

Running head: ONBOARDING: DEVELOPING A SYSTEM

**ONBOARDING: DEVELOPING A SYSTEM FOR NEWLY HIRED PROFESSIONAL STAFF
WITHIN THE EASTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT**

A Doctoral Capstone Project

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

Department of Secondary Education and Administrative Leadership

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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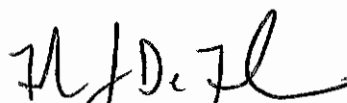
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Dedication

This capstone research is dedicated to my husband and children. Without your love and unwavering support, this simply would not have come to fruition. Collectively, you have helped me to achieve one of the most important goals that I ever set for myself. And for that I am forever grateful.

Dave, you are and have always been my rock. When I doubt myself you are always there to check me and get me back on track. From the day we met you've given me courage and support to go after my dreams. Nico and Mia, every day I hope to set a good example for you. And I hope that I have done that through this process, so that you learn that when you put your mind to something you cannot be stopped. Never let anything stand in your way. Barriers are nothing more than challenges and Emili's never quit.

Mom and Dad, you raised me to be a strong and independent woman who chases her dreams. I hope I've made you proud.

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Abstract

The purpose of this capstone research was to develop a formal process for onboarding professional employees in the Easton Area School District. The Easton Area School District is the twenty-first largest school district in the state of Pennsylvania with 75 teachers qualifying as newly hired professional staff as defined by this study. This research study surveyed the newly hired professional staff members within the District in order to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data that could be utilized to develop a formal system that, when implemented, provides a supportive and engaging atmosphere at the onset of employment. While the survey results were somewhat favorable of the current induction offerings, there were gaps identified based on research based best practices. Ultimately, the findings of this research study resulted in the development of a comprehensive, year-long onboarding system for the Easton Area School District, called *On the Bus*. This system includes all necessary components of research-based onboarding programs which, when implemented with fidelity, have the most lasting impact on organizations.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Over the course of my career I have come to recognize that human capital is the greatest asset within an organization. It is important not only to hire the best, but also to train and retain them. As the Assistant Superintendent of an organization employing 1,082 paid staff members, 604 of which are on the teacher contract, the individuals who are deployed across nine schools have the most significant impact on achieving the district's goals. There are many programs and initiatives that districts implement. Many are aimed at increasing student achievement and helping students reach their full potential throughout their schooling. However, no program can supplant the importance of a well-trained, positive staff that establishes a culture that strives to get the most out of their students.

The Easton Area School District is the twenty-first largest school district in Pennsylvania. Easton is a diverse community. The district is a mix of students coming from urban, suburban, and rural areas. Over one-half of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged. Fifty percent of the students are White, twenty-five percent are Hispanic, and twenty percent are Black. Fifteen percent of the students across the District receive special education services. There are a myriad of challenges present in districts with such a diverse population. It is no secret that many new teachers who are entering the field initially get assigned to the most challenging students. Therefore, teachers entering districts with more challenges often face a higher likelihood of working with students that have historically been marginalized (Coffey, Putman, Handler, & Leach, 2019). When coupled with the fact that over the past decade in Pennsylvania there are

71% less teachers being issued certifications (Mansfield, 2019), it is increasingly important to attract high quality teachers who have the ability to support their students in reaching their highest potential. However, districts cannot stop there. As jobs become more widespread and the candidate pool becomes more shallow, districts will have to make efforts to retain their teachers so that they do not move on somewhere else.

Throughout the past three years, in addition to serving as the Assistant Superintendent, I have taken on the role of Director of Human Resources on two occasions following the departure of two different directors. In the collective fourteen months that I have served in this capacity, I have become acutely aware of the fact that new staff members need more than what the District is providing. Historically, the District has treated its three-day pre-employment induction program as the primary means to integrate new teachers. However, the onboarding of new staff requires so much more.

New staff members, along with union leadership, have shared anecdotal information with me about the need to do a better job of transitioning new employees into the organization, ensuring that the training is valuable but not overwhelming, and providing sustained, meaningful support extending into the school year focused on growth. This led me to consider the concept of onboarding for my capstone research. I became interested in learning more by answering the following research questions:

1. How did the professional staff hired within the past five years rate their overall onboarding experience?
2. What aspects of current District practice during onboarding impact employee perception during the initial stage of employment in the District?

3. What elements in the initial stage of an onboarding process will have the greatest impact in the engagement of staff and the development of the relationship between the employee and District?
4. What methods will have the greatest impact in engaging newly hired employees by providing the support, confidence, and readiness needed in order to feel prepared as a new employee in the District?

Throughout this study, I seek to gain feedback from the professional staff who have joined the Easton Area School District over the past five years. These 78 individuals can provide valuable information as to what they experienced when they entered the District. Additionally, they will be able to share their experiences over the course of their induction program. Most importantly, they will be able to identify gaps in what they received as compared to what they believe would have been most beneficial to their integration into the District. This data will be utilized to better understand the needs of new teachers entering the field today. I will also be able to determine the actionable steps needed to develop a comprehensive onboarding program. Following the development of the program, the long-term goal will be to utilize the research and framework that is developed to improve the onboarding process for all employee groups within the district including administrators, para-professionals, administrative professionals, custodial/maintenance, and bus drivers.

I anticipate that the long-term product of this research will have significant impact on the organization moving forward. There is a significant investment made in new staff. This investment is often monetary through salaries, fringe benefits, and professional development. However, there is a great deal of personal investment made in new teachers

as well. Administrators and mentors dedicate time to train and support them throughout their transition into the field. These investments must be protected through the development of an onboarding program. Research supports the idea that quality onboarding programs ultimately pay for themselves through teacher retention and improved outcomes (Howe, 2006).

The ultimate goal of onboarding is to integrate new staff into the culture of the organization. This is only accomplished when there is a concerted investment into human capital. Leaders must view the onboarding process as an integral component to the achieving the goals they set within their schools. This will become increasingly more important in the years to come as the field of education is faced with a shortage of teachers. Districts that invest in their human capital will ultimately experience greater outcomes with their students.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Introduction

Onboarding has been defined as a process whereby new employees gain knowledge, skills, and behaviors in order to assimilate within the organization (Jakubik, Weese, Eliades, & Huth, 2017). Onboarding became a prominent element within human resources in the private sector in the mid 1970's, as a result of marketplace trends that placed a demand on companies to increase productivity and improve quality and became more prevalent in the early 2000's (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009; Stein & Christiansen, 2010). However, this concept was not formally introduced in the education field until more recently (Ingersoll, 2012; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019). Even still, school districts more typically

implement new teacher induction programs which mirror orientation programs, but could benefit from the further development of comprehensive onboarding programs. Many new teacher induction programs lack the depth of private sector onboarding programs because of the relatively new nature of the concept in the education field and the lack of specialized knowledge.

It is important to consider research that draws upon the onboarding practices within fields other than education. It is also important to consider global research and not simply focus research on public and private sector research across the nation, as other countries have engaged in onboarding practices that can be drawn from in order to improve the onboarding practice in education within the United States. Since the development of high-quality onboarding programs has been linked to reduced attrition and increased productivity, we cannot ignore the increasing need to build stronger onboarding programs as we see continue to see an increase in the teacher shortage (Howe, 2006). It is important for districts to develop strong onboarding programs, which show the value of the investment they make in their new teachers. There are significant costs associated with human resources functions of recruiting, hiring, and training teachers which make their retention even more noteworthy (DeCesare, Workman, & McClelland, 2016). High quality teachers have a far-reaching impact that cannot be overlooked. “The fulcrum for making major educational change is dedication to the success of the classroom teacher” (Callahan, 2016).

Employee Onboarding Programs

Elements of comprehensive onboarding programs. Onboarding programs have evolved over the course of time. The focus when onboarding was first introduced to the

human resources field was more geared to specific training areas within each individual's job responsibilities. This has grown over time to include a more holistic, strategic, long-term approach that is focused on getting the new hire to reach high levels of productivity in the shortest amount of time possible (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009; Stein & Christiansen, 2010). In the business sector, onboarding is traditionally a concept aimed at increasing productivity and profit, whereas in the education field it can translate to increasing productivity and student achievement. Select employee onboarding programs, such as the programs designed at Martha Stewart Living, Micron Technology, and Mary Kay, are outlined and scripted in a manner that allows for all new employees to undergo a similar experience which is important for organizational growth (Sims, 2011). This is of greater importance for larger organizations since there are many new employees onboarding at one time. Similarly, the formal onboarding program utilized by L'Oreal is divided into a six part integration program including: training, roundtable discussions, meetings with key insiders, on-the-job learning supported by management, individual mentoring, and field experience (Bauer, 2010).

The concept of onboarding begins with recruitment of staff. This must be viewed as a continuous process that is grounded in the reputation of the employer (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014). When building an onboarding program, employers should identify what is important to the organization and build the program backwards in order to incorporate all that is vital (Suggs, 2014). They should also take into consideration how the employees will know the relevance and importance of the program. If the onboarding program is simply known as the onboarding program, employees may associate it as just another compliant aspect of the organization. However, if the employer brands the onboarding

program, the employees will more likely view it as a fabric of the organization (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Employers should take pride in developing recruitment materials both in print and electronic forms that introduce potential employees to the organization and the surrounding area. Additionally, social media and online job portals can be used to expand recruitment efforts and reach more potential new employees (Nagendra, 2014).

The beginning of an individual's employment within an organization may be a time of stress, especially if adequate support is not provided, which can cause the employee to feel unprepared and unconfident in him or herself (Dias-Lacey & Guirguis, 2017; Zembytska, 2016). New employees could be described as survivalists (Unwin, 2015). Onboarding programs must be designed with this in mind. During this period, organizations should focus on enhancing future job performance and building a foundation for innovation (Keisling & Laning, 2016). This will lead to employee engagement and the development of a professional identity that is aligned to the organization and its mission and values (Baker & DePiro, 2019; Keisling & Laning, 2016).

In a research-based model of onboarding practices, Bauer (2010) identifies the following processes as integral for achieving successful onboarding: recruiting, orientation, process support, coaching/mentoring, training, and feedback. These can be designed through an onboarding roadmap so that new employees are aware of the intentionality of delivering each step (Bauer, 2010). When these steps are followed by an evaluation by the new employee, organizations are guaranteeing themselves that they are building responsive onboarding programs that can have significant impact on employee attitudes and connectedness (Israel, Kamman, McCray, & Sindelar, 2014).

Onboarding is mutually beneficial to the employee and employer. For the employee, it provides them with the tools that they need as they are entering a new workplace. For the employer, it allows a process to build capacity which strengthens the overall organization. Suggs (2014) cites that it takes approximately twenty weeks for professional employees to reach full productivity, and they must be supported during that time in order to do so. Employers should not simply be interested in personnel administration. They must focus on the constant improvement of their employees in order to achieve the goals of the organization (Bercu, 2017).

In order for onboarding programs to develop into effective programs, employers must engage in reflective practices that assist in future advancement. Programs should seek the feedback of those who have been a part of their onboarding process so that they can tailor the program in the future to the needs of the new employees (Sims, 2011). And while programs may be accustomed to surveying their constituents, they should also consider the value in assessing themselves. Those involved in the planning of the onboarding program should ask insightful questions focused on whether they make their new hires feel welcomed or if they are designing the program from the employee's perspective (Suggs, 2014).

In school districts, induction programs have often served as the onboarding program. However, there are various elements that take traditional induction programs and turn them into comprehensive onboarding programs. These include recruitment, orientation, one-on-one mentoring, coaching, and ongoing professional development within a learning community (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014; Moir, 2009; Zembytska, 2016).

Levels of onboarding. Four distinct levels of onboarding have been identified by Bauer (2010) through her research which has become seminal in the human resources field. These levels, also coined as the Four C's, are compliance, clarification, culture, and connection (Bauer, 2010). Each of the levels builds upon one another, yet few organizations formally program to achieve each level.

The compliance level, which is the lowest level of onboarding, provides new employees with basic policies and laws relevant to the job (Bauer, 2010). Nearly all organizations implement this level of onboarding. Many organizations incorporate this through an orientation program. One example of a way to support new staff through the compliance level of onboarding is to provide a New Employee Handbook (Sowell, 2017). When organizations stop at this level of onboarding they build knowledge in their new staff, but do not create systematic change.

Clarification occurs at level two and keeps organizations in a more passive role of onboarding (Bauer, 2010). This level ensures that the teaching that occurred in level one is understood by the new employees. There is some two-way interaction between the employer and the new employee, but this remains focused on policies and job-related functions (Bauer, 2010).

The latter two levels are not only focused on knowledge gained, but are aimed to change the behavior of the participants (Bercu, 2017). These two levels are what make onboarding programs strategic and systematic, instead of just superficial orientation programs (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Level three, known as culture, focuses on providing employees with the organization's norms (Bauer, 2010). Whereas level four, connection, creates opportunities to build interpersonal relationships and networks in both formal and

informal ways (Bauer, 2010). In a study conducted by Meyer and Bartels (2017) it is reasonable to conclude that onboarding programs that equitably focus on all four levels of onboarding net employees with greater organizational commitment and higher job satisfaction.

When developing onboarding programs, organizations should place focus on developing formal aspects of each level of onboarding. Levels one and two may seem more pressing for brand new employees, however employers cannot underestimate the value of continuing the onboarding program into levels three and four in a formal, systematically designed program. Attention should also be given to ensuring that the following four concepts are interwoven across all levels: self-confidence, role clarity, social integration, and organizational culture (Bauer, 2010).

Employee Orientation

New teacher induction. New teacher induction programs have become more widely utilized over the past few decades. Many states have implemented legislation that mandates districts to develop and implement induction for new teachers. In Pennsylvania, new teacher induction became mandatory in 1987 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019). Other states have built model induction programs that are widely referenced in literature. California developed the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessments (BTSA) program, which is funded at the state level (Howe, 2006). New teachers in Connecticut must participate in the state's induction program, known as Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) which has evolved since 1986 (Howe, 2006).

Induction programs can take many forms. Many programs contain basic elements, such as an orientation component (Ingersoll, 2012; Suggs, 2014). To some, induction has

become synonymous with orientation, which limits the scope of the intent. To others, mentoring has become synonymous with induction (Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, & Heikkinen, 2016). The purpose of induction programs is to improve teaching and learning, enhance professional efficacy, transfer valuable cultural aspects of the organization, all with the goal of retaining the teacher within the district (Sadiq, Ramzan, & Akhtar, 2017). It would be unreasonable to expect that these goals can be met simply by offering a pre-employment orientation.

