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The Relationship between the Accreditation Process and Perceptions of Efforts for Continuous Improvement in Catholic Elementary Schools in Texas

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The Relationship between the Accreditation Process and Perceptions of Efforts for
Continuous Improvement in Catholic Elementary Schools in Texas

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<u>ABSTRACT</u>

This study investigated the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school
personnel concerning whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic
Conference Education Department (TCCED) leads to substantiated efforts toward on-
going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards.
The history of the Catholic accreditation process in Texas provided a basis for connecting a
review of the literature with formal accreditation studies conducted by Minard (2002),
Verges (2003), and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (2006). The
works of Hampel, Johnson, Plank, and Ravitch (1996), Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk,
Easton, and Leppescue (2006) and Leithwood, Janti, and McElheron-Hopkins (2006)
established the theoretical framework for school improvement efforts. Senge (2006) and
Kruse (2001) contributed to the theoretical framework for continuous improvement and
learning organization theories. An examination of the work of Guerra, Haney, and Kealey
(1991) as well as a review of church documents served as a basis for exploring Catholic
identity.

Administrators, teachers, counselors, librarians, and support staff employed in
Texas Catholic elementary schools provided 705 responses to an anonymous on-line
survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analyzed to discover
varying perspectives from the participants in this research study.

The major finding of this research study is the strong belief by Texas Catholic elementary school personnel that the TCCED accreditation process is necessary for local continuous improvement efforts. School personnel agree that key stakeholders are sufficiently involved in the process although administrators do not view this involvement as strongly as do teachers and professional staff members. While the respondents agree that the 10-year cycle of the TCCED accreditation process produces both short and long-term improvements, they note long-term improvements occurring more frequently. Administrators perceive accreditation standards and expectations to be clearer than do teachers and professional staff members. In addition, respondents who have been trained to serve or have actually served on an accreditation team are more likely to perceive the process as necessary for educational quality in Texas Catholic elementary schools. There are varying perceptions by administrators, teachers, and professional staff members regarding local school improvement efforts resulting from the last accreditation visit. Finally, improvements to technology are most often cited as a specific example of program improvements that were made as a result of the last accreditation visit.

The conclusions of this research study have implications for the Texas Catholic Conference as it approaches possible revisions to the upcoming fourth state Catholic accreditation cycle. Furthermore, the results provide direction for Texas Catholic school superintendents and principals as they seek to assist their schools in providing quality education in all of their elementary schools.

This dissertation by Diane Starkovich fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Catholic Educational Leadership approved by John J. Convey, Ph.D., as Director, and by Merylann J. Schuttloffel, Ph.D., and Leonard DeFiore, Ed.D., as Readers.

John J. Convey, Ph.D., Director

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my men – my husband who has supported and encouraged me throughout my educational journey and work in Catholic education and our son who not only cheered me on but also provided technical assistance when needed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the State of Texas, Catholic schools are required to participate in an accreditation process under the auspices of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (TCCED). In order to maintain their accreditation status, all schools are required to undergo a self-study which precedes an on-site peer review visit. In the ten years between visits, principals complete an annual report that requires information on the school's progress of addressing recommendations resulting from the last site visit as well as its compliance with TCCED regulations and policies. In addition, principals complete a more substantive Five-Year Interim Report that lists specific steps taken to address any areas noted for improvement. Throughout the accreditation process and with support from the diocesan school office, the school community works to modify and adjust its strategic plan in line with TCCED requirements and recommendations from the accreditation commission.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the TCCED leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards. Particular attention will be given to how principals and teachers involved in the accreditation process perceive the relationship between accreditation and on-going improvement. The principal's role and leadership style as well as teachers' involvement and sense of empowerment will also be considered.

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In light of the site-based form of governance found in most Catholic schools, the research will also explore the relationship between continuous improvement and the involvement of the governing board or council as well as assistance provided by the diocesan central office throughout the accreditation cycle. As defined by Beck and Murphy (1995), site-based management emphasizes moving authority away from districts and states and establishing representative decision-making systems within individual schools.

History of Catholic Accreditation in Texas

According to the TCCED (2001a), historical documents cite the year 1541 as the beginning of Texas Catholic education with mission schools such as Corpus Christi de la Isleta located in El Paso opening in 1681.

Many Catholic schools were established across Texas during the 19th and early 20th centuries and a number of those are still in operation today. They serve as memorials to the religious and lay individuals who dedicated their lives to nurturing Catholic education in the state (TCCED, 2001a).

It was not until the 20th century, however, that Catholic schools in Texas sought formal recognition by the state through accreditation. During the early years of accreditation, Catholic schools received accreditation through a process sponsored by the Texas Education Agency.

It was not until the 1950's that the additional foundation and a standard of unified accreditation processes were built through the foresight of important Catholic leaders. In 1956, Monsignor Edward Maher and Bishop T.K. Gorman of the Diocese of Dallas-Fort

Worth led a unified effort to have a plan for accreditation of all Catholic schools in the seven existing dioceses (TCCED, 2001b).

In 1962, Monsignor Jack Meyers of the Diocese of Dallas-Fort Worth collaborated with other Catholic school superintendents to negotiate with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for an approved accreditation process. In 1965, bishops of the then nine dioceses agreed on requirements to initiate the accreditation process within six years. In 1966, representatives of the TEA visited Dallas, granting a five-year probationary status to its Catholic schools. By September of 1971, full accreditation was achieved and over the next several years a small number of schools were visited and accredited (TCCED, 2001b).

In 1984, massive public educational reform supported by legislative mandates, and problems with providing accreditation for all the private schools located in Texas led the superintendents of the now 14 Catholic dioceses in the state to formulate an accreditation process placed under the auspices of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (TCCED, 2001b).

Cooperative efforts characterized the history of Catholic accreditation in Texas from 1986-1989. As collaboration continued with the state via the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Association of Non-Public Schools (TANS) and a core group of private school associations, a single umbrella organization for private school accreditation resulted – the Texas Private School Accreditation Commission (TEPSAC) (TCCED, 2001b).

Under the aegis of the Bishops in the state, the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department, through its association with TEPSAC, is fully recognized by the Texas Education Agency and is currently responsible for the implementation of the accreditation process for all Texas Catholic schools.

Statement of the Problem

The Texas Catholic Conference Education Department's ten-year accreditation cycle varies from more commonly structured five and seven-year cycles of other regional and state accrediting organizations. During this ten-year cycle, each school's team of professional educators is responsible for generating responses to complete a lengthy self-study one year in advance of the site visit, for writing plans to address areas of weaknesses discovered during a collaborative self-study process, and for designing and implementing on-going efforts for improvement based upon written directives issued by both the visiting team and the Texas Catholic Conference Accreditation Commission. This locus of responsibility requires that schools operate under a site-based management form of governance.

For continuous improvement to occur throughout the entire accreditation cycle, local school communities must collaborate and join efforts in order to accomplish and sustain growth efforts. Senge (1990) contends that systems thinking, building a shared vision, dialogue and learning how to reflect on mental modes are, at some level, educational undertakings more than business undertakings. Further, he argues that fragmentation occurs in education because educational institutions are designed and structured in a way that reinforces the idea that a teacher's job is to teach her kids –

schools must learn to create environments that encourage individuals to rediscover what they feel is important. In addition, Ingram (2004) finds that the concept of data-based decision-making and continuous improvement is the ideal in most schools. Sergiovanni (1992) supports the concept of school improvement being dependent on people working together for a common purpose.

Teachers' involvement in establishing both the process for developing school improvement programs and the actual content of those programs is necessary to ensure their agreement with program decisions. Heck (1995) argues for teacher empowerment in the implementation of school-based reform and further states that having input into decisions about how improvements will be made will directly impact the teachers' agreement with the actual needs selected. In addition, recent evidence from school effectiveness studies indicates that collaboration, teacher empowerment, and group problem solving indirectly result in higher student outcomes (Heck, 1993; Leithwood, 1994). Short (1994) agrees, stating that attempts to create empowered school environments are critical if schools are to restructure to address the critical needs of students.

While much of the literature on school restructuring has emphasized organizational (internal processes), rather than structural (school grade level configurations) changes in the daily practice of professionals, the organization learning literature suggests that school reform efforts should be concentrated on the heart of the school – the teaching and learning process – through careful attention to how information informs and influences the practice of teachers. Therefore, when one thinks of school

improvement initiatives, the organization learning perspective suggests that the collective, regular processes of teachers and administrators working together around issues of practice and professional knowledge will provide schools with the capacity for change and continuous improvement (Kruse, 2001).

Most of the current research on the efficacy of accreditation models relates to the perceptions of administrators and teachers. Several studies from across the country occurred in the early 1980s. More current research exists in the publication of several doctoral dissertations from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s that examine not only teacher and administrator perceptions but also the effects of formalizing school improvement plans and long-range planning as a result of the accreditation process.

In her study of Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accredited Catholic high schools in the southern United States, Verges (2003) states that "teachers and administrators consider all aspects of accreditation to be important for fostering Catholic identity, promoting school improvement, and warranting the resources expended" (p. 118). In addition, "Administrators were significantly more positive than teachers about accreditation fostering Catholic identity, promoting school improvement, and warranting resources" (Verges, p. 118). However, educator perceptions concerning the goal of accreditation vary. "There was a difference in perception between school improvement as a goal of accreditation and specific practices relating to curriculum and teaching" (Verges, p. 120).

Minard (2002) also found similar differences in opinion when studying the perceptions of school principals, teachers, teacher-leaders, and support personnel in five

elementary schools in New England States, "There were significant differences among perceptions of teachers, school leaders, and support personnel about the value of participation in the accreditation process" (p. 201).

Williams (2001) identifies the effects of the North Central Association accreditation process to formalize a school improvement plan. "In examining the data, mixed results were found. While increases in test scores occurred in all areas, there was no statistically significant increase in the ACT scores and the Kansas Writing Assessment" (Williams, p. 57). However, "the school improvement plan had a positive impact on the school culture that was based on improved student learning and collegiality" (Williams, p. 59).

Paurazas (1997) cites school improvement in 11 Midwestern Catholic elementary schools because of accreditation. The researcher reports that all schools in the study were attentive to assessment of student achievement; additionally, all schools appeared to implement appropriate long-range planning. Moreover, "in all schools, the self-study process appeared to improve decision making processes, improve staff morale and commitment to continuous improvement, be accompanied by a sense of collegiality and empowerment felt by staff, and result in a sense of school pride" (Paurazas, p. 123).

Other accreditation studies have reported positive perceptions from superintendents and board members as well as chief administrators. Cushing (1999) reports that the perceptions of principals, superintendents, and board members were positive regarding the accreditation process. The author indicates that participants in the study viewed school improvement as the most important result of accreditation and that

the self-study was the most important aspect of the process. In addition, Cushing (1999) recommends the importance of involving the community in the accreditation process, "this study shows that accreditation is no longer exclusively a high school principal's domain, but that it does impact the whole school system" (p. 115). Finally, "if the accreditation process is used for school accountability and is a tool for school improvement, then the community must understand and be committed to its value before the process begins" (Cushing, p. 121).

While studying 25 schools participating in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' Renewal Project, Allen (1993) indicates, "the greatest improvement occurred in planning, followed by staff development, communication, and school climate" (p. 94). In contrast, "curriculum and instruction carried the lowest degree of improvement at all three levels" (Allen, p. 95).

Keeley (2001) reports positive findings from the study of the impact of the self-study process on the Catholic identity of elementary schools. "The process has the capability of re-energizing a school's community to academic excellence" (Keeley, p. 194). In addition, the self-study process allows schools to "focus on their educational goals and recognize the importance of fostering an environment conducive to learning" (Keeley, p. 197).

In an uncommon dissertation focusing on the perceptions of public school administrators and teachers regarding the accreditation process in public schools in Alabama, Wood (1999) finds that "both male and female administrators and teachers believe that positive change grew out of the accreditation process. They appear to believe

that when schools go through the accreditation process, they see an improvement in school climate in all areas" (p. 81).

With more current research focused on understanding the perceptions of the relationship between the accreditation process and school improvement, Texas Catholic grade school personnel may be better prepared to not only participate in a more substantive accreditation process but they may also be able to fully achieve the desired outcome of any accreditation cycle – on-going program growth and sustainability through the accreditation cycle.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards. The research includes Catholic elementary school administrators, teachers, and professional support staff currently employed in schools completing the accreditation process during the third accreditation cycle (2001-2011) of the Conference.

Verges (2003) researched the relationship between accreditation and school improvement. While this research addresses the perceptions of Catholic high school teachers and administrators, a void exists in determining similar perceptions of Catholic elementary teachers and administrators.

While research studies concerning accreditation processes conducted in the 1980's and 1990's were focused on several models, formal research has never occurred based upon the accreditation model developed by the Texas Catholic Conference.

This study attempts to address the gaps in documented research by examining the perception of Texas Catholic elementary school administrators, teachers, and professional support personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this research study occurs through an examination of scholarly research and previously published dissertations in the areas of accreditation, school improvement, continuous improvement and learning organizations, and Catholic identity.

The history of the Catholic accreditation process in Texas provides a basis for connecting a review of the literature and the examination of the standards and seven domains of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process. These seven domains establish the six theoretical constructs and resulting scales that are identified in the survey instrument: the accreditation process itself; mission, philosophy, and goals; community; management and leadership; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and, student services, school resources, and facilities.

Specifically, accreditation research conducted by Minard (2002), Verges (2003), and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (2006) serve as the theoretical

framework for analyzing the perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding the effectiveness of the accreditation process. This research study will clarify the varying perceptions of the participants in these previous research studies while providing new information from the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel; to date, no formal research exists regarding the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process.

School improvement research begins with a review of school reform efforts in the United States. The works of Hampel, Johnson, Plank and Ravitch (1996), Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton and Luppescu (2006), and Leithwood, Jantzi, and McElheron-Hopkins (2006) establish the theoretical framework for school improvement efforts. This research study attempts to support previously studied school improvement efforts while adding to existing knowledge concerning the importance of effective leadership. Notable works of Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), Chrisman (2005), Leithwood (2004) and Bennis (2003) serve as the theoretical framework for leadership effectiveness.

The works of Senge (2006) and Kruse (2001) establish the theoretical framework for continuous improvement and learning organizations. This research study attempts to solidify the appropriateness of continuous improvement efforts as a component of school improvement and validate the appropriateness of educational research efforts in this area.

An examination of the works of Guerra, Haney, and Kealey (1991) as well as a review of Church documents serves as the basis for examining Catholic identity. This research study attempts to further establish the need to maintain and strengthen Catholic identity for the long-term existence of Catholic schools. The philosophy and mission of

Catholic schools, as reviewed in the literature in Chapter II, supports a theoretical framework for Catholic identity to support and foster the goals for Catholic education in Texas and beyond.

Figure 1 on page 18 illustrates a pictorial summary of the theoretical framework for this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary school personnel perceive that the accreditation process results in continuous improvement in their schools?

2. What are the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel concerning the relative importance of different stakeholder's involvement in the accreditation process (i.e., principal, teachers, diocesan central staff, local governing body, clergy, parents, and parishioners)?

3. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary school personnel perceive the ten-year cycle of accreditation affecting local efforts toward continuous improvement?

4. Are there significant differences in the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel based upon position, prior training for and service on an accreditation team, gender, degree, certification, years as an educator, and years of service at the current school?

5. What are the relationships among and between the six theoretical constructs established in the research study and the demographic information provided by participants?

DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel concerning whether the accreditation process as established by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous school improvement efforts to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards. Acknowledged delimitations of this research study include the restriction of the survey population to elementary teachers and principals in Texas Catholic elementary schools. Feedback from Texas Catholic high school teachers and principals is restricted. In addition, the collection of data occurs during the month of October, 2009. Local programs, initiatives, and fund-raising efforts occurring during this time frame may impact respondent availability and participation.

Several limitations exist in this research study. Although the sample population includes approximately 6,500 Texas Catholic elementary school personnel, the release of the survey instrument to the teachers and professional support staff in each of the 228 identified schools depended on the willingness of the principal to forward the survey instrument. In addition, another limitation exists due to the anonymous nature of responses by participants. This anonymity made it impossible to seek clarification from individual respondents.

Krathwohl (1998) cites possible weaknesses of questionnaires which serve as additional limitations to this research study. These limitations include: a possible low percentage of participation; misunderstanding of directions; certainty that the intended respondents complete the survey instrument may not be possible; and, the tendency of

participants who may respond in a more positive manner than the reality of the current school situation.

Lastly, Texas Catholic elementary schools are currently participating in the third-cycle of the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department. This third cycle covers school accreditation visits during the years 2001 – 2010. A final limitation of this study relates to the year in which the school last participated in an accreditation visit. There will be some schools that have not participated in this last cycle prior to the distribution of the survey instrument. In addition, the principal must provide the date of the school's last accreditation visit during this accreditation cycle to all administrators, teachers, and professional support staff in the school. The principal's ability to encourage all administrators and teachers to respond to the survey instrument even if they were not employed at the school during its last accreditation visit may have impacted the number of respondents. Finally, the length of time since the school's last accreditation visit may have faded the memory of some participants.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Accreditation: a quality assurance process under which services and operations of an educational institution or program are evaluated by an external body to determine if applicable standards are met.

Catholic identity: as the teaching arm of the Catholic church, the foundations and guiding force for Catholic education which embraces the fourfold purpose of Christian education: to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel is proclaimed; a community in Christ is experienced; a service to our sisters and brothers is the norm; and, thanksgiving and worship of God is cultivated.

Collective teacher efficacy: the shared perception of a faculty about its capability to collectively affect learning.

Continuous improvement: a process that involves all members of the institution in continually seeking to improve the quality of the system by stressing learning and adaptation as keys to success of the organization.

Data-based decision-making: decision-making based upon the analysis of various achievement results generated from national, state, local and classroom resources.

Governing board/council: a group of people elected or appointed to advise the pastor and/or the principal regarding the operations of the school as determined by diocesan policy.

Leadership: the process in which the leader employs others to engage them in a shared vision and mission of the institution.

Learning organization: an organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire through creative thinking, collective goal setting, and learning to learn together.

Organizational learning: the social process of knowledge or the sharing of individually held knowledge or information in ways that constructs a clear, commonly held set of ideas and goals.

Self-study: an in-depth self-assessment undertaken by a school community to determine compliance with identified accreditation standards prior to a scheduled accreditation visit.

Site-based management: moving authority away from districts and states and establishing representative decision-making systems within individual schools.

Systems thinking: the process whereby individuals understand a system by contemplating the whole, not any individual part, of an organization to collectively work toward commonly held beliefs which will result in improvement of the organization.

Teacher efficacy: a teacher's expectation that he or she will be able to bring about student learning.

Teacher empowerment: the opportunity and the confidence to act upon one's ideas and to influence the way one performs in the teaching profession; assuming responsibility for involvement in decision-making processes.

<u>Teacher trust</u>: the process of establishing respect and instilling faith in teachers by leadership that values integrity, honesty, and openness.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (2007) states the objectives of the accreditation process as follows:

- to assess strengths and weaknesses of the school's total instructional process

- to examine effectiveness of various program components in meeting student needs

- to offer suggestions for developing and strengthening of school processes, systems, and services

- to provide assurance and accountability to the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department of the school's measure of effectiveness and quality under the Domains and Areas of Focus

- to establish the level of accreditation

The relationship between accreditation and continuous improvement has significance as a research topic for Catholic elementary schools since it further establishes levels of accountability. Indeed, the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) supports the need for "both subjective and objective measures that provide information for continuous improvement toward achieving the mission" (NCEA, 2004, ¶ 4). Included in its list of measures is NCEA's support of regional, state or diocesan sponsored accreditation processes. These accreditation processes provide affirmation that

a school offers a program of quality education that school communities expect as well as an endorsement from the educational community as a whole.

