive and self-confident leaders who were more concerned with wanting to have their change initiatives be successful than showing others how much they know and how they could do it all themselves. I say this because, from my experience, there was not a lot of training, resources, or guidance for leaders of these change initiatives that was provided (or used) internally within TEA at the time. In my opinion, there is a lot of unspoken pressure to be an expert and to lead your change initiative well from the start.

That kind of pressure can sometimes not provide the space for leaders to be vulnerable enough to actually engage in learning alongside other members of the team. Though I felt the pressure to make the right decisions and engage in the right amount of planning and lead things well, I cannot say I felt adequately prepared to meet the charges that were expected of me. So, by default, I had to lean on and learn from others. Though I wanted to be an expert, I could not be the expert in all aspects of the initiative I was leading because, in some cases, I had not yet had the experiences necessary to be an expert. Instead, I relied on the experts on my team with more targeted experience in school systems and in ESCs to help fill in the gaps for me and to provide feedback to inform decisions on content, design, and the way in which our initiative would be introduced into the field.

**Theme 4: Establishing Early Partners.** The fourth and final theme that surfaced from the interviews related to Research Questions 1 and 2 was establishing early partners. Within this theme of establishing early partners, two sub-themes or conditions emerged. The two sub-themes for establishing early partners can best be summed up as inviting others to weigh in on decisions and creating a safe space for discussion and feedback.

*Sub-Theme: Inviting Others to Weigh in on Decisions.* As my participants established partnerships early on in their change processes, they found that doing so created opportunities for others to join in the design, development, and implementation of the change. The concept of early partners serving as early designers aligns with Kotter's (1996) component of creating a guiding coalition to serve as a panel and sounding board of invested partners to help plan and drive change. According to Kotter, a guiding coalition is a group of individuals within an organization who are social leaders for change initiatives. These people bring expertise, energy, and perspectives in a variety of fields (Appelbaum et al., 2012).

Richard highlighted the comfort it brought to have partners alongside him to adjust and iterate on the design and rollout of his change initiative:

You know, bringing stakeholders in early and giving them a voice, giving them some sense of ownership and responsibility within the initiative so that they truly do feel like it's theirs, and giving yourself the space to iterate and improve. Then transparently establishing that expectation early on removes a lot of the pressure of being perfect and makes everybody settle into the work a lot more comfortably.

Schein's (2010) focus on the importance of creating motivation and actively managing the support and understanding surrounding the change initiative can also be seen in this theme of establishing early partners. According to Schein, change needs to be led and introduced in a way that will allow it to be sustainable and create buy-in among those responsible for leading, experiencing, and sustaining the change. Seeing others positively experiencing and advocating for the change can be powerful. Inviting others to be partners in decision making and helping shape and share the change initiative can be a formal or informal process.

The participants in this study engaged with early partners in both formal and informal ways, supporting Schein's (2010) assertions. Chris took an informal approach and shared,

A lot of my time early on was spent visiting with all of these different folks and just kind of introducing ideas. Having conversations that could be boiled down to, hey, here's some of my thoughts, what are some of your thoughts?

Richard also took a less formal approach and expanded on how organically his early partners came together when he shared,

We had an identified group of friendly folks who we had already established trusting relationships with. We had started to build the momentum for change management as we were also defining the problem and proposing the solution that the change would address. They were truly with us from the start.

On the other hand, Cooper took a much more formal and intentional approach by carefully selecting the early partners for his initiative. He stated, "You must engage the very individuals that are going to be affected by the change. Those that will be asked to carry the load

of this and that will be asked to implement.” His targeted approach was aimed at getting an insider’s perspective on what might be most helpful or painful during the process to help inform the planning. Cooper also took it a step further and highlighted the need to invite others at different points in the process of planning and leading change, as the stakeholders who are engaged and invested in supporting an initiative may change over time. When considering the timing and method of rolling out a new initiative, Cooper had a clear perspective of those he wanted to invite in:

It is of the utmost importance to find the key stakeholders that will be the individuals that carry the credibility that can be early champions of the program. You have to have early champions in the field that say that something is great. Someone’s peer can look at them and say, Hey look, I’ve implemented this or I was involved in this from the onset and I support the work. I believe in the work and I believe in the impact of the work.

Cooper placed a firm bet on the momentum that is created when there is investment from others:

“I’ll even say that creating a level of ownership over the work early on is a multiplier.”

***Sub-Theme: Safe Space for Discussion and Feedback.*** It is one critical element to invite others in, as explored in the first sub-theme; however, how you actually engage others as partners is another critical element. Several of the participants acknowledged that they felt they needed to create a safe space to engage in discussion, dialogue, and feedback that was free of judgment, defensiveness, and assumptions. This builds again on Schein’s (1980, 1985, 1992) argument that stakeholders or people in the organization should feel psychologically safe during the process of change. Chris shared,

Our goal was to create a safe space for others who are participating in the change to truly engage in discussion, internalization, and true mindset work. We aimed to create an environment where they felt like they could be themselves and to share their true thoughts and feelings.

Richard also prioritized the value of creating a space for the stakeholders who had been invited in. He went on to describe what that entailed:

We created a space for them where they felt comfortable sharing their insights and opinions on what it needed to look like. And that way we all feel like we truly have our own thing and we know that they feel the ownership, to a certain extent, since it was co-developed and co-designed and they're just much more willing to tend to it as if it's their own. That means taking care of it and helping us improve it and doing their best to make it work.

Though the two examples above support creating a space for discussion around getting feedback and shaping the change during the planning and rollout of a change initiative, another participant addressed the same idea a bit differently. Chris shared his desire to create a permanent safe space for stakeholders to join him:

I'm not going to clarify where we're going, I want to wait for people to chip into it, they will tell you how, if, when we arrive, and how we did along the way. Finding the balance is key because going too far in either direction is going to undermine the ability to lead change. I have found it easier to lead from the center.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** I find comfort in numbers, and being surrounded by others brings about a sense of community and unity for me that is very inspiring. The participants' approaches and beliefs around the critical moves they made around establishing early partners resonated with me both on a personal and professional level. On a personal level, I believe all of the cliché sayings: "There is no I in team," "Two heads are better than one," "The more the merrier." As I said, I like to be surrounded by people, and asking for their opinions before making big decisions provides me with the confidence and security that my decision was well thought out. On a professional level, this has been a go-to strategy and practice of mine since very early in my career. In my roles leading school improvement and the design and rollout of the ESF at the TEA, I understood the value of establishing early partners to help ensure the success of the initiatives. Establishing early partners for these two initiatives looked very different. On the school improvement side, I was balancing different voices and perspectives to ensure all stakeholders, from governance at the state to campus administrators, understood what we were trying to achieve and the path that would need to be taken to get there. The opportunity



to weigh in on decisions may not have been as available, but establishing a safe space for feedback, support, and problem solving was always a priority for me. For the ESF, the approach was much more casual. The nature of the framework was for it to be optional, prioritized in scope, and focused on best practices. Therefore, the pool of potential partners was deep and wide. I created many opportunities to bring in various stakeholders at different times to share their perspectives, their definitions, and to help in identifying the most important things to include in the ESF. It was those opportunities for stakeholder involvement that, in my perspective, helped ensure the ESF was not created in a vacuum and was actually a culmination of the contributions of many.

### ***Research Question 3: Leading Initial Change***

The third research question in this study was designed to uncover participants' moves, actions, and behaviors in relation to what they thought, how they felt, and what they did while engaged in planning and leading their respective statewide systemic change efforts. The purpose of this research question was to understand the ways in which the participants planned and initiated systemic change efforts in Texas and to gain insight into how they approached and undertook such complex and multifaceted change initiatives. The reasoning behind this research question was to better understand the thought processes and decision-making strategies that successful state leaders can employ when pursuing systemic change, and to identify the key factors that participants felt contributed to their perceived successes or failures of these efforts. This information can then be used to inform and improve future change efforts both in Texas and in other states where there are similar challenges.

**Theme 1: Listening to Stakeholders.** Listening served as an integral part of the process of the participating change initiative leaders' work. Participants felt and shared that, to them, listening and reading the current environment to get a feel for the appetite for change in order to best craft their communications and messaging, as well as listening to those who would be involved in the change or be the most affected by the change, paid dividends. Chris highlighted how he prioritized listening when he shared, "A lot of my time early on was spent visiting with all of these different folks and just asking questions and hearing their thoughts." Participants felt the process of listening allowed them to bring an element of resonance and empathy into the messaging that then allowed other stakeholders to feel a part of the change, rather than feel the change was happening to them. Participants felt that asking the right questions was key when preparing to listen so the information they shared felt timely and could inform the next steps in the process. Additionally, participants felt doing this increased transparency and trust among stakeholders and, by doing so, the participating change initiative leaders felt they were demonstrating their commitment to transparency and building trust. The literature has established that listening to stakeholders is a critical component of the change management process (Robbins, 2005). By engaging and involving stakeholders in the change process, organizations can gain valuable insights and perspectives that can inform decision making and help ensure the success of the change initiative. In my participants' responses, I saw multiple perceived benefits of intentionally listening and incorporating feedback from stakeholders. Participants felt stakeholders provided valuable insights into the impact their respective change efforts would have on different parts of the organization and enhanced the understanding of the change. This can help the organization better understand the potential challenges and opportunities associated with the change. Richard advocated for the importance of incorporating feedback when he stated,

Working with stakeholders and iterating with them is very important. It is powerful when they see their feedback in the design upgrades and are like, Wow, they really are listening to me! It must be a priority for them to see their perspective, their insights, and what they've learned and experienced along the way with you reflected as the change progresses.

By involving stakeholders in the change process, Richard felt he had built trust and support for his change initiative. This is especially important for changes that may be disruptive, hard, or controversial. When stakeholders have concerns or objections to the change, listening provides insights to the change initiative leaders they can use to address potential roadblocks and solutions and ensure a smoother transition. Listening to stakeholders is essential for ensuring the success of the change management process. Overall, in my participants' responses I saw a general theme that they felt that by engaging, listening, and involving stakeholders, they could gather valuable insights and perspectives, build support and buy-in, and improve the overall quality of their change initiatives.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** One of my favorite parts of leading change efforts has always been working with stakeholders on the change effort. I agree with my participants about the importance of listening to stakeholders and incorporating their feedback because it was what, in my experience, created so much buy-in with the ESF. One aspect I noted in my own experience that did not come up during my participant interviews was how much listening to stakeholders helps in the decision-making process for the change initiative leader. Though not every opinion can be taken into serious consideration, engaging and listening to stakeholders allows the change initiative leader to gather diverse perspectives and experiences that can inform decisions and improve the overall quality of the change initiative. Chris's experience of the value and appreciation stakeholders have when they see how their feedback and opinions inform a change initiative really resonated with me. I believe the practice of taking action, when appropriate, after listening to stakeholders builds further investment in them and promotes accountability for them

to continue to be a part of the change effort. When stakeholders are involved in the change process, they are more likely to feel invested in the outcome and take responsibility for its success. This helps ensure the change is sustained and effectively implemented over time.

**Theme 2: Frequent Analysis and Adjustment.** The need to balance time and pacing also surfaced as a common theme among the participants. Participants expressed often being conflicted with how quickly things needed to move. Despite feeling that things needed to keep moving, participants felt time needed to be spent slowing down to collect and analyze data to ensure progress was still being made. Frequent analysis and adjustment were seen by participants as important when leading a change initiative because they can help ensure the success of the change process. Participants cited several instances of analysis and adjustment and the reasons these cycles are important. For example, regular analysis and adjustment can help identify areas where the change process is not meeting expectations and can allow for timely modifications to improve the effectiveness of the change initiative. Richard shared how he had a feedback loop built in very early on in the process:

When we initially rolled out this change, there was immediate negative feedback that caused us to pivot pretty significantly. After making that pivot, we were constantly checking in to see what additional adjustments were needed along the way. Our actions in getting pulse checks and being comfortable adjusting as necessary were very warmly embraced.

For Richard, having that initial feedback earlier in the process not only helped build trust among his stakeholders, it helped shape the change in a way that created a greater chance of receptivity from those who were encountering it. Frequent analysis and adjustment can provide valuable information for continuous improvement, helping the organization to continuously evolve and adapt to changing conditions. Kotter (2012) said, “Change is constant, and continuous improvement is a necessary aspect of managing change” (p. 72). By continuously monitoring and adjusting the change process, organizations can be more flexible and responsive to changing

circumstances, making it easier to successfully navigate through complex and rapidly changing environments.

Cooper highlighted that frequent analysis and improvement need to start as a mindset and expectation for both the leader of the initiative and the initiative itself. By having adjustment as a necessary component of a change initiative, individuals are not surprised and come to expect shifts to occur based on the data that are being collected throughout the process. In Cooper's words:

For the state agency to operate in a place where it's willing to hear from ESCs and is willing to hear from school boards and superintendents and school systems about adaptations and flexibilities that can exist. While it was rough for us at first, we liked it because we were comfortable with any shift that was maybe coming towards us. Our thinking was that it didn't need to maintain the same form as when it was developed for the duration of that initiative's lifespan. And so I think that there has to be flexibility both for the initiative and the initiative leader because you absolutely have to bake in the expectations that we are going to see how things are going and adjust periodically.

Sarah added an additional component that the other participants did not surface, namely the importance of support and flexibility coming from supervisors of the change initiative leader.

Sarah felt empowered and trusted as a change initiative leader to make the changes necessary to have a successful initiative. For Sarah's initiative, that meant having an additional thorough review of implementation built into her initiative that would occur after the first year it was rolled out. The data collected and discussed during that review were then used to make adjustments for the implementation of the second year. Sarah expressed feeling this additional review was the key to her initiative's success:

I felt really lucky to have the full trust and support of my manager to be flexible and iterative. Even though we made little shifts throughout the first year, we were prepared to really dive in and reflect after the first year. We were able to kind of take what we saw and learn from it. We compared how the first year went against what we were wanting to achieve and I had the ability to put forth those changes for the next year to close the gaps.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** As a change initiative leader, you spend many hours mapping out and planning for your change but as we all know, no matter how much work goes into a plan, things can still go wrong. Stakeholder involvement and feedback are important, but in my experience you must also create the time in your plan to step back, reflect, and ask yourself and others how things are going. Making adjustments as issues arise or as feedback comes in also helps to mitigate risk, and regular analysis and adjustment can help identify potential risks and challenges associated with the change process, allowing the organization to proactively mitigate these risks and minimize the potential for negative impacts. When I was leading my own initiative for the development of the ESF, we relied on our first cohort of pilot schools and the network of ESCs to provide us with feedback early on in the process and regularly as we met with them monthly. By having these regular times to see how things were going, we were able to make adjustments to the processes to clear barriers. I also found that doing this reinforced and improved buy-in and commitment from stakeholders. By involving stakeholders in the frequent analysis and adjustment process, you are engaging them further in the change and fostering an environment of trust and collective investment in a successful implementation.

One critical aspect of frequent analysis and adjustment that I feel very strongly about and that was a large part of my initiative is performance management. Due to the importance of this for my own experience, just as I mentioned in one of my earlier reflections, I was again surprised here that elements of performance management did not surface in my interviews with the participants. All of the participants mentioned the use of data, but none shared specifics around metrics they had set for the initiative, benchmarks that could measure what success would look like. It left me wondering how different the data collection may have been across initiatives, a topic that would be a compelling and important focus of future research.