There are various levels in induction programs, such as recruitment, training, employment, and support (Perry & Hayes, 2011). It is imperative that when designing induction programs, districts do not stop short of providing sustained support. Some induction programs include supports, such as year long mentoring, regularly scheduled communication with building leadership, common planning time with other teachers, peer observations, professional learning networks, a reduced teaching schedule, and classroom support from a teacher's aide (Howe, 2006; Ingersoll, 2012; Perry & Hayes, 2011). California's BTSA program focuses on ongoing, intense refinement of classroom practice (Howe, 2006). Therefore, the focus moves beyond compliance levels of orientation programs, and places an emphasis on developing teaching practice. When studied, programs that provide such increased supports to new teachers have a very large effect on their acclimatization and long-term commitment within the organization (Ingersoll, 2012). Mitchell, Howard, Meetze-Hall, Hendrick, and Sandlin (2017) cite the Center for Teacher innovation's cyclical model of induction that includes extending knowledge, application, reflection, and collaboration.

It is important to consider that the initial period following teachers being hired will contribute to the manner in which they approach their work over time. In a study completed by the government of Punjab, it was observed that induction programs will serve as the backbone for what new teachers practice throughout their careers and will contribute to the development of their outlook on teaching (Sadiq, Ramzan, & Akhtar, 2017). In an analysis of induction programs conducted by Howe (2006) of Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States, common attributes were identified, all of which allowed new teachers to develop together in a supportive environment that focused on collaboration, reflection, and assimilation into their profession and organization. However, the programs in Germany, Japan, and New Zealand are far more robust than those in existence in the United States (Howe, 2006). These are nationally endorsed programs that are requirements for all new teachers entering their workforce and are developed with the purpose of enhancing their workforce. For instance, Japanese induction programs require new teachers to complete the equivalent of 125 days of professional development while in their first year of teaching so that they are working in a hands-on environment, rich in collaboration with their mentor teacher (Howe, 2006).

In a study conducted by Dias-Lacey & Guirguis (2017), new teachers cite work overload, lack of support from other teachers, lack of support from administration, discipline challenges, and curriculum challenges as the top five sources of stress in their first year of teaching. Therefore, induction programs must strive to overcome such stressors for their new employees. The research on induction programs indicates that more comprehensive programs have a relationship with teacher assuredness which can be

linked to teacher retention (Perry & Hayes, 2011). While not all induction programs are found to have an effect on new employees, those that are strategic and highly structured in their design show the greatest impact (Ariffin, Hasim, & Yusof, 2014). It also can be fairly stated that more comprehensive programs come with an increased cost. While all of the additional supports can serve as valuable, many are also tied to an increased financial obligation. It is important for school districts, when developing induction programs, to consider how best to provide ample support to their new teachers, consider the associated costs, and determine a cost-benefit analysis of investing in their greatest asset: their teachers.

Role of leadership. One aspect of new teacher induction programs that cannot be overlooked is the role of building principals. These are typically the individuals who seek to hire the new teachers that are coming on board and should play an integral role in supporting them once they are there. New teachers will often look to their building principal for direction. During student teaching, they received support from the supporting teacher and university faculty. When new teachers enter the teaching field, they will need similar connections in the beginning so that they are able to make a successful transition (Wood, 2005). If they do not receive ample support from their building leader, they are left with a negative perception and could develop a disconnect from the profession from the start (Baker-Gardner, 2015; Wood, 2005). This support must be timely, with immediate help and feedback within the first month not tapering off until individually appropriate (Martin, Buelow, & Hoffman, 2015).

In a comprehensive program, there should be an identified manner in which principals play a role in the induction process. As stated, since they serve as the new

teacher recruiter, they should also serve as the new teacher advocate and retainer (Wood, 2005). Principals should be aware of their role in the process specific to building school culture, serving as the instructional leader, and coordinating and supporting mentorship (Wood, 2005). Selecting the correct mentor for each new teacher is integral. Principals should be aware of what characteristics to consider when choosing mentors. Selection criteria should include interpersonal skills, instructional effectiveness, informal and formal leadership, content-area and grade-level expertise (Zembytska, 2016). Additionally, principals should select teachers who are trustworthy, non-judgmental, empathetic, and effective communicators (Hall, Hughes, & Thelk, 2017). Many induction programs simply select veteran teachers as mentors instead of identifying the correct fit for the mentee (Athanasios et al., 2008). Principals should strive to weave the induction program into the fabric of the school so that it isn't viewed as checklist compliance, but as meaningful development of their staff.

Principals set the tone of their buildings. When they place a strong value on employee growth, they are acknowledging the benefits of continued development (Moir, 2009). By providing an environment that supports the development of teachers, principals are establishing a culture that helps to positively define their schools (Callahan, 2016). Building principals should strive to offer opportunities to develop high-quality relationships with their new teachers (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrais, 2014). This can be accomplished by developing instructional sessions that help to convey relevant information to the new employees (Baker-Gardner, 2015). This gives the principal an opportunity to impart information to the new employees, while building a relationship with them. This also requires principals to be connected to best practices connecting them

to the needs of the new employees so that the sessions are viewed as beneficial (Baker-Gardner, 2015).

Another factor that can show the dedication of the building principal to the development of teachers involved in a new teacher induction program is the role they play in the instructional process. Principals who conduct regular walkthroughs and unannounced visits to new teachers' classrooms send an unspoken message that they value the new teacher and are interested in them. Early observations and evaluations can be a good mechanism to provide new teachers with a sense of accomplishment that they can build upon (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). In a study conducted by Keisling and Laning (2016) teachers reported that more frequent check-ins and attention led to a higher level of satisfaction in their first year. Further, while most new teacher induction programs do not include this job-embedded element of the program, principals modeling lessons for novice teachers can be a powerful learning tool that nurtures teacher learning (Molitor, Burkett, Cunningham, Dell, & Presta, 2014; Wood, 2005). This practice also shows a level of vulnerability by the principal and can help the new teacher to see them as a support more than an authority.

Teachers interfacing with their principals tends to happen more naturally and more regularly at the elementary level. Therefore, while it is important for all principals to be cognizant of how they will support their new teachers, it is of even greater importance for secondary principals to do this deliberately. New teachers rely on regular feedback, similar to that which they received during their student teaching. Principals must provide feedback and ongoing communication in instructional areas and classroom management strategies, while offering support to new teachers emotionally (Wood, 2005).

Mentoring and Professional Support

Mentoring and coaching. The National Education Association, as cited by Perry and Hayes (2011), indicate that “mentoring is best suited to helping new teachers translate their academic knowledge into meaningful instruction.” One of the most effective reasons that mentoring is useful is because it is a non-evaluative way to provide important feedback, support, and advocacy (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014; Leimann, Murdock, & Waller, 2008). Mentoring creates intentional support for new teachers who may be too reluctant to seek out support on their own (Lee et. al., 2006; Martin, Buelow, & Hoffman, 2015). This is particularly important since new teachers are not always sure of who can help them be successful (Keisling & Laning, 2016).

Mentoring has become an important element of new teacher induction programs in schools. Historically, mentoring has been viewed as a relationship between two people where there is a one-way imparting of knowledge. Mentoring programs typically focus on orientation to the role, technical advice, and local advice (Athanases et al., 2008). Organization is a factor that mentors should orient their mentees to so that they can be effective in a fast-paced, accountable work setting (Lee et. al., 2006). Mentor teachers can also be responsible for assisting teachers with meeting basic needs and the emotional adjustment to their new role and to their schools, providing feedback through observations, and assisting teachers perform functions of their role that they are less familiar with, such as analyzing assessment data (Leimann, Murdock, & Waller, 2008; Martin, Buelow, & Hoffman, 2015). Successful mentoring programs offer a reciprocal opportunity for new teachers to engage in open and honest communication with experienced teachers where the mentor teacher fosters opportunities for growth and

development and creates the habit of reflective practice (Callahan, 2016; Lee et. al., 2016; Pennanene, Bristol, Wilkinson, & Heikkinen, 2016). While not all mentor programs include all of these components, a comprehensive program will consider these as key aspects.

There are various models of mentoring across school districts in the United States and throughout the world. In a study conducted by Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, and Heikkinen (2016) mentoring programs in Finland and Australia were reviewed. In Finland, new teachers participate on a voluntary basis in mentor groups of four to eight teachers and meet monthly (Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, and Heikkinen, 2016). The members of these groups are responsible for motivating one another by planning and implementing their own professional learning throughout the year (Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, and Heikkinen, 2016). Finland's model focuses on socialization and growth. Australia takes a different, more traditional approach that is more aligned to the typical mentoring program in the United States. In Australia, new teachers are placed in one-on-one mentoring relationships, however they must fulfill specified standards of the program in order to maintain employment and become an accredited teacher (Pennanen, Bristol, Wilkinson, and Heikkinen, 2016).

Mentors have a very important role that cannot be understated. Essentially, they must focus on the positive aspects of teaching, such as helping students grow and contributing positively to the community, while not allowing their own stressors to impact their mentoring relationship (Perry & Hayes, 2011; Sowell, 2017). In some districts mentors simply complete a to-do list with their mentee. However, when mentors engage in instructional mentoring or individual coaching sessions they are helping new teachers to set goals, plan, analyze, and reflect (Martin, Buelow, & Hoffman, 2015; Moir, 2009; Wilson

& Lawton-Smith, 2016). All of these are skills, while not easily acquired, will serve a new teacher invaluable throughout their career.

It is important for mentors and mentees to be aware that mentoring will not remove all barriers. There will still be stressful situations that occur for new teachers. Therefore, mentors must continue to remind the mentee that as these circumstances occur, they should approach each situation calmly and be focused on problem solving instead of the problem itself (Ariffin, Hashim, & Yusof, 2014; Lee et. al., 2006). This is strengthened when the mentor relationship takes a humanistic, person-centered approach (Norman-Ganser, 2004).

Having mentors serve as coaches is an effective way to support new teachers with the actual teaching and learning process. When this is built into mentoring programs, it encourages new teachers to review and reflect on their own teaching in order to grow and improve (Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017). It is possible for programs to utilize the same mentor for all aspects of the mentorship. It is also feasible for the program design to incorporate different, more specialized individuals as instructional coaches (Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017).

Coaching, which can be described as human development, can either take the form of observations with feedback or modeling of lessons by the mentor (Sowell, 2017; Wilson & Lawton-Smith, 2016). Due to its one-on-one nature, coaching has been viewed as a more effective way to increase confidence and self-assuredness (Wilson & Lawton-Smith, 2016). This is a means to grow more innovative employees than through traditional professional learning that is textbook or lecture based. In the business sector, specifically in the telecom market, the field changes so quickly that training and support must be adaptive as well

(Wilson & Lawton-Smith, 2016). Therefore, this field utilizes coaching in their onboarding programs so that the training provided is not outdated. The field of education can learn from this approach since the field implements change at a much slower pace, despite increasing needs.

There are factors that can negatively impact the success of mentor programs which employers should be aware of. Cost is often a reason that mentoring programs do not succeed (Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017; DeCesare, Workman, & McClelland, 2016). Another factor that can interfere with building a strong mentor-mentee relationship is time (Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017; DeCesare, Workman, & McClelland, 2016; Zembytska, 2016). Mentees must feel that the mentor is available to them (Sowell, 2017). While the mentor is performing tasks associated with their role as a mentor, they still have their own job responsibilities as a teacher (DeCesare, Workman, & McClelland, 2016). It is for this reason that some districts have opted to utilize retired teachers as mentors (Callahan, 2016; Zembytska, 2016). In a study conducted in Aurora Public Schools by DeCesare, McClelland, and Randel (2017), pairing new teachers with retired teacher mentors even had a positive impact on student achievement in the first year of the program.

Mentor programs may develop a negative connotation to those in the organization if the mentor-mentee relationship is not carefully selected. Mentors must be carefully selected and thoroughly trained, or they could end up having a negative impact (Hall, Hughes, & Thelk, 2017). A mismatch of personalities, values, or work ethic can make the program itself appear to be ineffective (Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017)

Mentoring, though, cannot stand-alone. Mentoring must be accompanied by other aspects of onboarding in order to be most effective, such as coaching, resource connection,

and professional development (Athanasas et al., 2008). Additionally, mentoring cannot be implemented simply to comply with policy. Mentoring is a process, not an event. It must be done with intention and designed to truly support the new hires within the organization (Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017).

Personalized, professional development. Professional development should be a main component of onboarding programs for new teachers. Employees perform better if the professional development they engage in has a direct impact on their job performance (Bercu, 2017). Many onboarding programs in schools provide a level of administrative and collegial support, but not as many provide opportunities for ongoing, embedded professional learning (Zembytska, 2016). Strong programs incorporate experiential learning, social learning, and classroom learning within their programs (Adragna, 2018).

Specific areas of professional development that should be considered are classroom management, assessment, building relationships with students, communication with families, engaging with the community, legal aspects of the job, and professionalism (Leimann, Murdock, & Waller, 2008; Sowell, 2017). Classroom management is especially important since many teachers who leave the profession cite struggles in this area as a primary reason (Baker, Gentry, & Larmer, 2016). There must also be a dedicated focus on the participant's own teaching followed by reflection that connects to the pedagogy of effective teaching strategies (Unwin, 2015).

Professional development can take many shapes. One effective method is the utilization of collaboration circles. This allows for authentic discussion about topics, such as lesson planning, while sharing tips and strategies with colleagues (Bentley & Cason, 2019). Collaboration circles could also take the approach of book studies so that new

teachers are able to connect their practice to literature, however it is important not to overwhelm the new staff members in their first year (Sowell, 2017). Since collaboration circles are unique to each group engaged, they are a way to deliver non-tailor-made professional learning (Bentley & Cason, 2019). A point that should be instilled in new teachers, though, is that professional development should always be taking place (Bills, Giles, & Rogers, 2016). Attendance at planned events should not be the only time teachers are focused on growth and learning.