The Texas Catholic Conference Education Department promotes quality education among the Catholic schools in Texas by publishing *The Guide to Quality and Effectiveness* (2007) and by providing state chair and team member training to all of its member schools in order to affirm schools' efforts to meet the standards of the accreditation process. Assessing the perceptions of Catholic elementary school personnel will provide the Conference with valuable feedback for on-going assessment of its efforts to maintain and to improve Catholic education in the State of Texas.

Lastly, no formal research studies have been conducted on this topic for the Catholic schools in Texas. Findings from this research study will contribute to the body of knowledge about accreditation. Furthermore, the results have implications for developing recommendations for future policies for the Catholic elementary schools in the state of Texas. Finally, results achieved through this research study will provide the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department valuable information and feedback as it approaches possible revisions to its upcoming fourth state Catholic accreditation cycle (2011-2021).

Figure 1. The Relationship between the Accreditation Process and Perceptions of Efforts for Continuous Improvement in Catholic Elementary Schools in Texas.

TCCED Accreditation Process

Seven Domains and Areas of Focus

Continuous Improvement and Learning Organizations

Catholic Identity

School Improvement Efforts
- School Reform
- School Improvement Research
- Teacher empowerment
- Shared decision-making
- Staff Development
- Leadership

Accreditation
- Role of principal
- Teacher collaboration
- Teacher involvement
- School improvement
- Varying Perceptions

On-going Continuous School Improvement Efforts
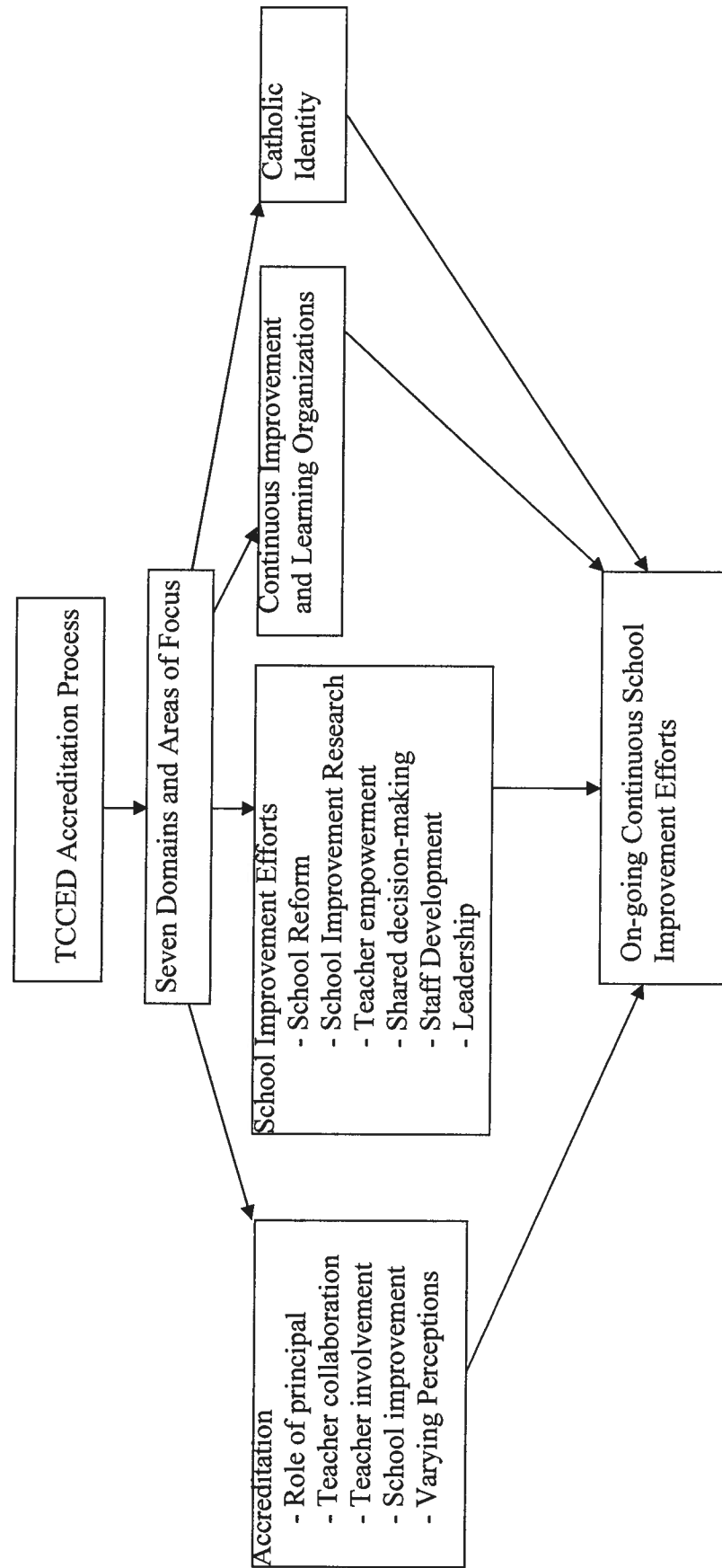
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (TCCED) oversees the accreditation process required of all recognized Catholic schools in Texas. During the 2008-2009 academic year, the National Catholic Education Association Annual Report (McDonald, D., & Schultz, M., 2009) indicates that 285 Catholic schools in the State of Texas enroll 81,225 students in both elementary and secondary schools. These statistics include 234 elementary schools with a total enrollment of 62,126 students. With such large numbers of students, teachers, administrators, and school communities invested in this accreditation process, feedback and research on the effectiveness of the Catholic accreditation process is warranted. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards.

A comprehensive review of the literature on research related to this study is contained in this chapter. For organizational purposes, the review of literature occurs in the following categories: (a) accreditation, (b) school improvement, (c) continuous improvement and learning organizations, and (d) Catholic identity. Each section contains research subdivided by related themes.

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Although accreditation processes impact educational institutions serving every school configuration from pre-kindergarten to postgraduate, few studies have explored its impact on continuous improvement efforts. While the overwhelmingly majority of school accreditation research occurs through dissertations published in the last 20 years, dissertations published since the mid 1990s have been examined for purposes of this research.

Journal research regarding accreditation processes currently exists in greater volume as it relates to the accreditation of institutions of higher learning and specialized accrediting bodies such as The Commission on Accreditation for the National Association of Schools of Art and Design. Scholarly research directly relating to accreditation in elementary and secondary schools is scarce and when it does exist the research is somewhat outdated.

The educational reform movement serves as the catalyst for school improvement efforts and is covered for historical purposes. Considerable research exists regarding school improvement efforts. Aspects of effective leadership styles as well as teacher collaboration, empowerment, and professional development warrant special inclusion in the literature review.

Additionally, the concept of continuous improvement and its relationship to organizational learning exist in business and organizational research literature. The recent application of these concepts to school improvement efforts appear in current research literature and is summarized as it relates to recent school accountability challenges.

Finally, the philosophy and mission of Catholic schools become paramount in any accreditation process since philosophy and mission flow from church teachings that emphasize the understanding of the ministerial role of the Catholic school. This research study would be incomplete without the inclusion of current research regarding Catholic school identity and its resulting culture.

ACCREDITATION

"Accreditation is the affirmation that a school provides a quality of education that the community has a right to expect and the education world endorses" (Commission on Secondary Schools – Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 2006). "Accreditation is an activity, not a status. Schools are accredited because of the way they move, not the way they stand" (AdvancEd, 2009).

Bernasconi (2004) cites two basic models utilized to evaluate the performance of K-12 schools: inspection (such as the model used by England's Office for Standards in Education) and accreditation, originally developed nearly a century ago by what are currently the regional agencies established in the United States. He further notes that the crucial difference between the two models rests with the intended use of the self-study. While the accreditation system utilized in the United States stresses the process of discovery and assessment of strengths and weaknesses identified by the school community itself during the self-study phase, the inspection model places its emphasis on an inspector's judgment of the data gathered during the self-study to evaluate and assign scores to identified standards.

Since no federal department of education assumes authority for a centralized accreditation process for elementary and secondary schools, the states assume control over education through various statutes, regulations, and regional accreditation agencies. In order to establish a basic level of quality assurance, the accreditation process in the United States has evolved over the years. Private educational accrediting organizations based on regional demographics have adopted criteria reflecting program standards and requirements. In addition, these organizations have established procedures for evaluating school programs to establish a baseline of quality assurance.

The system of accreditation in the United States flows from the recognition of accrediting agencies for the accreditation of institutions of higher (postsecondary) education. The United States Department of Education does not have the authority to provide accreditation status to public or private elementary or secondary schools. Rather, the United States Department of Education recognizes accrediting bodies for the accreditation of institutions of higher (postsecondary) education. The United States Secretary of Education must, by statute, publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies considered to be the authorities for quality assurance for programs offered by institutions of higher education. If an accrediting body which is recognized by the Department for Higher Education also accredits elementary and secondary schools, the Department's recognition applies only to the agency's accreditation of post secondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Accreditation policies vary considerably across the United States. While some states require no formal accreditation process, others require a regional accreditation and 30 states regulate their own state accreditation systems (Bernasconi, 2004).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), five regional accreditation commissions across this country facilitate the accreditation process for the majority of public and private elementary, middle, and high schools. They include: AdvancED (merger of North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) effective in April, 2006); Northwest Association of Accredited Schools (NAAS); New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC); Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC); and, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS). These accreditation agencies set standards, generally of a qualitative nature, against which individual schools or school districts evaluate themselves. The commissions serve both private and public institutions that seek to achieve accreditation; however, for many public schools, this process is considered voluntary.

Several Catholic dioceses require accreditation through their state Catholic conferences. Notable among these are Florida, Texas, and Oklahoma. Other dioceses coordinate accreditation efforts with the state department of education. The Ohio Catholic School Accrediting Association exemplifies an accreditation process that works closely with the state of Ohio since the state issues Catholic school charters as required by law.

Many Catholic schools across the country maintain dual accreditation with both the state conference commission as well as one of the regional accrediting commissions.

Regardless of the accrediting body, the accreditation process follows a prescribed series of events. These events include a self-study process, a site visit, the publication of the institution's accreditation status, on-going monitoring, and a method of reevaluation. This cycle of accreditation, however, varies from organization to organization. Most cycles occur in a five-year rotation while some occur over a seven-year period. The Texas Catholic Conference Education Conference accreditation cycle occurs during a ten-year period.

During the self-study process, the school community develops and analyzes a student and community profile. The faculty and staff review progress toward stated goals and objectives and the entire community provides input and evidence concerning the quality of the school program. Generally, the self-study process culminates with the generation of a school wide action plan. Additionally, most accreditation cycles call for the self-study to be completed in the year preceding the actual school visit.

Throughout the site visit, the visiting team seeks validation of the school's efforts to meet the standards established by the accrediting organization. These core standards vary from commission to commission; however, the following common elements exist among most of them: mission, leadership, governance, personnel, facilities, curriculum and instruction, student services, finances, strategic planning, and continuous improvement efforts. The key areas of focus revolve around meeting established standards, providing quality assurance, and engaging in continuous improvement.

Through a series of observations and interviews, the visiting team seeks to find evidence that the school complies with the organization's core standards and implements them at the local level in accordance with the school's mission. In addition, the team examines various forms of documentation that validate the school's achievement of not only identified core standards but also compliance with local, state, and federal regulations. Observations of classrooms as well as interviews with teachers, administrators, members of the governing body, and central office administration provide additional procedures for verification of accreditation standards.

The follow-up process involves the generation of a final report issued by the visiting team to the accrediting organization. The organization establishes the level of accreditation and provides recommendations to the school based upon a review of the self-study and the site visit. Generally, the cycle begins anew, and the school community during the next few years undertakes the review and the refinement of a school wide action plan in consultation with its many constituencies. On-going monitoring from the accrediting agency provides verification that the school continues to meet its standards.

Accreditation of Catholic Schools

In addition to the above-mentioned standards, the accreditation of Catholic schools achieved through a Catholic accrediting agency requires an additional component – Catholic identity. "The Catholic school is a center for evangelization; thus, its catechetical program is essential to its distinctly Catholic identity and character" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, p. 231). In addition, "Cathechetical instruction in the Catholic school should be based upon the *Catechism of the Catholic*

Church and thoroughly integrated into the curriculum and objectives of the school" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, p. 232).

Thus, the philosophy and mission of a Catholic school become paramount in the accreditation process. Philosophy and mission flow from church teachings that emphasize the understanding of the ministerial role of the Catholic school. "The Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the church" (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, #34).

Delivered during his address at The Catholic University of America in the fall of 2005, Archbishop Miller (2006) states, "The Holy See describes the school as a community in four areas: the teamwork among all those involved; the cooperation between educators and bishops; the interaction of students with teachers; and, the school's physical environment" (p. 29). Community, as described by Miller, articulates an essential benchmark of Catholic education.

Standards and the Seven Domains of the TCCED Accreditation Process

Currently, seven domains, consisting of 47 areas of focus, compose accreditation standards as approved by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (TCCED, 2007). These accreditation standards include consideration of: Catholic identity and programs; mission, philosophy, goals, and objectives; community support of the school; a safe and healthy environment which is conducive to learning; staff qualifications and performance; the effectiveness of the administrator as instructional leader; the purpose, design, and implementation of curriculum; the programs and resources available to meet the needs of special populations; the utilization of assessment

instruments to determine modification in student programs; staff development; in-service programs for governing bodies; and, compliance with federal and state statutes.

The seven domains and areas of focus (TCCED, 2007) include:

Domain I: Mission, Philosophy, Goals, and Objectives

The Catholic school is a unique environment that has as its primary purpose the continued formation of the Christian person. Members of the school community are called to unite in worship, to proclaim the Gospel message, and to serve others.

Domain II: Community

The school promotes a community of believers and learners in the spirit of Jesus Christ as experienced in the Catholic Church and lived out as active citizens in today's society.

Domain III: Governance, Administration, and Management

School governance supports an educational program of high quality with systematic, legal, and fiscal responsibilities.

Domain IV: Personnel

The instructional leader initiates and monitors an effective and efficient program of studies. The principal has a major responsibility of providing instructional leadership in the school. Collaborative program planning is encouraged and assistance from appropriate faculty and staff is actively solicited. The contribution of all concerned, under the leadership of the principal, should be considered in evaluating the effectiveness of the educational program within the school.

Domain V: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The purpose, design, and implementation of the curriculum represent the school's mission. A Catholic atmosphere, which is shared as well as understood by teachers, students, and parents, permeates all areas of the curriculum. Instructional decisions support the school's academic goals, objectives, and priorities. Evaluation of the curriculum is continuous and responsive to student needs.

Domain VI: Student Services, Resources, and Activities

Student services enhance the curriculum and are part of the learning process.

Domain VII: Plant and Facilities

The physical plant and facilities of the school are adequate, safe, well-designed for instruction, and conducive to learning. The indicators take into account the various groups served, i.e., early childhood, and elementary and middle school students as well as extended day participants.

REVIEW OF ACCREDITATION RESEARCH

Since 1990, a total of 38 dissertations have been published in the area of elementary and high school accreditation. As indicated in Table 1, the majority of these dissertations address high school research; several focus on all grade levels: merely three of these dissertations are associated with Catholic school research; and, no research exists regarding the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department Accreditation Process.

Table 1

Accreditation Dissertation Research Conducted From 1990 – 2007 by Researcher,

Year, Level and Topic

Researcher	Year	Level	Topic
Davis	1990	Elementary	Catholic self-study instruments
Kimbrel	1990	Secondary	Outcome accreditation of one school
Gillespie	1990	Elementary	School effectiveness and excellence
Little	1990	Secondary	Outcome accreditation of high schools
Leach	1991	System	Improvement planning and implementation
Merta	1992	Secondary	Influence of WASC accreditation
Dingman	1992	Elementary	NCA and Pueblo elementary schools
Gossard	1992	Elementary	School culture and regional accreditation
Allen	1993	All	Decentralization resulting from accreditation
Brunn-Machnak	1993	Secondary	Outcome accreditation of high schools
Fedun	1993	Secondary	Case study of a Washington high school
Mondell	1994	Secondary	Stages of concerns in 4 Ohio high schools
Cline	1995	Secondary	Educational orientation of 3 principals
Ramos	1995	Secondary	Managing accreditation and advocacy
Torres	1995	Secondary	Factors influencing evaluation information
Fite	1995	Secondary	Impact of outcome accreditation
Coan	1996	Secondary	Process changes: 1982-1992

Researcher	Year	Level	Topic
Coulson	1996	Elementary	Perceptions of Michigan teachers
Higgins	1996	Secondary	Relationship with organizational learning
Balke	1997	Elementary	Teacher collaboration and change efforts
Paurazas	1997	Elementary	Midwest urban archdiocese accreditation
Doyle	1998	All	Wyoming out-come based principles
Gayton	1999	Elementary	Teacher-perceived school climate
Orwin	1999	Elementary	Principal personality-types and leadership
Cushing	1999	Secondary	Impact and value of NEASC procedures
Wood	1999	All	Perceptions of public school teachers and administrators
Keeley	2001	Elementary	Middle States Association/Catholic identity
Williams	2001	Secondary	Connection of improvement plan to test scores
Lassiter	2002	All	Principals' perceptions to state standards
Minard	2002	Elementary	Accreditation – pro-forma or substance?
Pace	2002	All	Financial characteristics of Missouri schools
Poeske	2002	Secondary	Administrator perceptions of two models
Bazemore	2003	Secondary	Public alternative high schools
Verges	2003	Secondary	Educator perceptions/Catholic identity
Ryan	2004	Secondary	Negotiating assimilation
Perrello	2004	Elementary	Comparative study of stress

Researcher	Year	Level	Topic
Willard	2005	Elementary	Influences of SACS on student achievement
Fryer	2007	Secondary	Accreditation and accountability

Several themes emerged during the analysis of the findings generated by these research studies. They include the role of the principal, teacher collaboration, student achievement, the varying perceptions of administrators and teachers, and efforts toward school improvement.

This research study investigates the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards. Utilizing the six theoretical constructs contained in the Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey as well as demographic factors provided by respondents to the survey, this research study analyzes the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary teachers and principals regarding local continuous improvement school efforts resulting from the accreditation process itself, the mission and philosophy of Texas Catholic education, the development and support of the local community, effective and visible leadership, the alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment, and teacher collaboration, teacher empowerment, and professional development.

Leadership

Leadership (or lack of it) is an essential element affecting competent accountability reporting processes in schools (Fryer, 2007). While examining accountability practices of four public high schools in California in light of measures mandated by the California Department of Education, Fryer's findings establish that school leaders confirmed that achievement and accountability reporting success depended upon strong leadership by the principal. Although the administrators cite too many reporting requirements, they recognized that when endorsed by strong local leadership they created a successful benchmark for reform.

"If we have learned anything about effective change in schools or any complex organization, it is that neither managerial imperatives nor inspirational speeches will be sufficient to move people and organizations from their entrenched positions" (Reeves, 2009, p. 7). Reeves contends that leaders must assess readiness to change their organizations and to change themselves, "Change leaders know that they do not change organizations without changing individual behavior, and they will not change individual behavior without affirming the people behind the behavior" (p. 10).

Indeed, Balke (1997) states that the amount of teacher involvement in the quality review process varied according to the procedures that the principal selected and also that the motivation for teacher interaction was to fulfill mandates. In her study designed to examine the relationship between teacher collaboration and local change efforts for improvement in seven Illinois public elementary schools, the researcher notes a top-down

approach to the quality review process in which principals were mainly involved in responding to a process in which teachers supplied the required information.

In a research study designed to determine the relationship between accreditation and elementary school improvement in a Midwest urban Archdiocese, Paurazas (1997) states, "recommendations for change may be immediate or long-range, but the principal is the person who can initiate, implement and bring forth educational change" (p. 31).

Reeves (2009) states that in order for leadership to be successful, leaders must first define what will not change and create conditions for change by the actions they take and not just the words they proclaim. Further, "to change the collective behaviors and beliefs of the complex organizations we call schools, leaders must apply the right combination of change tools, varying their strategies to meet the changing needs of the system" (p. 39).