**Theme 3: Humility, Vulnerability, Lead Learning.** During the interviews with the participants, their responses also began to trend around their beliefs regarding leadership styles, personality traits, and mindsets that were quite intentional. Participating change initiative leaders shared their personal investment in the importance of humility, vulnerability, and embracing the idea of being a lead learner in their process of leading statewide change.

Humility played a crucial role in the participating change management leaders' experiences. The participants felt a humble leader recognizes their own limitations, is open to feedback and new ideas, and is willing to admit mistakes. Richard shared, "We have to settle into this idea that we're not going to be flawless. We're going to keep iterating and keep getting better. It's going to take time, but that's okay because worthwhile change takes time." He asserted that he wanted those he was leading to have realistic expectations of him as a human and for it to be okay to not get it right the first time. In his perspective, a leader who is humble is less likely to be attached to their own ideas or assumptions and more likely to consider the perspectives of others. This can lead to a more inclusive and collaborative change management process in which the ideas and input of all stakeholders are valued and integrated into the change plan. This creates a culture of trust and transparency, where others feel comfortable sharing their own thoughts and perspectives, and the leader is better equipped to make informed decisions.

Steve shared similar sentiments, along with this piece of advice to anyone wanting to be a change initiative leader at a state agency: "Lead with more humility and stay humble." He went on to share,

A critical mistake that individuals leading large statewide initiatives make is thinking that they know it all or that they know more than others just because you are at the state agency. You need to honor the context and experience of others, especially those in the field.

To these participants, a humble leader is seen as more approachable, which can help to build better relationships with stakeholders. This can increase their level of support for the change initiative and lead to greater buy-in and engagement throughout.

Participants also felt that change leaders should be vulnerable, as vulnerability builds trust and strengthens relationships. When a change initiative leader shows vulnerability, they are demonstrating that they are human and fallible, open to feedback, and willing to learn from their mistakes. This helps to create a sense of safety and trust among stakeholders, as they feel the leader is approachable and genuine. Richard laughed as he shared that it was tough to admit that things were not going well and said he can only laugh about it now: “We had to go in front of the ESCs and be extremely vulnerable and let them know that we needed to make some changes and we needed their help.” Being vulnerable also allowed the participating leaders to connect with others on a deeper level, as they were able to share their own experiences and emotions and to understand the experiences and emotions of others. They felt this led to greater empathy and understanding and to the development of stronger relationships and partnerships.

Lead learning was also seen by the participants as an important aspect of change management, as it involves the continuous development and improvement of leadership skills and abilities to effectively lead change initiatives. In the change management process, lead learning emphasizes the importance of leaders being open to new ideas, continuously improving, and adapting to new challenges. By adopting a lead learner mindset, a change initiative leader is promoting continuous improvement. Richard happily reported,

We gave ourselves a space to learn and iterate and we were very transparent in setting that expectation early on with both ESCs and school districts that we were learning too. By doing this, we removed a lot of pressure on ourselves to be perfect and it allowed everyone to settle in.



By embracing lead learning, this change leader felt he could continuously improve his skills, knowledge, and understanding of his initiative, as well as the larger change process. A change initiative leader who is the lead learner encourages adaptability, another related theme discussed above.

Change is constant, and the ability to continuously learn and adapt was seen by participants as critical for success in change management. Lead learning helped the change leaders stay ahead of the curve and be ready for any challenges. Chris was very honest when he shared,

Even though I had a significant amount of experience as a school board member, I was not a school board member in Texas. I had a lot to learn in that space and I learned a lot from the school board members that came on to help me design the initiative.

Lead learning builds leader capacity, fosters a culture of growth, and demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement. Seeing themselves as lead learners, participants understood that change is a constant and they needed to continuously evolve and adapt to meet new challenges and opportunities.

To conclude the discussion of findings related to Research Question 2 around participants' actions and thoughts during implementation, the major moves made by change initiative leaders during the initial change effort demonstrated their belief in the importance of listening to stakeholders, continuously analyzing and adjusting the change process, and adopting a humble and vulnerable leadership style while also serving as the lead learner along the way. By embracing these principles, participants felt other change leaders can increase the chances of success for their change initiatives and drive positive results for their organizations.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** The major themes that surfaced during participant interviews for the moves, actions, and behaviors of initiative change leaders during the initial implementation of their change initiative were not surprising to me. Based on my own

experiences, I would completely agree with them and likely validate the critical nature they each play in the change process. The emphasis on listening to stakeholders and incorporating feedback highlights the importance of engaging with stakeholders in the change management process. In a state as large as Texas, this likely means having a large and diverse stakeholder group. For the ESF initiative, I offered multiple stakeholder sessions along the way and leaned on the ESCs to provide diverse perspectives and to be the voice of their respective regions across the state. The focus on frequent analysis and adjustment in my participants' responses highlighted for me the need for change leaders to be agile and adaptable in the face of change. Being rigid and inflexible can really hurt an initiative. I think this is a balancing game for initiative leaders, because the timing of adjustments is so important and knowing when to adjust and when not to is a big responsibility. My participants' views on the importance of lead learning and exhibiting a humble, vulnerable leadership style underscore the critical role these traits play in successful change management. Speaking personally, this theme also makes me really proud to have leaders like them in their roles at the state agency. The actions of the TEA often trigger mixed reactions from educators in Texas due to their accountability-based role as a regulatory agency. My participants' reflections showed the often unseen human side of leading change efforts within the TEA, which I felt was an important and needed counter to the impersonal and bureaucratic impression many educators have of the agency. The integration of these multiple elements, including stakeholder engagement, continuous adaptation, and lead learning, truly highlights the nature and need for a comprehensive approach to change management.

As I reflected on my own experiences as a change initiative leader at the state agency, I noted several behaviors I was surprised did not come up as often in my participants' responses. The first is the importance of clear communication. I believe change management leaders must

ensure clear and consistent communication throughout the change process. This includes communicating the reasons for the change, the vision for the future, and the steps being taken to make the change happen. For a significant statewide initiative that has large numbers of stakeholders, in my experience communication is key and helps stakeholders to stay abreast of what is happening. Communication can help with the culture surrounding the change and plays a large role in change management. A positive and supportive culture can help ensure changes are embraced and sustained in the field, whereas a negative or resistant culture can create significant barriers to change for the change initiative leaders. Additionally, I wonder how the emotional intelligence (EI) of the change initiative leader plays a role in successfully leading change. The theme of humility, vulnerability, and lead learning being styles or mindsets that participating change initiative leaders intentionally adopted made me wonder whether these were learned traits or whether participants simply had preexisting high levels of EI. I wonder whether successful change management leaders have higher levels of EI, which would enable them to understand and manage their own emotions and the emotions of others. This would then help them to build trust and foster a positive and supportive culture that is more conducive to change. It makes sense that change leaders with high EI are better able to build trust and rapport with stakeholders, which is critical for successfully navigating change. Individuals with high EI are able to effectively communicate the reasons for change, the vision for the future, and the steps being taken to make the change happen. They are also able to listen and respond to feedback in a way that fosters a positive and supportive culture and are better able to understand and manage resistance to change by bringing others along. I recommend future research to explore the role of change leaders' EI in facilitating successful change.

#### **Research Question 4: Reflections of State-Level Change Initiative Leaders**

As I have stated previously, my aim in this study was to examine state leaders' experiences and perspectives on the processes involved in planning and leading a statewide systemic change effort. Through interviews, I dug into both the thoughts and experiences of these leaders as they navigated the complexities of initiating change at a statewide level, hoping to gain insight into the challenges, successes, and reflections of participating leaders.

This research question focused on the second aspect of that focus—the reflections and perspectives of participating state leaders on the processes involved in planning and leading a statewide systemic change effort. Specifically, the final research question in this study was: What are state leaders' reflections regarding their processes for planning and leading a statewide systemic change effort? The themes that surfaced under this research question shed light on participants' biggest reflections and takeaways from their experiences during and after leading large statewide systemic change efforts.

**Theme 1: Establishing Relationships Matters.** My participants indicated effective change management requires the establishment and nurturing of relationships. This is particularly crucial for change leaders who must form strong connections with stakeholders to ensure a seamless transition. My participants viewed building relationships as a way to foster a supportive and collaborative environment that facilitates the change process. The literature supports these conclusions, indicating leaders who establish trust and credibility through effective relationships are more likely to be successful in implementing change (T. G. Cummings & Worley, 2009). By gaining the trust and credibility of stakeholders, change leaders can secure their support and investment in the initiative.

Cooper's reflection about the different types of relationships he developed with stakeholders was extremely compelling:

You know, it is like who are those that will be your confidantes and also be your champions in the field because their words carry more credibility than yours, and their relationships with others are just as important as your relationship with them.

To Cooper, the trust built with stakeholders becomes a generative, reciprocal way to both spread support for proposed changes and build stakeholder willingness to contribute their time and effort to achieve a successful implementation.

Moreover, participants argued that building relationships provides change leaders with insight into stakeholders' needs and concerns, which inform the initiative's design and implementation. Richard highlighted how he used his previous teaching experience to be a better change initiative leader: "I don't see change management any different than what I used to do as a teacher working with students. You have to empathize, build relationships, and give people a voice in what you are trying to do." By involving stakeholders in decision making and soliciting feedback, Richard was able to align his initiative with the TEA's organizational goals and values and also meet stakeholders' needs.

Sarah was deeply grateful for the opportunity to lead a statewide initiative and felt it helped her grow as a leader. She reflected:

I feel like I have learned a lot in terms of how important it is to bring people along and together around an issue. I found that we could create a collective momentum by bringing a group together toward a common goal.

This approach also helped Sarah manage resistance to change, fostering a sense of ownership among her stakeholders and making them feel valued in the process. This supports similar conclusions in the literature—for instance, Edelman and Forsyth (2011) argued that a great leader has the ability to foster relationships and the capacity to build networks and coalitions.

Strong relationships also sustain the changes made during an initiative, ensuring the benefits of the initiative are realized over the long term. Change leaders can leverage these relationships to continually engage stakeholders, monitor progress, and adjust the initiative as needed. This approach not only ensures the sustainability of the change but also promotes a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

In conclusion, my participants felt building relationships was a fundamental aspect of their effective change management, particularly for those change leaders seeking to create a supportive and collaborative environment. Kotter (1996) stated change leaders who have the skills to articulate a vision and build strong relationships are the most successful. Strong relationships with all stakeholders involved, as well as the wider community experiencing the change, are critical for navigating change initiatives successfully. Therefore, change leaders must prioritize relationship-building efforts from the outset of any change initiative to ensure its success.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** As a researcher and as a change initiative leader, I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to closely observe the remarkable efforts of change initiative leaders who are dedicated to driving transformation within their organizations. I love that the leaders in my research study recognized and highlighted that building strong relationships serves as the foundation for collaboration and support, which ultimately contributes to the achievement of successful outcomes. As I have shown in previous sections, one of the critical factors for gaining support and understanding stakeholder needs and concerns is engaging stakeholders in the change initiative. For me, this brings to the forefront the importance of effective communication methods and tools, which should be designed to enable stakeholders to provide meaningful feedback and have their concerns addressed. The insights gained from the

reflections of change initiative leaders are invaluable for researchers and change initiative leaders like myself who are striving to understand the intricacies of stakeholder engagement and relationship building. By analyzing their experiences, we can better understand the nuances of stakeholder engagement and relationship building, which, in turn, can assist us in enhancing our research endeavors. The reflections from the change initiative leaders in this study serve as a reminder of the importance of being adaptable and responsive to stakeholder needs, which is a crucial component of successful change management. As I sit and think through their reflections and my own experiences, I feel very fortunate to be able to share the experiences of change initiative leaders who provided a wealth of knowledge for researchers and practitioners alike, as their insights are essential in promoting effective stakeholder engagement and relationship building.

**Theme 2: Shared Ownership and Passion Provide Motivation to Keep the Work Moving.** When individuals come together with a collective sense of ownership and a shared passion for a common goal, this creates a powerful force that can drive change and transformation. Sarah expanded on this idea during her reflections:

I had no idea how fulfilling it was for our stakeholders to share their insights with us. They were really part of the team in helping us rebuild and relaunch the initiative with their perceptions and lessons learned in mind.

Sarah here was highlighting the importance of this heightened level of investment and motivation that can spur action and encourage individuals to put forth the necessary effort to bring about positive change. Earlier in this chapter I shared similar results from a previous theme about engaging stakeholders, in which I showed the participants felt asking for feedback and building relationships really brings forth the power of collaboration. The fact that this similar theme was highlighted when participants were asked for their larger reflections only reinforces the perceived importance of this notion.

One of the key benefits of working toward a shared objective is the opportunity for stakeholders to sharpen their collaboration and problem-solving skills. Strong collaboration leads to shared ownership that can foster a sense of responsibility and investment in the outcome (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). When people work together toward a common goal, they are able to pool their knowledge, skills, and resources to come up with innovative solutions and overcome obstacles. This collaborative approach can lead to greater success and impact for the change initiative. As Henry argued, “We were building capacity among those that were already invested. It was easy to build on the investment that was already there because the ESCs and the stakeholders in the field already cared about the work.” Across the participant responses, there was agreement with the idea that when people have a shared sense of ownership and passion, it can lead to a culture of accountability and sustainability. This means the changes made are more likely to have a lasting impact, as individuals are invested in the success of the initiative and are willing to take responsibility for its outcomes. When individuals are deeply passionate about a particular cause or issue, they are more likely to engage in activism and take active steps toward effecting change. This is because passion creates a sense of urgency and motivation to overcome obstacles and make a meaningful difference. Passion was pinpointed by Valdez and Meyers (2014) as being an antecedent and catalyst of activism that mobilizes individuals to engage in change. Similarly, my participants argued that when individuals feel they have a stake in the outcome of a particular issue, they are more likely to take action and support efforts to make a difference.

When individuals come together with a shared sense of ownership and passion, they have the power to create real and lasting change. Several of the participants talked about how their own investment and passion kept them going when they encountered barriers or when leading



change was really hard. At least two of the six participants discussed their realizations that, at times, stakeholders in the field are sometimes even more passionate than the change initiative leader. One quote that really stood out to me was from Cooper, who said: “Our leaders want to see this change in the field and they were committed to trying to help us figure it out and be voices for why this change is important.” This quote highlights for me the significance of other voices (other than the change initiative leader) also being involved in driving change. When multiple stakeholders are passionate and committed to a change initiative and are actively involved in seeing it through, they can have a significant impact on the success of the change. In this context, stakeholder leaders (outside of the change initiative leader) are demonstrating their ownership and passion for the change, which is important because it sets the tone for others to follow. This quote and others that were similar also highlighted the importance of leaders being “voices for why this change is important,” as stated by Richard. These quotes reinforce the larger theme seen in the participant responses that a key enabler of creating lasting change and increasing the chances of an initiative’s successful implementation is the democratization and sharing of ownership for that initiative.

In concluding the discussion of this research question, I found the participants agreed that it is important for change leaders to facilitate the development of ownership and passion in others. When leaders play an active role in fostering ownership and inspiring passion, they can help to create a culture of collaboration, motivation, and accountability, which can increase the chances of success. By working collaboratively toward driving change and harnessing the power of passion, change initiative leaders can better ensure the success of their change initiative.