Personalization of the offerings in an induction program can enhance the buy-in of those participating. This can be likened to the manner in which we personalize learning for our students. There are unique nuances on the job for teachers at elementary, middle, and secondary levels, along with differences for specialists such as guidance counselors or special educators. This creates a need for personalizing and differentiating professional development to ensure that teachers are receiving specific support aimed at improving them within their role without creating an overwhelming feeling (Bentley & Cason, 2019; Martin, Buelow, & Hoffman, 2015). By differentiating the learning opportunities for new teachers, programs become more adaptive and responsive and do not limit learning to a one-size fits-all approach (Molitor, Burkett, Cunningham, Dell, & Presta, 2014; Winstead-Fry, 2010). One way that districts can assess the manner in which they determine the offerings within an induction program is by utilizing a Beginning Teacher Needs Assessment (Leimann, Murdock, & Waller, 2008). This is a way to ensure that teachers are receiving the supports that they have identified a need for and are not engaged in activities that do not hold personal meaning to their work. While it is encouraged to personalize learning, this should not be misconstrued into making learning voluntary (Klein, Polin, &

Sutton, 2015). Permitting staff to engage in professional learning at their own will could be detrimental to their own development in they did not opt to participate.

Online support. Online support can play an instrumental role in onboarding programs. Select corporations have transitioned their onboarding programs into fully online programs. For instance, Marriott, Holiday Inn, and Hyatt have moved away from a classroom setting for their program delivery and have built an e-learning platform in order to ensure that self-guided onboarding programs are delivered uniformly to all new employees across the world (West & Barnard, 2010). However, many other organizations including school entities utilize online resources, but do not allow it to dominate the program and supplant personal interaction. Effective onboarding programs require an intersecting blend of people, online resources, and processes (Adragna, 2018). It is important to not lose the personal aspect of onboarding with online programs which can lead to a disconnect and potential content overload (Sims, 2011).

The utilization of online programming in onboarding can help from a planning and coordination perspective. When employees are hired at various times in the year, it can be cumbersome to schedule employee orientation programs intermittently (West & Barnard, 2010). Yet it is important for new employees to be introduced to important information upon hire, so they cannot wait until it is logistically viable to schedule an orientation session to receive information. This is a prime opportunity for employers to develop online systems that deliver important orientation information in a timely fashion. It is also important to consider the fact that many newly hired employees who are entering the workforce are digital natives (Gong, Ramkissoon, Greenwood, & Hoyte, 2018). For employers who choose to utilize online programming, it is important that they remain

updated on new technologies that can be interwoven for even greater impact (Unwin, 2015).

One tool that can be integrated into an onboarding program and enhance its value is the use of online discussions (Moir, 2009; Unwin, 2015). Asynchronous online discussion boards can be used by the teachers at any time so they do not feel constrained by a designated time commitment. Online discussion board topics should be supportive and encourage the development of sound teaching strategies (Unwin, 2015). They should not be used to complain or commiserate. They can also contain relevant scenarios that help the novice teacher strategize solutions to common problems within the field. Online forums can also be a means to provide new teachers with specific resources that they can review as needed at their convenience (Moir, 2009). Additionally, participants can bring individual meaning to the process by identifying something that interests them within their own classroom and problem solve with peers (Unwin, 2015). In order to intertwine all aspects of the onboarding process, mentors could also participate in the online discussions so that there is veteran perspective provided (Baker, Gentry, & Larmer, 2016).

Mentor training and organizational support. In order for mentors to be effective, they must know the expectations of the role and receiving training in order to perform it. Mentors themselves report the need for increased training in order to be effective in their mentorship (Sowell, 2017). In a study conducted by DeCesare, Workman, and McClelland (2016) only one-third of states reviewed require mentors to receive training. This calls for the attention of school districts to consider implementing training in their programs.

Not only will mentors be there to assist new employees with basic functions, but they will also play a meaningful role in developing their mentees as professionals. Their

training as a teacher was focused on working with students, however when serving as a mentor it is important not to undervalue potential training for providing a helping and empowering response to an adult through effective communication skills (Dias-Lacey & Guirguis, 2017; Leimann, Murdock, & Waller, 2008; Sowell, 2017). Providing feedback in a non-judgmental way is an important skill for a mentor to hone (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014). It will be important for mentors to be trained in serving as a sounding board, making suggestions, and connecting mentees to resources, instead of simply directing them what to do (Sowell, 2017). The latter approach would not effectively teach the mentee how to problem solve for him or herself. Additionally, the mentor must establish a comfortable and trusting relationship rooted in empathy so that the feedback provided is received positively (Lee et. al., 2006; Norman & Ganser, 2004). Simply put, they will serve as a leader and role model for new teachers (Hall, Hughes, & Thelk, 2017).

Mentors must engage in their own self-reflection. This will allow them to help their mentees engage in the same behavior. This may not be as typical and self-explanatory as one would anticipate, therefore, this should be a component of mentor training. Mentors should also be trained in goal setting, which should apply to both the mentor and mentee (Lee et. al., 2006).

Mentor training programs should be a priority when developing onboarding programs. If mentors are not properly trained, they could conceivably pass along outdated practices that are not effective for effective for the new teachers to acquire (Sowell, 2017). Mentors should be trained to conduct observations so that the mentee is engaged in job-embedded learning (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014). Failure to adequately train mentors can have a negative impact on the teachers who are receiving the support (Martin, Buelow, &

Hoffman, 2015). Mentoring programs are only as strong as the mentors involved (Callahan, 2016).

As the old adage goes, “we are only as strong as our weakest link.” This should be considered when building an onboarding program. The organization, as a whole, will benefit by building and investing in its human capital. Dunn and Jasinski (2009) view synergism of a staff as an important concept when developing new employees. This requires teamwork and departments working collectively as a group (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009). This concept also reinforces the value of challenging and learning from our most experienced teachers (Moir, 2009).

New Employee Socialization

Practices that impact employee socialization. Employee socialization is an important aspect of all onboarding programs. This can be defined as the process where employees learn about and become entrenched in and bonded to their new role, organization, and its culture (Klein & Weaver, 2000). This should be viewed as the development of people instead of the development of competencies. Organizations should have a goal that new employees feel like a valued member of the organization at the conclusion of the onboarding program. Throughout the process, there should be an intentionality to transfer the organizational culture to the new employee, while integrating him or her into the social framework of the organization (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009; Meter & Bartels, 2017). Social acceptance is powerful and can influence long-term job performance and commitment to the organization (Fleming, Goldman, Correll, & Taylor, 2016). Onboarding programs that focus on employee socialization reach the third and fourth levels of Bauer’s theory, Culture and Connection (Meyer & Bartels, 2017). As employers

increase opportunities for socialization, they decrease uncertainty and increase connectedness (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrias, 2014).

It is essential that upon hire, new employees be welcomed so that they develop positive attitudes and beliefs toward the organization (Fleming, Goldman, Correll, & Taylor, 2016; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). Employee immersion drives the biggest gains and creates the highest levels of productivity (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). This is done informally through employee interactions, and formally through the onboarding program itself. One way for this to occur informally is simply by fostering relationships. An important aspect of socialization is the passing on of traditions, customs, myths, and stories related to the organization (Klein & Weaver, 2000). Additionally, employees who regularly receive feedback and have strong role models have been found to identify stronger commitment to the organization over time (Meyer & Bartels, 2017). It is not surprising that employees who build connections and experience networking opportunities throughout their onboarding program rate the program with greater satisfaction (Meyer & Bartels, 2017). The goal for organizations is to create an environment where new employees engage in formal organizational socialization to enough of an extent that they feel comfortable taking their own steps to engage in future informal socialization (Fleming, Goldman, Correll, & Taylor, 2016).

New employees should have the opportunity to socialize with the existing members of the school community. They should also be provided with opportunities to socialize with other inductees (Fleming, Goldman, Correll, & Taylor, 2016). This will allow them to become engrained in the existing and future culture of the organization, for which they will

play a role. Doing so has a pervasive impact on the new employee's socialization (Suggs, 2014).

Socialization within organizations is important. It is also important to consider the value of socializing employees to the full organization, beyond the department they are assigned to. In schools, socialization should occur with members of the full school community and should not be limited to those who share the same grade level or content area (Fleming, Goldman, Correll, & Taylor, 2016). This will allow new employees to become engrained in the full culture of the organization and not simply the ideals that are readily accepted by those in the same role as them which will lead to the development of a cohesive school community.

Research has indicated that comprehensive new teacher induction programs not only help new teachers with effective teaching practices, but also have a significant impact on their development of a professional identity (Howe, 2006). Socialization should be done with intentionality through an onboarding program, otherwise it will occur on its own but the outcome will be left to chance. Principals have the ability to impact employee socialization when assigning mentors who are respected and portray positivity within the school community (Wood, 2005).

Factors that impact the socialization of millennial employees. Many of the new employees entering the workforce are considered millennials. In fact, they make up the largest, most educated generation in the United States workforce (Gong, Ramkissoon, Greenwood, & Hoyte, 2018). Millennials can be defined as those individuals born between 1980-2000 and have distinct needs and motivations when compared to other generational groups (Abrams, 2018). Employers must understand the nuances of this demographic

group in order to recruit, train, motivate, and support them, specifically because a majority of new teachers from this point forward are millennials (Abrams, 2018; Gong, Ramkissoon, Greenwood, & Hoyte, 2018). Millennials are apt to be high achieving, high-energy, multi-taskers who think on a global level and are accustomed to personalization and immediacy (Abrams, 2018). They will likely need high levels of engagement from the beginning of the onboarding process (Vargas, 2013). Their big picture perspective should be considered when developing the onboarding program so that it does not have solely a task-driven focus (Vargas, 2013).

For many millennials, they are entering the professional workforce for the first time. Employers must consider orienting them to the role, along with orienting them to the world of work (Vargas, 2013). Consideration should be given to handling conflict, learning from constructive criticism, and communication skills with teammates and leaders (Vargas, 2013).

Knowing the characteristics of millennial employees is important, since employers will need to gear practices to align to their needs and motivations. Having an onboarding program that does not offer timely information could be troubling to a millennial. Providing detailed information and a means to access all information electronically would likely be preferred by millennial employees (Abrams, 2018). Since they have grown up in a culture of immediacy, employers cannot wait to support them. Ample information should be provided and should not be difficult to access or locate (Gong, Ramkissoon, Greenwood, & Hoyte, 2018). Further, many basic human resources functions are augmented through the use of social media, which is appealing to millennial employees (Nagendra, 2014).

Millennial employees also tend to prefer working collaboratively, in teams (Abrams, 2018). They are innovators and are eager to identify new ways to help the organization (Gong, Ramkissoon, Greenwood, & Hoyte, 2018). In a study conducted by Gong, Ramkissoon, Greenwood, & Hoyte (2018), millennials were found to develop greater role innovation when faced with opportunities for service and dedication to the organization than when they are simply presented with policy driven, technical tasks. Millennials also wish to be viewed as valued partners interested in creating change and often do not perceive the hierarchy in the same manner as other generations (Abrams, 2018). For this reason, mentors need to understand this as they approach their role. Otherwise, there could be role confusion and misinterpretation simply based on generational differences. Additionally, due to their collaborative nature, soliciting feedback from millennial employees throughout the onboarding process shows an organizational commitment and values their feedback for future development of the onboarding process (Vargas, 2013).

Employee Perception of Onboarding Process

Employee engagement and job satisfaction. Two goals of strong onboarding programs are to produce greater job satisfaction and achieve an alignment to the value system of the organization (Spanjol, Tam, & Tam, 2015). It is important for employees to embrace the same vision and values of their employer for maximized success. Employers who offer opportunities for employee development tend to have more satisfied employees (Bercu, 2017). This is because knowledge alone does not impact behavioral change (Suggs, 2014). Employees who have greater job satisfaction are more inclined to take on more work and demonstrate a commitment to the organization (Spanjol, Tam, & Tam, 2015). This results in a mutually beneficial relationship between the employee and employer.

According to Bland, Church, & Luo (2014), teachers who feel welcome and have a sense of belonging upon their arrival have been found to develop more positive attitudes. Ballard and Blessing (2006) liken this concept to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They cite that once new employees feel belongingness, they can reach levels of personal satisfaction which impacts positive output (Ballard & Blessing, 2006).

Peer mentoring has been associated with increased employee engagement and satisfaction (Jakubik, Weese, Eliades, & Huth, 2017). Taking this one step further, providing opportunities for new teachers to conduct peer observations of other teacher leaders is an element of a comprehensive onboarding program. This is a component that can have a great impact on employee engagement and does not simply treat the new employee as a recipient of information. In order to achieve employee engagement that leads to job satisfaction, peer mentoring should be incorporated into onboarding programs regularly (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, and Cowan-Hathcock (2007).

Dias-Lacey and Guirguis (2017) researched the coping strategies that most supported the challenges of new teachers. In their qualitative study, they found that when a novice teacher received the support she had been requesting, her emotions towards the teaching professional overall changed dramatically (Dias-Lacey & Guirguis, 2017). We cannot underestimate the value of simply listening and providing support, and the impact that has on new teachers.

In a study of 451 new teachers in North Carolina which was conducted by Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, and Cowan-Hathcock (2007), nearly 70% of the teachers indicated that their induction program activities were effective. In the same study, 96% of respondents indicated that the most valuable aspect of the induction program was when other teachers

made them feel part of the school community (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, and Cowan-Hathcock (2007). This data set is powerful as it illustrates that the highest impact to teachers is the support from other teachers. Certain aspects of induction programs focus on compliance and are necessary components of onboarding. However, in order to achieve employee engagement and a sense of assimilation, programs must incorporate strategies that acculturate new employees. As a respondent stated in a study conducted by Keisling and Laning (2016), “people in a new job are very happy to be here, and the organization should do as much as possible to capitalize on their enthusiasm.”

Commitment to the organization and retention. Comprehensive onboarding programs must focus on not allowing novice teachers reach a level of disenfranchisement, especially during an era of increased accountability and professional demands (Wood, 2005). While not always quantifiable, districts can be proactive in reducing attrition by implementing strong teacher induction and mentoring programs (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014; Callahan, 2016). Districts must guard against teacher attrition and teacher migration (Norman & Ganser, 2004). Once a teacher is invested in, they should be developed with an eye on maintaining them within the district. This is why it is important to provide specific onboarding for both new teachers and teachers who are new to the district.

When implemented well, onboarding programs take a great deal of time and resources, therefore organizations should strive to retain the employees that they invest in. It is for this reason that employee preparedness is a main focus of onboarding programs, so that the employees do not fall into isolation and, instead, remain confident and committed well beyond the conclusion of the onboarding program (Callahan, 2016; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). Research conducted by Callahan (2016) has shown that confident employees

directly correlate to employee retention. In a study conducted in the hospitality industry, West and Barnard (2010) cite the most correlative reason for loss of productivity in companies is a result of inexperienced staff who have not been trained to be efficient.