The varying styles of leadership, however, appear to have mixed results on affecting the outcome on the accreditation process. According to Paurazas (1997), since all principals used the same style of leadership during the implementation of a defined accreditation process, the data showed that pre-existing differences in leadership styles had no effect on the outcomes of the accreditation process.

However, Keeley (2001) concludes that the cultural and religious commitments of the school's leader positively impacted teachers' perceptions and understandings of the ministerial role of the Catholic school while allowing the principal to become more aware of the spiritual needs of the teachers. In a study designed to gather and analyze the perceived effects of the Commission on Elementary Schools' self-study process on the

Catholic identity of the Catholic elementary school, the researcher confirms that the process raised leaderships' awareness of the spiritual formation needs of their teachers.

Minard (2002) agrees stating that the role of the principal was critical in determining how the staff perceived the accreditation process. Minard notes that the principals of the elementary schools involved in the accreditation process appeared to play a significant role in how the self-study process and visiting committee recommendations were used to influence school improvement. In addition, Minard states, "There are significant differences among perceptions of teachers, school leaders and support personnel about the value of participation in the accreditation process" (p. 201). School leaders not only perceived the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' (NEASC) accreditation process to be more beneficial than teachers and support staff, they also felt more positively about the impact of the process on changes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Leaders were identified as necessary to positively carry forward school initiatives. "Assisting school leaders to articulate the value of the NEASC self-study and to promote the use of the self-study as a vehicle for change could lead to increased numbers of member schools that undertake accreditation in an integrated mode" (p. 210).

Finally, deliberate leadership efforts can influence the amount of stress teachers report as a result of an accreditation visit. In a research study examining types and levels of job-related stress experienced by teachers in both accredited and non-accredited public elementary schools in Virginia, Perrello (2004) states that regardless of their leadership style and involvement in the accreditation process itself, principals can directly reduce

teachers' stress levels during the accreditation process by offering emotional support, faculty socials, workshops on time management and stress, and by providing secured planning time. Reeves (2009) adds that leaders sometimes fail to grasp the fear and anxiety that change creates among their colleagues. Leaders must recognize that "anxiety displaces the advantages of change with overwhelming, if irrational, disadvantages and therefore stops change before it has the opportunity to begin" (p. 8). Effective change leaders must first identify and then affirm qualities, values, and stories of the school community before they can expect organizational change.

The review of literature establishes leadership as an essential ingredient to local school improvement efforts. This research study explores the perception of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the local principal's involvement in the accreditation process, his or her efforts to focus on the needs of the school community and to address accreditation recommendations, and the level to which the principal leads collaborative school improvement efforts.

Impact of District Central Office Involvement

In a study examining the implementation of school-based management and shared decision-making as tools for school improvement efforts in Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accredited schools, Allen (1993) found that there appeared to be little relationship between school-based management and shared decision-making or school improvement. The superintendents who responded to the survey perceived greater decentralization than did the principals who were surveyed. The degree of control exercised by the superintendent and local boards appears to be perceived much stronger

and with more influence on school improvement efforts by principals than by the superintendents themselves.

Bernasconi (2004) states that the focus of accreditation has recently moved from schools to district offices or it has at least involved central offices as well as schools in the school accreditation process. As central offices become more involved in strategic and operational planning as well as encouraging the use of system-wide data for decision-making, the involvement of central office personnel appears logical and key to school improvement efforts.

Since the involvement of the central office in strategic and operational planning promotes local school improvement efforts, this research study analyzes the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the amount of assistance provided by the diocesan office throughout the accreditation process and whether the accreditation process allows the school to become better known in the larger Catholic community. In addition, this study will assist in supporting or opposing research findings established by Allen (1993).

Teacher Collaboration

Not surprisingly, several research studies report improved and increased teacher collaboration to be a direct result of the accreditation process. "To be effective, professional collaboration requires time, practice and accountability" (Reeves, 2009, p. 46). Balke (1997) notes increased interaction among teachers and principals while Minard (2002) cites that the process promoted the creation of a community of

professional inquiry while fostering staff collaboration and inquiry around curricular, instructional, and assessment matters.

Gayton (1999), however, reports that teacher cohesiveness relates to the state accreditation status of public elementary schools in West Virginia. Cohesiveness was found to be lower in small schools that lack full accreditation. The researcher notes that a sense of cohesiveness may better cultivate working toward common goals.

In addition, Gossard (1993) provides evidence that a more productive work culture occurred for respondents using models of accreditation in which there was the greatest faculty participation in the process. Gossard establishes a positive relationship between work cultures of elementary schools accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the type of model used at the time the research was conducted.

In most schools, the self-study process appears to enhance trust, sharing of ideas, and communication among teachers. Teachers' morale increases as they are empowered in decision-making. Keeley (2001) states that the self-study process promotes and intensifies a spirit of collaboration among community members - teachers come to understand where they excel and identify areas for improvement. Moreover, "in all schools, the self-study process appears to improve decision-making processes, improve staff morale and commitment to continuous improvement, be accompanied by a sense of collegiality and empowerment felt by staff, and result in a sense of school pride" (Paurazas, 1997, p. 123).

Lastly, in a project used as a reaccreditation self-study process as a tool for curricula improvement in a Catholic grade school in Florida, Kohl (1996) notes that

teachers felt that through workshops and other methods of collegial support, they were able to share with colleagues their knowledge, problems, and new ideas. Additionally, teachers felt that this collaboration led to more interactive learning and subsequently an increase in students' interest or enjoyment of learning.

Teacher collaboration will be included in this research study by exploring the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the level of involvement of teachers in the accreditation process and the resulting effects on local school improvement efforts. Perceptions will be analyzed to determine whether teacher collaborative efforts have improved since the last accreditation visit.

Student Achievement

Research results are contradictory in the area of student achievement. Direct links between the accreditation process and students' academic achievement are limited. Kohl,(1996), Minard, (2002), and Willard, (2005) note limited relationships between them. Willard further noted that there was not a statistically significant difference of SACS accredited schools compared to non-SACS accredited schools. In addition, her research did not indicate a statistically significant difference on state achievement tests in language arts, mathematics, science or social studies in SACS accredited schools compared with those schools that did not achieve SACS accreditation status.

However, some respondents report improvements in their schools' total educational program as a result of their participation in the NEASC accreditation process (Minard, 2002). School leaders cite a more significant impact than do teachers and support personnel participating in this research.

While Verges (2003) finds that the vast majority of teachers and administrators view school improvement as the goal of accreditation, the direct improvement of curriculum and instructional materials as a result of the accreditation process were not rated as highly. Likewise, fewer than 83% of the respondents indicated an increase in teaching higher-order thinking skills or of student-centered teaching.

Allen (1993) agrees stating, "curriculum and instruction carry the lowest degree of improvement at all three levels" (p. 95). In addition, there appears to be no relationship between school-based management and shared decision-making or school improvement. Large schools and high schools demonstrated the lowest means for shared decision-making and school improvement (Allen, 1993).

Paurazas (1997) cites school improvement in 11 Midwestern Catholic elementary schools due to the accreditation process. All principals agreed that the process improved quality in the school and quality contributed to school improvement. Principals noted, however, that the benefits of the process would be lasting only if the staff continued to use the recommendations as a school improvement plan.

Similarly, Wood (1999) finds that academic performance in a group of public schools in East Alabama improved because of the accreditation process. "Students' needs were more accurately met because a wide selection of varied curricula and experimentation resulted from the accreditation process. Greater student performance and learning experiences resulted from the accreditation process" (p. 83). Both teachers and administrators indicated that accreditation had an impact on the following items: positive

school change, quality process, impact on student success, and impact on status/reputation.

Accreditation appears to have a more significant impact on schools that have a number of areas needing improvement or not meeting accreditation standards and less of an impact on schools in which most accreditation standards are satisfactorily addressed (New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2006). Additionally, several studies indicate that the percentage of students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch is significantly greater in schools that lack full accreditation status (Gayton, 1999; Orwin, 1999; Pace, 2002).

Gayton (1999) further notes that mean school climate scores were significantly higher in schools that earned full accreditation. In lower socio-economic-status schools, high faculty morale was identified as a predictor of school accreditation while in smaller schools, faculty cohesiveness and socio-economic-status were predictors of school accreditation. In larger schools, only socio economic status was a predictor of school accreditation.

Student achievement serves as an important goal of the accreditation process. However, this study will not explore student achievement through the analysis of student improvement as documented in a norm-referenced achievement test. Rather, this research study will include Texas Catholic elementary school personnel perceptions of school improvement efforts and corresponding student achievement as impacted by increased professional development opportunities, collaborative decision-making that is data-driven, instruction that is based on student needs and learning styles as well as interactive

learning opportunities and higher-level thinking skills, and the alignment of instruction, curriculum, and assessment.

Varying Perceptions of Administrators and Teachers

Perceptions of administrators and teachers vary regarding the effectiveness of the accreditation process. Both Minard (2002) and Verges (2003) find significant differences among perceptions of teachers, school leaders, and support personnel about the value of participation in the accreditation process. "Administrators are significantly more positive than teachers about accreditation fostering Catholic identity, promoting school improvement, and warranting resources" (Verges, p. 118). Further, "there was a difference in perception between school improvement as a goal of accreditation and specific practices related to curriculum and teaching" (Verges, p. 120).

Wood (1999) finds, "Both male and female administrators and teachers believe that positive change grew out of the accreditation process. They appear to believe that when schools go through the accreditation process, they see improvement in school climate in all areas" (p. 81).

While Minard (2002) finds that respondents are overwhelming positive about the value of participation in the accreditation process, school leaders feel more positively about the impact of the process on changes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment than do teachers or support personnel. In addition, school leaders perceive the NEASC process to be more beneficial than the perceptions of teachers or support personnel.

Finally, other school leaders also report that the impact of accreditation processes on student achievement is significant. The vast majority of school leaders indicate that

the accreditation process impacts a host of school-level characteristics in ways identified by best practice research to positively affect student learning (New England Association of Schools & Colleges, 2006). Further, "school leaders agree that accreditation drives positive changes in schools" (p. 8). Again, according to the perceptions of school leaders involved in the research study, accreditation appears to have a more significant impact on schools that have a number of areas needing improvement or not meeting accreditation standards and less of an impact on schools in which most accreditation standards are satisfactorily addressed.

This research study attempts to address conflicting perceptions of administrators and teachers in prior research studies by analyzing the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the Texas Catholic accreditation process and its relationship to continuous improvement efforts at local schools as they respond to questions posed in the six theoretical constructs of the survey instrument itself. An analysis of the data will add to existing knowledge concerning prior varying perceptions of teachers and principals.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

School improvement literature is extensive. A review of the writings of respected researchers and authors in the field of school improvement follows a brief history of school reform efforts. Additionally, current research is summarized in two areas considered vital to school effectiveness: teacher professional development, empowerment, and shared decision-making and leadership.

School Reform Efforts

Americans have always ranked the nation's schools lower than their local ones (Graham, 2005). During the 1960's and 1970's, they began to lose confidence in schools in general. "In 1974, 69 percent gave their local public schools a grade of A, B or C, but by 1982 only 63 percent did, with a big drop in the As and an increase in Cs" (Graham, p. 150).

Efforts that were directed toward improving schools through establishing standards and demanding educational accountability reached national prominence and momentum following the release of *A Nation at Risk.* This report, commissioned by President Ronald Reagan, confirmed that other countries were not only matching but also exceeding America's level of educational achievement, and thus these countries were jeopardizing America's perceived competitive edge across the world's economy and business sectors. "A rising tide of mediocrity was eroding the quality of American schools and colleges, according to the report, and this mediocrity had come to prevail because Americans had lowered their expectations about their schools performance" (Evers, 2001, p.206).

A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform: A report to the nation and the secretary of education, United States Department of Education proposed establishing academic standards for America's schools as an important part of improving student performance. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) recommended a strong academic curriculum in high school, higher retention rates in

schools and colleges, adequate financial investments in education, supplementary federal support of local and state school districts, and voluntary efforts to strengthen programs.

Following the release of *A Nation at Risk* school reform efforts concentrated on increasing educational spending, revising and updating textbooks, expanding academic class offerings, and tightening graduation requirements (Evers, 2001). The public continued to receive a number of other reports throughout the 1980's calling for increased academic achievement and equal educational opportunities for all students, especially those located in inner-cities.

By the end of the 1980's, school performance continued to decrease which led to a call for systemic educational reform. Some reformers advocated vouchers while others suggested stricter accountability measures such as requiring a testing system to measure student mastery of identified curriculum standards across grade levels.

By the 1990's, many states had begun efforts to put in place statewide educational standards and testing requirements as part of high-stake testing requirements for promotion from one grade level to the next. Graham (2005) contends, "As the standards movement accelerated after the turn of the century, the focus became the test themselves. The focus on testing and the penalties for failing the tests intensified with Congress's passage in 2002 of the No Child Left Behind Legislation" (p. 188).

In investigating changes brought upon by strong accountability standards during the 1990s and their impact on improving and equalizing mathematics learning outcomes for disadvantaged minority students, Lee and Wong (2004) find that state activism in

accountability policy did not bring about any significant improvements in key

educational resources, including per-pupil expenditures, class size, and qualified teachers.

The researchers noted that accountability policy did not necessarily hurt adequacy or

equity in school conditions; however, they also noted limited progress in learning

outcomes.

Currently, most students must take high-stakes tests throughout their school years.

Teaching to these tests now appears to be a prominent current educational concern. "Most

thoughtful observers recognize that some testing is important, but testing by itself is an

inadequate strategy for attaining universal academic achievement. Some other ideas are

necessary" (Graham, 2005, p. 189).

Finally, disputes over standards and accountability issues will most likely

intensify over the next few years as student performance on state mandated tests

approaches established benchmarks. Evers (2001) states,

> Not only will standards and accountability remain politically controversial,
> but they came into existence as products of the political process, which
> explains why their results around the country have been so diverse and
> in many cases disappointing. What are our children learning and how well
> are they learning it? This is still the question uppermost in the minds of
> accountability advocates.   (p. 247).

School Improvement Literature

"Ultimately, the improvement of American education depends not on a

technocratic solution, not on getting the laws written, not even on reorganizing the

schools' bureaucratic structures. The missing ingredient continues to be widespread

agreement on the value of a challenging and rigorous education for everyone"
(Ravitch, p. 177).

National political discussions continue to influence education policy. The on-going debate over educational standards and equity appears to suggest that there are easy fixes for educational reform and improvement. Prominent educational researchers call for reform to emerge from the inside out rather than be imposed from the top-down (Hampel, Johnson, Plank, Ravitch, 1996). The authors cite, "The seemingly endless carnival of complaints, fads and changing fashions in public education swirls on the surface of a deep and remarkably stable institutional structure; more reforms sink quickly and leave no trace" (Hampel, et al., p. 484). Further, these authors also contend that reform must emerge from the inside out. Greater community involvement and a redirection of resources are certainly required; but more importantly, educational reform and school improvement will require a new image.

"In the end, the only measure of quality in education is how much a child learns" (Goodling, Owens, Porter, Ravitch, 1994, p. 12). Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton and Luppescu (2006) cite five essential supports for school improvement in order to impact student achievement; they include: leadership; parent-community ties; professional capacity of the faculty and staff; a student-centered learning climate; and, ambitious instruction. During the years from 1990 through 1996 these researchers examined essential supports and how they relate to improvement in student outcomes in Chicago public schools. The authors note that schools strong in most of the above noted essential supports were at least ten times more likely than schools weak in most of the supports to

show substantial gains in both reading and math. Not a single school that was weak in most of the supports showed substantial improvements in mathematics.

Leithwood, Jantzi, and McElheron-Hopkins (2006) support the need for local efforts to foster school improvement. In a mixed-methods research project to support a best evidence model of school improvement in both public and Catholic schools, the authors find that the following processes associated with the school's improvement plan accounted for the largest impact on student test scores: staff development, the ability of the school, as a whole, to learn from new ideas and to problem-solve, and collaboration among those in the school.

Clearly, research points to the involvement of the local community, most especially teachers, to facilitate and move forward school improvement efforts. "Ultimately classroom instruction is the single most direct factor that affects student learning. Ambitious, coherent instruction and a curriculum that is coordinated within and across grades are essential" (Sebring et al., 2006, p.2). Goodling, Owens, Porter and Ravitch (1994) concur.

> Merely setting higher goals and exhorting schools to meet them
> will not magically create the world-class system we need. We
> must examine the kinds of curricula, professional development
> opportunities, and other resources that our schools need to help
> students attain these challenging new performance standards and
> to work to insure that all necessary resources are available to
> every child. (p. 8)

This research study connects the findings of school improvement literature by analyzing the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the relationship between the Texas Catholic school accreditation process and efforts toward

on-going continuous improvement in the areas of leadership, professional development and involvement of faculty, the establishment of high expectations for student success and the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Although many educational reforms continue to exist through the use of high-stakes testing and local school progress to meet prescribed benchmarks, this research study does not explore these recent reform efforts since they are not applicable to the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process.

Teacher Professional Development, Empowerment, and Shared Decision-Making

"The second wave of educational reform accented the profession of teaching. Emphasized in this second wave was the development of new schools to help prepare pre-service teachers and continued professional development of all teachers" (Frampton, Vaughn & Didelot, 2003, p. 293). Professional development school partnerships appear to have a positive impact on teacher practice. The authors surveyed teachers and principals in seven professional development elementary schools in a Midwestern school district that had entered partnership agreements with a Midwestern university in order to improve teacher practices. According to teachers, the partnership improved their teaching practices through the following: learning from university faculty, renewing knowledge, working more collegially with other teachers, allowing classrooms to be used more for university observations, becoming more reflective practitioners, positively changing their view on teacher and learning, and trying new methods and ideas. Principal perceptions of improved teacher practices differed. The researchers explained this difference by explaining that since teacher quality was targeted by professional development

agreements, teachers would be the first to recognize change and therefore would be in

a better position to note change in student achievement particularly initial improvements

far before the principals would note parallel changes.

Blasé (2001) states, "staff development can be a powerful tool for improvement in

classroom instruction. But it can be more. It can form the foundation for teacher growth

and collegial support that results in new, more authentic approaches to teaching and

learning" (p. 75).

In a study designed to ascertain change efforts in schools utilizing a university

school improvement center, Scribner, Cockrell K., Cockrell, D., and Valentine (1999)

note that school improvement processes create a potentially powerful learning

environment where leadership teams confront critical issues surrounding teaching,

learning, and school leadership. Additionally, the authors note that school improvement

process conferences benefited team members by promoting interteam learning through

shared experiences with professionals from other schools.

Heck and Brandon (1995) note that recent evidence from school effectiveness

studies indicate that collaboration, teacher empowerment, and group problem-solving

indirectly result in higher student outcomes and educational improvement. Additionally,

Blasé (2001) notes, "The principal cannot redefine education. It will take the collective

wisdom of all educators in the school to transform the institution, and shared governance

is a prerequisite catalyst for the revolutionary changes which will be needed to

accomplish the task" (p. 140).

Recent evidence from school effectiveness studies indicate that collaboration, teacher empowerment, and group problem-solving indirectly result in higher student outcomes and educational improvement (Heck and Brandon, 1995). The authors state further that site-based management and shared decision-making may be desirable approaches for school improvement since they involve stakeholders in school management decisions.

Blasé (2001) contends that shared governance principals affect three dimensions of teacher empowerment: affective dimensions such as motivation, satisfaction, and confidence; classroom dimensions such as innovation, creativity, and classroom efficacy; and, school-wide dimensions such as ownership, commitment, and school-wide efficacy. Teachers involved in this study state that two strategies used by shared governance principals – encouraging teacher autonomy and encouraging teacher innovation – were key in allowing them to work to their full instructional potential. In addition, "Successful shared governance principals sense that the school's success lies in the skills and attitudes of the professional staff, not merely in the leadership capabilities of the principal" (p. 33).