*Researcher's Reflections.* Hearing the change initiative leaders' reflections was a highlight for me as an experienced change initiative leader and the researcher for this study. It was such a wonderful opportunity to hear them reflect on their own experiences with fresh ears and a blank slate and then deeply reflect on my own experiences separately. This particular theme around the importance of shared ownership and passion among stakeholders deeply resonated with me. I found the conversations around how the leaders were also seeking the support and passion of others to help build them up at times particularly comforting. It can be very isolating to be a change initiative leader for a statewide change, a task that comes with so much pressure to be the expert and get it right. It became clear that leaders who prioritize engagement and creating motivation among those affected by the change are more likely to achieve success.

These realizations prompted me to reflect more deeply on the factors that contributed to my own effective change management and how they aligned to this theme. First and foremost, I believe a change leader's interest and passion are absolutely critical. It is a lot of work over a long period of time and I cannot imagine what a task it would be if the change initiative leader was not fully invested in seeing a change happen. Even though there are many different leadership styles and approaches and what works for one leader may not work for another, it is clear that effective change initiative leaders must prioritize being able to create a sense of momentum and excitement around their change initiative. In the larger policy field of education in Texas, particularly at the state level, this means stakeholder involvement must be fully thought through so the change is able to be scaled effectively throughout the state. Leaders who are able to involve stakeholders in the change process and create a sense of shared ownership are more likely to achieve buy-in and commitment from those directly affected by the change across

Texas. When stakeholders feel they are part of the process and that their input is valued, they are more likely to be invested in the success of the change initiative.

The last thing that comes to mind is that I believe creating a supportive and collaborative environment is essential. This can take many different forms depending on the specifics of the change initiative (e.g., size, scale, complexity, etc.). For example, it may involve building trust among the internal team members who are helping plan and lead the change, fostering a culture of innovation and experimentation among the external stakeholders supporting and being early adopters of the change, or providing resources and support to help those experiencing the change navigate the process. Whatever form it takes, creating a supportive environment can help to address some of the key challenges of change management, such as resistance to change or lack of motivation, which are detrimental to any change process.

My reflections on the importance of leader passion, stakeholder investment, and a supportive environment for the change leader, the environment, and all those involved have led me to appreciate just how complex and multifaceted the process of planning for and leading change can be. But it is these same things that have also reinforced my belief in the power of collaborative leadership to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

**Theme 3: Clarity of Purpose Paves the Path.** My participants argued that clarity of purpose is an important factor in shaping and paving the path for change because it helps to focus efforts and align resources toward a common goal. When the purpose of a change initiative is clearly defined and articulated, participants felt these circumstances provided a clear direction for all stakeholders involved, making it easier for them to understand what was expected of them and how they could contribute to the success of the change. Leaders who can clearly articulate the reasoning behind a change and the benefits it will bring can help create a sense of purpose

and direction for those involved. Clarity of purpose can also help to build support for the change. When people understand why a change is necessary and what it aims to achieve, they are more likely to be motivated to get involved and support the initiative. This can lead to increased collaboration and teamwork, which can ultimately drive the success of the change.

Richard explained: “Stakeholder voice and involvement along with clearly defining and articulating the problem was probably the most impactful part of the planning process for our initiative.” He went on, suggesting engaging stakeholders in defining the problem and articulating it clearly has a significant impact on the success of a change management initiative, because then everyone is absolutely clear on what they are trying to do. These quotes further highlight the importance of effective communication in change management, clearly stating from the beginning the problem you are aiming to address.

Steve supported this idea, highlighting the importance of effective communication when he described how his initiative mapped out the delivery chain of stakeholders who would be affected by the change initiative to ensure they had a strong sample of stakeholders who all agreed that change in this area was necessary. Steve and his team believed a robust sampling of stakeholders represented the thoughts and feelings of educators in the field, and their unique perspectives and insights were seen by Steve’s team as valuable to have at the table when identifying and defining the problem. Having a diverse group of voices at the table helped Steve to identify potential issues and solutions, build buy-in and support, and ensure the change was aligned with organizational goals and values. Steve further claimed that, “When the problem is defined, articulated, and communicate clearly, stakeholders can understand the need for the change, which can help to build trust and commitment.” Research also supports the idea that

clear and effective communication of the purpose and benefits is essential for successful change outcomes (Kotter, 1996).

Earlier in this chapter, I included the theme of the important role of stakeholder involvement in change management and how critical participants saw this as being throughout the change process. Though this theme of clarity of purpose highlights the role stakeholders play in defining the problem, it also surfaces the need for effective communication. I have previously discussed the critical nature of building relationships, soliciting feedback, and involving stakeholders in decision making—however, participants also argued that these components will all not be as strong if they are not communicated back often and regularly to ensure stakeholders are informed and engaged. Furthermore, circling back and regularly and clearly communicating what is driving the change and why one is engaging in the change was seen by participants as absolutely necessary, especially when the change is taking place over a long period of time to maintain understanding and support.

In the opinion of Richard: “Trying to find a solution to a problem that they clearly saw themselves lightens the change management load and it’s a lot easier than if you’re having to go out there and then convince everyone that a problem exists.” Similarly, Sarah said “everyone needed to be able to quickly share the same ‘why’ behind what we were doing.” These two quotes highlight the importance of stakeholder understanding of the “why” behind a change. When stakeholders clearly see and understand the problem, they are more likely to be invested in finding a solution and supporting the change.

“Words matter” is what Steve shared with me. In their words:

Once you define the problem and how you are going to solve it, and stick to the same words. Everyone must use and reinforce the same language to mitigate the telephone game that happens. Before you know it, it gets translated to something different.

I believe this reinforces my previous findings around the importance of effective communication, which expands stakeholders' understanding of the reasoning and rationale behind the change, or the "why." When stakeholders understand the "why" behind a change, they are more likely to be engaged and committed to the change, as they see the value and purpose. Without a clear understanding of the "why," stakeholders may feel disconnected from the change and be resistant to it. Furthermore, a lack of understanding can lead to confusion and miscommunication, making it challenging to implement the change effectively. As stated by Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), "Effective communication is crucial in managing change and building support for change initiatives. When stakeholders understand the reasons for change and the benefits it will bring, they are more likely to support it" (p. 50).

In addition, participants felt clarity of purpose can help to overcome resistance to change. When people understand the reasons behind a change, they are less likely to see it as a threat and are more likely to embrace it as an opportunity. This can help reduce resistance and create a more positive atmosphere for the change to take place. According to Lewin (1947), clear and consistent communication of the reasons behind a change is a critical factor in overcoming resistance and gaining support for change initiatives. The same sentiment was echoed in the words of Henry:

When we felt like things were going off the rails, we found it very effective to bring back the problem that we were trying to solve and how what we were doing was going to address it. It seemed to bring everyone back on course and reinvigorate the investment.

This quote is conveying that when individuals or groups of stakeholders are aware of a common problem and actively seek a common solution, it is easier to implement change than when there is resistance or denial of the problem's existence. In other words, Henry was arguing that change initiative leaders must be aligned with their stakeholders in identifying and addressing the problem to lighten the load of change management and make the process smoother.

By acknowledging the common problem and rationale, communicating with a shared language, and creating ownership to find solutions, participants argued that stakeholders are more likely to be invested in the change and have a sense of agency. Chris reflected on an experience that made him feel very successful as a change initiative leader even though he took a backseat in the moment:

One of my proudest moments was sitting in the audience and hearing district leaders talking about the change initiative and how it was going. They had so much pride and ownership over what they were trying to do and they were using words and language that everyone understood. We had created a common language and understanding around what we were trying to do and it allowed everyone involved and passionate about the cause to be able to stand up and lead a discussion.

In conclusion, both the academic literature and my participants would agree that clarity of purpose is a critical factor in paving the path for change. By effectively communicating the purpose and rationale behind a change initiative, the leader can better support the change by providing a clear direction, a common vernacular, aligned resources, and the tools for overcoming resistance. Ultimately, clarity of purpose and effectively articulating and communicating the rationale behind a change initiative can increase the chances of its success.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** To me, the participating change initiative leaders had such great reflections on the importance of establishing the purpose behind their change initiatives. I feel very happy that through this study, I was able to share their quotes to inform the work of others. Though all of them could name the importance of clarity of purpose and specifically what they did and why they would do it again to establish it, in their interviews I could also hear the spirit of continuous improvement in the way they talked about their lived experiences as change initiative leaders. Their choice of words, their body language, and even the emotion conveyed in their reflections made it very clear that they would want to do everything even better next time. That aspect of the work resonated with me. As I reflect on my experience as a change initiative

leader, I agree with several of the things that were highlighted, which I outline specifically below.

The first is that the research participants emphasized the need for a clear and compelling “why” behind the change, indicating that without a clear purpose, change may be met with resistance or confusion. This highlights the importance of communicating the rationale and benefits of the change to stakeholders and ensuring they understand the need for the change. I saw a similar need for a clear “why” in my experience as a change leader.

Second, I concur on the role of stakeholder involvement in change management. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging stakeholders in the change process, indicating that involving stakeholders can help to identify potential issues, build support, and ensure the change aligns with organizational goals and values. This highlights the importance of stakeholder involvement and the potential benefits it can bring to change management.

However, it is worth considering whether clarity of purpose and understanding the rationale behind a change are the same thing. Though the terms are often used interchangeably, clarity of purpose refers to understanding the goal of a change initiative, whereas understanding the “why” behind a change means comprehending the reasons for the change and the benefits it will bring. In either case, the emphasis is on having a clear and concise understanding of the initiative to build support, align resources and efforts toward a common goal, and overcome resistance to change.

In short, in my experience, having clarity of purpose and understanding the “why” behind change are important factors in driving successful change initiatives, as they help to provide a clear direction, build support, and overcome resistance.



Overall, my reflections lead me to agree with the importance of effective communication, stakeholder involvement, and the strategic use of language in change management. I wish I would have been given more from the participants about what they may have done differently within this theme because for me personally, effective communication can be perceived differently by different stakeholders, and sometimes intent and perception can be perceived very differently. In speaking from my own experience, I also aimed for overcommunicating and it never seemed like enough when leading complex change that involved large groups of stakeholders. Another interesting area for further research would be to explore what level of communication is viewed by change leaders and stakeholders as sufficient, too much, or too little, and the cultural factors that influence those perceptions.

**Theme 4: Learning and Doing Based on Past Experiences.** To achieve successful change, my participants argued it is crucial for change initiative leaders and larger organizations to learn from their past experiences and adapt accordingly. This theme emphasizes the need for continuous improvement and to avoid repeating past mistakes. By reflecting on previous efforts, both individually and collectively, organizational leaders can identify effective strategies that have previously yielded positive results, leading to improved outcomes in future change management endeavors. Research strongly supports the idea that learning and adapting based on past experiences are critical factors in achieving successful change (Bezold & Wrenn, 2000; Burnes, 2004).

As the participating change initiative leaders shared their reflections and this theme of continuous improvement and learning–doing cycle emerged, a few sub-themes also became apparent as the change initiative leaders were more specific about what they changed or what they would do differently given the opportunity. A few common sub-themes emerged from their

reflections that shed additional light on valuable lessons learned, which I explore one by one below.

First, effective communication emerged as a recurring sub-theme, with the change initiative leaders expressing regret over not having communicated more effectively with stakeholders throughout the change process. This idea came up some when they discussed the importance of communicating purpose with stakeholders, but was more significant when they talked more deeply about the expectations and pressures they personally felt around communication. They emphasized the importance of taking sufficient time to communicate with all stakeholders, internally and externally, to ensure a clear understanding of the change and their roles in it. This is magnified for Texas due to the size of the state, the model that includes the ESCs, and the number of school districts and campuses that need communication. Henry shared a story about how he thought he was a great communicator until he was asked to lead this change effort:

I thought I was all covered when it came to planning out my communication because I was just planning to follow the things that I had always done until I realized that I was coming from a state that was smaller than a quarter of the size of Texas, and then the panic set in.

Engagement was another key theme the change initiative leaders highlighted in their reflections. They expressed regret over not involving stakeholders more deeply in the change process and wished they had adopted a more collaborative approach. This was particularly prominent among the change leaders who encountered significant resistance when leading their change efforts. Chris confidently stated: “I know that I am to blame that this was a flop initially, but I had to do some learning on how to be more collaborative and recognize that I didn’t know it all.” Cooper stated: “We needed to build the army to help us get this out into the field and we

didn't do it at the onset." They believed that by engaging stakeholders more actively and seeking their input and involvement, they could have achieved greater buy-in and commitment sooner.

Flexibility was a crucial lesson learned from the experiences of change initiative leaders. They wished they would have been more adaptable in their design and planning approach, recognizing that change processes can be messy and unpredictable. Richard expressed this regret: "We seemed so heavy-handed at the beginning and we expected people to just jump right in with us. We were extending grace to ourselves or anybody else and that quickly blew up our pacing." By acknowledging the dynamic nature of change and being open to adjusting plans and strategies earlier, they could have set more appropriate timelines and expectations around reaching critical milestones.

Preparation was another subtheme among the change initiative leaders' reflections. They expressed the desire to have allocated more time and effort to building internal support, engaging in detailed planning and resource allocation, and anticipating potential roadblocks. Steve was passionate when he shared:

I wish I would have asked for more money and people on my team to get things rolling. We were killing ourselves because the timeline was so tight and we were both new to the agency and had a big responsibility.

Sarah signaled her learning by sharing what she wished she would have known about what she called the "pre-work" before planning and preparation:

I didn't realize how much internal norming and advocating I needed to do to gather the support from other leaders in the agency. It was apparent that change initiatives overlap and could have an impact on other work that was happening and we were all not talking to each other. In order to garner support, I needed to share internally more broadly.

In retrospect, all of the leaders acknowledged the importance of investing adequate resources into the preparatory phase of change initiatives, which included having time, money, and people

to support the change, training and the development of detailed plans, and proactive identification of potential challenges.

Last, some change initiative leaders lightly touched on performance management concepts like maintaining a focus on outcomes rather than getting bogged down in the process.

Richard said:

As an agency, we didn't start focusing on goals and performance management outcomes until the last couple of years and my initiative was already out there. I think about how much that could have helped me track progress along the way.

Richard expressed regret over not getting training and support for the organization and not knowing how they were going to measure progress and success along the way. Cooper reflected on a similar feeling of disappointment when he said: "We kept losing sight of the end goals of the change initiative and didn't focus enough on celebrating the small wins and the changing behaviors that we were witnessing." In these reflections, the participants showed a shared desire for the additional support that they, as change initiative leaders, would want in the future to better support their change journey.

As I think more deeply about this theme of learning and doing based on past experiences, it makes me wonder about the practical ways to learn from past experiences and create positive change. One such approach is called action learning, which involves reflecting on past actions to determine what worked and what needs improvement (Marquardt, 2004). This helps organizations gain valuable insights into their change management strategies, refine their approach, and capitalize on successful tactics. The need for this kind of approach was reflected in statements from Chris and Cooper, who both discussed needing to restart their initiatives because their initial planning and rollout was not successful.