Similar results are found in the education field related to employee commitment and retention of teachers. It has been shown that in order to have a positive impact on teacher retention, the substance, intensity, and length of the mentoring program are critical (Callahan, 2016).

Teacher retention is becoming a greater focus in the current era of education. Not as many teachers are entering the field so it is important for employers to protect and nurture their human capital. Further, the annual turnover rate in the education field is 13.2%, which is greater than the average of 11% in other fields (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014). Additionally, nearly 30% of new teachers leave the profession during the first three years of their careers (Winstead-Fry, 2010). These statistics are of grave concern, since Zembytska (2016) reports that the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future has calculated the cost of teacher turnover annually at over \$7 billion inclusive of training, recruiting, and hiring. When broken down, this can be attributed to \$8,000 per teacher (Callahan, 2016). This is a significantly high financial cost to school districts with an even greater cost to student achievement (Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017). Additionally, this is of great importance since there are already many financial constraints placed on school districts (Callahan, 2016).

Teachers will feel a sense of commitment to the organization if they feel valued. Engaging them in the future development of the onboarding program by soliciting their feedback is an effective way to display value (Vargas, 2013). In research cited by Carr,

Holmes, and Flynn (2017) the implementation of onboarding practices, either in sum or in isolation, has been found to reduce teacher turnover and decrease retention. Simply stated, “[t]eachers flourish when they feel good about their work” (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014).

Conclusion and Synthesis

There are many reasons for employers to develop comprehensive onboarding programs. While the impetus of onboarding programs in businesses was based on financial and market outcomes, improved employee attitudes and behaviors has had an equally important impact on organizations (Spanjol, Tam, & Tam, 2015). Strong onboarding programs in education must focus on the fact that the single greatest factor for success of students is the teacher. Therefore, induction programs and onboarding programs that focus solely on compliance and review of policies and practices do not help to grow the individuals who will ultimately have the most significant impact on students. Additionally, this is an area that requires greater development and research. Due to the fact that there are not widespread examples of onboarding programs in the field of education, the research of their impact on teacher retention and job satisfaction remains sparse. As districts develop and implement comprehensive programs, research should focus on best practices and elements that make them most successful.

While the state of Pennsylvania requires each local district to develop and implement an induction program, it is not a state coordinated program. Therefore, districts must develop their own program to support new teachers which leads to inconsistencies. Comprehensive new teacher induction programs must be developed to include elements of

onboarding that are present in other sectors of work in order to provide sustained support that will have the greatest positive impact on new teachers.

An onboarding program should be developed with sound expectations and components that are mandatory. There should also be elements of the program that are more specific to each individual teacher based on their needs and role in the district. It is important to remember that “although new teachers need support, forcing them to participate in too many learning activities can adversely affect their teaching” (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, and Cowan-Hathcock (2007).

There is nothing profound about developing an onboarding program for new teachers. However, the time and resources that are dedicated to developing a strong and comprehensive program will yield an improved organization with the goals of retaining teachers and building a culture of support for professionals. This will translate to support for students.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Purpose

There has never been a more important time in education than the present to recruit and retain teachers that are hired. There is a teacher shortage nationwide, with veteran teachers reaching the age of retirement and far less people entering the profession on an annual basis to take their place (Mansfield, 2019). A review of literature indicates that a key strategy in recruitment and retention used by organizations, including school districts, is the onboarding process (Bauer, 2010; Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014; Perry & Hayes, 2011).

The Easton Area School District lacks a formal system for onboarding professional employees. While the Easton Area School District implements an induction and mentoring program for all newly hired professional staff in accordance with the Pennsylvania Department of Education's induction requirements, this induction program has been in place for nearly twenty years with little modification over time. I have served in the capacity of Assistant Superintendent in the Easton Area School District since 2014. During this time period the District has been without a Director of Human Resources in two instances totaling eighteen months and on both occasions I have provided direct oversight to the Human Resources Department. This has allowed me to have an intimate review of the onboarding process that is in place and has led me to recognize the need for improvement. A review of the current induction program indicates that there is a three-day workshop prior to the start of the school year, followed by a one-year mentoring process which includes a checklist of items for the mentor and mentee to review. Based on literature, the current system does not rise to the level of a formal onboarding program and is more closely aligned to the compliance tasks that are a single component, and basic level, of true onboarding (Bauer, 2010).

The intent of this action research study is to identify key components of high quality, research-based onboarding programs, along with identifying the opinions, experiences, and needs of the newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District. The development of a documented, comprehensive onboarding process will bring about increased support and attention for newly hired professional employees from the time of recruitment through their initial stages of employment within the Easton Area School District. The end result will be the development of a formal onboarding process that

includes elements of the District's current practice along with best practices within the field. The goal of implementing a formal process is to provide support to new staff members during a potentially stressful time of entering a new position with the intent of welcoming, engaging, and contributing to the development of confidence within the new employees within the District.

For the purpose of this action research project, the following research questions were developed.

Research Questions

1. How did the professional staff hired within the past five years rate their overall onboarding experience?
2. What aspects of current District practice during onboarding impact employee perception during the initial stage of employment in the District?
3. What elements in the initial stage of an onboarding process will have the greatest impact in the engagement of staff and the development of the relationship between the employee and District?
4. What methods will have the greatest impact in engaging newly hired employees by providing the support, confidence, and readiness needed in order to feel prepared as a new employee in the District?

Setting and Participants

The Easton Area School District is the twenty-first largest school district in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The area is comprised of urban, suburban, and rural communities spanning approximately thirty square miles, with a total population of over 63,000 people (Easton Area School District, 2017). The most appropriate socio-economic

designation for the District would be middle class. However, the population across all communities ranges from impoverished to upper class. Both the Easton community and District alike take pride in a rich history and unparalleled sense of tradition. The School District is nearly equidistant between New York City and Philadelphia, making it an attractive location for individuals and families to settle in.

There are approximately 8,700 K-12 students in the Easton Area School District. There are seven elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The student population is racially and culturally diverse with a representation of approximately 51.5% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic, 18% African American, 5% Asian, and 3.5% multi-racial (Easton Area School District, 2017). The District has encountered an increasingly transient student population as families have moved to the area from New York and New Jersey for work opportunities (Easton Area School District, 2017).

The demographics of the community and the demographics of the student population are important factors from the perspective of the employer because they have an impact on teacher recruitment and teacher retention (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). As an organization, the Easton Area School District must be cognizant of the densely populated Lehigh Valley area and the other options that prospective employees have when determining which district to accept employment in. In the Lehigh Valley, alone, there are twenty school districts. These districts range from large urban districts to small suburban or rural districts. However, there are also large suburban and large rural districts. Depending upon a teacher's preference, the Easton Area School District may be more or less desirable. For this reason, the District must ensure that it provides a supportive

onboarding program so that even those staff members who are entering the district with reservation feel supported and this leads to a positive experience.

The student demographics across the Lehigh Valley schools are equally diverse. There are districts with very high economically disadvantaged and minority populations, while there are other districts with very little diversity. Since the Easton Area School District is very diverse in its enrollment, the District must be aware of the needs teachers will have as they transition into such a circumstance. Essentially, a one-size-fits-all instructional approach will likely be unsuccessful, and the District must provide the correlative professional development to its newly hired teaching staff in order to engage them so that they develop into confident and prepared teachers (Coffey, Putnam, Handler & Leach, 2019).

Another factor that impacts teachers selecting districts and remaining in districts is the compensation. Currently, the Easton Area School District's average teacher salary is \$78,587 which is within the top one-third of the districts in the Lehigh Valley (Forecast5 Analytics, 2020). This is a promising aspect for the recruitment process for the Easton Area School District, but one that cannot stand alone. Maintaining a competitive starting and average teacher salary certainly assists in recruiting staff members, but once the staff members are hired they must also be supported in order to be successful and remain within the District (Gunther, 2019). A consideration that also must be a component of long-term planning is the sustainability of competitive teacher pay specifically due to the impact a recession could play so that hiring continues and furloughs are avoided (Stover, 2009). This is especially important in the current COVID-19 nationwide pandemic since

there is no certainty as to the short or long-term impact this will have on school districts and the economy moving forward.

Student and community demographics, along with teacher pay, are largely out of the control of District leaders. While the compensation is typically bargained by a team of Board members and administrators, the compensation package that is offered must be within the financial means of the District's budget and tax base. Therefore, districts must ensure that its teachers are provided with the necessary support during their transition into the district so that they remain committed to the District.

The Easton Area School District employs 602.5 professional employees (Easton Area School District, 2020). Professional employees include teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and a behavior specialist. The staff is comprised of mostly veteran teachers. There are one hundred twenty-three (123) staff members with twenty or more years in the District. Three hundred seventy-six (376) teachers have been employed in the district for 10-19.9 years. Only twenty-nine (29) teachers have been working in the Easton Area School District for 5-9.9 years. Seventy-five teachers (75) have worked for the District for less than five years, with three (3) of them being hired within the past three months.

The teachers who are hired in the Easton Area School District come from a variety of backgrounds. There are many local colleges and universities with strong education programs, including but not limited to Lehigh University, Moravian College, and East Stroudsburg University. The Easton Area School District has developed relationships with these and other post-secondary institutions for the purpose of recruiting strong candidates. There is, however, a balance of teachers hired directly out of college and quite a few from

other school districts, including those located in New Jersey. Many professional staff members in the Easton Area School District have come into the teaching profession as a second career.

This action research study focuses on the experiences of the newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District. For the purpose of this study, newly hired professional staff has been defined as those with less than five years of experience in the Easton Area School District. The total number of staff members who meet this criterion is seventy-five (75). However, three (3) of the newly hired staff members were hired within the past three months and therefore have not yet participated in the District's induction program. For this reason, the total sample used for this research project is seventy-two (72). Only twenty-four (24) of the newly hired professional staff members came to the District directly out of college. Ten (10) of the staff members had taught previously in other states. The remaining thirty-eight (38) staff members had worked in other Pennsylvania school districts, charter schools, or an Intermediate Unit. The newly hired professional staff members span teachers of Kindergarten through grade 12 in various content areas including special education and English as a Second Language, and also include certified school counselors, certified school psychologists, certified school nurses, and a behavior specialist as identified in the Table 1 (Easton Area School District, 2020).

Table 1

Newly Hired Professional Staff

	Elementary	Middle School	High School	District-wide
Classroom Teacher	29	7	14	0

Special Education	4	4	1	0
English as a Second Language	0	0	1	0
Certified School Counselor	2	1	0	0
Certified School Nurse	3	1	1	0
Certified School Psychologist	2	1	0	0
Behavior Specialist	0	0	0	1

Research Plan

A sound research design connects the purpose of the research to the process utilized during the research plan so that the data collected helps to provide answers to the research questions (Newman & Covrig, 2013). Action research has been defined by Ernie Stringer, former teacher and school administrator, as “a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to the problems that confront their everyday lives” (as cited in Hendricks, 2017). Participatory action research is defined as a collaborative process of action research that strives to identify and study realities that can be improved upon (Hendricks, 2017). The research plan contained in this study would be designated as participatory action research, since the onboarding process in the Easton Area School District has been identified as an area that can be improved upon and the newly hired professional staff are being asked to provide feedback that will help the process to be redeveloped and ultimately enhanced.

Baseline data relative to this research study was initially gathered and included personnel data and the current induction program paperwork. This personnel data ascertained from Easton Area School District's human resources database, eSpace, included information specific to the professional staff members who were hired within the past five years, their certification, assignment within the district, and education and employment background (Easton Area School District, 2020). While the initial total data set was identified to be seventy-five (75) newly hired professional staff, the total number who were identified as potential participants was seventy-two (72) since three (3) staff members were recently hired and have not yet participated in the induction process. Since the sample population was less than one hundred individuals, it was determined to study the entire population (Olney & Barnes, 2013). Additionally, artifacts from the District's current induction program were identified for collection and review.

Qualitative and quantitative data was sought. Inquiry data was collected through a questionnaire administered to newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District. Quantitative data was collected through Likert Scale evaluation questions. Qualitative data was collected from the open-ended questions on the questionnaire.

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of the newly hired staff within the Easton Area School District during onboarding with the goal of developing a formal and responsive onboarding program for future professional staff who are hired. Based on this goal, the data that was sought from the participants should provide an illustration of the positive aspects of the current induction program, the areas of need or gaps in the current induction program, and aspects that could be added to future induction programs that would lead to greater staff confidence as they assume their roles. It is

essential to obtain this qualitative data since it provides perspective of those who recently participated in the induction program. This could prove to be especially important since the design of the induction program is largely planned by administrators who have very different perspectives than those new to the district and who may not be cognizant of the specific needs of current, newly hired professional staff.

The inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative data is important to this study. The quantitative data is garnered from five-point Likert style questions included on the questionnaire. The value of Likert style questions in research is that they assign a numerical or descriptive value to qualitative data which is beneficial during the data analysis period of research (Olney & Barnes, 2013). The qualitative data is derived from the open-ended questions contained on the survey. The open-ended questions provide first-hand opinions and experiences of the research participants and can be used to determine if themes emerge from multiple respondents (Olney & Barnes, 2013). The qualitative data is also valuable because it provides insight into the various perspectives maintained by all respondents. While there may be outliers when reviewing quantitative data, there is no justification and only assumptions can be drawn. When reviewing qualitative data, the perspective of the outliers becomes known and can be used for future planning.

Documents from the District's current induction program were also identified for collection and review. The documents, which will serve as a source of baseline data, included the annual memos regarding the three-day induction program held in August, an Induction Program Activities Log, a Support Teacher Checklist, and a Peer Observations form. These documents will aid in determining the current activities that are occurring

within the District's induction program, and can be used to help illustrate the experiences that are referenced by the survey respondents in the open-ended questions on the questionnaire.