Teacher involvement in establishing the process for developing school improvement programs and the actual content of these programs is necessary to ensure their agreement with program decisions (Heck and Brandon, 1995). Blasé (2001) adds, "Empowering teachers by implementing shared governance is more than the "in" thing for educators, rather, it may be the best way to fulfill the school's mission and achieve its goals" (p. 14). In addition, Short, Greer and Melvin (1994) conclude that attempts to

create empowered school environments are critical if schools are to reform and change to address student needs.

Research on school effectiveness points to teacher trust as a key ingredient for on-going school improvement. In examining relationships between the level of collaboration in a school and the level of trust, Tschannen-Moral (2001) notes a significant connection between teachers' collaboration with the principal and their trust in the principal, collaboration with colleagues and trust in colleagues, and collaboration with parents and trust in parents. "Relationships among teachers and principals, in part, are being held out as important indicators of a school's or district's readiness for reform and ability to sustain it" (Brewster and Railsback, 2003, p. 8).

However, Forsyth, Barnes and Adams (2005) note that while teacher trust of teachers and teachers' trust of parents are strongly correlated with collective teacher efficacy; they are not significantly correlated to academic performance. In attempting to ascertain the importance of both parent and teacher trust for three school outcomes – collective teacher efficacy, bureaucratic structure, and academic performance – the researchers find that only parent trust of school and parent trust of principal were strongly correlated with academic performance. Supporting this, "Trusting environments will result in more enabling school structures because in an environment of relationship trust, teachers and principals will feel supported and not pressed to regulate their own behavior with additional rules and concentration of decision-making in the principalship" (Forsyth et al., p. 128).

In a large and well-known study of trust in schools, Bryk and Schneider's 2002 research study analyzed the relationships between trust and achievement during a 10-year study of more than 400 Chicago elementary schools. Bryk and Schneider established a connection between the level of trust in a school and student learning. They found, "Trust fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity improvements" (p. 116). On the other hand, they note that environments in which teachers feel unsupported, mistrusted or constantly in fear of being reprimanded, trust between teachers and administrators is unlikely to improve.

This research study further explores trust through an analysis of the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the relationship between the Texas Catholic accreditation process and local school improvement efforts. Specifically, areas for consideration include: improvement in the work environment; increased professional development opportunities; enhanced professional conversations and improved collaborative planning; increased staff communication efforts; and, the level of involvement of various stakeholders in the accreditation process utilized in Texas Catholic elementary schools – all key factors in establishing and strengthening levels of teacher trust.

Leadership

"With a national emphasis on accountability (adoption of standards) and public demand for reform, the demands for excellence in school leadership are higher than ever" (Goldstein, 2003, p. 5). It is widely recognized that the quality of leadership of the school

principal is a major factor impacting school effectiveness. Effective schools have effective leaders (NASSP, 2002; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Elmore (2000) stresses the importance of understanding effective curriculum practices, instruction and assessment, and the ability to work with teachers to solve challenges common to the school environment. The knowledge base that a principal must demonstrate is vast and Elmore suggests the distributed model of leadership for effective school management.

"Given the perceived importance of leadership, it is no wonder that an effective principal is thought to be a necessary precondition for an effective school" (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005, p.5). In analyzing the potential for a school improvement process to foster professional community, Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine (1999) note that the most important facilitating or impeding factor for success is the principal. The principal's leadership style plays a critical role in the degree of professional community achieved.

Chrisman (2005) finds that primary and secondary schools that sustained growth on California's academic program index for two consecutive years appear to be the product of how well a school operates as well as the quality of leadership and effectiveness of school programs. Principals representing successful school reform illustrate strong abilities in analyzing data and collaborating effectively with teachers and staff.

In developing a transformational model of school leadership, Leithwood (1994) provides the needed four 'I's' for school principals to develop in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence.

Ross and Gray (2006), note "the essence of transformational leadership is dedication to fostering the growth of organizational members and enhancing their commitment by elevating their goals" (p. 180). While studying the effects of transformational leadership on collective teacher efficacy, the researchers state,

> The critical leadership task is to help teachers identify cause-effect relationships that link their actions to desired outcomes. Teachers need to recognize which of their skills contribute to student achievement, that they control the acquisition of these skills, and that they need to take responsibility for the successes and failures of their students. (p. 193)

Newcomb (2008) contends that educational change is the number one issue facing this country. In an interview conducted with John Kotter, Newcomb notes the steps Kotter provides for guiding change. Kotter notes that it is essential for a leader to put together the right team to assist with change. Leaders must be able to draw upon their strengths to convince others that change needs to occur.

Bennis (2003) concurs. He emphasizes the need for leaders to be able to engage others through a shared vision. Leaders must go beyond relying on personal skills or charisma to produce change; leaders must exhibit a sense of purpose and a sense of self-confidence in order to lead others.

A well-respected author and speaker on the habits of highly effective people, Stephen Covey (1989) identifies behaviors that generate positive results: be proactive; begin with the end in mind; put first things first; seek first to understand and then to be understood; and, synergize and sharpen the saw. In a follow-up book on the basic operating principles of effective leadership, Covey (1992) emphasizes the need for leaders to have a strong sense of purpose in their own lives and principles that guide their daily actions. Effective leaders clearly communicate by their actions a clear sense of purpose.

In further identifying desired leadership characteristics for change, Fullan (1993) identifies five: moral purpose; understanding the process behind the change; strong relationship skills; the ability to share knowledge; and, connecting new with existing knowledge. Sergiovanni (1992) takes leadership skills to another level:

> The reality is that building professional authority as a course for leadership is a long-term proposition. In the meantime, we can do as much to advance leadership by moving moral authority – the authority of felt obligations and duties derived from widely shared professional and communities values, ideas and ideals – to center stage. (p. 42)

Heifetz and Linsky (2003) emphasize the ability of successful leaders to adapt behaviors to the situation of the challenge at hand. Leaders must be able to utilize different strengths in order to lead effectively. At times, leaders must establish routines and operating procedures and protect staff members from problems that might distract them from their work. At other times, effective leadership behavior requires providing resources that help those in the organization identify new ways of addressing problems.

Additionally, other situations will require the leader to manage conflict and to facilitate new values and beliefs that allow for actions not previously possible. Finally, leaders must use their authority to shift responsibility for the success of the organization to key stakeholders.

Research documents the importance of local leadership efforts. This research study further establishes the need for strong local leadership by exploring the perception of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the local principal's involvement in the accreditation process, his or her efforts to focus on the needs of the school community and to address accreditation recommendations, and the level to which the principal leads collaborative school improvement efforts.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

Continuous improvement and learning organizations until recently are terms more commonly associated with business. Effective business leaders understand the need for a deep understanding of an organization's core business, its history, its values, its purpose and its potential in an ever-changing environment. Successful business leaders embrace transformational change.

With increased expectations placed on them to improve educational quality and to meet accountability standards, school leaders now find themselves in a similar environment. Now, more than ever, school leaders must understand the school's "business" core, its values and history, its purpose, and its potential in an ever changing environment. "To learn from the stories of business leaders, school leaders must first accept the fact that the organizations they lead, though perhaps unique in some ways, are

nonetheless complex, formal organizations – and all formal organizations have much in common" (Schlechtry, 2008, p. 20).

Senge (2006) defines learning organizations as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3).

The concept of a school as a learning community may be difficult to grasp. Voulalas, Zafiris, Sharpe and Fenton (2005) identify a school as a learning community when life-long learning takes place for all stakeholders for their continuous growth and learning, teachers act as leaders, students are prepared adequately for their future, and mistakes become catalysts for further learning and improvement. Principals were the key interview respondents in this study and they believed the concept of learning communities had much to offer in the positive transformation of their schools. In addition, they indicated that their leadership would be the key factor in any successful transformation process.

Total quality management as an educational improvement tool exists in schools that embrace the belief that dedication to continuous improvement is required for meaningful change. Bonstingl (1992) relates the concept of total quality management to "a true learning organization optimizing its entire system – including processes and products – by empowering everyone, especially front-line workers – students and teachers in the case of schools – to continuously improve their work" (p.28). Bonstingl contends that in quality schools everyone understands that improvement of student

outcomes can only be achieved when learning processes are continuously improved by teachers. Additionally, administrators must continuously improve the entire system which supports learning processes in order to create optimal opportunities for success within the school environment.

Kruse (2001) agrees.

> While much of the literature on restructuring has emphasized organizational, rather than structure, changes in the daily practice of professionals, the learning organization literature suggests that school reform efforts can be concentrated at the heart of the school – the teaching and learning process – through careful attention to how information enters and informs the practices of teachers. (p.362)

Therefore, "when one thinks of school change initiatives, the organization learning perspective suggests that the collective, regular processes of teachers and administrators working together around issues of practice and professional knowledge will provide schools with the capacity for change and development" (Kruse, p. 362).

Senge (2006) describes a process for businesses to adopt strategies of learning organizations. These components are remarkably similar to those needed to achieve school improvement: (1) systems thinking – understanding a system by considering the whole, not any individual part of the system; (2) personal mastery – a special level of proficiency required of all members of the system; (3) mental models – agreed upon assumptions that influence how members of a system understand the world around them and how they take action to influence it; (4) building shared vision – the future the community seeks to create; and, (5) team learning – when teams learn individual members are growing more rapidly as a result of forced group learning processes.

When examining the relationship between school culture and implementation of continuous improvement practices, Ingram, Louise and Schroeder (2004) believe that the concept of data-based decision-making and continuous improvement is ideal, but under conditions found in most schools, it is unrealistic. In a qualitative longitudinal study conducted of practices in nine high schools implementing continuous improvement approaches, Ingram et al. note that teachers place barriers to establishing a school culture supportive of data-based decision making. While teachers aren't necessarily against using data for decision-making, many teachers state that it is difficult to measure the things they really want to know. Little agreement exists among the stakeholders about which student outcomes are most important and what kind of data is most meaningful. "Because of the prevalence of these responses, we surmise that being dismissive of externally generated achievement data is a cultural trait that teachers learn and pass on to other teachers as the "right way" to think, act and feel about the use of data" (Ingram et al., p. 1273).

Schuttloffel (2008) proposes four components of transformational leadership – communication, credibility, curriculum, and community. Further, the author states, "The principal's role is to provide a culture that encourages professional growth and development in order to provide continuous improvement for all members within the learning environment. In order to create this culture, the principal serves to challenge the status quo and act as an agent of change" (p. 7). In a school culture, the principal's role is essential to successfully implement a culture of ongoing continuous improvement.

Finally, Temponi (2005) finds that continuous improvement efforts on teaching and related research documenting these efforts are scarce. Arguments continue as to whether continuous improvement efforts are appropriate for education. However, the author states that a continuous improvement focus in the academic world could create more involved, motivated, and engaged learners while at the same time improving relationships within the community as a whole and especially with prospective employers in that community.

This research study attempts to validate the appropriateness of continuous improvement efforts as a component of school improvement and to strengthen educational research efforts in this area through analyzing the responses of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the relationship between the Texas Catholic accreditation model and local continuous improvement efforts.

CATHOLIC IDENTITY

Catholic identity provides the foundation for the existence of Catholic schools around the world. In his address to Catholic educators at The Catholic University of America, His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI states, "Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News" (*Christ Our Hope*, 2008, p. 27). The American bishops agree. "Our vision is clear: our Catholic schools are a vital part of the teaching mission of the Church" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, p. 15).

Davis (1991) states,

The quest for quality and accountability in the secular and religious

dimensions of the Catholic school shows a tendency to be linked most specifically to the issuance of a series of significant Church declarations on its total educational ministry, the special role of the Catholic school, and finally the general reform movement in education in the United States. (41)

Several documents published after Vatican II provide guidance to Catholic educators in the area of Catholic identity. In 1972, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued *To Teach as Jesus Did* which contains the three-fold purpose of Christian education. Catholic school teachers were asked to integrate three components into their daily teaching: preach the message, build community, and render service. Teachers were advised to prepare students to become lifelong learners, "Today, perhaps more than ever before, it is important to recognize that learning is a lifelong experience. Rapid, radical changes in contemporary society demand well planned, continuing efforts to assimilate new data, new insights, new modes of thinking and acting" (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972, #43). In addition, the role of the teacher as a community builder was clarified (National Conference of Catholic Bishops):

> As God's plan unfolds in the life of an individual Christian, he grows in awareness that, as a child of God, he does not live in isolation from others. From the moment of Baptism he becomes a member of a new and larger family, the Christian community. Reborn in baptism, he is joined to others in common faith, hope and love. (#22)

The Catholic school community became identified by its members who collectively shared the concepts of faith, hope and love.

In *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith* (1982), teachers were urged to teach for peace and justice.

The vocation of every Catholic educator includes the work of ongoing

social development: to form men and women who will be ready to take
their place in society, preparing them in such a way that they will make
the kind of social commitment which will enable them to work for
the improvement of social structures, making these structures more
conformed to the principles of the Gospel.

(The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, #19)

The document further defined the concept of the vocation of the Catholic school teacher.

"The teacher under discussion here is not simply a professional person who

systematically transmits a body of knowledge in the context of a school; 'teacher' is to be

understood as 'educator' – one who helps for human persons" (The Sacred Congregation

for Catholic Education, #16).

His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI states,

Teachers and administrators, whether in universities or schools, have the
duty and privilege to ensure that students receive instruction in Catholic
doctrine and practice. This requires that public witness to the way of
Christ, as found in the Gospel and upheld by the Church's Magisterium,
shapes all aspects of an institution's life, both inside and outside the
classroom. (*Christ our Hope*, 2008, p. 30).

Formation that occurs in the context of the Catholic school community was

clarified in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988).

In pedagogical circles, today as in the past, great stress is put on
the climate of the school: the sum total of the different components
at work in the school which interact with one another in such a way
as to create favorable conditions for the formation process.

(The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, #24)

Further, "From the first moment that a student sets foot in a Catholic school, he or she

ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one illumined by the light of

faith, and having its own unique characteristics" (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, #25).

In *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School,* parents are acknowledged as "the first and primary educators their children" (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, #43). The call for collaboration with parents is clear. Catholic school teachers must partner with parents in the educational endeavors of their children.

Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millenium (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997) defines the Catholic school at the heart of the Church.

> The complexity of the modern world makes it all the more necessary to increase awareness of the ecclesial identity of the Catholic school. It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its original characteristics and its "structure" as a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry. (#11)

The document further reinforces the focus of the school as a teaching mission of the Church, "By reason of its identity, therefore, the Catholic school is a place of ecclesial experience, which is moulded in the Christian community" (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, # 12).

Shimabukuro (1998) cites the critical importance of "Clarification of Catholic identity among Catholic school teachers as one of the greatest challenges facing Catholic schools today" (p. 1). Convey (2006) agrees. "As Catholic schools experience continued change, it is clear that steps must be taken to preserve Catholic identity" (¶ 1).

Cook (2008) adds, "Catholic identity serves as the foundation and guiding force for the Catholic educational project" (p. 3). In addition, "It is our distinctive configuration of school aims, outcomes, characteristics and culture that makes us Catholic" (Cook, p. 2).

Heft and Reck (1991) in *The Catholic Identity of Catholic Schools* define three qualities that mark the essential qualities of a Catholic school: "teaching all subjects well, and especially teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ; forming community through which the presence of God is experienced in the midst of a faith-filled people; and, serving others after the example of Jesus" (p. 9).

Guerra, Haney, and Kealey (1991) report on the Catholic identity of Catholic schools following the work of the National Congress of Catholic Schools for the 21st Century which was commissioned by the National Catholic Educational Association to further assist schools and teachers in maintaining strong Catholic identity in schools. The fundamental belief statements include: (a) The Catholic school is an integral part of the church's mission to proclaim the Gospel, build faith communities, celebrate through worship, and serve others; (b) The commitment to academic excellence, which fosters the intellectual development of faculty and students, is an integral part of the mission of the Catholic school; (c) The Catholic school is an evangelizing, educational community; (d) The spiritual formation of the entire school community is an essential dimension of the Catholic school's mission; (e) The Catholic school is a unique faith-centered community which integrates thinking and believing in ways that encourage intellectual growth, nurture faith, and inspire action; (f) The Catholic school is an experience of the church's

belief, tradition, and sacramental life; and, (g) The Catholic school creates a supportive and challenging climate which affirms the dignity of all persons within the school community.

Miller (2006) expands on the concept of Catholic identity. "If Catholic schools are to be true to their identity, they will suffuse their environment with a delight in the sacramental" (p. 40). Also, "Prayer should be a normal part of the school day so that students learn to pray in times of sorrow and joy, of disappointment and celebration, of difficulty and success" (p. 41).

Catholic identity remains a critical issue for the long-term existence of Catholic schools. Due to the decline of religious sisters, brothers and priests in our Catholic schools, the responsibility for maintaining our Catholic identity and traditions now falls on the shoulders of the ever-increasing presence of lay employees in Catholic schools. During the 2008-2009 academic year, McDonald and Schultz (2009) report, "Over the past decade, the lay faculty percentages increased from 85 % to the current 96%. At present, 4 % of the professional staff are religious and clergy" (p. 23).

The Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (2007) provides the following goals for Catholic education in Texas: (a) The Catholic school promotes a community of believers, learners, and active doers in the spirit of Jesus Christ as experienced in the Catholic school and lived out as active citizens in today's society; (b) the Catholic school provides instructional leadership and maintains an effective and efficient program of studies; and, (c) the purpose, design, and implementation of the

curriculum represents the school's mission which is understood as well as shared by teachers, students, and parents.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel concerning whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards. The philosophy and mission of Catholic schools become paramount in any accreditation process since philosophy and mission flow from church teachings that emphasize the understanding of the ministerial role of the Catholic school. Thus, research regarding Catholic identity forms an essential component of this research study.

In conclusion, this research study attempts to address five research questions through an investigation of the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel involved in the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process and its relationship to local continuous improvement efforts. Specifically, this study attempts to relate these perceptions to the extent to which the accreditation process fosters Catholic identity and leads to school improvement efforts. Chapter III describes the methodology of this research which was designed to gather perceptions of currently employed Texas Catholic elementary school personnel in light of their position and experience with the TCCED accreditation process.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilizes a mixed methodology significantly focused on a non-experimental comparative design. Miles and Huberman (as cited in Creswell, 2005) state when one combines quantitative and qualitative data, "we have a very powerful mix" (p. 510).

A mixed methodology allows this research to be built on both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data produces scores that are statistically analyzed while the inclusion of qualitative data provides an opportunity to discover different perspectives from participants in the research study. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards.

Participants

Teachers, administrators, counselors, librarians, and support staff employed in Catholic elementary schools throughout the fifteen dioceses located in the State of Texas were eligible to participate in this study regardless of the year in which the school received its last accreditation visit. However, since the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process occurs during a ten-year cycle and the

system is currently in its third ten-year cycle, school visits occurring between the fall of 2001 and the current year were the primary focus of this research study.

Population of Texas Catholic Elementary Schools

During the 2008-2009 school year, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) Report indicates that 234 Texas Catholic elementary schools enrolled 62,126 students throughout the state (McDonald & Schultz, 2009). McDonald (2009) reports 6,380 teachers in Texas Catholic elementary schools during the 2008-2009 school year; this number includes 4,653 full-time and 1,727 part-time teachers.

When the initial request for participation in this study was mailed to elementary principals throughout the state, communication from three schools indicated that one elementary school had closed at the end of the 2008-2009 school year and two schools with grade level configurations through high school elected to participate in the high school accreditation process during the last accreditation cycle. With the removal of these three schools and the additional three schools that participated in the pilot test of the survey instrument, 228 Texas Catholic elementary schools with approximately 6,200 professional staff employees remained eligible to participate in this research study.