Similarly, organizational learning plays a vital role in the continuous improvement of change management practices. This process encompasses the acquisition and application of

knowledge within an organization to enhance performance (Basten & Haamann, 2018). This relates to a mindset I saw as a common thread among all of the participants: namely, the change initiative leaders in this research study were all very iterative in nature and their shared practice of cycling back often to reflect and learn was reflected often in our interviews. Steve shared his process for onboarding new team members, which involved using that opportunity to truly step back from the work to identify what was working and what was not working in order to quickly make adjustments. He shared:

I took every opportunity to get fresh eyes and ears on our initiative because I think it is possible to be too close to the work and not see something that is not working even though it is right in front of you.

This idea is also reflected in the literature. Organizations that prioritize continuous learning from past experiences are better equipped to navigate change successfully and achieve the desired outcomes (Brown & Duguid, 1991). By cultivating a learning culture, where insights and lessons learned are actively shared and integrated into future change initiatives, organizations can foster an environment that is conducive to ongoing growth and improvement (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

Another trend in my findings that resonates with the existing literature is the concept of learning and doing based on past experiences, or what has been called the philosophy of continuous improvement (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017). Henry boldly reflected:

We were all about continuous improvement all the time. I remember hearing our upper leadership say that our success is not solely determined by whether we got something right but also about how we can quickly pivot when things are not going well and if we can do it better next time.

In the literature as well, continuous improvement is described as a focus on making small, incremental improvements over time. Having strong feedback loops, regularly assessing performance, and implementing small-scale changes can enhance change management practices

that will ultimately lead to more effective and successful outcomes (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017).

In summary, the concept of learning and doing based on past experiences in change management is a resonant theme both in the existing academic literature and a theme that emerged throughout my interviews with participating change initiative leaders. By actively learning from past experiences and continuously adapting strategies, change initiative leaders can navigate change more effectively, drive positive transformation, and achieve the desired outcomes. By embracing action learning, organizational learning, and continuous improvement methodologies, change initiative leaders and organizations that lead change can leverage the wealth of knowledge gained from previous experiences to refine their change management practices. Moreover, by heeding the reflections of change initiative leaders, future change leaders can glean valuable lessons on effective communication, stakeholder engagement, thorough preparation, flexibility, and maintaining a focus on outcomes. By integrating these lessons into their change initiatives, leaders can enhance their approach to change management and increase the likelihood of success. Ultimately, learning and doing based on past experiences coupled with a continuous improvement mindset forms a comprehensive and effective framework for planning and leading change.

***Researcher's Reflections.*** Reflecting on the experiences of the change initiative leaders provided additional insights into the practical application of learning and doing based on past experiences. We all know that change is an inevitable part of life, especially in the fast-paced world we live in today. As a leader, I have learned that one of the most important things to do is to reflect on past experiences. It is all about figuring out what worked and what did not work, and using that knowledge to inform future change initiatives. But it is not just about looking

back—as seen in previous sections of this chapter, effective communication is also key. As a leader of teams and a leader of change initiatives, I have found it is critical to communicate clearly and frequently with all stakeholders to ensure everyone is on the same page. This means not just sharing information, but actively listening to feedback and addressing concerns. By engaging stakeholders in the change process, I have been able to build trust and create a sense of ownership that drives change forward.

Another thing I have learned is to be flexible. Plans can change and circumstances can shift, and it is important to be able to adapt quickly and pivot when needed. But at the same time, it is important to keep the end goal in mind and stay focused on outcomes. Setting clear goals, identifying potential challenges, and developing a detailed plan are all critical steps to ensure the change is implemented smoothly.

My final reflection is that I have found it is important to keep learning and growing. Reflection is key, but so is taking concrete steps to improve. By embracing practical approaches and learning from others, we can all continuously improve and become more effective leaders of change.

### **Other Emergent Themes**

Now that I have covered the major themes that emerged in response to my research questions, I wanted to introduce two other emergent themes that came up throughout the interview process: (a) deep personal investment and (b) mindset. In financial terms, personal investment is an amount of money allocated for a resource or fund by an individual, rather than from a company or organization. In socio-emotional terms, however, personal investment is when a person invests more of their time and energy when they see a change as in line with their personal beliefs (Tsarenko et al., 2018). All participants in this study, as change initiative owners

within the TEA, demonstrated personal investment in the success of their change initiatives because they deeply believed in the research and best practices in which their change initiative was rooted. The second overarching theme was mindset, in that the participants felt a positive mindset was a powerful enabler both for themselves as change initiative leaders as well as for the recipients of the change initiative. More specifically, people with a growth mindset have been found to prioritize learning and see failure more as an opportunity, praising efforts that lead to growth and continuous improvement (Dweck, 2006)—this commitment to a growth mindset, as I illustrate below, was a common belief among my participants.

### ***Emergent Theme 1: Deep Personal Investment***

The deep personal investment my participants felt in their initiatives' success was a key driver and motivator for all participants that kept them engaged and excited about the process. This came through not only in their verbal responses, but also in the excitement observed in their voices and facial expressions during the interviews. Each had their own “why” that deeply invested them in the change they were leading. I found this to be extremely interesting, as the investment from the participants did not seem to come from a selfish place. Their desire to persevere and successfully lead their change initiative stemmed from a belief in the efficacy and “rightness” of their change initiative on the basis of their past experiences.

For Richard, his investment in improving instructional leadership practices was based on his teaching experience, during which he experienced firsthand how much of an impact it makes on teachers' perceptions of support when the principal on the campus is a strong instructional leader who is also consistently being supported and coached by their supervisor. In Richard's words, “The ripple effect of consistently providing job-embedded support rooted in best practices increases the capacity of and support to those on the campus leading instruction.” For



Sarah, Henry, and Steve, their investment was rooted in beliefs built on their personal past experiences working in or directly with school systems exploring innovative (and often underutilized) paths to improving schools. Though their paths also differed based on their varied roles, their experiences in different states, and the array of vastly different challenges they had encountered in their careers, the results and outcomes that they experienced relative to their particular change initiatives motivated them to bring those innovative options to Texas school systems. Sarah shared what ultimately was her driving force:

Ultimately, our goal has been that we need to do whatever is best to make sure that we're being good financial stewards and that these dollars are able to have a high impact in getting more kids into high-quality schools.

Part of what kept Sarah and the other participants focused on their goals was the belief that their change initiatives were cost-effective uses of public money that would improve educational outcomes for Texas students.

### ***Emergent Theme 2: Mindset***

Mindset can be a powerful motivator for all involved in change initiatives, both those leading and those receiving the change. As Dweck (20068) asserted, growth-mindset choices stem from the belief that those we lead can be motivated to improve and develop their practices. This choice usually involves including many stakeholders in decision making; overcommunicating the vision, mission, and goals; building shared values; and providing specific, targeted, and timely feedback.

Chris and Cooper were focused on working with the board of trustees of participating school districts because they believed this was a stakeholder group that had the collective power to either catapult or stall a district based on their focus and mindset. They came to this belief in the importance of school boards from different perspectives—one of them as a former superintendent working with the board of trustees and the other as a former board member

working with the superintendent. The fact that these two came to a similar belief from such contrasting prior experiences was striking. Both believed that through shared responsibility and the steady provision of feedback and resources, school boards and superintendents could lead forward momentum in their organizations. Chris shared:

I wanted to be a more powerful catalyst for change in the lives of my students. That was the fun part of watching that shift for others, you know, in terms of I knew where I had succeeded in the past when my leadership was really grounded in the mindset of wanting what was best for students.

Chris's sentiments aligned with those of Dweck (2006), who argued that the growth mindset of a leader is based in believing in people's potential, with their current abilities and skills representing not an end point, but a starting point.

### ***Researcher's Reflections***

Though I believe my past experiences as a teacher and in schools also fed my passion and investment in leading my change initiative well and being able to successfully execute on developing and rolling out the ESF as a new approach to school improvement processes, my investment was created by the feedback and needs expressed by those in schools. My previous role of Director of School Improvement afforded me the opportunity to conduct a statewide needs assessment process to hear from campus-level staff, like principals and assistant principals, as well as district-level staff, like the district coordinator for school improvement and superintendents, to share their experiences of how past intervention frameworks had or had not met their needs. The feedback analysis process was very eye-opening for me and my team as it revealed some very honest and disappointing feedback. Though some aspects of our previous framework were positive, the vast majority of feedback reflected that it was too complex, too broad, and resulted in a wide range of possible approaches without guidance into prioritization, fit, or enabling the conditions necessary for success. These flaws in our framework resulted in

campus leaders being overwhelmed by all of the areas they needed to improve upon, not knowing where to start, and needing to filter all of the voices coming at them with ideas of how to improve. As a team, we felt deflated because our efforts and intentions were rooted in trying to be the most supportive to schools and most responsive to the struggling schools that needed support the most. In response, I leaned on my own personal investment and motivation to pick myself up and push my team to take our stakeholders' feedback and run with it. I had a deep passion for being able to create something that built upon the areas in which we were doing well and reinvented the areas in which feedback showed we were missing the mark. Similar to Sarah, I felt it was our responsibility to try again in an effort to support schools in a way that would lead to better outcomes for students. In that pursuit, I knew my passion and drive to serve campuses were not enough, as I had to also rely on leaning into my mindset and the mindset of others that we, as a collective group of educators, were all striving for the same goals. Our growth mindset allowed us to be resilient in the face of harsh feedback and have the grit to try again and continue to improve. Grit (Duckworth, 2016) provided us the sustenance to continue striving toward our goal of helping improve schools despite the challenges and setbacks we were hearing from our stakeholders.

The second theme, mindset, played a critical role in the success of the initiatives. Participants recognized the power of a growth mindset, emphasizing the importance of learning, embracing failure, praising efforts that lead to growth, and motivating individuals to improve. They stressed the significance of involving stakeholders, communicating the vision and goals, building shared values, and providing specific and timely feedback to foster a growth mindset among all involved.

Overall, the themes of personal investment and mindset highlight the commitment, belief, and motivation needed for successful change initiatives. These findings underscore the importance of aligning personal values and beliefs with initiatives, as well as fostering a growth mindset among leaders and stakeholders to promote continuous improvement and positive change in educational settings. The participants were deeply invested in their initiatives and believed in the research and best practices underlying them. Their motivations were not self-centered, but rooted in a genuine desire to bring about positive change based on past experiences and their belief in the effectiveness of their initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

After sharing my findings and the connections between them and the larger literature, I found that participant responses shed light on the complexities faced and strategies employed by state change leaders in Texas. Four major themes within Research Questions 1 and 2 emerged from the analysis: intentionality of planning, influences of past experiences, learning together, and establishing early partners. These themes highlight key aspects of successful change leadership and provide valuable insights for future initiatives.

The first theme under Research Questions 1 and 2, intentionality of planning, emphasizes the importance of investing time and effort in designing a systemic strategy for change. Participating state leaders recognized the need for a well-thought-out approach that addresses the purpose, urgency, and vision of the initiative. By intentionally mapping out critical aspects and engaging in proper planning, future leaders can increase their chances of success.

The second theme under Research Questions 1 and 2, being influenced by past experiences, highlights how the participating state leaders drew upon their previous knowledge, skills, and successful approaches to shape their current change efforts. Participants leveraged

their backgrounds and used resources and tools from their lived experiences to craft their strategies. This theme underscores the value of capitalizing on past successes and incorporating proven practices into new initiatives.

The third theme under Research Questions 1 and 2, learning together, emphasizes the shared belief among my participants that they were facilitators of learning rather than sole experts. The participating leaders recognized the importance of creating inclusive environments that fostered continuous learning and collaboration. By approaching change as a collective learning journey, participants fostered a sense of shared responsibility and engagement among stakeholders, making the change process more inclusive and less intimidating.

The fourth theme under Research Questions 1 and 2, establishing early partners, underscored the significance of involving others in the decision-making process and creating a safe space for open discussion and feedback. By inviting stakeholders to contribute to the design and implementation of the change initiative, participating leaders ensured diverse perspectives and increased buy-in. This theme aligns with the concept of creating a guiding coalition and emphasizes the benefits of building partnerships early on.

These themes under Research Questions 1 and 2 provide valuable insights into the planning and approaches employed by the participating state leaders in leading statewide systemic change efforts. By recognizing the importance of intentionality in planning, leveraging past experiences, fostering a culture of collective learning, and establishing early partners, future leaders can enhance their change initiatives and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

The research themes highlighted for Research Question 3 display the significant role of change initiative leaders in leading and implementing systemic change efforts. The identified themes for Research Question 3 of listening to stakeholders, frequent analysis and adjustment,

and embracing humility, vulnerability, and lead learning provide valuable insights into the actions and behaviors of successful change leaders. By actively listening to stakeholders and incorporating their feedback, future change leaders can enhance transparency, build trust, and gain valuable insights to inform decision making and improve the overall quality of their change initiatives. Additionally, frequent analysis and adjustment can enable change leaders to proactively identify areas for improvement, mitigate risks, and adapt to changing circumstances, ensuring the success of the change process. The importance of humility, vulnerability, and lead learning was emphasized by the participants, as these qualities were seen as helpful in fostering collaboration, building relationships, and promoting continuous improvement and adaptability.

These research findings have practical implications for future change efforts, not only in Texas but also in other states facing similar challenges. By understanding and applying the strategies employed by successful change leaders, other organizations can enhance their change management practices and increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. The results from this study provide a compelling argument that incorporating stakeholder feedback, embracing flexibility and adaptability, and cultivating a culture of humility, vulnerability, and lead learning are essential for driving positive results and sustaining change over time.

As a change initiative leader myself, the themes and findings under Research Question 3 and the importance placed on stakeholder engagement, continuous analysis and adjustment, and the qualities of humility, vulnerability, and lead learning resonate with me. These themes align with my own experiences and highlight the critical nature of these practices in achieving successful change outcomes. By actively involving stakeholders, reflecting on progress, and embracing a mindset of continuous improvement, change leaders can build trust, enhance buy-in, and foster a supportive environment for change implementation.

Research Question 4 also had several themes. The focus of these themes shed light on the change initiative leaders' perspectives and reflections on their experiences. In relation to Research Question 4, multiple themes were discovered. These themes provided insight into the perspectives and reflections of the leaders of the change initiatives regarding their experiences. The first theme under Research Question 4 emphasized the significance of establishing and cultivating relationships with stakeholders. Developing strong relationships creates a supportive and collaborative atmosphere, guarantees stakeholder support and investment in the initiative, and offers valuable insights into stakeholder needs and concerns. This knowledge can be used to inform the initiative's design and implementation. Moreover, strong relationships can help to maintain the changes made, promote ongoing improvement, and encourage innovation.

Research Question 4's second theme highlights the importance of shared ownership and passion in driving change. When people unite with a collective sense of ownership and shared passion toward a common goal, it creates a robust force that motivates them to take action and put in the necessary effort. Collaborating with stakeholders leads to shared responsibility, better problem-solving abilities, and a culture of accountability and sustainability.

The third theme in Research Question 4 emphasizes how crucial it is to have a clear purpose in guiding the direction of the change. Clearly defining and communicating the purpose of a change initiative helps align the efforts of everyone involved; builds support for the change; and fosters understanding, trust, and commitment among stakeholders. This helps to mitigate any resistance or confusion that may arise. Effective communication of the problem, rationale, and benefits of the change is key to achieving these outcomes.