A cursory cost-benefit analysis would imply that the benefits to the Easton Area School District far exceed the costs assumed by the District and me as the researcher. The research plan for this study was designed with minimal cost to implement. One fee associated with the research was specific to the Society for Human Resource membership, which cost \$219 for a one-year membership. This membership was reimbursed by the Easton Area School District, per my contract. The only other fee was to Survey Monkey, for a standard monthly membership at the cost of \$29 per month which will be paid throughout the duration of the research and data analysis phases of this project. This fee was assumed in full by me as the researcher. The financial outlay for this research is vastly insignificant when compared to the high cost of \$8,000 per teacher that is estimated each time teacher turnover occurs (Callahan, 2016). Any steps that the District can take to decrease the likelihood of teacher turnover by implementing strong onboarding upon hire will pay dividends in retention of teachers and translate to student achievement (Callahan, 2016; Carr, Holmes, & Flynn, 2017).

Methods of Data Collection

The objective of this research was to focus on the onboarding experience of the newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District. The newly hired professional staff were defined as those who have worked in the District for under five years. The first step in the research process was to receive approval from the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval was granted by

the IRB Chairperson on December 20, 2019. Additionally, the Superintendent of the Easton Area School District provided authorization for this research to occur using subjects from within the professional ranks of the District.

The survey presented to and accepted by the IRB for use during this action research study was adapted in a non-substantive manner from the New Hire Survey #1 and New Hire Survey #2 which are endorsed by the Society for Human Resource Management (n.d.). When determining the most appropriate questions to include from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) new hire surveys, the research questions for this study were considered. A thorough review of the questions contained in SHRM's (n.d.) New Hire Survey #1 and New Hire Survey #2 was conducted in order to determine which questions would assist in answering the research questions that have been posed.

Both quantitative and qualitative questions were included in the survey. The quantitative, Likert style evaluation questions, were identified and included at the beginning of the survey. This was done strategically in order to draw respondents in to the survey and not make the survey appear overwhelming. Olney and Barnes (2013) indicate that beginning a survey with open-ended questions can deter respondents and that it is most beneficial to begin surveys with questions that are more easily answered. Open-ended questions were placed towards the end of the questionnaire. This allows for the collection of qualitative, descriptive data that, through analysis, can provide the opinions and experiences of respondents which can lead to the assessment of attaining the goals set forth in the research questions (Olney & Barnes, 2013). Once finalized, the survey questions were built into Survey Monkey so that the survey could be administered electronically. The survey utilized for this research was titled, EASD Onboarding and a

unique URL was created for this survey so that only those who were provided with the link would have the ability to complete the questionnaire.

Baseline data was collected in the first question of the survey. Respondents were asked to identify which year they were hired in the Easton Area School District. The options included: 2015-2016; 2016-2017; 2017-2018; 2018-2019; 2019-2020. The next three questions on the survey were designed with Likert style response options, as outlined in Table 2. The final seven questions on the survey required open-ended responses, as identified in Table 3. These questions were designed to elicit experiences and opinions in an effort to provide descriptive data that would assist in the development of a comprehensive onboarding program in the Easton Area School District (Olney & Barnes, 2013).

Table 2

Likert Style Evaluation Questions

Please rate the following aspects of your hiring process:

Survey Items:

- Application process
- Interview process
- Overview of role applied for
- Review of contract
- Review of benefits package

Please rate the following aspects of the district-wide portion of the three-day induction program held in August:

Survey Items:

- I was provided clear information regarding the first day of induction.
- The information presented was in an easy-to-understand format.
- The people presenting were able to answer my questions during the induction program.

Please rate the following aspects of the building-based orientation portion of the three-day induction program held in August:

Survey Items:

- My building principal was present and available to meet with me during the induction program.
- I was taken on a tour of my building during the induction program.
- I was introduced to co-workers and other staff members at my school

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient time was allotted for the induction program. • I felt confident about district policies following the induction program. • Enough information was provided on key policies and practices during the induction program. • I got what I expected from my induction program. • The administrative staff conducting the induction program was courteous and professional. 	<p>during the induction program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I received instruction on how to operate district-issued technology. • I received instruction on how to request technical support from the IT staff. • My building principal was available to answer questions in a timely manner during the induction program.
<p>Response Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Satisfied • Somewhat Satisfied • Neutral • Somewhat Dissatisfied • Very Dissatisfied 	<p>Response Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Somewhat Agree • Neutral • Somewhat Disagree • Strongly Disagree 	<p>Response Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly Agree • Somewhat Agree • Neutral • Somewhat Disagree • Strongly Disagree

Table 3

Open-Ended Questions

-
- What was your overall impression of the three-day induction program in August?
 - Are there any topics you feel would be beneficial for new staff to hear about during the induction program that weren't covered during the induction program?
 - Did you have any further questions that were not answered during the induction program that would have helped you begin on your first day?
 - Is there anything you think the District should consider changing about or adding to the induction program that would contribute positively to a new hire's experience?

-
- What is your overall impression of the mentoring component of your onboarding experience?
 - Are there any topics you feel would be beneficial for new staff to receive training on during their first school year?
 - Please use the area below to comment on any issue or suggestion that you would like to bring to the District's attention for the purpose of improving the onboarding program.

In addition to the questions that were included in the survey, an informed consent page was included, as contained in Appendix A. This page was designed to provide the survey respondents with important information relevant to the research study. Included on the page was the purpose of the research study, what the respondents would be asked to do, the foreseeable risks, confidentiality, the contact information of the researcher and faculty advisor, and a disclosure statement indicating that the research project had already been approved by the California University of Pennsylvania IRB. Respondents were asked to agree to the consent form and that by doing so their data could be used for the purpose of the research. No demographic information was collected on the respondents in order to protect confidentiality of responses. Participants who did not agree with the terms that were presented on the informed consent page were able to opt out of the survey at this time. Additionally, any respondent who started the survey and did not wish to submit their responses was able to discontinue their participation at any time during the survey without penalty.

Prior to the survey being distributed to the sample, it was important to pilot test the questionnaire. The purpose of the pilot test was to ensure that the wording contained in the email invitation, informed consent, and survey questions was easily understandable for

the target audience. The pilot survey was provided to one member of the sample of newly hired professional staff whom I have been acquainted with prior to her tenure in the Easton Area School District. I sent the pilot survey to her attention on March 9, 2020. She thoroughly reviewed the email contents, informed consent page, and survey questions and provided clarifying and grammatical feedback to make the contents less confusing and more direct. Additionally, she answered all questions of the survey, and was therefore the first respondent. Having her participate in the survey, and not simply read its contents, was an important step that is recommended by Olney and Barnes (2013) since respondents may not pick up on complicated wording or confusing response options just by reading it. The pilot test was successful in providing minor amendments to the wording in the email and the informed consent page. There were no changes, as a result of the pilot test, to the survey itself. Conducting the pilot test, however, was an integral step within the research process. Not only did it provide necessary feedback, but it provided me with increased confidence in my communication and the survey instrument overall.

The next step in the research process was to begin the data collection phase. This step was, however, delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the school closure that occurred in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania announced on March 13, 2020. This was a time of great concern to the nation and the closure of schools brought about significant changes in the manner in which education was delivered. Educators were under an unprecedented level of change and stress. As the Assistant Superintendent of the Easton Area School District I was keenly aware of the stress that teachers were facing. I could only surmise that this was intensified for those new to the profession. Therefore, I opted to delay my communication to the newly hired professional staff asking for them to complete

the survey for my research until the District's continuity of education plan was well underway. An email was ultimately sent to them on April 10, 2020.

The email that was sent to the seventy-two (72) newly hired professional staff informed them of my research topic. I provided the purpose and rationale for my selection of this topic, including the fact that I have recently been providing direct oversight to the Human Resources Department. I informed each individual who received the email that for the purpose of this research study, they were considered newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District. I also included the fact that I would be the only person within the School District viewing their responses, but also that no name or email address would be attached to the responses thus ensuring anonymity. I shared that the goal of the research was to improve the onboarding process in the Easton Area School District and reminded them that the only way to improve the system is to gain honest feedback. Following the first email that was sent on April 10, 2020, forty-five (45) newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District completed the survey. On April 18, 2020, I sent a follow up email thanking those who had already completed the survey and requested that anyone who had not yet completed the survey but was willing to do so could complete it prior to April 20, 2020. From the time the April 18, 2020 email was sent through the time the survey closed on April 20, 2020, ten (10) additional individuals completed the survey. This resulted in the survey being completed by fifty-six (56) newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District from the time the pilot survey was issued, through the two emails to the entire sample. This designates a 77.78% response rate, which will be further discussed during the data analysis portion of this research project.

It was important during both the email that was sent to the newly hired professional staff and in the informed consent that I acknowledge the foreseeable risks that those within the sample may experience or perceive. As the current Assistant Superintendent in the School District, I hold the position as the second highest ranking official within the organization. It is on rare occasions that I have direct, individual interaction with teachers within the District. I recognize that this factor could make my communication to the newly hired professional staff intimidating. I was sensitive to the fact that the respondents could be nervous or hesitant to provide honest feedback, if in fact that honest feedback were constructive or negative. It was important to be clear in both my email communication and the informed consent that was included prior to the survey that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that participation in the survey would in no way be used for evaluative purposes. While I do not evaluate any members of the professional staff, I also conveyed that the information obtained would not be shared with anyone who does have evaluative responsibilities of the professional staff.

During the data collection phase, the induction paperwork utilized by the Easton Area School District was also collected from the Human Resource Department Executive Assistants. The purpose of collecting this paperwork was to utilize it as baseline data for comparison purposes during the data analysis phase of research. The documents included the 2019 memo mailed to all newly hired professional staff for the 2019-2020 school year regarding the three-day induction program held in August, an Induction Program Activities Log, a Support Teacher Checklist, and a Peer Observations form. Additionally, a memo that was sent to newly hired professional staff regarding specific requirements for the 2018-2019 school year was also collected, since it differed from the requirements in 2019-2020.

Due to turnover within the Human Resources Department, memos from the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018 years were not retrieved. While the memos changed minimally from year to year, the Induction Program Activities Log, Support Teacher Checklist, and Peer Observations form remained the same for all years being studied during this research project.

There was very little fiscal impact of this research study. The only financial commitment of the research phase of this study was the standard monthly membership to Survey Monkey so that the survey was able to be developed and implemented electronically. This cost, of \$29 per month, was encumbered by the researcher and not passed on to the District. Nevertheless, the ultimate benefit to the School District will far exceed the monthly fee expended to collect the necessary data that will be utilized in improving the onboarding program within the Easton Area School District with the ultimate intention of retaining professional staff.

Validity

Validity can be defined as the accuracy of the data collected through research (Olney & Barnes, 2013). When feasible, researchers should attempt to utilize research survey tools that have been used previously, as they have already gone through the validation process. Since validity cannot be proven as an absolute, researchers must be able to demonstrate that the research tool was appropriately designed and administered properly (Olney & Barnes, 2013). It is important for researchers to consider any issues that may have an impact on validity through design or administration of the tool, and subsequently how that could impact the actual data collected. In action research, research is considered to be valid if it appears to solve the original presenting problem (Watkins, 1991). In this

case, the data sought is directly connected to the research questions, which have been derived from the initial problem related to the Easton Area School District's lack of a formal onboarding program.

The survey utilized in this study was non-substantively adapted from New Hire Survey #1 and New Hire Survey #2 of the Society for Human Resource Management (n.d.). Utilizing previously administered surveys is a recommended approach in research, since the design has already been validated. Therefore, the primary focus of validating this study is based on the administration of the survey.

When determining validity, there are various aspects of the data collection process to consider. One consideration that could impact validity is the response rate, since a low response rate could lead to a bias in the data collected (Olney & Barnes, 2013). The response rate for this survey is 77.78%, accounting for 56 respondents out of the 72 potential. Due to the high response rate, it is doubtful that a bias exists in the responses and the data can be generalized to the full sample.

Another consideration to ensure accuracy of the data collected is to look for low completion rates of either questions or sections of the survey. The Likert Style questions were all responded to at a 92.86% rate, or 52 of 56 respondents. The open-ended questions varied in their response rate, with the highest rate being 89.29%, or 50 of 56 respondents, while the lowest rate was 71.49%, or 40 of 56 respondents. It should be noted that the open-ended question responded to at the lowest rate was the final question on the survey which asked respondents to utilize the text box to comment on any suggestions that they wish to share in order to improve the onboarding program. This is intended to serve as a catch-all question that would provide any additional descriptive or

experiential data not already ascertained in the questionnaire. Despite the fact that open-ended questions on most surveys are typically only completed by a small percentage of the sample, the open-ended questions contained in this survey were answered at a high rate thus leading to validity of the survey's implementation (Olney & Barnes, 2013).

Foreseeable risks were considered prior to the survey. It was recognized that the respondents may be hesitant to provide honest feedback due my high-ranking position within the School District as the Assistant Superintendent. While steps were taken through the informed consent process to mitigate this likelihood, such as providing anonymity of responses and a guarantee of confidentiality, it is still important to consider this factor during the validation process. Nevertheless, it appears through the high rate of response, including the response rate on the open-ended questions, that this was not a factor and positively impacts the validity of this research.

CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

Onboarding is not a new concept in the business sector. For many decades, businesses have utilized onboarding in an effort to train employees so that productivity and profits increase (Spanjol, Tam, & Tam, 2015). Yet school districts have more linearly viewed the process of bringing employees into their organizations through the lens of induction, which is mandated in many states. This often translates into an orientation and compliance driven process that, if expanded, could have more meaningful impact for the employees' transitions and overall health of the organization.

The goal of this action research study was to identify the perceptions of newly hired staff during their entry into the Easton Area School District so that a formal and responsive onboarding program could be developed for future professional staff who are hired. A mixed-methods approach was utilized in this research project through the inclusion of qualitative and quantitative questions on a questionnaire. Of the seventy-two (72) newly hired professional staff who were eligible to participate in the research study, fifty-six (56) completed the questionnaire, which designates a 77.78% response rate.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire that was administered to newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District was developed in Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey is a platform that allows researchers to gain feedback in an easily analyzed and sharable format for the purpose of transforming organizations (SurveyMonkey, n.d.). This format served to be valuable to the researcher during the data analysis phase, specifically so that the qualitative data could be analyzed using different techniques than the quantitative data.

When beginning the data analysis phase of the research, it was advantageous to break the questionnaire into sections to streamline the data analysis process. Question one of the questionnaire was specific to informed consent. Therefore, a potential respondent would not proceed to the next question if he or she did not agree. This question was not reviewed during data analysis. Question two of the questionnaire contained baseline information as to the year the staff member was hired. This was not initially considered in the data analysis phase, and was viewed as potentially valuable to further understand the experiences of the newly hired professional staff over the five-year period being studied once all other data was analyzed. Questions three through five were designed as Likert

Scale evaluation questions and was analyzed using quantitative techniques. Qualitative data was sought through open-ended questions on the questionnaire in items six through twelve.