Permission to Conduct the Research Study

Superintendents in the fifteen dioceses were contacted for permission to communicate with their elementary school principals. All fifteen Texas Catholic superintendents (100%) granted permission to contact their principals for participation in this research study during the fall of the 2009-2010 school year. (Appendix A)

The Director and Assistant Director of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department were contacted prior to contacting the Texas Catholic School superintendents for informational sharing purposes as well as to solicit their support in encouraging statewide participation with this research study.

Instrumentation and Theoretical Constructs

This study utilized an on-line survey created by the researcher entitled Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey. Participants were provided an electronic link to anonymously complete the survey through SurveyMonkey.com. (Appendix C)

The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects for The Catholic University of America reviewed the survey and declared it exempt on May 15, 2009. The exemption certification remains in place through May 15, 2012.

The survey instrument is organized in four sections. Section I gathers demographic data concerning the date of the school's last accreditation visit and information regarding the participant's current role in the school; prior accreditation training and service on visiting teams; gender; length of employment in the school and time in current position; length of service as an educator; highest degree earned; and, certification.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

Sections II and III of the survey instrument establish six theoretical constructs for this research study. The first construct relates to the accreditation process itself while the remaining five constructs relate to the survey question which corresponds to an area of

focus found in the seven domains of the Texas Catholic Conference Education

Department accreditation process. Each construct is identified as a specific scale.

Scale One – The TCCED Accreditation Process

Section II is organized around the accreditation process itself; however, it begins

with two questions ascertaining the participant's primary role during the last accreditation

visit and whether the participant served on the steering committee organized to direct the

self-study process. In this section, participants responded to a six-point Likert scale

regarding clarity of the process; adequate training and sufficient assistance throughout the

process; the self-study; collaboration and involvement of key groups associated with the

accreditation process; and, the relationship between the accreditation process and

educational quality and continuous improvement. For organizational and analytical

purposes, Section II is identified as Scale One – The TCCED Accreditation Process (see

Table 2).

Scale Two – Mission, Philosophy, and Goals

The first question in Section III of the survey instrument focuses on mission,

philosophy, and goals as identified in the Texas Catholic Conference Education

Department accreditation process. For organizational and analytical purposes, this

question is identified through Scale Two – Mission, Philosophy, and Goals (see Table 2).

Scale Three – Community

The second question in Section III of the survey instrument relates to community

as identified in the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation

process. For organizational and analytical purposes, this question is identified through Scale Three – Community (see Table 2).

Scale Four – Management and Leadership

The third question in Section III of the survey instrument collects information regarding management and leadership within the Texas Catholic elementary school. For organizational and analytical purposes, this question is identified through Scale Four – Management and Leadership (see Table 2).

Scale Five – Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Question four in Section III of the survey instrument gathers information regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices within the Texas Catholic elementary school. For organizational and analytical purposes, this question is identified through Scale Five – Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (see Table 2).

Scale Six – Student Services, School Resources, and Facilities

The last question in Section III of the survey instrument corresponds to student services, resources, and facilities. For organizational and analytical purposes, this question is identified through Scale Five – Student Services, School Resources, and Facilities (see Table 2).

Section IV contains open-ended questions which allowed participants to provide responses in more detail; participants are asked to comment on the strengths of the accreditation process; how the process could be strengthened; examples of any impact the process had on the quality of education found in the school; and, finally, the participants are given the opportunity to provide comments not covered by any other section of the

study. Participants' responses to the open-ended questions are grouped according to emerging themes and highlighted in the next chapter.

RELIABILITY

Wiersma (1995) defines reliability as, "The consistency of the instrument in measuring whatever it measures. It is the degree to which an instrument will give similar results for the same individual at different times" (p. 309).

A formal pilot test of the instrument was conducted to determine the internal reliability of the survey with three elementary schools in Texas. The schools were chosen with the researcher's knowledge that the principals were retiring at the conclusion of the 2008-2009 school year. Therefore, these three schools will not be contacted to participate in the full study. A total of 86 respondents participated in the pilot test of the instrument; three respondents were principals and the remaining respondents were teachers or other administrators found in the schools.

The Cronbach Coefficient Alpha Test was used to determine the internal reliability of the survey instrument. "The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient establishes internal consistency and reliability by determining how all items on a test relate to all other items and to the total test" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 142). In addition, this test determines if the answers to the survey items differed because respondents had differing opinions or because the survey was confusing or could be interpreted differently (SPSS, 1999). By calculating the Cronbach Coefficient Alpha through the use of the statistical program, PASW Statistics 17.0 created by SPSS, Inc., the internal consistency reliability among each group of items created a single scale and then it was analyzed for reliability.

All of the results indicate a very high level of internal consistency, which translates to

a very reliable instrument. Results from the reliability analysis range from .808 to .976

and all are well above the minimal level of acceptability.

Table 2

Results of Reliability Testing for the Texas Catholic Elementary School

Accreditation Survey

Name of Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
The TCCED Accreditation Process	.808	12
Mission, Philosophy, and goals	.931	6
Community	.952	12
Management and Leadership	.956	12
Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	.976	12
Student Services, School Resources, and Facilities	.919	8

Section I of the survey instrument collected demographic information from each

of the respondents and therefore no statistical analysis is deemed necessary on these

responses.

Section II of the survey instrument asked respondents to answer questions

concerning the accreditation process by utilizing a six-point Likert scale to indicate

agreement with each statement. This section contains 13 questions; however, when

respondents replied to question #6, the pilot responses indicated that the question needed

to be rephrased for the study. Rather than ranking the extent of the involvement for

several key groups involved in the accreditation process, the question was rephrased to

ask respondents to rate the involvement of each of these key groups through the use of

the same six-point Likert scale utilized for the other 12 questions. Therefore, the results

of the reliability analysis in this section include the 12 questions which were not modified for the final study. As indicated in Table 2, the results from this reliability analysis indicate a score of .808.

Section III deals with the areas of focus found in the seven domains of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process. Questions were organized and subcategories are grouped based upon the researcher's familiarity with the accreditation process. Section III contains five questions relating to the seven domains of the accreditation process; the number of subcategories found in each question varies from 6 to 12. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement concerning areas for school improvement through the use of a six-point Likert scale for questions one through four. Question five utilized a five-point Likert Scale.

The first question in Section III of the survey instrument contains six categories for response; the question relates to Domain I of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process. As indicated in Table 2, the results from this reliability analysis indicate a score of .931.

Question 2 in Section III of the survey instrument contains 12 categories for response; the question corresponds to Domain II of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process. As indicated in Table 2, the results from this reliability analysis indicate a score of .952.

Question 3 in Section III of the survey instrument also contains 12 categories for response; the question corresponds to Domains III and IV of the Texas Catholic

Conference Education Department accreditation process. As indicated in Table 2, the results from this reliability analysis indicate a score of .956.

Question 4 in Section III of the survey instrument contains 12 categories for response; the question corresponds to Domain V of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process. As indicated in Table 2, the results from this reliability analysis indicate a score of .976.

Question 5 in Section III of the survey instrument contains eight categories for response; the question corresponds to Domains VI and VII of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process. As indicated in Table 2, the results from this reliability analysis indicate a score of .919.

Since Section IV of the survey instrument allowed for participants to respond to open-ended questions, no reliability testing was deemed necessary for the four questions contained in this section. Rather, responses were grouped according to emerging themes and summarized without statistical analysis.

COLLECTION OF DATA

In August, the researcher collected from each of the participating diocesan offices a list of elementary school principals and their contact information. An excel spreadsheet was created to ease distribution of the survey instrument and also to facilitate second requests for participation in the research study.

By the end of the second week in October, The Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey was distributed to Texas Catholic elementary school principals. Each principal received a letter introducing the purpose of the research study along with a

copy of the superintendent's approval to solicit participation from elementary schools located within the diocese. The letter contained an electronic link and directions for participation in the research study. Prior to providing the electronic link to the school's administrators and teachers, the principal was asked to identify the year of the last accreditation visit and to provide this date to the school's professional staff for accurate reporting purposes. In addition, the principal was asked to return a self-addressed stamped postcard to the researcher indicating that the school is participating in the research study. (Appendix B)

The collection of data occurred during the third week in October through the first week in December. The electronic link to the survey instrument was activated at the time of the mailing to the Texas Catholic elementary principals and it remained active through December 7, 2009. On November 10, 2009, a second request for schools' participation in the research study was sent electronically to all principals who did not return the postcard indicating that the school's administrators and teachers were participating in the study. A third and final request for participation was again sent electronically on November 23, 2009. (Appendix B)

The principals of the three schools who participated in the formal pilot test of the survey instrument were not contacted for participation in the research study. Since all three principals in these schools were new to their assignments in the fall of 2009, exclusion of their schools in this research study seemed appropriate.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Responses to the on-line survey instrument were downloaded to an excel spreadsheet. Data was analyzed through the use of the statistical program, PASW Statistics 17.0, created by SPSS, Inc.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze, classify and summarize the data. Inferential statistics were used to generate inferences from the responses that are received from administrators, teachers, counselors, librarians, and support staff members. In addition, correlations were calculated among the six scales identified in the survey instrument.

The analysis of variance was used to determine any differences between responses from Texas Catholic elementary school personnel based upon the demographic data gathered in Section I of the survey instrument: position, prior training for and service on an accreditation team, gender, degree, certification, years as an educator, and years of service at the current school. In addition, the responses of the participants were analyzed to determine any differences in perceptions concerning the relative importance of different stakeholder's involvement in the accreditation process (i.e., principal, teachers, diocesan central office staff, local governing body, clergy, parents, and parishioners).

If differences occurred among the means of subgroups compared using the demographic data gathered in Section I of the survey instrument, Scheffe's F-Projections (S-Method) post-hoc comparison test was used to determine differences among the responses of the comparison groups to items identified in the six theoretical constructs of the survey instrument.

Lastly, differences among the mean scores for each section of the survey were examined utilizing a repeated measures analysis of variance. The purpose of this type of analysis is to "help the researcher decide whether the observed differences between two or more sample means may be due to chance or to systematic differences among population means" (Shavelson, 1996, p. 465).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (TCCED) leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference education standards. Findings described in this chapter reflect responses by 705 Texas Catholic elementary school personnel to an anonymous on-line survey. An additional 153 survey responses were not included due to no answers provided to the survey questions beyond demographic data.

The findings reported in this chapter reflect the following research questions formulated in the study's design:

1. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary school personnel perceive that the accreditation process results in continuous improvement in their schools?

2. What are the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel concerning the relative importance of different stakeholder's involvement in the accreditation process (i.e., principal, teachers, diocesan central staff, local governing body, clergy, parents, and parishioners)?

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3. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary school personnel perceive the ten-year cycle of accreditation affecting local efforts toward continuous improvement?

4. Are there differences in the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel based upon position, prior training for and service on an accreditation team, gender, degree, certification, years as an educator, and years of service at the current school?

5. What are the relationships among and between the six theoretical constructs established in the research study and the demographic information provided by participants?

Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze, classify, and summarize data. Inferential statistics were used to generate inferences from the responses that were received from survey participants. The analysis of variance was utilized for research questions one through three. In addition, correlations were calculated for the fourth research question using the Pearson Product Moment correlations (two-tailed). Finally, differences among the mean scores for the six scales established for the fifth research question were examined using the repeated measures of analysis. Data were analyzed using the software PASW Statistics 17.0 created by SPSS, Inc.

For the fourth research question, the analysis of variance was used to determine differences between responses of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel based upon the demographic data provided by respondents in Section I of the survey instrument. Additionally, responses were analyzed to determine differences in perceptions concerning

the relative importance of different stakeholder's involvement in the accreditation process. Lastly, Scheffe's F-Projections (S-Method) post-hoc comparison testing was used to determine and describe differences among the responses of the comparison groups to different questions contained in the survey instrument.

Finally, since the number of responses to the four opened-ended questions in Section IV of the survey instrument was smaller than anticipated, all of the responses to these questions have been analyzed and grouped based upon common themes. These responses were included in order to assist with the interpretation of the quantitative data.

Statewide Participation

During the 2008-2009 school year, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) reported that 234 Texas Catholic elementary schools enrolled 62,126 students throughout the state (McDonald & Schultz, 2009). Further, McDonald and Schultz (2009) reported 6,380 teachers in Texas Catholic elementary schools during this academic year; this number includes 4,653 full-time and 1,727 part-time teachers.

Three Texas Catholic elementary schools participated in the formal pilot test of the survey instrument. Therefore, these schools were not included in the research study.

In the fall of 2009, one Texas Catholic elementary school closed due to low enrollment reducing the number of Texas Catholic elementary schools eligible to participate in this research study to 230. Following the distribution of the letter inviting principals to participate in this study, two principals declined to participate based upon their schools' participation the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department high school accreditation process available for school configurations of grades 5 to 12 and

grades 6 to 12. Therefore, the final number of possible respondents was reduced to approximately 6,000.

Demographic Data

As indicated in Table 5, 101 principals participated in this research study. Since the survey instrument was completed anonymously, the exact participants from each diocese can only be estimated based upon 79 postcards returned from school principals indicating that their schools participated in the study. Further, even though these postcards were returned, there is no certainty that the schools actually participated in the study. However, as indicated in Table 3, the estimated Catholic elementary school participation by diocese indicates a representative sampling from the State of Texas.

Table 3

Estimated School Participation by Diocese

(Arch)diocese	Postcards returned	Eligible Schools	Estimate Participation
Amarillo	3	5	40%
Austin	8	19	42%
Beaumont	4	5	80%
Brownsville	6	12	50%
Corpus Christi	2	17	12%
Dallas	9	31	29%
El Paso	2	11	18%
Fort Worth	11	14	79%
Galveston-Houston	25	52	48%
Laredo	1	6	17%
Lubbock	1	2	50%
San Angelo	1	3	33%
San Antonio	5	36	14%
Tyler	1	5	20%
Victoria	0	12	0%
Total	79	230	

The Diocese of Beaumont posted highest percentage of verified schools participating in the research study with a participation rate of 80%. The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston recorded the largest number of confirmed schools participating in this research study with 25 returned postcards. The Diocese of Victoria was the only diocese with no confirmed school participation in this research study.

Table 4 indicates that more than three-quarters of the respondents (76%) indicated that their schools experienced accreditation visits between 2005 and 2009.

Table 4

Date of School's Last Accreditation Visit

Year	Frequency	Percent
2009	105	15.5
2008	120	17.7
2007	131	19.3
2006	71	10.4
2005	109	16.1
2004	67	10.0
2003	31	4.6
2002	22	3.2
2001	10	1.4
Earlier than 2001	12	1.8
Total	678	100.0

Table 5 provides information regarding respondents' primary current role in the school. As indicated, teachers generated the majority of responses (67%) while principals provided 14% of the responses.

Table 5

Current Role of Respondents

Position	Frequency	Percent
Principal	101	14.4
Assistant Principal	12	1.7
Other Administrator	22	3.1
Teacher	472	67.0
Counselor	8	1.1
Librarian	28	4.0
Support Staff	58	8.2
Missing	4	6.0
Total	705	100.0

The vast majority of respondents (71%) had not been trained to serve as a visiting team member for accreditation visits and 76% of the respondents had never served as a visiting team member on a school accreditation visit. Frequency distributions are provided to reflect responses to these two questions as indicated in Table 6 and Table 7 respectively.

Table 6

Visiting Team Member Training

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	188	26.7
No	502	71.2
Missing	15	2.1
Total	705	100.0

Table 7

Visiting Team Member Experience

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	155	22.0
No	534	75.7
Missing	16	2.3
Total	705	100.0

Since administrators generally serve as visiting team chairpersons, the percentage of respondents not trained to serve as a visiting team chair increased to 91% of the total responses as indicated in Table 8; consequently, a mere 4% of respondents have actually served as a visiting team chairperson as indicated in Table 9.

The gender analysis of data reflects 9% of respondents were male while 91% of responses were female as indicated in Table 10.

Table 8

Visiting Team Chairperson Training

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	53	7.5
No	639	92.3
Missing	13	1.8
Total	705	100.0

Table 9

Visiting Team Chairperson Experience

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	31	4.4
No	668	94.8
Missing	6	.9
Total	705	100.0

Table 11 indicates that 36% of respondents have been employed at their schools from two to five years while 18% of respondents reported six to ten years in the education profession (Table 14). A larger percentage (44%) of respondents indicated they have held their current position from two to five years as indicated in Table 12.

Table 10

Gender of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percent
Male	61	8.7
Female	640	91.3
Missing	4	.6
Total	705	100.0

Table 11

Length of Service in Current School

Response	Frequency	Percent
First year	50	7.1
2-5 years	255	36.2
6-10 years	197	27.9

Response	Frequency	Percent
11-15 years	98	13.9
More than 15 years	95	13.5
Missing	10	1.4
Total	705	100.0

Table 13 indicates that 53% of the respondents hold a bachelor's degree, 31% have earned a master's degree, 6% have no degree, and 3% reported the achievement of a doctoral degree.

The last demographic question asked in Section I of the survey instrument probes certification status. As reported in Table 15, over half of the respondents (55%) hold Texas certification, 12% hold other state certification, 3% have been declared specialists in the field, and 27% of respondents replied that they are not certified.

Table 12

Length of service in Current Position

Response	Frequency	Percent
First year	78	11.1
2-5 years	311	44.1
6-10 years	182	25.8
11-15 years	70	9.9
More than 15 years	59	8.4
Missing	5	.7
Total	705	100.0

Table 13

Highest Degree Earned

Response	Frequency	Percent
No Degree	45	6.5
Associate	33	4.7
Bachelor	371	52.6
Master	221	31.3
Specialist	6	.9
Doctorate	19	2.7
Missing	10	1.4
Total	705	100.0

Table 14

Length of Service as an Educator

Response	Frequency	Percent
First Year	17	2.4
2-5 years	92	13.0
6-10 years	124	17.6
11-15	93	13.2
More than 15 years	347	49.2
Missing	32	4.5
Total	705	100.0

Table 15

Certification

Response	Frequency	Percent
Not Certified	193	27.4
Specialist in the field	22	3.1
Other state	82	11.6
Texas	389	55.2
Missing	19	2.7
Total	705	100.0

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

The first research question formulated for this study probed the extent to which Texas Catholic elementary school personnel perceived that the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process resulted in continuous improvement efforts in their schools. Question 10 in Section II of the survey instrument asked participants whether the TCCED accreditation process is necessary for continuous improvement.

On a six-point Likert scale, 253 respondents strongly agreed (35.9%); 197 respondents agreed (27.9%); and, 53 respondents slightly agreed (7.5%) that the accreditation process is necessary for continuous improvement efforts. As reflected in Table 16, a total of 12 respondents disagreed with the statement (1.7%). Clearly, an overwhelming majority of respondents believed that the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process is necessary for continuous improvement.

Table 16

Frequency Distribution for the Accreditation Process is Necessary for Continuous Improvement

Response	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	253	35.9
Agree	197	27.9
Somewhat Agree	53	7.5
Somewhat Disagree	7	1.0
Disagree	4	.6
Strongly Disagree	1	.1
Missing	190	27.0
Total	705	100.0

Since some of the group responses returned a small rate of participation (Table 5), in order to strengthen the statistical analyses, three groups were created: (1) administrators (principals, assistant principals, and other administrators); (2) teachers; and, (3) professional staff (counselors, librarians, and support staff). These three groups were used in the analyses of variance. As indicated in Table 17, the mean responses by group for the question as to whether the accreditation process is necessary for continuous improvement produced means that were closely aligned. As indicated in Table 18, with an alpha level of .05, there is no statistical difference in the responses by group as to whether the accreditation process is necessary for local continuous improvement efforts.