The final theme that emerged in response to Research Question 4 is the importance of learning from past experiences. Leaders of change initiatives and organizations must take time to

reflect on and analyze their previous efforts in order to improve future change efforts. By drawing on past experiences, they can identify successful strategies, anticipate challenges, and refine their approaches for greater effectiveness.

These findings emphasize the importance of building relationships, fostering shared ownership and passion, clarifying the purpose, and learning from past experiences in planning and leading successful statewide systemic change efforts. Understanding and incorporating these reflections can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of change initiatives in the field of education and public policy.

Overall, the findings from this study provide valuable insights and practical guidance for change initiative leaders who are embarking on statewide systemic change efforts. By integrating these strategies into their leadership approach, leaders of change can navigate the complexities of change management more effectively, promote stakeholder engagement, and achieve sustainable and impactful change outcomes. These insights can be used to guide future change efforts and help leaders navigate the complexities of large-scale systemic change, leading to sustainable improvements in educational systems. As researchers and practitioners in this field, we have a responsibility to continue exploring the factors that contribute to success and sharing our insights with others. Through ongoing reflection and collaboration, we can help organizations and individuals navigate the challenges of change and achieve their goals.



## V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Background and Overview

Leading change within any organization is difficult and requires leaders who possess the ability to influence others toward an intended purpose (Jian, 2011). Within the educational community, the near-constant focus at the state and federal levels on student achievement means change happens much more frequently. “By any objective measure, the amount of significant, often traumatic, change in organizations has grown tremendously over the past two decades” (Kotter, 1996, p. 2). The TEA is not the only entity that experiences change every other year after the legislative session—the trickle effect ripples through every district, every campus, and every classroom. It is safe to say frequent change is often the rule rather than the exception. So other than legislative changes, how are large-scale change initiatives executed?

The purpose of this study was to examine the statewide systems change planning processes through the eyes of those tasked with planning and leading these processes, in this case within the TEA. The goal was to describe the moves, actions, and behaviors of state change initiative leaders as they approached leading statewide change efforts under strategic priority four of the TEA’s strategic plan (see Figure 2; TEA, 2018). I explored the change processes the change initiative leaders experienced, identifying factors considered, patterns, and trends as they planned for their particular change initiative under strategic priority four. I also noted what these leaders were thinking, feeling, and doing when planning for these change efforts and what reflections they had that might be useful to others. I limited the study to the planning through initial implementation phases, focusing on how the change initiative leaders identified the change components, acquired resources, considered and prepared the implementation drivers, identified and prepared critical stakeholders, and managed and prepared for the initial

implementation (Fixsen et al., 2009). The study did not include the full implementation or any aspects of managing the analysis or impact of the change once implemented. Because change happens so often in education, there is a need to identify how to go about planning and leading the initial implementation of planned organizational change.

My focus in this study was on identifying successful change initiative leaders within the TEA and the key strategies they employed to uncover replicable behaviors that could be beneficial to others in the future. The findings of this research may prove to be of great significance to future state leaders in Texas and other states as they can help inform the development or revision of policies, procedures, and practices for planning change initiatives. Results may also serve as a useful resource for those who carry the responsibility of leading and planning systemwide change efforts, as well as provide a foundation for future research. I designed the study to answer four key research questions related to the approaches and strategies state leaders used to plan and lead statewide systemic change efforts, the resources and tools they relied on, and their reflections on the process of planning and leading such efforts.

I used phenomenological theory and autoethnography to gather information on the lived experiences and perceptions of participating state leaders. By conducting interviews, I identified common themes and processes used by the state leaders that can serve as a guide for policymakers and state leaders in the future (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). The use of autoethnographic field notes allowed me as the researcher to capture my own experiences and reduce bias in the analysis of participant transcriptions. The data collected revealed similar experiences are often addressed, internalized, and executed very differently based on individuals' mindsets, past experiences, and intentions. Through data analysis, several common themes were

identified under each research question and two emergent themes that were overarching also surfaced.

### **Phenomenological Approach**

I engaged in this phenomenological experience study to analyze how change initiative owners led planned change using a combination of Schein's (2010) "Lewinian" model of change/learning, that is rooted in Kurt Lewin's (1947) work, and Kotter's (1995) theory of change, viewed through the lens of a crosswalk framework of three change models. To capture the experiences and perceptions of leaders of change initiatives found in strategic priority four of the TEA's strategic plan, I conducted a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach through interviews. Change initiative leaders were given the opportunity to reflectively share their lived experiences through individual interviews.

The phenomenological approach enabled me to document and describe the lived experiences of leaders who have initiated large-scale statewide change initiatives. By reflecting on the participants' past experiences, I was able to uncover common themes and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Creswell (2013) noted phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. According to Creswell, "The purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (p. 76).

Using hermeneutic phenomenology, I was able to explore the experiences of those within the TEA who underwent change initiatives. The ethnographic principle of interpretation allowed me to provide an insider's view of the group's understanding to inform why and how the participants perceived their experiences (Wolcott, 2008). I used the themes that surfaced from

the participants' responses to describe and document the findings in a way that will be more actionable for future state leaders planning and leading change efforts.

Van Manen's (1990) research further supported the use of the phenomenological approach for my study. The task of phenomenological research and writing is to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience. Through phenomenology, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of change initiative leaders and provide valuable insights for future leaders in similar positions.

The goal of my research was to provide insights for current and future state leaders who are planning and leading change efforts. I documented the approaches taken by state change initiative leaders and explored their thoughts, feelings, and actions during the planning process. My aim was to identify reflections that could be helpful to others in similar positions. In order to conduct a well-planned investigation, Moustakas (1994) proposed seven qualities to guide researchers. These include recognizing the value of qualitative designs and methodologies, focusing on the wholeness of experiences rather than measurements and explanations, and searching for meanings and essences of experience. Obtaining descriptions of experiences through first-person accounts and regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior were also emphasized. Formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher and viewing experiences and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and parts and whole were other important qualities. This research can be beneficial for leaders in the State of Texas or in other states that are embarking on leading large change initiatives. As Van Manen (1990) stated, "The interpretive examination of lived experience has this methodical feature of relating the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality" (p. 36).

Within my phenomenological study, I used field notes to incorporate the autoethnographic aspect. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method wherein writers explore their own personal experiences and relate them to broader social meanings and understandings (Ellis, 2004). To gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences, I employed a hermeneutical phenomenological approach. Additionally, I integrated my field notes to include the autoethnographic elements that offered insights into the change processes used (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

### **Review of Site and Participants**

For this study, I selected past and present employees of the TEA, the state agency in Texas that is responsible for overseeing public education and initiatives that affect over five million students; 1,200 districts; and 8,600 campuses. I chose this site due to its geographical proximity and my interest in large-scale education change efforts. The study included six participants who were change initiative leaders under strategic priority four of the agency's strategic plan (TEA, 2018), which focuses on improving low-performing schools. I selected the participants through convenience sampling, and each had the responsibility of planning or leading the initial efforts of the change initiative. The small participant group allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. As Creswell (2013) suggested, in qualitative research, it is crucial to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied, rather than focusing on a large number of individuals or sites. The interviews took place in December 2020 with the following six participants:

- Richard had been with the agency for 7.5 years, previously serving as an English department chair in Texas. He lacked specific knowledge in planning large-scale change management but had experience leading the redesign of the teacher appraisal

system. He had connections with the SEDL and a colleague experienced in large change efforts.

- Chris joined the agency after years in leadership roles in the tech sector. His focus was on board governance, and he was recruited for his expertise in improving student outcomes through effective board processes. He played a key role in strengthening school governance in Texas.
- Steve had experience supporting school district leaders in significant change efforts. He sourced providers and offered technical assistance support. His initiative aimed to develop an innovative performance management framework for school districts, drawing on past experiences and shared best practices.
- Cooper was a former superintendent who had successfully led change efforts in a local district. He brought a stakeholder perspective and reflected on ongoing school governance initiatives, focusing on understanding the current state and making recommendations for the future.
- Sarah had extensive executive leadership experience in state agencies. She was the founding Executive Director of a charter authorizing board, leading initiatives focused on bold school actions. Her approach emphasized performance management, clear goals, and data-driven adjustments.
- Henry, a contractor turned team member, had previous experience as a consultant and central office administrator. He supported various school systems across states, gaining insights into innovative performance management. He co-led a state initiative with Steve.

## **Review of Theoretical Framework**

I engaged in a phenomenological analysis of the process of planning and leading large-scale change at the state level using three change models, viewed through the lens of a crosswalk framework. I used Schein's (2010) "Lewinian" model of change/learning, which expanded on Kurt Lewin's (1947) earlier work, as well as Kotter's (1996) theory of change to examine how change initiative owners approached leading planned change. Below, I provide a brief overview of the change models I used to create the theoretical framework for my study and some insight on why I chose to overlay them on top of each other to provide a more comprehensive theoretical framework.

### ***Kurt Lewin's Approach***

Kurt Lewin (1947), a renowned psychologist and social scientist, developed a three-step model known as the "unfreeze-change-refreeze" model, which describes the key phases of planning and leading change. This model provides a framework for understanding and implementing successful organizational change. The first phase involves creating the necessary conditions for change by unfreezing the existing mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals within the organization. The second phase is the actual implementation of the change, and the final phase focuses on stabilizing the change and solidifying it as the new norm. The model emphasizes the importance of managing the psychological and social aspects of change and provides strategies for addressing resistance, involving stakeholders, and providing support to increase the chances of a successful implementation (Lewin, 1947, 1951).

### ***Edgar Schein's Approach***

The process consultation model developed by Schein (2010) focuses on the interpersonal and group dynamics that influence the change process. The model emphasizes the importance of

involving and engaging individuals and groups throughout the change journey. The key stages of the model include entry and contracting, diagnosis and feedback, joint action planning, implementation, and consolidation and learning. Throughout these stages, Schein highlighted the importance of the consultant's role as a facilitator of the change process, emphasizing building relationships, open dialogue, and collaboration to achieve successful change outcomes.

### ***Comparing Lewin and Schein***

Organizational change is a complex process that requires a deep understanding of the psychological and social dynamics at play. To achieve successful change, it is crucial to have a detailed understanding of the stages involved in the process, as well as the interpersonal and group dynamics that influence the process. Both models recognize the importance of involving individuals and fostering ownership for successful change. This means organizational leaders should work to engage stakeholders in the change process and empower them to take an active role in driving the change forward. By combining these models, organizational leaders can achieve a comprehensive understanding of change and effectively manage and implement it. This includes identifying potential sources of resistance, addressing communication challenges, and creating a clear plan for implementing and sustaining change over time. A thorough understanding of psychological and social dynamics is essential for successful organizational change. By using the insights provided by Lewin's (1947) unfreeze-change-refreeze model and Schein's (2010) process consultation model, organizational leaders can navigate the complex terrain of change and achieve lasting success.

### ***Kotter's Approach***

The 8-step process for leading change, also known as John Kotter's change process (1996), is a highly effective framework for organizations to manage and implement change. The



process is designed to guide leaders through eight critical stages of change implementation, each of which is essential for success in leading change efforts. These stages include creating a sense of urgency, building a coalition of leaders, formulating a strategic vision, communicating the vision, empowering action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and anchoring new approaches in the culture. By addressing each of these stages and elements of change in detail, leaders can successfully navigate organizational change initiatives and ensure the changes are fully embraced by all stakeholders (Kotter, 1996).

### ***Comparing Kotter and Lewin***

Kotter's (1996) 8-step change model is an extension of Lewin's foundational concepts for implementing successful change initiatives. It emphasizes the importance of establishing a compelling reason for change, developing a clear vision, introducing new processes and behaviors, building a coalition of support, communicating effectively with stakeholders, and integrating the change into the organization's culture and systems. By providing a more detailed and practical framework for implementing successful change initiatives, Kotter's model complements Lewin's (1947) model and, together, they offer comprehensive guidance for planning and leading successful organizational change initiatives.

### ***Comparing Kotter and Schein***

Kotter's (1996) model for change and Schein's (2010) model for change share a people-centric approach to change management, emphasizing the importance of involvement, engagement, and communication throughout the process. They both recognize the significance of organizational culture and values and the need to understand the existing norms and attitudes that can influence the success of change initiatives.

However, the models differ in their specific steps and emphasis. Kotter's (1996) model consists of eight sequential steps that focus on the role of leadership, vision, and structured implementation. It highlights the importance of creating a guiding coalition and communicating a clear vision that inspires and motivates people to embrace the change. Schein's (2010) model, on the other hand, does not prescribe a specific number of steps and instead focuses on interpersonal and group dynamics during the change process. It emphasizes the significance of involvement, communication, and understanding organizational culture. Another notable difference between the two models is the concept of process consultation, which is incorporated in Schein's (2010) model but not in Kotter's (1996). Process consultation involves engaging stakeholders in the diagnosis, planning, and implementation of change and emphasizes the importance of facilitating the change process and enabling individuals and groups to develop their problem-solving skills.

In conclusion, both Kotter's (1996) and Schein's (2010) models offer valuable insights into change management. Kotter's (1996) model provides a structured approach to leading change with an emphasis on leadership, vision, and implementation. Schein's (2010) model focuses on the interpersonal and group dynamics during the change process, emphasizing involvement, communication, and understanding of organizational culture. By taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of both models, organizational leaders can adopt a more comprehensive and effective approach to managing change.

### ***Creating a Comprehensive Lens for Analysis***

Significant contributions from Kurt Lewin (1947), Edgar Schein (2010), and John Kotter (1996), each with their unique approach to change management, have informed the field of research surrounding change management and leading change. Although there are similarities

among their frameworks, there are notable differences. All three frameworks emphasize the importance of the human element, creating a sense of urgency, strong leadership, and ongoing learning and adaptation. Lewin's (1947) model primarily focuses on the stages of change, Schein's (2010) model emphasizes interpersonal and group dynamics, and Kotter's (1996) model provides a more comprehensive framework that covers more action-oriented aspects of change. Schein's (2010) model emphasizes the role of the change consultant as a process facilitator, whereas Lewin (1947) and Kotter (1996) did not specifically address the change consultant's role in their frameworks.

Combining or overlaying the three frameworks can provide a more comprehensive approach to change management. Lewin's (1947) stages of unfreeze, change, and refreeze can provide a foundation for understanding the overall change process. Schein's (2010) emphasis on interpersonal and group dynamics can be overlaid onto Lewin's (1947) stages to provide insights into the underlying cultural and interpersonal aspects that influence the change process. Kotter's (1996) comprehensive framework can be integrated by overlaying the specific steps onto Lewin's (1947) and Schein's (2010) models. This would involve building a guiding coalition, formulating a strategic vision, empowering action, generating short-term wins, and anchoring new approaches. By combining these frameworks, change leaders can benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the change process, addressing the stages of change, the interpersonal dynamics, and the specific actions required for successful change.

In conclusion, overlaying the frameworks of Lewin (1947), Schein (2010), and Kotter (1996) provides a strong guide for change initiative leaders. It offers a more comprehensive approach to change management that considers the human element, creates a sense of urgency, and leverages strong leadership, which are all critical for planning and leading a large-scale

change initiative. By combining the strengths of each framework, I was able to have a more comprehensive lens for the analysis of my findings. In turn, results can help inform future change initiative leaders' actions and support more replicable behaviors for organizational leaders to navigate the complexities of change and increase the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes. Thus, change leaders can use the learnings and recommended actions from this more comprehensive approach to address the different aspects of change and create a supportive environment for change.