The first step in analyzing the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire was to utilize descriptive statistics to help identify the response distribution and patterns that exist within the data (Olney & Barnes, 2013). This applied to questions three through five, as they represented those garnering quantitative data. I was interested in knowing how many respondents selected each answer on the Likert scale for each question. This was ascertained through a table generated directly in SurveyMonkey. From there I was able to see the overall impressions of the respondents on various aspects of the onboarding process that is currently in place in the Easton Area School District. This allowed me to determine the central tendency, or the most representative score, of the group (Olney & Barnes, 2013). Due to the nature of the questions being asked, I was most interested in the mode, or the most frequent response. From there, I was able to determine the percentage of respondents selecting each option and create a frequency table for each question, as this is an easily understood format for readers of research studies.

In an effort to further simplify the data, I also explored the trends in the responses to the quantitative questions. For instance, since the Likert Scale that was utilized in some questions on the questionnaire gave options of Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neutral, Somewhat Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, I was able to consider the data through the more simplistic lens of either Positive or Negative. I was able to deem all responses of Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree as "Positive," while the responses of Somewhat

Disagree and Strongly Disagree could be seen as “Negative.” In this analysis strategy, Neutral remains Neutral and does not account for Positive or Negative results.

Due to the fact that respondents were asked their year of hire, I was able to analyze data based on this data set as well. The year of hire with the most respondents was 2019-2020. Of the fifty-two (52) individuals who answered this question, nineteen (19) were hired at the start of the 2019-2020 school year. This accounted for 36.54% of those who participated in the research study. A similar sample size, sixteen (16) respondents, represented the respondents who were hired for the 2017-2018 school year. I also reviewed the responses of the respondents by year of hire to determine if overall experiences were impacted based on the year the staff members entered the School District.

Qualitative data can provide researchers with rich information based on the sheer amount of text that can be provided by respondents (Olney & Barnes, 2013). However, for the very same reason, the data analysis process for qualitative data can be overwhelming and daunting. In this phase of data analysis, I was most interested in determining themes within the data. In an effort to bring cohesion to the overall study, I found it most beneficial to remain aligned to the methods used to analyze the quantitative data. This would assist in the presentation of the data in this study, when sharing with stakeholders within the District, and in developing recommendations for future developments to the onboarding process. The overarching themes that were utilized were: Positive, Neutral, and Negative. When analyzing the open-ended responses, Positive comments were highlighted in yellow, Neutral comments were highlighted in pink, and Negative comments were highlighted in orange. From there, subthemes were determined as they emerged during the data analysis

process and were then utilized to further code the text which helped to collect feedback that would be useful in the recommendations phase of this study. The specific subthemes utilized when coding text were: Experiences (Exp), Suggestions (S), Barriers (B), and Specific Needs (SN). The corresponding codes were entered into the margins when analyzing the data for ease in the analysis and reflection of the data.

The coding of the text into themes and categories was a cumbersome process that culminated in the need to identify the most usable format. Therefore, brief written summaries were drafted followed by the development of tables to aid in presenting the interpretation of the data. Through this process, Olney and Barnes (2013) recommend that the researcher consider the following questions in order to ensure that all aspects of the data are incorporated:

- What worked well?
- What were the challenges?
- What can be improved?
- What stories were told through the open-ended responses that demonstrate positive experiences?
- What unexpected findings were reported?

Additionally, SurveyMonkey includes a feature known as Word Cloud. Word Cloud identified key words that are used by the respondents and informs the researcher of the frequency with which the word was used (SurveyMonkey, n.d.). This feature of the platform was utilized during the data analysis of the open-ended questions to categorize the units of information based on themes that emerged (Olney & Barnes, 2013). These approaches proved to be effective in collating all of the data from the qualitative questions

into a format that can be used to describe the experiences of the participants and subsequently in the planning process for further development of the onboarding process in the Easton Area School District.

Results

The purpose of this research study was to gain feedback of newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District on the onboarding process so that it may be further developed for future new hires. The findings obtained through this action research study via the quantitative and qualitative data are discussed below.

Quantitative results. Quantitative data was collected from questions three through five on the EASD Onboarding Survey. The Likert Scale questions were in a matrix format, with sub-questions that were rated by respondents. Overwhelmingly, through cursory review, the data collected through these questions indicates that the respondents rate their overall onboarding experience positively. Nevertheless, a deeper analysis can help to identify aspects of the onboarding process that can be improved upon.

The hiring process. Five aspects of the hiring process were rated by the survey respondents: the application process, interview process, overview of the role applied for, review of contract, and review of benefits package. In simplifying the data, respondents identify these aspects in a positive manner, as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

A Positive or Negative Hiring Process

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Application Process	94.12%	5.88%	0.00%
Interview Process	96.08%	0.00%	3.92%

Overview of role applied for	98.03%	1.96%	0.00%
Review of contract	65.39%	15.38%	19.23%
Review of benefits package	71.15%	13.46%	15.39%

It should be noted that while a majority of the respondents view the hiring process in a positive manner, there are two aspects of the hiring process that respondents had negative experiences with at a higher rate than the other processes. Additionally, when considering the five-point Likert ratings on the questionnaire, less respondents considered their experience relative to the Review of contract and Review of benefits package as something they were very satisfied with. The mode for the Review of contract sub-question fell within the Somewhat Satisfied range, as outlined in Table 5.

Table 5

Review of Contract and Benefits Package

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Review of contract	16	18	8	8	2
Review of benefits package	20	17	7	6	2

The district-wide, three-day induction program. The aspects reported on by survey respondents regarding the three-day induction program indicate moderate to high levels of satisfaction with their experience. While some aspects of the induction program could be improved upon, based on a neutral or somewhat agreeable response, few respondents indicated dissatisfaction with facets of the program. Table 6 highlights key

portions of the induction program and the corresponding rating based on the responses collected.

Table 6

Induction Program

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Information was presented in easy to understand format	30	12	9	1	0
Confident about district policies	18	20	6	6	2
I got what I expected from my induction program	24	10	11	5	2
Administrative staff was courteous and professional	44	4	4	0	0

Data sets were also compared based on year of hire. The comparison indicates that the experience of induction participants did not vary to any great degree based on the year they participated in the induction program. This can be reviewed in Table 7.

Table 7

Year of Hire Comparison

The people presenting were able to answer my questions during the induction program.

Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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2019-2020	52.63%	26.32%	10.53%	10.53%	0.00%
2017-2018	62.50%	18.75%	18.75%	0.00%	0.00%

Enough information was provided on key policies and practices during the induction program.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2019-2020	36.84%	36.84%	10.53%	10.53%	5.26%
2017-2018	43.75%	43.75%	6.25%	6.25%	0.00%

I got what I expected from my induction program.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2019-2020	42.11%	21.05%	21.05%	10.53%	5.26%
2017-2018	56.25%	25.00%	12.50%	6.25%	0.00%

The building-based orientation. The building-based orientation portion of the onboarding process was also rated with moderate to high levels of satisfaction by the respondents. Data trends in a positive direction, as outlined in Table 8. The participants viewed their building principals as being present and available, with 67.31% strongly agreeing with this statement. However, only 42.31% of the participants strongly agreed that they received instruction on how to operate district-issued technology, followed by only 30.77% in strong agreement that they received instruction on how to request technical support.

Table 8

Building-Based Orientation

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
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I was taken on a tour of my building	75.00%	13.46%	11.54%
I was introduced to co-workers	75.00%	17.31%	7.69%
I received instruction on operating district-issued technology	73.08%	13.46%	13.47%
My building principal was available to answer questions	86.54%	5.77%	7.69%

Qualitative results. The open-ended responses on the questionnaire provided insight into the perceptions of newly hired professional staff of the onboarding program in the Easton Area School District. Initially, all responses were coded as either Positive, Neutral, or Negative. This allowed further review into subthemes that emerged. Primarily, the subthemes that emerged could be categorized as Experiences, Suggestions, Barriers, and Specific Needs. Respondents were asked to describe their overall impressions of the three-day induction program, along with topics to add and ways to improve the induction program. Participants were also asked to provide their overall impression of the mentoring program. Other suggestions were also solicited through this research.

For most, the overall impression of the induction program, based on the responses provided to the open-ended questions, was positive. Of the fifty (50) respondents, only nine (9) responses were categorized as negative. With two (2) responses described as neutral, the remaining thirty-nine (39) were deemed positive. Common themes in positive responses were that the induction program was informative, professional, organized, and made participants feel comfortable. A commonality within the negative responses was that

the induction program was confusing. Table 9 further demonstrates the responses within the subthemes.

Table 9

Overall Impressions of the Induction Program

Experiences	Bus tour of the Easton Area School District was most beneficial
	Appreciated having time to digest everything before the start of school
	Gave me a safe net of people I could communicate with and feel comfortable with
	Highly impressed with how informative induction was. I taught previously in another school district and it was not nearly as informative as the EASD
	Too much information in a short amount of time
	Principal was not present to answer any questions and colleagues were not there
	Not a lot of time to get used to the building
Suggestions	More time at my building and having mentor meet with me at that time
	Have some teachers volunteer to come in and meet new staff
	More time spent on technology
	More time for staff interaction with more hands-on activities
	More time to see materials and the curriculum
Barriers	Those not hired in the summer do not experience induction and miss out on all of the information and activities during this program
Specific Needs	Did not feel that it was sufficiently geared to my role

The induction program could be more geared towards
School Nursing for Certified School Nurses than teaching

Various suggestions were provided when participants were asked to share any topics that would be beneficial to cover during the induction program. These responses were analyzed via the text provided in the open-ended responses and through the Word Cloud feature within SurveyMonkey. Word Cloud indicated the following words as having the most frequency in responses: technology, time, building, benefits, and mentor. When analyzing the open-ended responses, it can be noted that themes emerged surrounding these words. The remaining analysis can be best summarized in Table 10.

Table 10

Topics in Induction that Build Confidence

Topics to be included or expanded in the induction	School building expectations
	Student behavior expectations and student discipline
	Technology and systems, such as PowerSchool, Xello, Google Classroom, SeeSaw
	Collective bargaining agreement, fringe benefits, and Level II certification process
	Teacher evaluation process
	School specific programs and services for students, such as Family Connection, trauma informed practices, resource room, para-professional support

The mentoring program is a component of induction but lasts during the full school year. This was met with a mix of perceptions by the participants. Forty-nine (49) participants provided an open-ended response to this question. While twenty-eight (28)

respondents considered their mentor experience to be positive, ten (10) rated it neutrally or fair, and eleven (11) perceived this experience negatively. Table 11 displays themes that emerged within both the positive and negative responses to the mentoring process.

Table 11

The Mentoring Process

Positive	Negative
My mentor was the best resource I was given	Checklist was dated and had many things that were not relevant
Great to have a go-to person to go over questions and concerns	Mentor did not have a clear understanding of the role and expectations
I continue to collaborate with my mentor on content and still ask for advice on certain situations	Mentor was very passive
I always feel supported	My mentor was overwhelmed so I did not get to spend as much time with her
My mentor was wonderful, helpful, and knowledgeable	It was a joke. My mentor never checked on me
I cannot say enough about my mentor	The mentorship is a necessity but the mentor needs to be chosen carefully and not necessarily based on years of experience but more importantly on helpfulness
The process was easy to navigate	
The mentor is a highly valuable component of the induction program	

Additional suggestions for improvements to the onboarding process, not specifically captured within any of the other open-ended questions were provided by respondents.

These varied from specific instructional strategies to the implementation of theoretical concepts, such as trauma informed practices and social-emotional learning. The suggestion to have teachers conduct meaningful observations followed by collaboration was provided.

Additionally, the diversity and traditions that exist within the Easton community emerged

as an area to lend greater focus to. Participants also recognized the volume of information in general that must be provided during the onboarding process and cited the potential need to establish periodic check-ins during the school year to better support the transition of new employees.

Discussion

Participatory action research is a collaborative process that explores reality so that it can be changed (Hendricks, 2017). The purpose of obtaining data in this action research study was to identify findings that will aid in the further development of a formal, comprehensive, and supportive onboarding process for the Easton Area School District. Once data is obtained, inferences are able to be drawn and utilized for discussion, and ultimately recommendations. Overwhelmingly, the data ascertained through the questionnaire showed that the respondents had a relatively positive onboarding experience.

Based on the quantitative data, there are aspects of the onboarding process that emerge as meeting the needs of the newly hired professional staff. Survey respondents rated high levels of satisfaction with the interview process. This is important since the interview is often the first impression of the organization. The respondents also indicated that the administrators who led the induction program were courteous and professional. This is especially important because organizations can be defined by their leadership. It is of critical value for the new hires to have confidence in those who are leading the organization, as this can have an impact on the relationship between the employee and the District. The data also indicated that building principals were available and provided responses to questions that the inductees had during the orientation program. This, too,

helps to establish a supportive environment that leads to a trusting sense for new employees.

There are, however, areas within the onboarding process that can be built upon in order to impact employee perception, provide support, and increase the confidence of the newly hired professional staff. The District must review the procedures for reviewing the contract and benefits package. This can be a confusing aspect of onboarding for new employees, and this should be improved upon. Additionally, more attention should be given to training on key policies and procedures. School district policies are legally binding and become a vital component of ensuring organizational compliance. New employees should be well versed in key policies and procedures so that they are aware of the expectations. Technical support must also be provided to newly hired professional staff. All Easton Area School District teachers are provided with both a laptop and iPad. Since the District expects that technology will be integrated into the instructional program, it is necessary to provide adequate training so that the employees are able to utilize it in a meaningful manner.

Similar to the analysis of the quantitative data in this study, the qualitative data also generally characterized the onboarding experience in the Easton Area School District as a positive one for the participants. The respondents identified experiences that contributed to their positive outlook of the onboarding program. For example, the bus tour visiting all of the district schools during the induction program was cited favorably by multiple respondents. They acknowledged this as a way to become familiar with the district while also seeing the communities that the students come from. Another positive experience that emerged throughout the responses on the questionnaire was relative to socialization. The

newly hired professional staff members valued the opportunities they had to connect with one another during the induction program. Additionally, some respondents recognized the significance of meeting with veteran staff members at their respective buildings despite this not being a formal aspect of the induction program. This creates an area that can be built more formally into the process.