Table 17

Descriptive Statistics for the Necessity of the Accreditation Process for Local Continuous Improvement by Group

Group	N	Mean
Administrator	97	5.40
Teacher	345	5.29
Professional staff	70	5.41
Total	512	5.33

Table 18

Analysis of Variance for the Necessity of the Accreditation Process for Local

Continuous Improvement by Group

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Between groups	1.555	2	.778	1.209	.299
Within Groups	327.320	509	.643		
Total	328.875	511			

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

The second research question formulated for this study asked Texas Catholic elementary school personnel their perceptions of the relative importance of different stakeholders' involvement in the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process. Question 7 (Section II) of the survey instrument asked participants to respond regarding their perceptions of sufficient involvement among teachers, staff, parents, council members, parish members, and clergy. Question 8 (Section II) asked participants to rate the level of involvement of each of the following throughout the accreditation process: pastor, diocesan central office, principal, local advisory council (board), teachers, parents, and parishioners.

Table 19

Sufficient Involvement of Various Stakeholders

Group	N	Agree	Percent	Disagree	Percent	N/A	Percent
Teachers	508	489	96.3	13	2.7	6	1.2
Staff	503	470	93.4	18	3.6	15	3.0
Parents	480	393	81.9	48	10.0	39	8.1

Group	N	Agree	Percent	Disagree	Percent	N/A	Percent
Council Members	470	382	81.2	31	6.6	57	12.1
Parish Members	467	250	53.5	91	19.6	126	26.9
Clergy	464	329	70.9	49	10.6	86	18.5

As indicated in Table 19, Texas Catholic elementary school personnel agreed that teachers and staff were sufficiently involved in the accreditation process. Although they also indicated that parents, council members, parish members, and clergy were sufficiently involved, the percent of agreement for these stakeholders decreased as indicated.

Similarly, Texas Catholic elementary school personnel ranked the involvement of principals and teachers in the accreditation process as the highest. As indicated in Table 20, the remaining groups - pastor, central office, advisory council (board), and parish members - were not ranked as high.

Table 20

Level of Involvement of Various Stakeholders

Group	N	Very	Somewhat	Slightly	Not Involved
Pastor	452	102 (22.6)	187 (41.4)	85 (18.8)	78 (17.3)
Central Office	442	142 (32.1)	203 (46.0)	68 (15.4)	29 (6.6)
Principal	491	466 (94.9)	20 (4.0)	2 (.4)	3 (.6)
Council	444	172 (38.8)	195 (43.9)	45 (10.1)	29 (6.5)
Teachers	498	419 (84.1)	65 (13.1)	8 (1.6)	6 (1.2)
Parents	459	112 (24.4)	239 (52.1)	59 (12.9)	49 (10.7)
Parish Members	426	30 (7.0)	118 (27.7)	111 (26.1)	167 (39.2)

Note. Percent in parentheses.

Questions 7 and 8 of the survey instrument were combined to form a new variable – involvement. As indicated in Table 21, responses by group to the question regarding sufficient involvement of stakeholders produced the lowest mean response by administrators (4.03). The mean responses for teachers and professional staff members, however, were closely aligned at 4.28 and 4.29, respectively. Teachers and professional staff members provided higher means, and stronger agreement, to the question regarding the level of involvement of key stakeholders.

An analysis of variance was performed to determine any significant differences in responses to involvement among administrators, teachers, and professional staff. A significant difference was detected between the responses of the three groups. With an alpha level of .05, an analysis of variance revealed that the responses to involvement by these three groups were statistically significant (p = .042) as indicated in Table 22.

Table 21

Descriptive Statistics by Group to Sufficient Involvement by Key Stakeholders

Group	N	Mean
Administrator	96	4.03
Teacher	347	4.28
Professional staff	71	4.29
Total	514	4.24

Table 22

Analysis of Variance by Group to Sufficient Involvement by Key Stakeholders

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Between groups	5.192	2	2.596	3.187	.042
Within groups	416.291	511	.815		
Total	421.483	513			

As indicated in Table 23, Scheffe's F-Projections (S-Method) post-hoc testing

revealed a significant difference (p = .048) between the responses of administrators and

teachers. Further, although the administrator-professional staff mean difference was

slightly larger than the administrator-teacher mean difference, the non-significance of the

administrator-professional staff comparison (p = .180) was due to the lower power of the

comparison due to the smaller number of professional staff responses (n = 71) versus the

larger number of responses from teachers (n = 347).

Table 23

Scheffe Post-Hoc Testing for Involvement by Group

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Significance
Administrator	Teacher	-.257*	.104	.048
	Professional staff	-.262	.141	.180
Teacher	Professional staff	-.005	.118	.999

*Mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

The third research question of this study probed the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary personnel regarding the ten-year cycle of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process on local efforts toward continuous improvement. In order to differentiate between short-term and long-term improvements, Question 12 (Section II) of the survey instrument solicited responses to short-term school improvements as a result of the accreditation process while Question 13 (Section II) of the survey instrument solicited responses to long-term school improvements as a result of the accreditation process.

On a six-point Likert scale, 111 respondents strongly agreed (15.7%); 253 respondents agreed (35.9%); and, 95 respondents slightly agreed (13.5%) that the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process allowed for short-term improvements in the school. As further reflected in Table 24, a total of 33 respondents disagreed somewhat (4.7%); 18 respondents disagreed (2.6%); and 2 respondents (.3%) strongly disagreed with the statement. Clearly, the majority of respondents believed that the ten-year cycle of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process produced short-term improvements in their schools.

Similarly, as reflected in Table 25, on a six-point Likert scale, 140 respondents strongly agreed (19.9%); 251 respondents agreed (35.6%); and 99 respondents (14.0%) somewhat agreed that the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process allowed for long-term improvements in the school. Further, 14 respondents (2.0%) disagreed somewhat; 8 respondents disagreed (1.1%); and 1 respondent (.1%) strongly disagreed with the

statement. Clearly, the majority of respondents believed that the ten-year cycle of the

Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process produced long-

term improvements in their schools.

Table 24

Belief That the Ten-Year Cycle of the Accreditation Process Allowed for Short-

Term School Improvements

Response	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	111	15.7
Agree	253	35.9
Somewhat agree	95	13.5
Somewhat disagree	33	4.7
Disagree	18	2.6
Strongly disagree	2	.3
Missing	193	27.4
Total	705	100.0

Since some of the group responses returned a small rate of participation (Table 5),

in order to strengthen the statistical analyses, three groups were created: (1)

administrators (principals, assistant principals, and other administrators); (2) teachers;

and, (3) professional staff (counselors, librarians, and support staff). These three groups

were used in the analyses of variance.

Table 25

Belief That the Ten-Year Cycle of the Accreditation Process Allowed for Long-Term School Improvements

Response	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	140	19.9
Agree	251	35.6
Somewhat agree	99	14.0
Somewhat disagree	14	2.0
Disagree	8	1.1
Strongly disagree	1	.1
Total	513	100.0

An analysis of variance was performed to determine any significant differences among the responses of three groups of respondents to the two questions of school improvement: (1) I believe that the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process allows for short-term improvements in the school and (2) I believe that the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process results in long-term improvements in the school. As indicated in Table 26, the means, by group, were slightly higher for the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process resulting in long-term improvements in the school. However, all means were closely aligned and little variance was noted among the means by group for the two levels of the question – short- and long-term school improvements. As indicated in Table 27, with an alpha level of .05, there was no statistical difference in the responses by group to the questions formulated on the length of the accreditation cycle and therefore post-hoc testing was determined unnecessary.

Table 26

Descriptive Statistics by Group to Short-Term and Long-Term School

Improvements

Source	N	Mean
Short-term improvements		
Administrator	97	4.72
Teacher	344	4.79
Professional staff	68	4.87
Total	509	4.79
Long-term improvements		
Administrator	97	4.95
Teacher	344	4.99
Professional staff	69	4.87
Total	510	4.97

Table 27

Analysis of Variance by Group to Short- and Long-Term School Improvements

Resulting from the 10-Year Cycle of the Accreditation Process

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Short-term improvements					
Between groups	.856	2	.428	.434	.648
Within groups	498.802	506	.986		
Long-term improvements					
Between groups	.891	2	.446	.595	.552
Within groups	379.542	507	.749		

RESEARCH QUESTION 4

The fourth question of this research study attempted to determine if any differences existed in the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel to different survey questions based upon position, prior training for and service on an accreditation team, gender, degree, certification, years of service at the current school, and years as an educator. Survey questions chosen for analysis include: the accreditation process is necessary for continuous improvement (Question 10 – Section II); the accreditation process is necessary to ensure educational quality (Question 9 – Section II); accreditation standards were made clear (Question 3 – Section II); adequate training occurred before the accreditation process (Question 4 – Section II); the (arch) diocesan office provided sufficient assistance throughout the accreditation process (Question 5 – Section II); and, the self-study component was a collaborative staff effort (Question 6 – Section II). Mean responses, by group, to each of these questions are provided in Table 28.

Table 28

Descriptive Statistics by Group to Six Survey Questions on the Accreditation Process

Source	N	Mean
Necessary for continuous improvement		
Administrators	97	5.40
Teachers	345	5.29
Professional staff	70	5.41
Total	512	5.33

Source	N	Mean
Necessary for educational quality		
Administrators	96	5.44
Teachers	348	5.28
Professional staff	69	5.46
Total	513	5.33
Clear standards		
Administrators	96	5.50
Teachers	345	5.22
Professional staff	69	5.29
Total	510	5.28
Adequate training		
Administrators	97	5.00
Teachers	347	4.90
Professional staff	69	4.96
Total	513	4.93
Sufficient diocesan assistance		
Administrators	96	4.51
Teachers	340	4.70
Professional staff	65	4.69
Total	501	4.66
Collaborative self-study		
Administrators	97	5.55
Teachers	343	5.15
Professional staff	69	5.38
Total	509	5.26

On a six-point Likert scale, the mean responses for teachers to clear accreditation standards (5.22) and collaborative self-study (5.15) fell below the mean responses for administrators to clear accreditation standards (5.50) and collaborative self-study (5.55) as indicated in Table 28. In summary, teachers responded less favorably than

administrators to two survey questions regarding the accreditation process: accreditation standards were made clear and the self-study component was a collaborative staff effort.

An analysis of variance was performed, by position, for all six questions under consideration. Since some of the group responses returned a small rate of participation (Table 5), in order to strengthen the statistical analyses, three groups were created for position: (1) administrator (principals, assistant principals, and other administrators); (2) teachers; and, (3) professional staff (counselors, librarians, and support staff). These three groups were used in the analyses of variance.

As indicated in Table 29, with an alpha level of .05, there was a significant difference in responses, by group position, to two survey questions: accreditation standards and expectations were made clear (p = .008) and the self-study component was a collaborative effort (p = .001). Scheffe's F-Projections (S-Method) post-hoc testing was performed to pinpoint where these significant differences occurred. As indicated in Table 30, there was a significant difference between the responses of administrators and teachers to the survey question regarding clear accreditation standards and again between the responses of administrators and teachers to the question regarding the collaborative nature of the self-study.

Table 29

Analyses of Variance by Position to Six Survey Questions on the Accreditation

Process

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Necessary for continuous improvement					
Between groups	1.555	2	.778	1.209	.299
Within groups	327.320	509	.643		
Necessary to ensure educational quality					
Between groups	3.363	2	1.682	2.420	.090
Within groups	354.302	510	.695		
Standards clear					
Between groups	5.880	2	2.940	4.848	.008
Within groups	307.461	507	.606		
Adequate training					
Between groups	.742	2	.371	.397	.672
Within groups	476.731	510	.935		
Sufficient diocesan assistance					
Between groups	2.682	2	1.341	1.266	.283
Within groups	527.633	498	1.060		
Collaborative self-study					
Between groups	13.137	2	6.568	6.929	.001
Within groups	479.661	506	.948		

Table 30

Scheffe Post-Hoc Testing for Accreditation Standards Made Clear and

Collaborative Self-Study by Group Position

Variable	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Significance
Clear standards					
	Administrator	Teacher	.280*	.090	.008
		Staff	.210	.123	.233
	Teacher	Staff	-.070	.103	.795
Collaborative self-study					
	Administrator	Teacher	.398*	.112	.002
		Staff	.170	.153	.543
	Teacher	Staff	-.228	.128	.208

*Mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

In order to perform the next analysis of variance, by professional degree of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel, the six responses available in the survey instrument to type of degree held (no degree, associate degree, bachelor degree, master degree, specialist in the field, and doctoral degree) were transformed to three groups: (1) less than bachelor (no degree, associate degree, and specialist in the field); (2) bachelor degree; and, (3) graduate degree (master degree and doctoral degree).

Table 31

Descriptive Statistics by Professional Degree to Six Accreditation Survey Questions

Source	N	Mean
Necessary for continuous improvement		
Less than a bachelor degree	64	5.48
Bachelor degree	270	5.28
Graduate degree	160	5.34
Total	494	5.33
Necessary for educational quality		
Less than a bachelor degree	63	5.44
Bachelor degree	270	5.27
Graduate degree	162	5.40
Total	495	5.33
Clear accreditation standards		
Less than a bachelor degree	63	5.46
Bachelor degree	269	5.20
Graduate degree	160	5.33
Total	492	5.28
Adequate training		
Less than a bachelor degree	64	5.19
Bachelor degree	270	4.90
Graduate degree	162	4.88
Total	496	4.93
Sufficient diocesan assistance		
Less than a bachelor degree	63	4.97
Bachelor degree	265	4.65
Graduate degree	156	4.54
Total	484	4.66
Collaborative self-study		
Less than a bachelor degree	63	5.49
Bachelor degree	267	5.14
Graduate degree	162	5.35
Total	492	5.26

On a six-point Likert scale, grouped by professional degree to the questions regarding sufficient diocesan assistance and the collaborative nature of the self-study, participants with a graduate degree responded less favorably to the question regarding sufficient diocesan assistance (mean = 4.54) than those respondents with less than a bachelor's degree (mean = 4.97). In addition, participants with a bachelor's degree responded less favorably to the collaborative nature of the self-study component (mean = 5.14) than those respondents with less than a bachelor's degree (mean = 5.49) as indicated in Table 31. Those participants with less than a bachelor's degree responded the most favorably and most strongly agreed that sufficient diocesan assistance occurred throughout the accreditation process; they also responded more favorably and more strongly agreed that the self-study component of the accreditation process was a collaborative staff effort.

An analysis of variance was performed, by degree, for all six survey questions under consideration. As indicated in Table 32, with an alpha level of .05, there was a significant difference in responses, by group degree, to three of the survey questions on accreditation: accreditation standards were made clear (p = .040); the (arch) diocesan office provided sufficient assistance throughout the accreditation process (p = .022); and, the self-study component was a collaborative staff effort (p = .013).

Scheffe's F-Projections (S-Method) post-hoc testing was performed to identify where significant differences occurred between responses by professional degree. As indicated in Table 33, although the analysis of variance indicated a significant difference in responses by group degree to clear accreditation standards, Scheffe's conservative

post-hoc testing indicated no real significant difference to this question by the three

degree responses: less than bachelors, bachelors, and graduate degree. Additional post-

hoc testing was performed to possibly identify where significant differences may have

occurred between responses by degree utilizing Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc testing. Dunn-

Bonferroni also indicated no real significant difference to the question regarding clear

accreditation standards by the three degree responses: less than bachelors, bachelors, and

graduate degree.

Table 32

Analyses of Variance by Professional Degree to Six Survey Questions on

Accreditation

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Necessary for continuous improvement					
Between groups	2.189	2	1.094	1.676	.188
Within groups	320.686	491	.653		
Necessary for educational Quality					
Between groups	2.725	2	1.362	1.930	.146
Within groups	347.275	492	.706		
Clear standards					
Between groups	4.002	2	2.001	3.231	.040
Within groups	302.849	489	.619		
Adequate training					
Between groups	4.892	2	2.446	2.595	.076
Within groups	464.777	493	.943		
Sufficient diocesan assistance					
Between groups	8.067	2	4.034	3.829	.022
Within groups	506.683	481	1.053		

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Signifcance
Collaborative self-study					
Between groups	8.449	2	4.225	4.347	.013
Within groups	475.282	489	.972		

Table 33

Scheffe Post-Hoc Testing for Clear Accreditation Standards, Sufficient Diocesan Assistance, and Collaborative Self-Study by Professional Degree

Variable	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Significance
Clear accreditation standards					
	Less than bachelor	Bachelor	.256	.110	.068
		Graduate	.129	.117	.545
	Bachelor	Bachelor	-.127	.079	.273
Sufficient assistance					
	Less than bachelor	Bachelor	.315	.144	.091
		Graduate	.423*	.153	.023
	Bachelor	Graduate	.108	.104	.581
Collaborative self-study					
	Less than bachelor	Bachelor	.340*	.138	.041
		Graduate	.140	.146	.632
	Bachelor	Graduate	-.210	.098	.104

*Mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The Pearson Product Moment correlation was utilized to determine if any significant differences in responses to the six survey questions on the accreditation process occurred due to prior training for and service on an accreditation team, gender,

certification, years of service at the school, and years as an educator. Prior to the analysis, responses to level of certification were transformed from four (not certified, specialist in the field, other state certification, and Texas certification) to two available responses: (1) not certified (not certified and specialist in the field) and (2) certified (other state certification and Texas certification). Transformations were performed in order to establish a nominal scale with two categories to accurately calculate the correlation coefficient.

As indicated in Table 34, using the Pearson Product Moment correlation, responses to four of the six accreditation survey questions (accreditation is necessary for continuous improvement, accreditation standards were clear, the diocesan office provided sufficient assistance, and adequate training occurred prior to the accreditation process) showed no significant response differences based upon training for and service on an accreditation team, gender, certification, years of service at the school, and years as an educator. However, significant response differences occurred to the two remaining survey questions – the accreditation process is necessary for educational quality and the collaborative nature of the self-study component. Factors for both prior training for and service on an accreditation team provided significant response differences to the question probing the necessity of the accreditation process for educational quality in Texas Catholic elementary schools. In addition, factors for years of service at the school and years as an educator provided significant response differences to the question probing the collaborative nature of the self-study component of the accreditation process.

An analysis of variance was performed to determine significant response differences based upon the two factors indicating a significant difference: prior training for and service on an accreditation team to the survey question regarding the necessity of the accreditation process to insure educational quality. Estimated marginal means produced for the analysis provided a lower response mean for those participants who had not been trained to serve on an accreditation team (mean = 5.27) than for those who had been trained to serve on an accreditation team (mean = 5.48). In addition, a lower response mean was indicated for those participants who had not served on an accreditation team (mean = 5.28) than for those participants who had actually served on an accreditation team (mean = 5.48). Respondents who had been trained for and served on an accreditation team more favorably agreed with the statement that the accreditation process was necessary to ensure education quality.

Table 34

Correlation Matrix for Responses to Six Questions on the Accreditation Process

Source	Factor	N	Significance	Correlation Coefficient
Necessary for continuous improvement				
	Team training	506	.074	.079
	Team service	503	.092	.075
	Gender	511	.053	.086
	Certification	501	.168	-.062
	Years at school	508	.248	.051
	Educator years	484	.813	-.011
Necessary for educational quality				
	Team training	507	.009	.116**
	Team service	504	.029	.099*
	Gender	512	.502	.030
	Certification	501	.140	-.066
	Years at school	509	.638	.021
	Educator years	490	.315	-.046
Clear accreditation standards				
	Team training	504	.134	.067
	Team service	502	.468	.032
	Gender	509	.974	-.001
	Certification	499	.277	-.049
	Years at school	506	.801	.011
	Educator years	488	.515	.030
Adequate training				
	Team training	507	.274	.049
	Team service	504	.456	.033
	Gender	512	.220	.054
	Certification	501	.800	-.011
	Years at school	509	.087	.076
	Educator years	491	.324	.045
Sufficient assistance				
	Team training	495	.497	-.031
	Team service	492	.090	-.077
	Gender	501	-.077	.007

Source	Factor	N	Significance	Correlation Coefficient
	Certification	489	.246	-.053
	Years at school	498	.962	-.002
	Educator years	480	.721	-.016
Collaborative self-study				
	Team training	503	.019	.104
	Team service	500	.283	.048
	Gender	508	.564	.026
	Certification	497	.468	-.033
	Years at school	505	.005	.124**
	Educator years	487	.018	.107*

**Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

An analysis of variance was performed to determine significant response differences based upon the two factors indicating a significant difference to the question regarding the collaborative nature of the self-study component: years of service at the school and years as an educator (Table 34). Estimated marginal means produced for the analysis provided increasingly higher response means as the years of service at the school increased: first year (5.00); 2-5 years (5.09); 6-10 years (5.27); 11-15 years (5.40); and, more than 15 years (5.41). Those participants with greater years of service at the school provided the highest group mean thus indicating the most favorable responses to the self-study as being a collaborative component of the accreditation process.