### **Summary and Discussion of Findings**

In Chapter IV of this comprehensive research study, I thoroughly expounded upon the intricacies and methods employed by state leaders in Texas related to planning and implementing widespread systemic change initiatives. I narrowed the focus of my study to how change initiative leaders at the state level planned for and initially led large-scale change. What this means is that I did not focus on the implementation, outcomes, or sustainability of the change. Earlier in the chapter, I discussed the comprehensive nature of the theoretical framework I used as a lens for analysis. To further support the summary of findings, it is beneficial to identify where alignment to the preexisting frameworks exists and where new information was garnered.

#### ***Research Questions 1 and 2: Planning the Approach***

By digging into Research Questions 1 and 2, I gleaned a plethora of valuable insight, including the importance of being intentional in the planning phase, the significant influence of past experiences, the benefits of learning together, and the efficacy of establishing early partnerships.

**Theme 1: Intentionality of Planning.** After conducting my participant interviews, it became clear to me that planning with intentionality is crucial for a successful change initiative. Leaders must invest time and effort in designing a systemic strategy and have a clear vision of what they want to achieve and how to achieve it. This level of clarity allows for a more focused approach and ensures the steps taken align with the end goal. State leaders recognize the need for a well-thought out approach that addresses purpose, urgency, and vision. By intentionally mapping out critical aspects and engaging in proper planning, leaders increase their chances of success.

Both Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage and Kotter's (1996) steps emphasize the importance of intentionality in planning for change. Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage involves creating motivation for change by making individuals aware of the need for change and creating a sense of urgency. This aligns with the idea of intentional planning, as it requires a deliberate effort to communicate the reasons for change and generate a shared understanding of its necessity. Similarly, Kotter's (1996) first step, "establishing a sense of urgency," emphasizes the intentionality of planning. It involves creating a compelling case for change and ensuring all stakeholders understand and agree on the need for change. This step reflects the idea that effective planning requires intentional efforts to establish a clear purpose and rationale for change.

**Theme 2: Influenced by Past Experiences and Best Practices.** The second theme explored in the research questions is the influence of past experiences. It highlights how state leaders drew upon their previous knowledge, skills, and successful approaches to shape their current change efforts. Learning from the past can provide valuable lessons that can be applied to present and future situations, especially when it comes to change initiatives. It is crucial to take

stock of past experiences, both good and bad, and use them as a foundation for new initiatives. This approach allows for a more informed strategy and can help avoid pitfalls encountered in the past. Participants leveraged their backgrounds and used resources and tools from their lived experiences to craft their strategies. This theme emphasizes the value of capitalizing on past successes and incorporating proven practices into new initiatives.

Both Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage and Kotter's (1996) steps support that past experiences influence the change process. Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage acknowledges that individuals and organizations have established patterns and behaviors that need to be disrupted for change to occur. This recognition implies that past experiences and existing habits shape the current state and need to be addressed during the change process. Similarly, Kotter's (1996) second step, "creating a guiding coalition," emphasizes the importance of building a diverse team with different experiences and perspectives to guide the change process effectively. By acknowledging the influence of past experiences and involving key individuals who have dealt with similar challenges, Kotter's model recognizes the value of leveraging lessons learned from the past to navigate the change successfully.

**Theme 3: Learning Together.** The study showed it is important to learn together, and participants believed they were facilitators of learning rather than sole experts. Leaders understood the significance of creating inclusive environments that encouraged continuous learning and collaboration. Change initiatives can be complicated and involve many stakeholders and partners. Working together and learning from each other can ensure everyone is on the same page and the initiative is approached from a unified perspective. This helps avoid confusion, misunderstandings, and unnecessary obstacles. Leaders fostered a sense of shared responsibility

and engagement among stakeholders by approaching change as a collective learning journey, making the change process more inclusive and less intimidating.

The theme of learning together aligns with both Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage and Kotter's (1996) steps. In Lewin's (1947) model, the unfreezing stage involves creating a supportive environment that encourages open dialogue and learning. This stage recognizes that change is more likely to be successful when individuals are engaged in a shared learning process, exchanging perspectives and co-creating new ways of thinking and behaving. Kotter's (1996) model also emphasizes the importance of communication and learning in several steps. For instance, the fifth step, "empowering action by removing obstacles," highlights the need for open and transparent communication channels to facilitate the flow of information and ideas. Additionally, the seventh step, "consolidating gains," emphasizes the importance of learning from early successes and using those insights to drive further change. Both steps reflect the idea of learning together as a crucial aspect of the change process.

**Theme 4: Establishing Early Partners.** Establishing early adopters and partners is crucial for the success of any change initiative. By involving stakeholders in the decision-making process and creating a safe space for open discussion and feedback, leaders can ensure diverse perspectives and increased buy-in. Partnerships also provide valuable resources and support that can help ensure success. Change initiative leaders should prioritize establishing partnerships from the start to ensure they have the necessary support and resources in place. This aligns with the concept of creating a guiding coalition and emphasizes the benefits of building partnerships early on in the change process (Kotter, 1996).

The concept of early adopters aligns more closely with Kotter's (1996) steps rather than Lewin's (1947) model. In Kotter's (1996) model, the sixth step, "generating short-term wins,"

emphasizes the importance of identifying and celebrating early successes. Early adopters, who are individuals or groups that embrace change and demonstrate positive outcomes, play a vital role in creating momentum and inspiring others to follow suit.

Though Schein's (2010) model does not explicitly mention early adopters, the idea of building momentum and generating support for change is indirectly addressed in Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage. By involving key stakeholders, creating a sense of urgency, and facilitating open dialogue, Lewin's (1947) model aims to gather support and readiness for change. Early adopters can emerge naturally during this stage as influential individuals who help foster acceptance and encourage others to embrace the change.

Overall, both Lewin's (1947) unfreezing and change stages and Kotter's (1996) steps align with the themes of the intentionality of planning, influenced by past experiences, learning together, and the role of early adopters, although Kotter's (1996) model places more emphasis on the latter.

### ***Research Question 3: Leading Initial Change***

With regard to Research Question 3, certain themes emerged that highlight the important role of change initiative leaders in leading and implementing systemic change efforts. These themes include listening and incorporating stakeholder feedback; frequent analysis and adjustment; and embracing humility, vulnerability, and lead learning. These themes provide valuable insights into the actions and behaviors of successful change leaders.

**Theme 1: Listening to Stakeholders.** Incorporating stakeholder feedback is crucial for successful change initiatives. By actively listening to stakeholders and incorporating their feedback, change leaders can enhance transparency, build trust, and gain valuable insight to inform decision making and improve the overall quality of their change initiatives. Leaders who



prioritize stakeholder feedback understand the importance of collaboration and partnership in driving positive results.

Both Lewin's (1947) unfreezing and change stages and Kotter's (1996) steps share the common theme of involving stakeholder feedback. Lewin's (1947) model stresses the importance of creating a supportive environment for open dialogue and communication, which encourages stakeholders to provide feedback, express their concerns, and contribute to the change process. By actively involving stakeholders, Lewin's (1947) model promotes a collaborative approach to change. Kotter's (1996) model also recognizes the significance of stakeholder engagement throughout various steps. For example, the third step, "developing a vision and strategy," involves engaging stakeholders to solicit their input and incorporate their perspectives. Additionally, the fourth step, "communicating the vision," stresses the need for two-way communication, where stakeholders can provide feedback and ask questions. By seeking and incorporating stakeholder feedback, Kotter's (1996) model acknowledges the importance of involving those affected by the change in shaping its direction and implementation.

Though both models emphasize the importance of stakeholder feedback, they differ in their approaches. Lewin's (1947) model places a strong emphasis on creating a supportive environment for open dialogue and communication, promoting collaboration and inclusivity in decision making. In contrast, Kotter's (1996) model recognizes the significance of stakeholder engagement but may not provide explicit guidance on the mechanisms for gathering feedback or how to ensure its incorporation, potentially assuming a more top-down approach to change.

**Theme 2: Frequent Analysis and Adjustment.** Embracing flexibility and adaptability is another crucial theme for successful change leadership. Change initiatives often come with unforeseen challenges and obstacles. Leaders who are receptive to change and able to pivot quickly are more likely to succeed in achieving their goals. Being able to adapt to changing circumstances and adjust strategies accordingly can help mitigate risks and ensure the success of the change process.

Both Lewin's (1947) unfreezing and change stages and Kotter's (1996) steps emphasize the need for frequent analysis and adjustment during the change process. Lewin's (1947) model stresses the importance of ongoing evaluation and adjustment, whereas the change stage involves implementing new behaviors or practices and continuously monitoring their effectiveness. Adjustments are made based on feedback and data gathered during this stage. This approach allows for flexibility and ensures change efforts remain aligned with desired outcomes. Similarly, Kotter's (1996) model highlights the significance of regularly assessing progress and making adjustments accordingly. For example, Kotter's fifth step, "enabling action by removing barriers," involves identifying and addressing obstacles that hinder the change process. This step requires the continuous analysis of the current state and making adjustments to remove any barriers that impede progress. Kotter's seventh step, "consolidating gains and producing more change," underscores the need to build on initial successes and learn from them to make further adjustments and improvements.

Both Lewin's (1947) and Kotter's (1996) models recognize the need for ongoing evaluation and the ability to make adjustments during the change process. Lewin's (1947) model involves an iterative approach, emphasizing continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of the change efforts and promoting flexibility and adaptability throughout the process. Kotter's (1996)

model provides a framework for addressing specific challenges and adjusting the change approach accordingly, emphasizing the need to identify obstacles and learn from both successes and failures.

**Theme 3: Humility, Vulnerability, Lead Learning.** Fostering a culture of humility and vulnerability among leaders is also essential for successful change leadership. Leaders who prioritize these traits are more likely to build relationships based on trust and mutual respect. By acknowledging their own limitations and being open to feedback, leaders open themselves up and can create a culture of continuous improvement and adaptability. Leaders who are willing to lead by example and show vulnerability are more likely to inspire their team members to do the same. The concept of modeling being a lead learner is critical for successful change leadership. Leaders who prioritize learning and growth are more likely to foster a culture of innovation and creativity. By actively seeking out new ideas and perspectives, leaders can stay ahead of the curve and drive positive results. Being a lead learner also involves being open to feedback, embracing failure as a learning opportunity, and seeking out mentorship and guidance when needed.

Lewin's (1947) model indirectly aligns with the concept of embracing humility, vulnerability, and lead learning by emphasizing the creation of a safe and supportive environment for individuals to challenge their existing beliefs and behaviors during the unfreezing stage. However, it may not explicitly address the need for leaders to embrace vulnerability and model a learning-oriented mindset. On the other hand, Kotter's (1996) model does address the theme of embracing humility, vulnerability, and lead learning. It recognizes the importance of leaders celebrating early successes and acknowledging the collective effort behind

that success. By fostering a culture of learning and continuous improvement, leaders can inspire a growth mindset and recognize that they can learn from both successes and failures.

Overall, though both models touch upon the themes of stakeholder engagement and frequent analysis and adjustment, Kotter's (1996) model provides more specific guidance in the areas of embracing humility, vulnerability, and lead learning.

#### ***Research Question 4: Reflections of State-Level Change Initiative Leaders***

**Theme 1: Establishing Relationships Matters.** Research Question 4 uncovered various themes that provide insight into the perspectives and reflections of change initiative leaders on their experiences. One crucial theme that emerged is the importance of building and nurturing relationships with stakeholders. When strong relationships are established, it creates a supportive and collaborative environment, ensuring stakeholder support and investment in the initiative. Additionally, it provides valuable insights into their needs and concerns, which can be used to inform the design and implementation of the initiative. Furthermore, these relationships help to sustain the changes made, promote ongoing improvement, and foster innovation.

Both Lewin's (1947) and Kotter's (1996) approaches align with the theme of building relationships during the change process. Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage recognizes the importance of creating a supportive environment where open dialogue and communication can take place. This emphasis on communication and engagement fosters relationship building among individuals and stakeholders. By providing opportunities for individuals to express their concerns, perspectives, and ideas, Lewin's model promotes relationship building and collaboration. Kotter's (1996) model also emphasizes the significance of building relationships throughout the change process. For example, the second step, "creating a guiding coalition," involves assembling a diverse team of individuals who share a common vision and purpose. This

step recognizes the importance of fostering strong relationships and collaboration among team members. Additionally, the fourth step, “communicating the change vision,” emphasizes the need for leaders to establish trust and credibility with stakeholders through effective communication, which contributes to relationship building.

**Theme 2: Shared Ownership and Passion Provide Motivation to Keep the Work Moving.** The second theme emphasizes the significance of having collective ownership and a shared passion to drive change. When individuals unite with a common purpose and a sense of responsibility toward achieving a particular objective, it creates a powerful force that inspires them to take action and put in their best effort. Collaborating with stakeholders fosters shared responsibility, enhances problem-solving skills, and cultivates a sense of accountability and sustainability. Overall, shared ownership and passion play a crucial role in driving meaningful change and building a sustainable future.

The theme of ownership and passion is particularly evident in Kotter’s (1996) steps, but may not be as explicitly addressed in Lewin’s (1947) model. Kotter’s (1996) model emphasizes the importance of creating a sense of ownership and passion among stakeholders. The third step, “developing a vision and strategy,” involves engaging stakeholders in the development process, which helps create a sense of ownership and investment in the change. By involving stakeholders in shaping the vision and strategy, Kotter’s model aims to ignite their passion and commitment. Additionally, Kotter’s sixth step, “generating short-term wins,” aims to create tangible successes and celebrate achievements. This step fosters a sense of ownership and passion by allowing stakeholders to witness the positive impact of their efforts. Celebrating wins can further ignite enthusiasm and commitment among individuals and teams.

In contrast, Schein's (2010) and Lewin's (1947) models do not explicitly address the theme of ownership and passion. Though individuals' engagement and motivation are considered during the unfreezing stage, Lewin's (1947) model does not provide explicit guidance on creating a sense of ownership and passion throughout the change process.

**Theme 3: Clarity of Purpose Paves the Path.** The third key theme that stands out is the significance of having a clear and definite purpose in directing the course of change. Precisely defining and conveying the purpose of a change endeavor helps to synchronize the efforts of all involved parties; creates a foundation of support for the change; and promotes comprehension, trust, and commitment among stakeholders. This goes a long way in reducing any resistance or confusion that may arise. Effective and compelling communication of the problem at hand, the reasoning behind the change, and the benefits it brings is crucial to achieving these outcomes.

I found a lot of alignment between Lewin's (1947) and Kotter's (1996) approaches with the theme of clarity of purpose. Lewin's (1947) model emphasizes the need to create a shared understanding of the need for change during the unfreezing stage. This process involves communicating the purpose and rationale behind the change to individuals and stakeholders. By establishing clarity of purpose, Lewin's model aims to align individuals' understanding and commitment to the change effort. Kotter's (1996) model also emphasizes the importance of establishing a clear purpose and vision. The third step, "developing a vision and strategy," involves articulating a compelling vision that provides a sense of direction and purpose for the change effort. By clarifying the purpose and vision, Kotter's model helps align individuals and stakeholders, ensuring everyone is working toward a common goal.