Many of the participants in this study cite the fact that starting a new role in a school district is overwhelming. For some, they were even beginning their career. Therefore, there is a tremendous amount of information that must be presented during the three-day induction program, much of which must be introduced but could not be expected to be retained. For this reason, some respondents suggested the need for additional time. Other respondents identified the need to provide the newly hired professional staff with a guidebook that would assist them chronologically with what they need to know and do prior to the first student day and beyond. Other respondents recognized the need to continue support beyond the induction program through scheduled meeting times for maintenance purposes.

A common theme within the open-ended responses was the pride and tradition that exist in Easton. However, interestingly, this theme was referenced based upon the perspective of the respondent. Some of the newly hired professional staff cited the fact that they were Easton graduates and felt a great deal of pride returning to their school district. They were proud of how well-organized the introduction to the District was and felt lucky to be a part of a district with such a cohesive foundation. Yet, others who did not hail from the area recognized the existence of pride and traditions, but did not understand their significance. There were suggestions for this to be more explicitly reviewed, even

displayed through videos, and not to assume that it was understood by all. Essentially, while there is so much pride and tradition in Easton, it is important to make sure that the induction program is inclusive so that individuals not from Easton do not feel they are starting at a deficit.

There were various suggestions of topics that would be beneficial for new staff to hear about during the induction program that were not covered to the desired depth. These included specific school building expectations, school district policies, student behavior and discipline expectations, technology and the systems utilized within the district, the evaluation process, and school specific programs and services for students. Another topic that was identified as a need to be covered more comprehensively is the induction program itself. Respondents cited the need to better understand the expectations for working with their mentor and the associated paperwork that needs to be completed throughout the school year. Mentioned most frequently as a topic requiring additional time is contract review and benefits. This is an area that many respondents did not feel confident in understanding during their onboarding process, and future attention should be given to this area.

The mentoring program elicited a range of responses. While some participants classified their mentoring experience positively, there was a somewhat equal rate of neutral and negative responses when asked directly about their mentorship. It was recommended that mentors have a clear understanding of their role and the expectations. The need to select the proper mentor was also discussed by respondents. The sheer volume of responsibilities of a mentor was cited, with the suggestion that newly hired professional staff be assigned to multiple mentors. Additionally, multiple respondents

suggested that the mentor/mentee checklist be revised so that it is updated and relevant. The entire mentoring process is an area that will require additional attention through recommendations for future changes.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data which was ascertained through this study, it can be concluded that the Easton Area School District does a satisfactory job at the induction program and the associated aspects of onboarding that are currently in place. While many of the activities are geared to orientation and compliance, the School District executes those aspects with fidelity. There is, however, room for growth and sustained learning and support for its newly hired professional staff.

Summary

The results from this action research study provided information that helped in understanding the aspects of the onboarding program that participants rated as valuable, the areas that require further development, and the additional gaps in programming that exist and should be considered when developing a comprehensive onboarding program. Many of the respondents rated their experience in a positive vein. Twenty-four, or one-third, of the newly hired professional staff members joined the Easton Area School District directly out of college. Therefore, they would not have participated in another onboarding program in another district to draw a point of comparison from. Of the forty-eight other members of the sample, it only known through self-report during an open-ended response as to if they participated in an onboarding program previously and how they compared their prior experience to Easton's, as this information was not directly sought from respondents. The lack of comparison or knowledge about comprehensive onboarding programs could contribute to the positive ratings that were reported. This factor makes it

essential that the conclusions and recommendations being made in the next section of this study consider both the data and the best practices learned through the literature review.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

Onboarding of new staff members into any organization is an important process that, if done effectively and purposefully, yields dividends. In the field of education, the concept of onboarding has often been synonymous with the induction process and is most frequently achieved through an orientation program. There are, however, many aspects of a comprehensive onboarding process that can be learned from best practices and prior implementation in various fields.

The Easton Area School District is no different than most educational institutions. The Easton Area School District does not have a comprehensive onboarding process, and the program that is in place is comprised of a three-day induction program which mirrors a compliance-driven orientation, and a mentoring process that utilizes an outdated checklist. This leads to compliance, but does not effectively deepen learning, establish sustained support, or solidify the confidence in new employees that would result in the intended level of readiness to flourish in their jobs. Effective onboarding programs can assist organizations with not only preparation of its employees, but the retention of its employees (Howe, 2006). For educational institutions, such as the Easton Area School District, this is of utmost importance since the nation is in a teacher shortage (Howe, 2006). It is imperative to begin an employee's career with a focus on strengthening the relationship between the staff member and the district, and with an eye on continued preparation and

support that will lead to the new employee remaining with the organization. This is important both from a financial perspective and through the investment in human capital that impacts students.

The research conducted throughout this study considered the best practices within onboarding programs in various sectors of employment along with the experiences of newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District. Consideration was given to the strengths of the current program in place within the District, along with the gaps that were identified through literature and the data provided by the newly hired professional staff members. The goal of this research project was to develop a comprehensive onboarding program that can be utilized within the Easton Area School District in order to improve the initial stage of employment for professional staff. This should lead to immediate and long-term impact for the District, as it will integrate new staff members into the culture of the organization and provide the necessary level of support to its new employees with the ultimate goal of making a difference for students.

Conclusions

Comprehensive onboarding programs can be viewed as a holistic, strategic, and long-term approach focused on getting new employees to reach high levels of productivity at the onset of their employment (Dunn & Jasinski, 2009; Stein & Christiansen, 2010). These programs have been implemented in the business sector for decades, and only recently have been considered in the field of education. Bauer (2010) has been a leader in researching onboarding processes and cites four levels that must be in existence in order for an onboarding program to reach its highest level of effectiveness. These levels, known as the Four C's are compliance, clarification, culture, and connection (Bauer, 2010).

Therefore, the framework for a comprehensive onboarding program for the Easton Area School District must be comprised of each of these levels. Additionally, the development of any program should be built around the concept of onboarding being a continuous process, not an event (Norman & Ganser, 2004).

The system: On the bus. The year-long onboarding system developed as a result of this research study has been coined *On the Bus*. The name was derived from the idea that as students embark on their journey to school, their first experience is typically riding a school bus. Additionally, a component of the current induction program in the Easton Area School District is a bus tour around the community so that all new staff members are able to see first-hand the district's nine schools and the diverse communities that our students reside in. The activities included in *On the Bus* have been developed with a basis in the Four C's, combining a blend of people, technology, and process (Adragna, 2018; Bauer, 2010). The system includes a cohesive set of activities that clearly lead to the organizational commitment of the newly hired professional staff members. Additionally, prior to the 4C's it includes the basic human resource functions that occur before a new employee joins the organization, such as recruitment, talent acquisition, and the hiring process (Nagenara, 2014).

Recruitment and acquisition. *On the Bus* begins with an outlined process for the recruitment and hiring of professional staff members. All recruitment materials will be developed both in print and electronic form. Those in electronic form will be posted on the District's Human Resources webpage. In addition to posting all vacancies on the District's webpage, they will also be included on job portals such as PA-REAP and PSBA Career Gateway. This, however, may not hit the entire market of prospective employees, therefore

social media and LinkedIn will also be utilized, to ensure that the District appeals to millennial employees as well.

The interview process will continue in its current fashion, whereby candidates will be interviewed by a panel and a successful candidate recommended to Human Resources. Once employees are recommended for employment, an onboarding checklist will be followed in the Human Resources Department to ensure that all aspects of the onboarding process are adhered to for each employee. One of the more frustrating aspects of the onboarding process that was identified by the respondents to the survey in this study was the lack of clarity around the employment contract and the associated benefits. It is important that the Human Resources Department take time with each individual upon their hire to review such important terms of their employment and fully answer any questions that may arise. It also gives the new employee the opportunity to meet directly with the Chief Human Resource Officer which also deepens the connection to the District.

Compliance. Compliance can be viewed as the process of providing employees with the necessary tools needed for their jobs (Bauer, 2010). This can occur through an orientation or a new employee handbook. In the Easton Area School District's current program, much of the three-day induction program and the mentoring process fall within this category. While this phase is somewhat basic and does not have long-term cultural impact on the organization, it is nevertheless a very important foundational aspect of a comprehensive onboarding program.

On the Bus will maintain a three-day induction program prior to the start of the school year. The orientation program will be designed where each day starts with light refreshments and coffee, an icebreaker activity on the first morning, and a lunch served

mid-day on the first day. The program will continue to include an overview of topics focused on district-wide goals, technology training, curriculum and assessments, special education, student services, and equity. These topics will be presented by the respective central office administrator during identified blocks of time, never exceeding one hour. Additionally, during the three-day induction program, the newly hired professional staff will be taken on a bus tour, in line with the name of the onboarding program. This activity was well received by the participants in the survey as part of this research study and allows the new employees to gain a visual understanding of the communities that make up the Easton Area School District.

There will be opportunities built into the induction program for the newly hired professional staff to return to their respective school buildings and meet with their principals. It is imperative that the building principal be present during these times so that the teacher is not left by him or herself. This was cited as a concern through the survey data through this study and there must be an expectation that building principals understand the importance of establishing a relationship with their new employees during these designated times. Additionally, it will be encouraged that the principals also invite existing teachers to meet and greet the new hires at the buildings and assist them by touring the facility. The new teacher's mentor will be expected to meet with the new employee during the time spent at the school on a specified day as well so that they are able to become acquainted prior to the school year beginning.

In addition to the three-day induction program prior to the start of the school year, a new employee handbook will be developed that will contain key policies and procedures and will serve as a reference guide for all newly hired professional staff. A new employee

handbook was cited by many of the respondents as something that would have been useful to them following the induction program since there was a great deal of information presented in such a short period of time. This new employee handbook will be developed electronically and will be included in a new employee portal which will aid in the ease of updating and its accessibility to the new employees. Additionally, by developing it electronically it will appeal to millennial employees who prefer the immediacy of access to information (Abrams, 2018).

The mentoring process will remain a component of *On the Bus*, and will be further delineated during the Connection sub-section of this research study. But a component of the mentoring process that resides in the compliance phase is the mentor checklist. The mentor checklist will be updated on an annual basis, collectively by the administrative team, to ensure that it does not become outdated. Routine items, such as the process to request a personal day or the safety drill procedures will remain. However, the mentor checklist will also be designed so that the topics that are of utmost importance appear at the beginning, with those less important to be aware of within the first month of employment listed at the end of the document.

Clarification. The clarification phase is intended to create a two-way exchange that deepens the understanding for the new employee. So, while the compliance phase is dedicated to imparting information, the goal of the clarification phase is to ensure that the information has been absorbed. Many activities associated with the clarification phase can occur simultaneous to the compliance phase, as embedded activities. For instance, at the conclusion of the first day of the induction program, the inductees will participate in a new employee trivia game. This not only gives a way for the administrators to assess the

effectiveness of their presentations, but also provides for a light-hearted way to engage the new employees.

Another strategy that can be utilized, specifically following the equity presentation of the induction program, is to conduct round table discussions. Round table discussions are an effective way to have smaller groups debrief about new learning and share insights with one another. In addition to solidifying new learning, this strategy also creates an opportunity for socialization amongst the newly hired professional staff. Round table discussions should not cease following the three-day induction program. These are an effective way to check the understanding of the newly hired professional staff on a variety of topics throughout the year-long onboarding program and will be scheduled periodically by the Chief Human Resource Officer.

Culture. Two words that are often associated with the Easton Area School District are pride and tradition. Both of these words emerged as key elements in the survey responses by the participants of the research study. It is important for those who do not hail from Easton to better understand the traditions since they are so interwoven into the activities in the District throughout the year. The rich history that exists in the Easton Area School District and its community must be capitalized on throughout On the Bus in a variety of ways.

The Easton brand is something that many take pride in. The culture within the Easton community is centered around the community's love for the school district and its activities. The Rover E is easily recognizable. Therefore, each newly hired professional staff member will be provided with an Easton water bottle and a coupon to receive an Easton t-shirt from the high school store to welcome them into the Easton family.

Additionally, a cornerstone activity in the Easton community is a Friday night football game at Cottingham Stadium. In order for the newly hired professional staff to get integrated in the community beyond the walls of the school, each newly hired professional staff member will be provided with a complimentary ticket to each home football game. There are very few events that enculturate someone to the school community in Easton other than a football game.

The local businesses in the City of Easton and its surrounding municipalities are thriving and dedicated to the community. Through the *On the Bus* onboarding program, a passport to the community will be developed which will be distributed to each newly hired professional staff member. In coordination with the local business development organization, the passport will contain discounts to stores and eateries that will encourage the inductees to become acquainted with the community while helping the local businesses.

Videos that are available but not required to be viewed at a specified time are an effective way to share information, especially on norms within the District. This also enhances the personalized nature of *On the Bus* since there will be online professional learning sessions dedicated to specific employee groups, such as Certified School Nurses or School Counselors. Virtual professional development opportunities will be included in the new employee portal and will be developed on topics that were highlighted by survey respondents as part of this study such as school building expectations, trauma informed practices, social-emotional learning, classroom management, and student behavior and discipline. Many new teachers struggle in fully comprehending these ancillary areas, as they are not typically instructed in teacher preparation programs (Sowell, 2017).

Brief videos will also be developed that assist in sharing the programs in the Easton Area School District. For instance, Family Connection serves as the family center for the Easton Area School District. There is an abundance of resources provided by Family Connection to the students within the District. Many of these are coordinated based on referrals by teachers. So, if the newly hired staff member is not aware that the resources exist, their students could be at a disadvantage. For this reason, videos will be developed for programs and services, such as Family Connection, so that the newly hired professional staff can view them at their leisure and refer back to them as needed.

Connection. The deepest level of an onboarding process, which has the most impact on the employee's success, is connection (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrias, 2014; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). Connection builds the socialization and organizational commitment that onboarding programs strive to achieve. Providing new employees with the opportunity to develop high-quality relationships with supervisors and peers is the most effective way to ensure a connection to the organization (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrias, 2014). This is extremely important from a behavioral perspective and even more important in a district as large as Easton. For instance, at Easton Area High School, there are nearly 200 teachers. So, the District must create intentional opportunities for genuine connections to occur amongst its new employees and the existing staff members.