An analysis of variance was performed to determine significant response differences based upon the two factors indicating a significant difference to the question regarding the collaborative nature of the self-study component: years of service at the

school and years as an educator (Table 34). Estimated marginal means produced for the analysis provided increasingly higher response means as the years of service at the school increased: first year (5.00); 2-5 years (5.09); 6-10 years (5.27); 11-15 years (5.40); and, more than 15 years (5.41). Those participants with greater years of service at the school provided the highest group mean thus indicating the most favorable responses to the self-study as being a collaborative component of the accreditation process.

However, when the estimated marginal means were calculated for years of service as an educator, the analysis provided increasingly higher response means as the years as an educator increased until the highest level of service was recorded: first year (4.00); 2-5 years (4.98); 6-10 years (5.13); 11-15 years (5.44); and more than 15 years (5.30). In this instance, those participants with the greatest years of service as an educator were not as favorable in responding to the collaborative nature of the self-study component of the accreditation process as those participants with 11-15 years of service. In this instance, those respondents with 11-15 years of service as an educator most favorably responded to the question probing the degree of collaboration involved with the self-study component of the accreditation process.

RESEARCH QUESTION 5

The last research question of this study attempted to examine the relationships among and between the six theoretical constructs established by the questions contained in Sections II and III of the survey instrument. These constructs were subsequently identified by six scales: (1) the accreditation process; (2) mission, philosophy, and goals; (3) community; (4) management and leadership; (5) curriculum, instruction, and

assessment; and, (6) student services, school resources, and facilities. In Sections II
and III, respondents were asked to select from a six-point Likert scale the degree of
agreement to each survey question. Scale One was created to ascertain perceptions
concerning the accreditation process itself while Scales Two through Six were created to
ascertain perceptions that certain improvements occurred as a result of the last
accreditation visit. Differences among the mean scores for the six scales were examined
utilizing a repeated measures analysis of variance.

Table 35

Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance of Six Theoretical Constructs (Scales)

Scale	Group	N	Mean
One – Accreditation Process	Administrators	87	4.7683
	Teachers	307	4.6777
	Professional staff	62	4.7663
	Total	456	4.7070
Two – Mission, Philosophy and Goals	Administrators	87	4.5031
	Teachers	307	4.7724
	Professional staff	62	4.9220
	Total	456	4.7413
Three – Community	Administrators	87	4.2239
	Teachers	307	4.4243
	Professional staff	62	4.6193
	Total	456	4.4126
Four – Management and Leadership	Administrators	87	4.6709
	Teachers	307	4.6131
	Professional staff	62	4.8386
	Total	456	4.8386

Scale	Group	N	Mean
Five – Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Administrators	87	4.4673
	Teachers	307	4.5712
	Professional staff	62	4.7766
	Total	456	4.5793
Six – Services, Resources and Facilities	Administrators	87	2.9595
	Teachers	307	2.8639
	Professional staff	62	3.0852
	Total	456	2.9123

As indicated in Table 35, mean scores for the six scales remain closely aligned with the exception of the mean scores for the sixth scale – student services, school resources, and facilities. Mean scores in this scale were considerably lower than the means for the other five scales. In scale 6, all three groups – administrators, teachers, and professional staff – recorded levels of agreement consistently lower than recorded in the other five scales. As indicated in Table 36, no group differences were detected; however, with an alpha level of .05, there are significant differences in responses within groups to the six theoretical constructs ($p = .000$).

Table 36

Repeated Measures of Analysis of Variance of Six Scales Between and Within

Subjects

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Significance
Between Subjects					
Groups	13.204	2	6.602	2.121	.121
Error	1409.747	453	3.112		
Within Subjects					
Measures	669.238	5	139.848	458.963	.000
Measures X Group	9.596	10	.960	3.149	.000
Error	690.152	2265	.305	458.963	.000

Overall, professional staff (counselors, librarians, and support staff) consistently responded the most favorably to constructs two through six with only administrators (principals, assistant principals, and other administrators) responding more favorably to the first construct – the accreditation process itself. Professional staff members in descending order, indicated the greatest improvement as a result of the last accreditation visit: mission, philosophy, and goals (construct two); management and leadership (construct four); community (construct three); and, student services, school resources, and facilities (construct six).

Teachers responded more favorably than administrators in constructs two (mission, philosophy, and goals), three (community) and five (curriculum, instruction, and assessment). However, teachers rated improvements to the school since the last accreditation visit consistently below those provided by the professional staff. Teachers ranked, in descending order, the greatest impact in the same order as indicated by

professional staff: mission, philosophy, and goals (construct two); management and leadership (construct four); community (construct three); and, student services, school resources, and facilities (construct six).

Administrators responded the most favorably to only the first construct – the accreditation process itself. Additionally, they provided the lowest mean responses to mission, philosophy, and goals (construct two), community (construct three), and curriculum, assessment, and instruction (construct five). Administrators as a group ranked these three constructs as impacted the least since the last accreditation visit. Lastly, their responses indicated, in descending order, improvements in the following areas: management and leadership (construct four), mission, goals, and philosophy (construct two); community (construct three); and, student services, school resources, and facilities (construct six). All three groups noted the least improvement in student services, school resources, and facilities (construct six) since the last accreditation visit (See Figure 2).
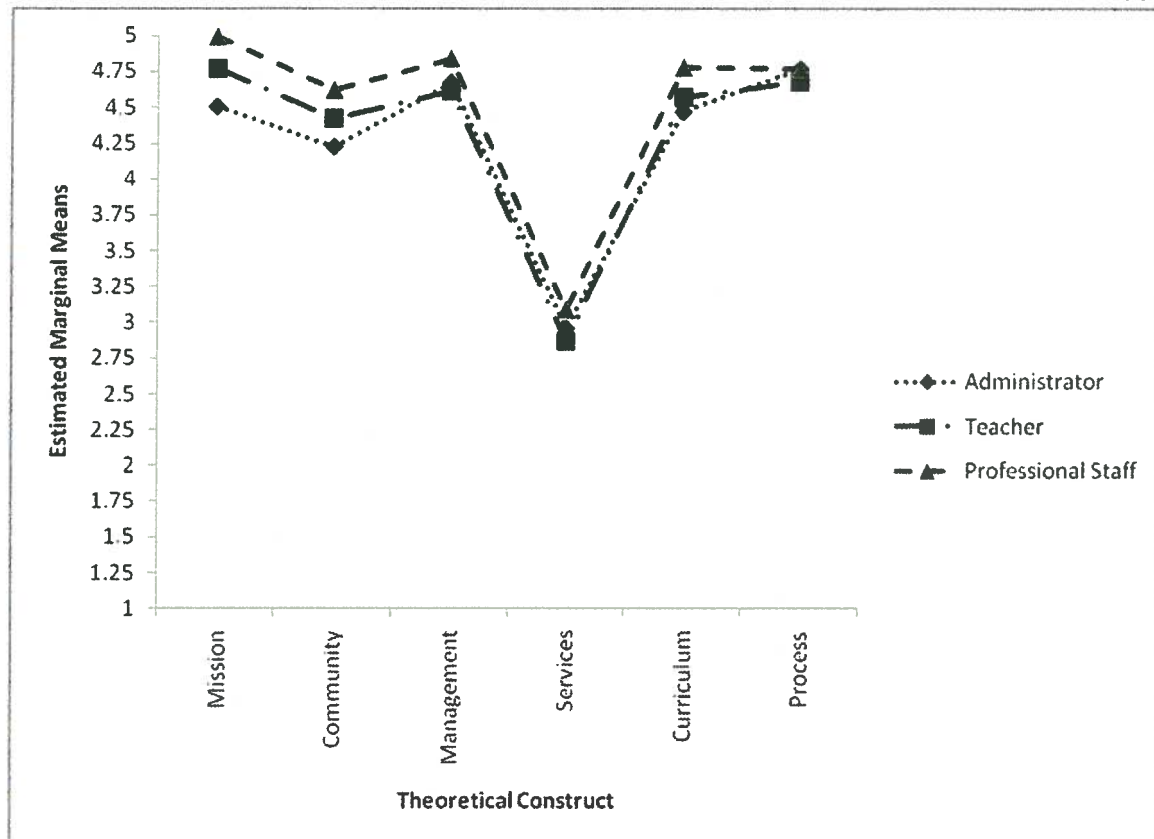
Figure 2. Relationship of group responses to six theoretical constructs regarding school improvement since the last accreditation visit.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Section IV of the survey instrument contained four open-ended questions which allowed participants to provide responses in more detail. Since the number of responses to each of the four questions was smaller than anticipated, all responses were counted and grouped according to emerging themes and summarized without relating the responses to any particular theoretical construct or resulting scale.

Question One – Please describe what you believe are the greatest strengths of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department Accreditation Process.

As indicated in Table 37, 389 participants provided 14 areas of accreditation process strengths. The greatest strength identified was the ability of school personnel to identify the strengths and weaknesses of school programs (23.6%) followed by a renewed focus on improvement (12.6%) and the self-study component of the accreditation process (12.3%). Eleven respondents (8.5%) indicated that they do not understand the process.

Table 37

Responses to Greatest Strengths of the Accreditation Process

Response	N	Percent
Identifies strengths and weaknesses of school	92	23.6
Focus on improvement	49	12.6
Self-study	48	12.3
Builds collaboration/teamwork	44	11.3
Compliance	39	10.0
Accountability	33	8.5
Peer review	27	7.0
Affirmation	14	3.6
I do not understand the process	11	2.8
The process itself	11	2.8
Emphasis on Catholic identity	10	2.6
Re-evaluating our mission	9	2.3
Training	1	.3
Personnel changes	1	.3
Total	389	100.0

Question Two – How do you believe the accreditation process could be strengthened?

As indicated in Table 38, 293 participants provided 22 suggested areas to

strengthen the accreditation process. The largest number of responses (14.7%)

recommended shortening the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process while 36

respondents (12.3%) indicated that they felt the process was fine as is. The next area

recommended for strengthening the process was providing more and better training in the

accreditation process (11.6%). Again, 12 respondents indicated that they did not

understand the process enough to comment (4.1%).

Table 38

Areas Recommended for Strengthening the Accreditation Process

Response	N	Percent
Shorten 10-year cycle	43	14.7
Fine as is	36	12.3
More and better training	34	11.6
More teacher involvement	18	6.1
Stronger yearly reporting on addressing recommendations	16	5.5
Better teams	14	4.8
Lengthen the time of the site visit	14	4.8
More diocesan assistance	13	4.4
Reduce paperwork	13	4.4
Begin self-study earlier	13	4.4
More concrete recommendations from team	12	4.1
Full disclosure of the final team report	12	4.1
I don't understand the process	12	4.1
Make visits less stressful	10	3.4
Better communication regarding expectations	9	3.1
Reduce areas of focus	7	2.4
Focus more on student achievement	6	2.0
More parent involvement	3	1.0
More accountability	3	1.0
Focus more on spirituality	2	.7
Change to a different model	2	.7
More help for new staff members	1	.3
Total	293	99.9

Question Three – Please provide specific examples that illustrate how the accreditation process impacted the quality of education at your school.

As indicated in Table 39, 260 respondents provided 21 areas of program impact since the last accreditation visit. The largest number, 39 (15%), cited technology improvements. Thirty-four respondents (13.1%) noted improved instruction strategies and 24 (9.2%) respondents indicated that the process improved collaboration and a sense of community in the school. Fourteen respondents (5.5%) stated that the process was a waste of time.

Table 39

Responses to Examples of School Improvement as a Result of the Accreditation Process

Response	N	Percent
Technology	39	15.0
Improved instructional strategies	34	13.1
Improved collaboration and sense of community	24	9.2
Better alignment of curriculum	21	8.2
More focus on Catholic identity	19	7.3
More focus on meeting individual student needs	16	6.2
Safety/security	14	5.5
Waste of time	14	5.5
Facilities	11	4.2
New Administration	10	3.9
Library	10	3.9
Strategic plan created	9	3.5
Increased resources	9	3.5
More goal-driven	6	2.4
Better hiring practices	4	1.6
More student services	3	1.2
Better parish relationship	3	1.2
More organized	3	1.2
More family-oriented	3	1.2

Response	N	Percent
Recommitment to Catholic education	2	.8
Positive public relations	2	.8
Total	260	99.4

Question Four – Do you have any other comments not covered by any section of this research study?

As indicated in Table 40, 87 respondents provided additional comments not covered by other questions in the survey instrument. Thirty categories emerged from an analysis of the comments. The largest number, 17 (19.5%), indicated that the accreditation process should not drive school improvement; rather, it should be on-going. Although some responses are similar to others provided in the first three open-ended questions, all comments are included in the table.

Table 40

Comments Not Covered in Other Sections of the Research Study

Comment	N	Percent
Process should not drive school improvement	17	19.5
It's a good process	6	6.9
Leadership is key	6	6.9
Enjoyable experience	6	6.9
Nothing really changed at our school	4	4.6
Need better interim process between visits	4	4.6
Too paper driven	4	4.6
More training needed	4	4.6
Reduce stress	3	3.4
Ten-year cycle is too long	3	3.4
Reduce cost	3	3.4
More support needed from diocese	2	2.3

Comment	N	Percent
This was a learning experience	2	2.3
Standards need to be raised	2	2.3
Annual reports need improvement	2	2.3
Exit report lacked substance	2	2.3
Burdensome process	2	2.3
High turnover affects implementation	2	2.3
Librarians need special training	2	2.3
Include Montessori philosophy	1	1.2
Focus more on self-study	1	1.2
Non-Catholics need help with Catholic identity	1	1.2
TCCED is very helpful	1	1.2
Repetitive reports	1	1.2
Improve check lists	1	1.2
Technology has improved	1	1.2
Safety has improved	1	1.2
Use public school process	1	1.2
Involve the teachers more	1	1.2
Counselors should be employed in every school	1	1.2
Total	87	100.0

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

An overwhelming majority of respondents believed that the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process was necessary for school continuous improvement efforts. There was no statistical difference discovered between responses produced by administrators, teachers, and professional staff members to this research question.

Texas Catholic elementary school personnel agreed that teachers and staff were sufficiently involved in the accreditation process. Other stakeholders – parents, council members, parish members, and clergy – were viewed as sufficiently involved in the

process although the percent of agreement for these stakeholders' involvement was lower than the involvement of teachers and staff. Teachers and professional staff members provided stronger agreement than administrators that key stakeholders were sufficiently involved.

The majority of respondents agreed that the 10-year cycle of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process produced both short- and long-term improvements in their schools. There were no statistical differences discovered between the responses provided by administrators, teachers, and professional staff members to the survey questions formulated on the length of the accreditation cycle.

Teachers responded less favorably than administrators to survey questions that probed whether accreditation standards were clear and whether the self-study component of the accreditation process was a collaborative staff effort. In addition, respondents with less than a bachelor's degree responded more positively about the collaborative nature of the self-study process. Those participants with a bachelor's degree were least likely to view the self-study as a collaborative staff effort.

Respondents with graduate degrees were the least likely to indicate that sufficient diocesan assistance was received throughout the accreditation process as well as being the least confident that adequate training occurred before the process actually began.

Respondents' gender, certification, years of service at the school, and years as an educator did not have a statistically significant impact on their responses to the necessity of the accreditation process to foster local continuous improvement efforts. In addition, these demographic factors did not significantly impact responses to survey questions that

probed whether the accreditation standards were clear, whether the diocesan office provided sufficient assistance, or whether adequate training occurred prior to the onset of the accreditation process.

However, respondents who had been trained for or served on an accreditation visiting team more strongly viewed the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process as necessary for educational quality in Texas Catholic elementary schools. These respondents also viewed the self-study process as a more collaborative staff effort. On the other hand, respondents with the greatest years of service as educators were not as positive about the collaborative nature of the self-study process.

Of the six theoretical constructs established for this research study, the sixth theoretical construct – student services, school resources, and facilities – was viewed by all respondents as least likely to have been improved upon since the last accreditation visit.

Administrators were least likely to recognize improvements in mission, philosophy, goals, and community since the last accreditation visit occurred. While teachers responded more favorably to school improvements in these areas, professional staff members consistently responded the most favorably to school improvements made as a result of the last accreditation visit.

In their responses to four open-ended questions, respondents identified the greatest strength of the accreditation process as the ability of school personnel to clearly identify strengths and weaknesses of school programs. The largest number of suggestions

to improve the accreditation process related to shortening the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process followed closely by the need to provide more and better quality training in the entire accreditation process.

The largest number of respondents cited technology improvements as a direct result of the last accreditation visit followed by improved instructional strategies.

Overall, the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process was viewed by the respondents to this research study as enhancing local continuous improvement efforts in most domains and areas of focus. However, in the comment section of the survey instrument, 17 respondents stated that the accreditation process should not drive continuous improvement efforts; rather, these efforts should be on-going by staff as part of local school improvement efforts.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the State of Texas, Catholic schools must participate in an accreditation process sponsored by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department. The domains and areas of focus contained in the ten-year cycle of renewal include mission, philosophy, goals, and objectives; community; governance, administration, and management; personnel; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; student services, resources, and activities; and facilities. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continuous improvement to meet Texas Catholic Conference Education standards.

Administrators, teachers, counselors, librarians, and support staff employed in Texas Catholic elementary schools provided 705 responses to an anonymous on-line survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analyzed to discover varying perspectives from participants in this research study.

The pilot study confirmed the reliability of the on-line survey, Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey, created by the researcher. Included in the survey instrument were

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four open-ended questions that allowed participants to comment in more detail and also to clarify their responses to the survey.

While the primary focus of this study examined the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the relationship between the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department (TCCED) accreditation process and local efforts for on-going continuous improvement, the principal's role and collaborative leadership style were also examined. In addition, the involvement of key stakeholders in the accreditation process was considered.

Short and long-term school improvements were explored in relationship to the ten-year cycle of the TCCED accreditation process. Differences in responses based upon position, prior training for and service on an accreditation team, gender, degree, certification, years of service in the current school, and years as an educator were analyzed.

The history of the Catholic accreditation process in Texas provided a basis for connecting a review of the literature. Accreditation research by Minard (2002), Verges (2003), and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (2006) served as the theoretical framework for analyzing the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the effectiveness of the TCCED accreditation process.

The works of Hampel, Johnson, Plank, and Ravitch (1996), Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, and Leppescue (2006) and Leithwood, Jantzi, and McElheron-Hopkins (2006) established the theoretical framework for school improvement efforts. Senge (2006) and Kruse (2001) contributed to the theoretical framework for continuous improvement and learning

organization theories. An examination of the work of Guerra, Haney, and Kealey (1991) as well as a review of church documents served as a basis for exploring Catholic identity.

The development of six theoretical constructs in the survey instrument resulted in the establishment of scales which explored school improvement efforts in mission, philosophy, and goals; community; management and leadership; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and, student services, school resources, and facilities since the previous accreditation visit. The constructs closely align with the domains of the accreditation of Catholic elementary schools in Texas.

In this chapter, major research conclusions are discussed and data implications are presented. Comparisons to prior elementary school accreditation research studies are provided and the importance of Catholic identity is highlighted. In addition, implications for practice based on the research that was conducted are listed. Finally, suggestions for future studies are offered.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this research study include the following:

- The major finding of this research study is the strong belief by Texas Catholic elementary school personnel that the TCCED accreditation process is necessary for local continuous improvement efforts. All personnel groups affirm the necessity of the accreditation process for on-going continuous improvement in Texas Catholic elementary schools. No significant differences in perceptions of

administrators, teachers, and professional staff members were detected when probing this relationship.