**Theme 4: Learning and Doing Based on Past Experiences.** The final theme that surfaced emphasizes the value of learning from past experiences. The leaders of change initiatives and organizations need to take the time to examine and analyze their previous efforts to improve future change initiatives. By referring to past experiences, they can identify successful strategies, anticipate potential challenges, and refine their methods for greater effectiveness. This will undoubtedly lead to even better change efforts in the future.

The approaches outlined in the theoretical framework recognize the importance of learning from past experiences, although they approach this theme differently. Lewin's (1947) unfreezing stage acknowledges that individuals and organizations have established patterns and behaviors that need to be disrupted for change to occur. This recognition implies that past experiences influence the current state and need to be addressed during the change process. Though Lewin's model does not explicitly guide the process of learning from past experiences, the focus on challenging existing beliefs and behaviors suggests a willingness to reflect on and learn from past experiences. Kotter's (1996) model does not specifically address learning from past experiences as a distinct step. However, it acknowledges the importance of learning from both successes and failures throughout the change process. The steps of "generating short-term wins" and "consolidating gains and producing more change" involve reflecting on past successes, identifying lessons learned, and leveraging those insights to drive further change.

In summary, both Lewin's (1947) unfreezing and change stages and Kotter's (1996) steps align with the themes of building relationships, clarity of purpose, and learning from past experiences. However, Kotter's (1996) model explicitly addresses the themes of ownership and passion, whereas Lewin's (1947) model does not provide explicit guidance in those areas.

## **Other Emergent Themes**

### ***Emergent Theme 1: Deep Personal Investment***

One of the most notable drivers of motivation and engagement among my study participants was their deeply personal investment in the success of their change initiatives. This investment was evident not only in their words but also in the excitement and passion that came through their expressions and vocal inflections during the interviews. It was clear that each participant had a unique and meaningful reason for championing their particular change initiative, and this sense of purpose and conviction fueled their determination to see it through. What struck me most about this investment was that it did not seem to stem from a selfish desire for personal gain, but rather a belief in the transformative power of their initiatives based on their own past experiences.

The theme of deep personal investment is a crucial aspect of change management approaches and is evident across the change approaches of Schein (2010), Lewin (1947), and Kotter (1996). Although the three approaches may differ in some respects, they all recognize the importance of personal investment in driving successful outcomes.

Schein's (2010) approach emphasizes the need for leaders to create a safe environment that fosters trust, open communication, and active participation. Schein recognized that deep personal investment arises from involvement, engagement, and a sense of psychological safety. On the other hand, Lewin's (1947) model indirectly aligns with the theme of personal investment through the unfreezing, change, and refreezing stages. Lewin's model recognizes that individuals need to be deeply invested in the change process for it to be effective. Kotter's (1996) change model emphasizes the role of leadership in creating a sense of urgency and recognizes the importance of personal investment in the change effort. Kotter's approach acknowledges the



need to involve stakeholders in shaping the vision and strategy, which fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the change process. Furthermore, Kotter's approach encourages celebrating early successes and recognizing individual and collective efforts, which fosters a sense of personal investment. Building on these thinkers, my findings here confirm that personal investment is crucial for successful outcomes, and leaders must foster a supportive environment that encourages individuals to engage in the change process.

### ***Emergent Theme 2: Mindset***

The change initiative leaders exuded a similar mindset as they spoke about and reflected on their change initiatives. Developing the right mindset can be a formidable driving force in implementing changes across any organization. As stated by Dweck (2006), adopting a growth mindset requires having confidence in the ability of those we lead to enhance their skills and practices. This often entails involving a diverse group of stakeholders in the decision-making process; communicating the vision, mission, and objectives clearly and extensively; fostering shared values; and providing precise, targeted feedback in a timely manner.

The concepts of a positive or growth mindset are aligned with the change approaches of Schein (2010), Lewin (1947), and Kotter (1996). Although there are differences in how each approach manifests, a growth-oriented mindset is essential in facilitating and implementing change.

Schein's (2010) change approach recognizes the importance of mindset in the change process. He emphasized the creation of a psychological environment that encourages a positive mindset and open engagement. Schein believed trust, respect, and psychological safety are crucial in fostering a growth-oriented mindset among individuals and teams. By embracing a

positive mindset, individuals are more likely to approach change as an opportunity for personal and professional growth.

Lewin's (1947) change model does not explicitly address the concept of a positive or growth mindset. However, his approach indirectly aligns with this theme. Lewin's unfreezing stage involves challenging existing beliefs and behaviors, which implies a willingness to embrace new ideas and perspectives. This process of unfreezing requires individuals to adopt a growth-oriented mindset that is open to change and personal growth. Additionally, the change stage emphasizes the implementation of new behaviors and practices, which often requires individuals to learn and develop new skills. This learning process aligns with a growth mindset, as individuals are encouraged to embrace challenges, persevere through obstacles, and continually improve their capabilities.

Kotter's (1996) change model also aligns with the theme of a positive or growth mindset. Kotter emphasized the importance of creating a sense of urgency and a compelling vision to inspire and motivate individuals during the change process. These elements contribute to cultivating a positive and forward-thinking mindset among individuals and teams. Kotter's approach acknowledges the importance of learning and adaptation. For example, the sixth step, "generating short-term wins," involves celebrating successes and using them as learning opportunities. This emphasis on learning and continuous improvement aligns with a growth mindset, as individuals are encouraged to embrace challenges, experiment with new approaches, and learn from both successes and failures.

Overall, the change approaches of Schein (2010), Lewin (1947), and Kotter (1996) share a common theme of fostering a growth-oriented mindset. Though there are differences in their specific methods, all three approaches prioritize the importance of learning, adaptability, and

personal growth throughout the change process. My findings also confirm the conclusion shared by these thinkers that by embracing a positive or growth mindset, individuals and teams are better equipped to handle change and view it as an opportunity for development rather than a threat.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, I have several recommendations for future change initiative leaders, organizations that will be embarking on change, and the gaps that future researchers and future research studies can aim to close. These recommendations are based on an in-depth analysis of the research data and are intended to enhance the effectiveness and success of change initiatives.

### ***Recommendations for Future Change Initiative Leaders***

Chapter V of this dissertation presents the opportunity to discuss the findings and recommendations derived from the findings of the study, aimed at guiding future change initiative leaders in planning and leading large-scale change efforts (Bryman, 1992). Though this is not an exhaustive list, it provides important considerations for leaders to keep in mind when planning and implementing change initiatives.

**Communication is Key.** I heard from the participants in this study that communication was something they wished they would have spent more time planning. Effective communication is crucial during times of change. Given my findings, I recommend that change leaders prioritize transparent and frequent communication to keep stakeholders informed about the reasons behind the change, expected outcomes, and progress made (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). It is essential to be open about the challenges and risks involved in the process (Jian, 2011). Establishing open channels for two-way communication will help address concerns, provide clarification, and

gather feedback. Developing a comprehensive communication plan that includes regular updates, targeted messages, and multiple communication channels is recommended (Herold et al., 2008). Leaders should strive to be transparent, honest, and consistent in their communication, providing clarity about the change, its impact, and the available support. Richard shared that they felt their initiative continued to improve as their communication to stakeholders, both internally and externally, improved throughout their change initiative. Encouraging two-way communication, actively listening to feedback, and addressing questions and concerns promptly are critical components of effective communication during change initiatives.

**Change is Emotional.** Leaders must not underestimate the emotional impact of change on individuals (Song, 2009). Change is a deeply emotional experience for individuals within an organization, and change leaders must recognize and appreciate the significant impact on people's emotions (Reynolds, 1997). When change initiatives are introduced, employees often experience a wide spectrum of emotions, including resistance, fear, and anxiety (Senge, 1999). These emotional responses can stem from various factors such as uncertainty about the future, apprehension about new responsibilities or processes, and fear of the unknown.

Acknowledging and addressing these emotions in a compassionate and empathetic manner is crucial for change leaders. By recognizing and validating stakeholders' emotional reactions, change leaders create a safe space for individuals to express their concerns and anxieties openly (Shields, 1999). This acknowledgment helps to build trust and foster a supportive environment in which the individuals experiencing the change feel heard and understood.

In addition to acknowledging emotions, change leaders should provide the necessary support systems and resources to help individuals navigate the emotional challenges associated

with change (Sammut-Bonnici & Wensley, 2002). By offering these resources, change leaders demonstrate their commitment to the well-being of those they lead and their understanding of the emotional toll the change can take (Higgs & Rowland, 2005).

Even though I discussed the importance of communication earlier, effective communication is another vital aspect of addressing the emotional impact of change. Change leaders should communicate in a compassionate and considerate manner, taking into account stakeholders' emotional states. Clear and transparent communication about the reasons for change, the expected outcomes, and the steps involved can help alleviate anxiety and provide stakeholders with a sense of clarity and purpose. Regular updates or individual conversations can provide opportunities for those involved or experiencing the change to ask questions, seek reassurance, and receive the necessary information to navigate the change effectively.

Furthermore, change leaders can offer assistance and resources tailored to the specific emotional needs of those involved in the change (Shields, 1999). By providing these resources, change leaders can empower stakeholders with the skills and tools they need to manage their emotions and adapt to the evolving organizational landscape (Applebaum et al., 2012).

Overall, by acknowledging and addressing the emotional impact of change, change leaders create a supportive environment. Through compassionate communication, the provision of resources, and fostering a culture of empathy, change leaders can help individuals cope with the emotional aspects of change and facilitate a smoother and more successful transition for the organization as a whole (Ford & Ford, 2012).

**Stakeholders and the Role of Followership.** Followership plays a crucial role in change management (Sanford, 1950). Followership was a concept Steve specifically named. He felt it was something that was not discussed within the TEA but that he had done some research on.

For Steve, he found it more humanizing to think of his stakeholders as the future followers of his change initiative. Followers have the power to either support or hinder change efforts. Effective followership involves actively engaging in the change process, embracing new ways of doing things, and providing feedback and constructive criticism (Baker, 2007). Change leaders should provide support and resources to help followers navigate the change. Empowering followers by involving them in decision making, providing training and development opportunities, and acknowledging their efforts and achievements is important. Creating a positive and inclusive work environment that encourages innovation and adaptation are also beneficial.

Leaders should intentionally plan for followership in the change management process from the outset (Hollander, 1974). Considering the perspectives, needs, and concerns of followers when developing and implementing change initiatives is crucial. By engaging followers in the change process and addressing their concerns, leaders can build buy-in and support for the change initiative. Early and open communication with followers can help mitigate resistance and prevent it from becoming a major obstacle to change. Engaging followers also provides valuable feedback and insight that can be used to improve the change plan and make it more effective.

By focusing on creating followership, change initiative leaders can address the need to build a strong change coalition (Kotter, 1996). As a change leader, it is important to assemble a dedicated and diverse team of individuals who support the change initiative. This coalition should include key stakeholders from different levels and departments to ensure the representation and involvement of those who will be affected by the change. The coalition should collaborate, share responsibilities, and serve as advocates for the change effort.

Focusing on followership will also mitigate the risk of insufficient stakeholder engagement and involvement (Baker, 2007). Leaders sometimes make the mistake of not involving key stakeholders early on or failing to engage them effectively throughout the change process. This can result in resistance, lack of buy-in, and limited support for the change initiative (Applebaum et al., 2012). Change leaders should proactively engage stakeholders, involve them in decision making, seek their input, and address their concerns. Building a sense of ownership and collaboration among stakeholders is crucial for successful change implementation. Throughout the change journey, change leaders should involve key stakeholders to gain their support, build commitment, and foster a sense of ownership. Identifying the individuals and groups who will be affected by the change and proactively engaging them in the decision-making process is essential. Seeking their input, addressing their concerns, and creating opportunities for collaboration and participation will contribute to successful change implementation (Higgs & Rowland, 2005).

Planning for followership should be an integral part of the change management process and considered throughout the entire lifecycle of a change initiative (Hollander, 1974). By incorporating these recommendations, change leaders can improve the effectiveness of their change initiatives and enhance the overall outcomes (Ford & Ford, 2012).

### ***Recommendations for Organizations Planning Change***

In this section, I discuss a comprehensive set of recommendations designed to assist organizational leaders in planning and implementing successful change initiatives. Building upon the findings of the study, I explore key areas that organizational leaders should consider to enhance their change management strategies. These recommendations encompass various aspects, including the selection and development of change initiative leaders, the importance of

EI, the integration of performance management concepts, and the value of learning from failures and celebrating successes. By following these recommendations, organizational leaders can navigate the complexities of change more effectively, foster engagement, and increase the likelihood of achieving their desired outcomes.

**The Selection and Investment in Change Leaders are Critical.** Organizational leaders should be very intentional in the selection of change initiative leaders for their organizations. The selection and investment in change leaders are critical factors for organizations embarking on change initiatives (Bryman, 1992). It is essential for organizational leaders to carefully choose leaders who possess the specific leadership skills and competencies required for successful change management, including EI (Battilana et al., 2010). Selecting the right leader is just the beginning; organizational leaders should also invest in the development and support of their change initiative leaders. This investment can take the form of providing professional development, training, and resources to enhance their skills and capabilities. It is important to establish a comprehensive onboarding process and ongoing capacity-building opportunities for all change initiative leaders within the organization. Additionally, organizational leaders should consider standardizing the planning and leading change process by adopting common frameworks, protocols, or processes for training and calibration purposes.

***Emotional Intelligence.*** Research has consistently demonstrated the significance of EI in effective change leadership (Boyatzis et al., 2013). EI refers to the ability to recognize and understand one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others, and leverage this understanding to guide thoughts and actions. Leaders with high EI exhibit several crucial capabilities that contribute to successful change management. They are adept at building trust and rapport with employees and stakeholders, fostering a supportive environment necessary for



navigating change. Leaders with high EI possess effective communication skills, enabling them to articulate the reasons behind the change, share the vision for the future, and communicate the steps involved in the change process. Furthermore, they actively listen and respond to feedback, cultivating a positive and supportive culture within the organization. Leaders with high EI excel at managing resistance to change, both from employees and other stakeholders, as well as within the organization's leadership (Boyatzis et al., 2013). By creating a positive and supportive culture and emphasizing teamwork and collaboration, these leaders facilitate a smooth transition during change initiatives.

***Professional Development and Resources.*** The participants in this study shared that they felt they were on their own regarding professional development in the area of planning and leading change. Sarah shared that she heavily relied on the training she received in a previous job and researched resources to help her with her initiative. To ensure leaders and change agents are fully prepared to lead and manage change effectively, organizational leaders must prioritize their professional development and provide them with the necessary resources. This involves offering comprehensive training programs specifically designed to enhance their change management skills, EI, and resilience. Change management training programs can cover a wide range of topics and competencies, such as change leadership strategies, effective communication techniques, stakeholder engagement, conflict resolution, and decision making during times of change. These programs should be tailored to the unique needs and challenges of the organization and its change initiatives. When leaders are equipped with a solid understanding of change management principles and best practices, they can navigate complexities and proactively address potential obstacles that may arise during the change process.

In addition to change management skills, it is crucial to focus on developing leaders' EI (Boyatzis et al., 2013). EI, as described above, is a critical skill that change initiative leaders should possess and should continue developing. EI encompasses self-awareness, empathy, social skills, and self-regulation. Through EI training, leaders can gain a deeper understanding of their own emotions and how they influence their decision making and interactions with others. They also learn to recognize and empathize with the emotions of their team members, fostering a supportive and collaborative environment that is conducive to successful change. By enhancing their EI, leaders can effectively manage resistance, communicate change messages with empathy and clarity, and build trust and rapport with employees and stakeholders.