Mentoring is a prime example of a way to build connection within an onboarding program. Mentoring is an intentional process that creates a support system for new teachers to aid in their continued development at the onset of their employment (Lee et. al. 2006; Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014). Mentoring must go beyond the compliance driven relationship of information sharing that currently exists in the Easton Area School District.

Through *On the Bus*, each newly hired professional staff member will be paired with a mentor. They will meet during the induction program and complete a checklist throughout the school year. However, in addition to these activities, they will also be responsible to participate in activities that deepen the connection between the mentor and mentee in order to have a significant impact on the behaviors of the new employee. There will be an expectation for the mentoring relationship to include professional goal setting, lesson planning, the analysis of student work, and a reflection on the teaching and learning process.

A component of *On the Bus* will be for the mentor and mentee to participate in a book study using *Teach Like a Champion* by Doug Lemov so that the mentee can read a few chapters and attempt a few of the strategies within the classroom prior to debriefing with the mentor. This type of job embedded learning creates a dialogue between the mentor and mentee that would not otherwise exist and deepens the connection between the two. It also provides a safe space for the mentee to discuss successes and failures that may not as easily be shared with a larger group.

The mentor will perform job embedded coaching for the mentee. The newly hired professional staff member will have the opportunity to conduct a peer observation of the mentor while he or she is instructing, and the mentor will then conduct a similar observation of the mentee. Following the observations, the two will meet and discuss what they observed. The goal of this is to increase professional collaboration and deepen the understanding of strong teaching pedagogy. This type of non-evaluative practice is intended to generate feedback and lead to true impact on the new employee's professional

practice. This will be implemented in the fall and in the spring as a component of *On the Bus*.

Collaboration circles are another way to build connection amongst newly hired professional staff. In collaboration circles, the participants are all inductees who are sharing ideas, asking questions, and reflecting on their own practice in an informal, nonthreatening environment with their peers (Bentley & Cason, 2019). These can be held on site, off site, or virtually. Establishing collaboration circles, but offering them voluntarily, adds to the favorable nature of the experience. The Chief Human Resource Officer will share out dates, times, and locations for collaboration circles throughout the school year for anyone who is interested to attend.

Another mechanism that will be utilized in the onboarding program is the implementation of an online discussion board. This will be an asynchronous platform that will be available to all newly hired professional staff and monitored by the Chief Human Resource Officer. Establishing an online professional learning community can be an effective way to supplement any in-person trainings that are in place (Moir, 2009). New employees will be able to post questions, ideas for feedback, or articles they found to be helpful, and their newly hired peers will have the ability to review and respond. This is a way for the District to ensure that the mentees have a safe place to ask questions of their peers and receive responses in a timely fashion. It maintains a connection for all newly hired professional staff, regardless of the building they teach in. Additionally, if all else fails and the mentor/mentee match was not positive, the new teacher still has a group of individuals to rely upon and receive support from. The Chief Human Resource Officer will

monitor the discussion board solely for the purpose of providing answers or connecting inductees to answers so that their questions do not go without a response.

The voluntary nature of respective components of this program is important so that the newly hired professional staff members do not feel overwhelmed, but instead realize the various activities that are designed and offered to support their transition into their role (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007). This will require the development of a menu of the voluntary options so that the inductees are aware of all of the opportunities available to them. This also opens up the flexibility of some of the voluntary components, such as the online professional learning sessions, to any faculty members who would find benefit from the opportunity.

Undoubtedly, *On the Bus* has been scaled up significantly from the induction program that was previously offered in the Easton Area School District. Nevertheless, the robust nature of the onboarding system is rooted in research and based upon the needs cited by the most recent hires to the District. *On the Bus* is designed to be a comprehensive onboarding program for the Easton Area School District. A full outline of the program is contained in Appendix B of this research study. This guide will be utilized to present the program to the administrative team in the Easton Area School District.

Other considerations. While the activities outlined above describe the opportunities that will occur for the newly hired professional staff, there are additional considerations that must exist within the program in order for it to have the greatest impact. For a multitude of reasons, *On the Bus* will be developed so that it can be delivered in the format outlined above, but it will be also be modified so that each phase can be implemented electronically if necessary. One of the barriers that was presented by the

respondents of the survey in this study was for those who were not hired at the traditional time. Those that were hired after the school year began missed the three-day orientation program and felt they were starting at a disadvantage by missing such key content.

Additionally, under the current circumstances of being in a nationwide pandemic and the uncertainty that this brings to in-person interactions, having all content built online would ensure that all staff members would receive the information from the three-day induction program. While there should not be an intent to supplant personal interaction through the onboarding process, having a back-up plan so that new employees do not miss critical information is important.

On the Bus will have an established process for mentor matching. This was one of the most frequently cited negative aspects of the onboarding process that was provided by the participants in this study. Principals will be provided with a list of considerations to utilize when selecting and matching mentors to mentees. The checklist will include the following characteristics: effective communicator, trustworthy, empathetic, respectful, ability to provide nonjudgmental responses, experience acting as a role model, ability to empower the new teacher, effective instructional practices, and prior displays of leadership capabilities (Bland, Church, & Luo, 2014; Dias-Lacey & Guirguis, 2017; Hall, Hughes, & Thelk, 2017). The relationship and fit between the mentor and mentee cannot be ignored and including this as a formal component of *On the Bus* ensures that it is not overlooked.

Another factor that must be an integral component of *On the Bus* is mentor training. The training of all mentors will be conducted by the Chief Human Resource Officer in the summer prior to the mentors meeting their mentees. Those who have participated in the training in a prior year would not be expected to complete the training again, unless

recommended by the principal. The training will be developed virtually, with an interactive component. This will ensure that all potential mentors can participate, despite any vacation plans, but the interactive nature of the training provides an opportunity for the Chief Human Resource Officer to assess the mentor's level of commitment and understanding of the expectations.

The mentor training protocol will highlight the following topics: mentoring strategies, providing suggestions instead of instructions, adult learning theory, and effective communication strategies (Leimann, Murdock, & Waller, 2008; Sowell, 2017). A basic way to open the dialogue about effective mentoring strategies is to share a professional article dedicated to mentoring as the initial phase of the mentor training. One article reviewed as a component of the literature review in this study, *Create Effective Mentoring Relationships: Strategies for Mentor and Mentee Success*, could serve as a valuable tool that outlines the basic tenets of effective mentoring practices in an easily digestible format (Lee et. al., 2006). From there, the training will focus on ways to deepen the mentoring relationship and will require some interactive activities that prepare the mentors to be most effective. Requiring the mentor training is important because it establishes a sense of commitment for those who are signing up to serve as mentors and decreases the chance that veteran teachers are agreeing to act as mentors solely for the associated compensation.

Principals play an important role in the development of new teachers (Wood, 2005). However, most interactions, especially at the secondary level, that occur between teachers and principals in the Easton Area School District are focused on the evaluation process. Therefore, it is important to establish occasions where principals and new teachers are

interfacing in order to strengthen the relationship in a non-evaluative forum. This should be an expectation of the principals, but in an informal manner. Principals should establish a personal goal to spontaneously stop in and see each new teacher within the first two weeks of the school year, and again once per quarter. Doing so in the teacher's classroom gives the teachers the opportunity to share any needs or artifacts with their supervisor on their own turf. Also, by the principal seeking out the teacher, it sends the message that they genuinely care.

Financial implications. The comprehensive onboarding framework described in this research study will have increased financial impact on the District over the current induction program. Currently the only costs associated with the induction program are the meals served by the District, the in-kind cost of the administrative time being dedicated to the orientation program, and the compensation provided to those who serve as mentors. For the 2020-2021 school year, that rate is established at \$60 per month through the collective bargaining agreement with the Easton Area Education Association. Based on the increased responsibilities that are associated with serving as a mentor in *On the Bus*, it is recommended that the monthly rate be doubled to \$120 per month. Additionally, based on the expectation that the mentors attend a training session and a portion of the three-day induction program, the mentors should also be compensated at the hourly contractual rate for these summer meetings, which is set at \$40 per hour. The added expectations and increased sophistication of the onboarding program justify the increase in the expenditure.

With all of this said, Ingersoll (2012) concluded that there is a correlation between comprehensive onboarding programs and the retention of teachers. This, coupled with the average cost to replace one teacher being estimated at over \$8000 makes it essential for

districts to invest properly on the front end (Callahan, 2016). Therefore, the increased expenses being added to the onboarding program will ultimately pay for themselves in the District's long-term investment in its human capital.

Future Directions for Research

The research conducted through this study establishes a solid framework that can be utilized for the implementation of a comprehensive onboarding program within the Easton Area School District for newly hired professional staff. Nevertheless, this brings about the need to also consider a proper onboarding program for all new employees to the Easton area School District. The Easton Area School District has employees that fall within six different bargaining units: Professional Staff/Teachers, Para-professional staff, Custodial/Maintenance Staff, Administrative Professionals, Bus Drivers, and Act 93/Administrative Support Staff. It will be important to consider the applicability of this framework to other bargaining units.

Currently, there is no induction or orientation program for any employee group within the District other than the professional staff. This leads to role confusion and a lack of overall understanding of the expectations for positions and the district as a whole for newly hired members of other bargaining units. The responsibility to orient new staff members within each of the five other employee groups falls to the respective supervisor. This does not lead to a consistent process, and depending upon the time of year that the hire is being made could result in a virtually nonexistent orientation or onboarding process. These factors point to the need for a formal, comprehensive program to be developed and implemented by the Human Resources Department prior to any new employee beginning their employment within the District.

Future research should focus on the elements of the onboarding program developed for professional staff that would be applicable to other bargaining unit employees. The next step would be to survey the newly hired staff members within each respective bargaining unit to discern what aspects of an onboarding program would have helped them to transition into their roles. From there, similar to the process utilized in this research study, an onboarding program could be developed for each respective bargaining unit. Undoubtedly there will be unique needs across each bargaining unit which is why the program cannot simply be replicated and survey responses must be utilized in order to ensure that the programs being developed are specific to supporting the new employees in their roles.

Another aspect of this research study that was not explored was the opinion of the administrators in the Easton Area School District. The administrative team, including central office administrators and building principals, play a sizable role in the current induction process. It would be valuable to ascertain the feedback of the administration in order to ensure that the comprehensive onboarding program being developed meets the needs of the district from their perspective as well. The building principals are able to gauge first-hand the strengths and needs of their new employees. They would be able to share, through a survey that would provide either qualitative or quantitative data, the areas that the induction program should be robust in based on their general experiences with newly hired professional staff. Further, the central office administrators would have a more global perspective on the trends in education systems and may have ideas that would be valuable in the planning process.

Similarly, in order to ensure that the program is developed comprehensively from the perspective of all involved, mentors should also be surveyed. Those who have served as mentors within the same period being studied in this research program should also be asked to provide their experiences and to provide data surrounding the effectiveness of the program. This could assist not only in the development of the onboarding program, but also the mentor training portion of the framework that is being presented as a result of this study.

Once the comprehensive onboarding program is implemented, it will be necessary to assess its effectiveness. While it has been developed based on best practices included in literature along with the data obtained through the survey contained in this research study, the implementation of the program will need monitoring. Newly hired professional staff should continue to be surveyed, utilizing the same survey tool from this study, in order to compare results from year to year. This will allow the District administration to modify the program, as needed, in order to increase its overall effectiveness.

Summary

There are many reasons for employers to invest time and resources into developing a comprehensive onboarding program. Businesses utilize onboarding programs with the goal of improving outcomes, many of which are related to profits. For educational entities, our outcomes come in the form of students. Therefore, it is imperative that we invest our resources in developing our greatest asset, our teachers.

The framework developed as a result of this study provides the most important aspects of onboarding at each phase of the process. Each component builds upon the prior, like the foundation of a structure. This creates building blocks throughout the employee's

first year of employment that lead to sustained learning, a connection to the school district, and the support needed in order to have a true impact on the District's students.

On the Bus is a comprehensive onboarding program that is designed to engage the newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area School District, deepen the relationship between them and the District, and provide the supports that will have the greatest impact on a seamless transition into the District. Undoubtedly, there will be stressors for any new employee. However, the purpose of establishing a comprehensive onboarding program is to provide a safety net and readily available resources that will minimize stressors and help new staff members develop the confidence they need in order to improve teaching and learning and the overall educational process in the Easton Area School District.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

California University of Pennsylvania Research Participant Informed Consent Form

For the capstone research project entitled:
Onboarding: Developing a system for newly hired professional staff within the Easton Area
School District

I. Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this capstone research is to develop a formal process for onboarding professional employees that will be utilized within the Easton Area School District's Human Resources Department. This data obtained in this research will be used to develop a formal system that, when implemented, provides a supportive and engaging atmosphere to the beginning of a professional employee's tenure in the District.

II. What you will be asked to do:

If you wish to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire focused on your experience with the onboarding process as a new employee in the Easton Area School District. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and there is no requirement for your participation. You may withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty and any data you submitted would be discarded. Your participation in this study will take a total of under ten minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks:

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this research. Your anonymous responses will only be viewed by the researcher and will not be used in any way by any other administrator in the District. Feedback will not be used in an evaluative manner in any way, nor will it be shared with anyone with evaluative responsibilities for professional staff in the district.

IV. Confidentiality:

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file. Following the conclusion of this study, the data and results will remain in locked file at California University in the Educational Administration and Leadership Department.

V. Contact Information:

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

Primary Researcher:
Alyssa L. Emili

Faculty Advisor:
Dr. Peter J. Aiken

Email: emi0956@calu.edu
Phone: 610-390-0952

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Phone: 717-368-8745

- VI. This research project has been approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective 12/20/19 and expires 12/19/20.
- VII. Your agreement to this consent form shall serve as your consent to utilize the data provided herein.

Yes

No

Appendix B

On the Bus: An Overview for Implementation

Research Based Best Practice Category	Onboarding Activity
Recruitment and Acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment through HR webpage, Job Portals, and Social Media • Paper screen and interview • Recommendation to HR • HR meets with each new employee
Compliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3-day induction program • New employee handbook in electronic portal • Mentor checklist
Clarification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New employee trivia during induction program • Round table discussion during induction program • Round table discussions scheduled throughout the year on topics identified by HR
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easton water bottle and t-shirt coupon • Complimentary Easton football tickets • Easton passport • Online professional learning sessions • School-specific program videos
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor • Mentor book study • Job embedded coaching • Collaboration circles • Online discussion board