Investing in the professional development of change leaders not only equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge, it also sends a powerful message about the organization's commitment to change. It creates a culture of continuous learning and improvement in which leaders are encouraged to seek personal and professional growth. This continuous learning approach enhances the organization's change management capabilities and ensures leaders are well-prepared to drive successful change initiatives (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017).

Additionally, providing leaders with the right tools and resources is equally important. This can include access to relevant research and literature, technology platforms for effective communication and collaboration, project management tools, and mentoring or coaching support. As a former change initiative leader myself, I would have loved this level of support from the TEA. When leaders are equipped with these resources, they are empowered to make informed decisions, streamline the change process, and effectively support their teams.

**Culture Can Make or Break Change.** The success of any change initiative is closely intertwined with the organizational culture within which it is implemented. Neglecting the significance of organizational culture can impede the effectiveness of change efforts. Leaders must recognize the influential role of culture in shaping attitudes, behaviors, and reactions to change. Failure to align the change initiative with the existing cultural values and norms can lead to resistance and hinder progress.

Understanding and actively managing organizational culture is paramount to successful change management (Ford & Ford, 2012; Song, 2009). Leaders should proactively assess the prevailing culture within their organization and identify cultural factors that may affect the change process. By doing so, they can anticipate potential resistance and leverage cultural strengths to foster a more conducive environment for change. This entails aligning the change effort with the values, beliefs, and norms that are already deeply embedded in the organization's culture. To facilitate successful change, leaders should strive to cultivate a culture of continuous improvement.

**Performance Management Can Support Change.** To support successful change initiatives, organizational leaders should develop a clear change strategy that serves as a roadmap for the entire process (Griffith-Cooper & King, 2007). This strategy should encompass the objectives, scope, timeline, and expected outcomes of the change initiative while also aligning with the organization's overarching vision, mission, and long-term goals (Lok et al., 2005). Effective communication, as mentioned multiple times in this study, is crucial in this regard, as leaders must clearly articulate the reasons behind the change, the benefits it will bring, and the step-by-step process involved. This reinforces the themes I heard from the participants of this research study.

Performance management can play a pivotal role in integrating with the change management process and assessing the effectiveness of the initiative. The key practices of goal setting, monitoring progress, creating feedback loops, and recognizing results can be employed to weave performance management into the change journey (Lok et al., 2005).

By integrating performance management into the change management process, organizational leaders can ensure alignment between their change efforts and overall goals. This approach fosters accountability among individuals and teams, as their contributions to the change initiative are assessed and recognized within the performance management framework. By using performance management as a tool to drive and evaluate change, organizational leaders can enhance their ability to achieve meaningful and successful transformations (Griffith-Cooper & King, 2007).

**Learn From Failure and Celebrate the Wins.** In the process of change management, it is important to not only focus on the initial planning and execution but also on the valuable insights gained through the review of data collected along the way. Setbacks, resistance, and unexpected challenges are common in change initiatives, and organizational leaders should acknowledge these realities. Encouraging a learning mindset within the organization allows failures to be seen as opportunities for growth and improvement. By fostering a culture that embraces learning from mistakes, adapting strategies, and continuously improving change management practices, organizational leaders can enhance their ability to navigate future change efforts more effectively (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017).

On the other hand, it is equally important to recognize and celebrate the milestones, achievements, and successes achieved during the change journey. This involves acknowledging the efforts of individuals and teams involved in the change initiative. Celebrations and positive

reinforcement play a crucial role in boosting morale, maintaining momentum, and reinforcing the significance of change. Recognizing and rewarding behaviors that align with the change effort further reinforces the desired cultural shift. By acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of individuals and teams actively involved in the change initiative, organizational leaders can foster a sense of purpose and engagement among stakeholders. This recognition highlights the positive impact of change-related behaviors and encourages a collective commitment to the ongoing change journey.

By valuing both the lessons learned from failures and the celebrations of wins, organizational leaders can foster an environment that supports growth, adaptability, and effective change management (T. G. Cummings & Worley, 2005). The combination of a learning mindset and recognition of achievements enables organizational leaders to continuously refine their change management approaches and drive successful transformations.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The field of change management is complex and continuously evolving, but there are still several gaps in our understanding of this multidimensional area despite the significant progress that has been made in this area. These gaps provide opportunities for future research to explore new approaches and provide valuable insights into how organizational leaders can effectively manage change in today's fast-paced and rapidly changing business environment. By filling these knowledge gaps, we can develop more effective change management strategies and help organizations achieve their goals more efficiently and effectively.

#### ***Lack of Standardization***

Change management researchers have made significant strides in advancing our understanding of effective practices. However, one area that still requires attention is the lack of

standardization in the field. Despite the existence of numerous models and frameworks aimed at guiding change management efforts, a notable scarcity of standardized guidelines persists.

Participants in this study shared that they felt they had so much research to choose from but lacked direction on how to select an appropriate model. This absence of standardization hampers the ability to compare and evaluate different approaches, creating confusion for practitioners who must navigate a multitude of methods.

The absence of a standardized framework poses challenges for practitioners seeking to make informed decisions about which change management methods to employ. Without clear guidelines, it becomes difficult to assess the effectiveness and suitability of different approaches for specific organizational contexts. This lack of clarity can lead to suboptimal outcomes and a lack of confidence in the chosen change management strategies.

By establishing standardized guidelines, the field of change management could benefit from increased consistency and comparability. Practitioners would be able to assess the suitability of different methods, compare their effectiveness, and determine which approach aligns best with their organization's unique needs and goals. Standardization would provide a foundation for shared terminology, common practices, and benchmarks for success.

Finally, standardized guidelines would contribute to the development of a common knowledge base and promote the sharing of best practices. They would allow researchers and practitioners to build upon the existing knowledge, collectively refining and improving change management approaches. Standardization could facilitate the accumulation of empirical evidence, enabling rigorous evaluations and meta-analyses that would further enhance the field's understanding of effective change management strategies.

Addressing the lack of standardization in change management is crucial for advancing the field and supporting practitioners in their efforts to drive successful organizational change. By establishing clear and widely accepted guidelines, we can foster consistency, comparability, and shared learning, ultimately improving the effectiveness and impact of change management practices.

### ***Lack of Attention to Context***

In order to enhance the effectiveness of change management efforts, it is crucial to recognize and address the significance of context. Though many studies and theories in the field of change management emphasize universal principles and best practices, there is a noticeable lack of attention to the specific contextual factors that influence change initiatives. This gap in the research inhibits our understanding of how different organizational cultures, industry dynamics, and unique challenges affect the success of change efforts.

Organizational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes, behaviors, and responses to change. Each organization has its own distinct culture that is characterized by shared values, norms, and beliefs. Understanding and considering the existing cultural context is essential for change management practitioners. Without taking into account the prevailing cultural dynamics, change initiatives may encounter resistance, face difficulties in gaining buy-in, or fail to align with the organization's values and norms. Research into the interplay between organizational culture and change management would provide valuable insight into how to effectively navigate and influence cultural factors during change processes.

Furthermore, each change initiative presents its own set of unique challenges and opportunities. Research that focuses on understanding and addressing the contextual factors specific to individual change projects would be highly beneficial. This could include examining

factors such as the size and complexity of the organization, the level of stakeholder involvement, and the readiness for change. By considering these contextual elements, practitioners can make informed decisions about which change management strategies and approaches are most appropriate for a given situation.

By filling the gap in research and providing a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that influence change management, practitioners would be better equipped to tailor their approaches, strategies, and interventions to fit specific organizational contexts. This would result in more effective change implementation, increased stakeholder engagement, and improved overall outcomes. It would also contribute to the development of a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of change management as a discipline.

#### ***Limited Focus on Later Implementation and Outcomes***

There is a significant paucity of research on the implementation phase of change initiatives. Though planning and design receive significant attention, understanding the challenges, best practices, and long-term outcomes of implementing change is crucial. Further exploration of this phase will provide valuable insight into how change plans are put into action, the sustainability of change efforts over time, and the factors that contribute to a successful implementation. The lack of focus on the implementation phase makes it difficult to understand the challenges and best practices associated with putting change plans into action and the outcomes and sustainability of the change over time.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of change management processes, a mixed-methods approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods would be beneficial. This approach would enable researchers to capture subjective experiences, individual perspectives, and organizational trends, providing a more holistic view of change management



dynamics. This will enable researchers to capture both the subjective experiences of individuals and the broader organizational and statistical trends.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I designed this research study to investigate the planning and execution of state-level change initiatives within the TEA's strategic plan with a focus on identifying and uncovering the strategies employed by change initiative leaders. In this chapter, I summarized the major themes and findings. For Research Questions 1 and 2, four major themes emerged: intentionality of planning, influences of past experiences, learning together, and establishing early partners. These themes highlight key aspects of successful change leadership, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning, leveraging past experiences, fostering a culture of collective learning, and involving stakeholders from the beginning.

The findings for Research Question 3 focused on the actions and behaviors of successful change leaders. The themes of listening to stakeholders, frequent analysis and adjustment, and embracing humility, vulnerability, and lead learning provided valuable insights into effective change leadership practices. Actively engaging stakeholders, adapting to changing circumstances, and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement were identified as critical elements for driving successful change initiatives.

Research Question 4 explored the perspectives and reflections of change initiative leaders. Several themes emerged, including the significance of establishing relationships with stakeholders, fostering shared ownership and passion, clarifying the purpose of change, and learning from past experiences. Building strong relationships, promoting collective ownership, clarifying goals, and leveraging lessons learned were identified as important factors in achieving successful change outcomes. Additionally, two emergent themes, deep personal investment and

mindset, surfaced among all of the participants and across all research questions. The themes and recommendations presented in this chapter provide a roadmap for change leaders to navigate the complexities of large-scale systemic change and drive sustainable improvements in educational systems.

This chapter offers valuable insights and guidance for change initiative leaders, building on the themes that arose from my analysis of the literature and my own data. By integrating the strategies I noted in this chapter into their leadership approach, leaders can navigate the complexities of change management, promote stakeholder engagement, and achieve sustainable and impactful change outcomes. Moreover, the research has significant implications for leaders in Texas and other states, results can inform the development or revision of policies, procedures, and practices for planning and implementing change initiatives. The study can serve as a valuable resource for those responsible for leading system-wide change efforts as results provide guidance on effective strategies and processes. Overall, this research study has provided valuable insight into change leadership within the TEA and offers actionable recommendations for organizations and state leaders. Also, this study lays the groundwork for future research in change leadership, opening avenues for further exploration and investigation into this critical area.

### **Researcher's Reflection**

As I move forward on this journey of change leadership, I must reflect on the invaluable insights I gained from this research study and those before it. I believe it is essential that we continue to explore and uncover the factors that contribute to successful change transformations. By embracing a spirit of ongoing reflection and fostering collaborative efforts, we can navigate the challenges ahead with renewed clarity and purpose. Together, we have the power to ignite

positive change, not only in education but in the broader landscape. Let this study serve as a gentle reminder that our collective exploration and shared wisdom hold the potential to uplift and empower organizations and individuals in their pursuit of greatness.

In conclusion, this research study has contributed to my own understanding of change leadership in large-scale educational initiatives and has highlighted actionable findings and insights for change leaders, policymakers, and state leaders. The identified strategies, themes, and processes offer a future guide for planning, approaching, and leading statewide change initiatives. I know I will continue to refine my approach to planning and leading change efforts and I will walk away from this study challenging myself to do things better next time. It is my hope that the findings and recommendations from this study will be used to inform and inspire future change efforts, contributing to positive and impactful transformations in the field of education and beyond.

**APPENDIX SECTION**  
**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Introductory Protocol

*To facilitate my note-taking, and to ease my ability to transcribe our conversation, I would like to video and audio record our conversation today. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the recordings and transcriptions of the conversations. Research must be maintained for three years and then will be destroyed.*

*Also, please sign a consent form required to participate in this study. The form is devised to meet our human subject requirements per University Rules. Essentially, this document states that: 1.) all information will be held confidential, 2.) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and 3.) research does not intend to inflict any harm.*

*Thank you for agreeing to participate, I have planned this interview to last no longer than 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover.*

1. How long have you or did you work at the state education agency?
2. What experience did you have in planning for and leading large-scale systemic change prior to joining the state education agency?
3. What have you experienced in terms of planning for and leading state-level change since joining or while at the state education agency?
4. Describe an initiative included in the agency's strategic plan that you were responsible for planning and leading that had state-wide implications? [If the participant was involved in multiple initiatives, this question may be repeated]
5. Specifically, can you describe your role in this initiative and the role of others in planning for and leading this large-scale systemic change? [If the participant was involved in multiple initiatives, this question may be repeated]
6. What resources, tools, and/or guidance informed your planning and leading of this change initiative? [If the participant was involved in multiple initiatives, this question may be repeated]
7. What specific actions, behaviors, and mindsets were particularly important in planning for change effort?
8. What contexts or situations influenced or affected your leadership or experience in carrying out the planning portion of this responsibility?
9. What specific actions, behaviors, and mindsets were particularly important in leading initial implementation of this change effort?
10. What contexts or situations influenced or affected your leadership or experience in carrying out the initial implementation of this responsibility?
11. How would you describe your holistic experience in carrying out this large-scale systemic change?

12. How might this experience have changed your view or perception of yourself as a leader of change or your practices in leading a state-wide change initiative?
13. What were your biggest takeaways or identified best practices from having this experience in planning for and leading state-wide systemic change?
14. Describe any lessons learned or anything that you would do differently if given the opportunity to do it again?
15. Any advice for future leaders in planning for and leading state-wide change?

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT

**Study Title:** PREPARING FOR CHANGE: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW STATE EDUCATION LEADERS PLAN AND EXECUTE SYSTEMIC CHANGE FOR IMPROVED OUTCOMES IN EDUCATION

**Principal Investigator:** Cristina L Ramos  
Ridgeway

**Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor:** Rolf  
Straubhaar

**Email:** clr177@txstate.edu

**Email:**

straubhaar@txstate.edu

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

#### **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about the ways that state education leaders have thought about, planned for, and led statewide and large-scale change efforts in education. The information gathered will be used to potentially inform the development or revision of policies, procedures, and practices in planning for change initiatives, capturing the attention of those who carry the responsibility of leading and planning a systems change effort, and serving as a foundation for future research. You are being asked to participate because you have been identified as having led or currently leading a change initiative under strategic priority four under the agency's strategic plan.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in 1-2 brief interviews: conducted outside of work hours via telephone or video conference. Each interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. During the interviews, you will be asked to describe your experiences and processes when planning for and leading state wide change efforts in school improvement. The interview will be audio-recorded and the researcher may take notes as well.

#### ***BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES***

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide could provide opportunities to inform and assist future leaders planning for and leading change efforts.

#### ***EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY***

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

### **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Cristina L Ramos Ridgeway, 512-971-3323, [clr177@texasstate.edu](mailto:clr177@texasstate.edu).

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – ([dgoibert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgoibert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)).

**DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

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<b>Printed Name</b> of Study Participant	<b>Signature</b> of Study Participant	Date
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Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date
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