- School personnel agree that key stakeholders are involved in the accreditation process. All three groups of personnel (administrators, teachers, and professional staff) agree that teachers and staff were sufficiently involved in the accreditation process. In addition, Texas Catholic elementary school personnel ranked the involvement of principals and teachers in the accreditation process as very high (94.9% and 84.1% respectively).

- Texas Catholic elementary school personnel also perceive the remaining groups of key stakeholders – pastor, central office, advisory council (board), and parish members – as only somewhat and slightly involved in the accreditation process. Teachers and professional staff members had stronger agreement than did administrators as to the level of involvement of parents, council members, parishioners, and clergy. The mean responses for teachers and professional staff members were closely aligned and higher than administrators' mean responses to the question regarding the level of involvement of key stakeholders. Teachers and professional staff members perceived that key stakeholders are more sufficiently involved than do administrators.

- Respondents agree that the 10-year cycle of the TCCED accreditation process produces both short and long-term improvements in schools. All three response

groups – administrators, teachers, and professional staff – perceived long-term improvements occurring more frequently than short-term improvements as a result of this 10-year accreditation cycle. Although there was no statistical difference in the responses to questions regarding the length of the accreditation cycle, several respondents recommend that the cycle be reduced to 7 years in their responses to the four open-ended questions at the end of the survey instrument.

- Not surprisingly, administrators more than teachers or professional staff members perceive that accreditation standards and expectations are clear. Teachers had the lowest level of agreement that accreditation standards and expectations for the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process were made clear.

- Respondents who have been trained to serve or have actually served on an accreditation team compared to those who were not trained or who did not serve on a team view the accreditation process as necessary for educational quality in Texas Catholic elementary schools. The former also view the self-study as a more collaborative staff effort.

- The level of respondents' education influences their attitudes toward the collaborative nature of the self-study process. Respondents with less than a bachelor's degree perceive the self-study as more of a collaborative effort than those employees who hold a bachelor's degree. On the other hand, respondents

with graduate degrees do not view that the diocesan central office provided sufficient assistance throughout the accreditation process. They also cite the lack of adequate training in preparation to participate in the process.

- Technology improvements are most often cited as a specific example of program improvement since the last accreditation visit. Additionally, administrators, teachers, and professional support staff strongly agree that the area of student services, school resources, and facilities improved the least since the last accreditation visit.

- Finally, professional staff members consistently recognize local school improvements resulting from the accreditation process. Teachers are less favorable than professional staff members in their responses to local school improvements resulting from the last site visit but are more positive than administrators that school improvements occurred as a result of the last accreditation visit. Administrators cite the greatest improvement since the last accreditation visit in the area of management and leadership while both teachers and professional staff members cite the area of mission, philosophy, and goals as showing the greatest improvement since the last accreditation visit.

Five research questions provided the basis for the design of this study. Findings to these questions are presented in this section along with implications for general practice.

Research Question 1

This study examined the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel as to whether the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process results in continuous improvements in their schools. A key finding of this study is that Texas Catholic elementary school personnel believe the TCCED accreditation process is necessary for local continuous improvement efforts.

This finding supports the research of Minard (2002). In her study examining how New England elementary school teachers, principals, and support personnel valued the participation in the New England Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation process, Minard cites that participants were overwhelmingly positive about the value of participating in the accreditation process as a vehicle for school improvement.

Similar findings were found by Cushing (1999) who researched the value of partnering in the New England Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation process for New Hampshire high schools. In this study, school improvement was noted as the most important result of the accreditation process. Principals viewed the NEASC accreditation process as a means of quality assurance and positive school improvement.

In a study conducted by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (2006), most school leaders agree that accreditation standards drove positive changes in schools. However, the results also indicated a perception that accreditation appeared to have a more significant impact on schools that had a number of areas needing improvement or not meeting

accreditation standards and less of an impact on schools in which most accreditation standards are satisfactorily addressed.

Bonstingle (1992) states a "true learning organization optimizes its entire system – including processes and products – by empowering everyone to continuously improve their work" (p. 28). Schuttloffel (2008) adds "the design and creation of a culture of continuous improvement cannot be left to good luck and opportunity" (p. 40). The movement toward a culture of continuous improvement in schools cannot be ignored. As demands for school accountability continue to grow, educators are faced with increasing pressures to improve upon the quality of education that students receive. Since the accreditation system utilized in the United States has generally proven to be effective in encouraging self-improvement as a component of the accreditation cycle, schools must find ways to communicate the need for on-going continuous improvement efforts based upon clearly defined and clearly articulated accreditation standards and expectations.

Research Question 2

In this research study, Texas Catholic elementary school personnel agree that teachers and staff were sufficiently involved in the accreditation process. Similarly, they rank the level of involvement of teachers and principals as the highest of all key stakeholders involved in the accreditation process. Strong leadership and teacher empowerment are supported in a review of the literature.

Leadership is an essential element regarding whether schools have competent accountability reporting processes (Fryer, 2007). Further, in a research study designed to determine the relationship between accreditation and elementary school improvement, Paurazas (1997) notes that the principal is the person who not only initiates recommendations but the principal is also the individual who implements and brings forth change.

Minard (2002) states that the role of the principal was critical in determining how the school staff perceived the accreditation process. In addition, principals involved in the accreditation process played a significant role in setting the direction for visiting committee recommendations to be used in order to influence school improvement.

Voulalas, Zafiris, and Sharpe (2005) find that school leadership is the key factor in the transformation process for schools as learning communities. Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine (1999) also cite that the most important facilitating or impeding factor in a school improvement process was the principal. Their leadership styles played critical roles in the degree of professional community achieved.

"School leadership is the key to achieving a school community that fosters continuous improvement for adults and students" (Schuttloffel, 2008, p.39). Further, school leadership is considered to be vital to the successful functioning of many aspects of a school (Marzano, 2005).

In her study on the relationship between teacher collaboration and local change efforts for improvement, Balke (1997) found that interaction among teachers and principals did increase; however, the amount of teacher involvement varied according to the quality review procedures

selected by the principal. Thus, the quality review process did not show significant opportunities to improve various aspects of school improvement due to the leadership style of the principal.

Leithwood (1994) states that a transformational model of school leadership involves principals who show skills in individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. Bennis (2003) emphasizes that leaders must not only rely on their personal skills but also on their ability to engage others in a shared vision.

Ross and Gray (2006) found that transformational leadership had an impact on the collective teacher efficacy of the school. Further, commitment to the school mission was the strongest outcome of transformational leadership efforts.

Copland (2003) also discovered benefits from distributed leadership. The distribution of leadership functions at schools provided the capacity, coherence, and ownership necessary to sustain reform over time.

Gossard (1993) cites a more productive work climate for respondents using models of accreditation in which there was the greatest faculty participation in the process. Minard (2002) further notes that the accreditation process promotes school change by fostering staff collaboration and inquiry around curricular, instructional, and assessment matters. Finally, Paurazas (1997) finds that a self-study process appeared to enhance trust, sharing of ideas, and community among teachers. Teacher morale increased as they were empowered in decision-making thus resulting in more positive attitudes toward change and school improvement efforts.

This study strengthens the findings of prior accreditation research studies (Paurazas, 1997, and Minard, 2002) regarding the importance of the involvement of the principal throughout the accreditation process. In addition, the findings of this study support the importance of the involvement of teachers in the accreditation process as noted in the review of literature as well as several research studies focused on school accreditation and school improvement efforts (Ross and Gray, 2006; Copland, 2003; Balke, 1997; Minard, 2002; and, Paurazas, 1997).

The involvement of teachers and administrators in the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process is highly ranked by all Texas Catholic elementary school personnel who participated in this research study. This finding is important because it establishes that this extent of involvement by teachers and administrators in the accreditation process strengthens local continuous improvement efforts.

While Texas Catholic elementary school personnel agree that teachers, staff, and principals were sufficiently involved in the accreditation process, teachers and professional staff had stronger agreement than administrators as to the level of involvement of parents, council members, clergy, and parishioners. Shared responsibility among everyone involved in the success of a school calls for further involvement of all key stakeholders to determine their knowledge of and satisfaction with local school improvement efforts.

Strong leadership, empowered teachers, and involved stakeholders are key ingredients for successful accreditation processes. Since accredited schools are committed to continuous

improvement over time, the engagement of the entire school community is necessary to instill a process and a school culture that are dedicated to excellence. While the review of literature established leadership as an essential ingredient to local school improvement efforts, effective school leadership involves everyone in the educational process. It is the principal's responsibility to encourage and to provide the necessary conditions for empowering others to assist with local school improvement efforts.

Research Question 3

Respondents in this research study agree that the ten-year cycle of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process produces both short and long-term improvements. However, they perceive that long-term improvements occur more frequently than short-term improvements.

These findings support those discovered by Paurazas (1997) in her study to determine the relationship between accreditation and elementary school improvement. Paurazas cites that recommendations and subsequent school improvement efforts were both immediate and long-range. In addition, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (2006) survey of the perceptions of school leaders finds similar results. Results of the study indicate that school leaders perceived the accreditation process to have a profound and enduring impact on member institutions' quality of education.

Paurazas (1997) also finds that principals believed that the benefits of the accreditation process would be lasting only if the staff continued to use the recommendations the schools

received as part of the long-term school improvement plan while Senge (2006) contends that learning organizations must learn to look beyond short-term events.

While accreditation models and policies vary considerably across this country, most models employ a self-study component to allow school personnel to identify both strengths and weaknesses of school programs. Since this self-study process has been viewed to be the most important part of the accreditation process in prior research studies (Cushing, 1999, and Allan, 1999), a more frequent participation of the school staff in the self-study component of an accreditation process allows for more current identification of and a more constant focus on areas that need improvement. The length of the cycle of an accreditation process may focus the attention of school employees on the event rather than on areas needing improvement. Indeed, in the current research study, several respondents indicated that the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process could be strengthened by shortening the length of the accreditation cycle form ten to either five or seven years in length.

Research Question 4

An important finding of this research study is the varying perceptions of elementary school personnel based upon position and various demographic factors. In this study, teachers had the lowest level of agreement that accreditation standards and expectations are clear. They also viewed the self-study as a less collaborative effort than did administrators. However, they were more positive that administrators about school improvements resulting from the last accreditation visit.

Respondents who had prior training for and service on an accreditation team viewed the accreditation process as necessary for educational quality in Catholic elementary schools in Texas. These respondents also viewed the self-study as a more collaborative effort.

The respondents' educational degree influenced their responses to questions regarding sufficient diocesan assistance and the collaborative nature of the self-study process. Those participants with a graduate degree responded less favorably to the question regarding sufficient diocesan assistance than those with less than a bachelor's degree. In addition, participants with a bachelor's degree responded less favorably to the collaborative nature of the self-study process than those participants with less than a bachelor's degree. Those participants with a bachelor's degree most strongly agreed that sufficient diocesan assistance occurred throughout the process. These respondents also agreed that the self-study was a more collaborative staff effort.

These findings support the research of Minard (2002) and Verges (2005) who both found varying perceptions of school personnel regarding the effectiveness of school accreditation models. Both Minard and Verges find school leaders to perceive accreditation processes to be more beneficial than teachers or support personnel. In both studies, support personnel were more positive than teachers regarding the impact of accreditation on school improvement.

In the current research study, professional staff members were the most positive about improvements in school programs resulting from the last accreditation visit. Teachers responded more favorably to improvements occurring to school programs since the last accreditation visit than administrators but less favorably than professional staff members. Administrators

consistently viewed the least improvement in school programs since the last accreditation visit. Clearly, these findings contradict the findings of Minard and Verges who found school leaders to be the most positive about the impact of accreditation on school improvement. However, this study supports their findings that support personnel were more positive than teachers regarding the impact of accreditation on school improvement.

In addition, this study confirms the findings of Verges (2005). The extent to which educators believe in the value of the accreditation process differed according to varying factors: role in the school, experience in the accreditation process, and the number of years of experience as an educator.

These findings are also important because they reinforce the need for pro-active measures to be taken throughout the accreditation cycle. Increased communication among the entire school community about the value of accreditation and additional training in accreditation standards and expectations better prepare personnel to effectively engage in the accreditation process. Increased involvement of all school personnel enhances perceptions that accreditation processes result in increased educational quality. Additionally, arranging for prior service on accreditation teams influences school personnel's perceptions regarding the accreditation process as leading to improved educational quality. Finally, assigning members to local school improvement and accreditation committees by balancing years of experience as an educator and also the degree of education of employees allows for a more successful approach to understanding and fully participating in the accreditation process.

Research Question 5

Participants in this research study responded positively to school improvements as a result of the last accreditation visit in all six scales established by the theoretical constructs of this study: the accreditation process; mission, philosophy, and goals; community; management and leadership; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and, student services, resources, and facilities. All participants viewed the least local improvements in the area of student services, school resources, and facilities since the last accreditation visit.

Prior research studies have conflicting results regarding local school improvement efforts as resulting from accreditation or quality review processes. Balke (1997) found that principals and teachers did not use the quality review process as a vehicle to improve various aspects of school programs. Allan (1999) discovered that superintendents and principals rated an accreditation process as having more impact on the school's educational programs than do school board members while Kohl and Gomez (1996) found limited direct links to student achievement as a result of a re-accreditation study. On the other hand, Paurazas (1997) stated that the accreditation process did lead to school improvement regardless of a variety of demographic and school engagement factors. Lastly, Verges (2003) found that teachers and administrators considered all aspects of accreditation to be important for fostering Catholic identity, promoting school improvement, and warranting resources expended during the accreditation process.

This study provides further understanding and more current research to further clarify the varying perceptions of the relationship between the accreditation process and school improvement. In addition, it supports research previously conducted by Paurazas and Verges. Therefore, communicating the values and benefits of participating in an accreditation process to all school constituencies promotes local school improvement efforts while at the same time addressing school accountability expectations.

Further, in the current study, respondents consistently noted improvements to the school's mission, philosophy, and goals as a result of the last accreditation visit. In fact, this theoretical construct ranked second in total response means by group (4.7) only slightly below the total response mean by groups to the theoretical construct dealing with management and leadership (4.8) as the area experiencing the most improvement since the last accreditation visit.

Since mission, philosophy, and goals flow from church teachings that emphasize the ministerial role of the Catholic school, the perceptions of Texas elementary school personnel reinforce the need for strong Catholic identity as a key component of its accreditation process. His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, in *Christ Our Hope* (2008), reinforced the role of teachers and administrators in providing instruction in Catholic doctrine and practice to Catholic school students. *Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millenium* (The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997) further defined the Catholic school at the heart of the Church and reinforced the focus of the Catholic school as the teaching mission of the Catholic Church. Finally, Guerra, Haney, and Kealey (1991) reported the need for Catholic schools to commit to the intellectual development of faculty and students as an integral part of the mission of the

school; to serve as an evangelizing and educational community; to serve as an experience of the Church's beliefs, traditions, and sacramental life; and, to serve as a faith-centered community. According to the results of this study, Texas Catholic elementary school personnel support the importance of Catholic identity, as measured through the theoretical construct of mission, philosophy, and goals, as a key component of the accreditation process and an area that continues to improve as a result of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process is viewed by the 705 respondents to this research study as necessary for local continuous improvement efforts. All personnel groups affirm the necessity of the accreditation process for on-going continuous improvement in their schools.

School personnel also agree that key stakeholders are sufficiently involved in the accreditation process and rank the involvement of principals and teachers in the accreditation process as very high. Administrators, however, view the level of involvement of parents, council members, parishioners, and clergy lower than did the teachers and professional staff members.

While the respondents agree that the 10-year cycle of the TCCED accreditation process produces both short and long-term improvements in schools, several respondents recommend that the cycle be reduced to 7 years.

Administrators perceive the accreditation standards and expectations to be clearer than do teachers and professional staff members. In addition, respondents who have been trained to serve or have actually served on an accreditation team are more likely to perceive the accreditation process as necessary for educational quality in Texas Catholic elementary schools.

There are varying perceptions by administrators, teachers, and professional staff members regarding local school improvement efforts resulting from the last accreditation visit. Professional staff members respond the most favorably to local school improvements occurring as a result of the last accreditation visit while administrators respond less favorably than both professional staff members and teachers.

Professional staff members and teachers note the greatest improvement since the last accreditation visit in the area of mission, philosophy, and goals while administrators note the greatest improvements as a result of the last accreditation visit in the area of management and leadership. Improvements to technology are most often cited as a specific example of school program improvements.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

No formal research studies have been conducted on the relationship between the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process and efforts for continuous improvement in Catholic elementary schools in Texas. The major conclusions of this research study have implications for the Texas Catholic Conference as it approaches possible revisions to its upcoming fourth state Catholic accreditation cycle (2011-2021). Furthermore, the results of

this research study provide direction for Texas Catholic school superintendents and principals as they seek to assist their schools in providing quality education in all of their elementary schools.

The data indicate that Texas elementary school personnel perceive that the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process is necessary for on-going continuous improvement efforts in Texas Catholic elementary schools. Therefore, the entire accreditation process should be shared with all school personnel and reviewed frequently throughout the accreditation cycle. In addition, recommendations resulting from the last accreditation visit should be reviewed throughout the accreditation cycle to allow all school personnel to note areas that the visiting team perceived as strengths as well as those areas that the visiting team perceived as needing improvement. Principals should provide new staff members additional training at the beginning of the school year so that they may be more fully aware of the process, accreditation standards and expectations, and recommendations received from the last accreditation site visit. Finally, principals are encouraged to establish local school committees that annually review each domain of the accreditation process to not only assist in understanding the expectations of the accreditation process but also to maintain on-going efforts for improvement throughout the accreditation cycle. Such actions would allow all staff members to be more fully engaged in on-going continuous improvement efforts throughout each school year.

Since there is a significant difference between the responses of administrators and teachers regarding the involvement of all key stakeholders, administrators are encouraged to

regularly survey teachers, school parents, council members, clergy, and possibly parishioners to determine their knowledge of and satisfaction with local school improvement efforts. A necessary preliminary step to surveying these individuals would be sharing these efforts. An implication for administrators would be to release an executive summary that contains the highlights of the local school improvement plan and the strategies to accomplish the goals and objectives established by the school community. Surveying these constituencies could provide valuable information regarding sufficient involvement of all key stakeholders throughout the accreditation process.

While the majority of respondents agree that the 10-year cycle of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process produces both short and long-term improvements in their schools, several respondents indicated that the accreditation process could be strengthened by shortening the length of the accreditation cycle from ten to either five or seven years in length. The Texas Catholic Conference Education Department is encouraged to review the length of its current accreditation process with consideration given to shortening the number of years between visits. In addition, TCCED would be encouraged to correspondingly review yearly reports of progress and the current five-year interim reporting structure.

Since the data further indicates that teachers respond less favorably than administrators to survey questions that probed whether accreditation standards were clear and whether the self-study component of the accreditation process was a collaborative staff effort, additional team member training would improve the understanding of the entirety of the accreditation process. The Texas Catholic Conference Education Department is encouraged to provide statewide

opportunities for team member training and superintendents must ensure that all schools are represented in this training. This recommendation is supported by the 11.6% of respondents that suggest more and better training in the accreditation process as a suggestion for strengthening the accreditation process.

A further implication for diocesan central office staff would be to provide sufficient assistance to local schools throughout the accreditation process. While the number of staff in diocesan offices throughout the state may not be consistent and should a dedicated central office staff member not be available to provide on-going assistance to local schools, superintendents are encouraged to utilize the services of a principal who has been trained in the accreditation process and who has served on multiple accreditation teams to assist peer principals in the diocese. Principals who have additionally been trained and have served as a visiting team member chairperson could also provide valuable assistance to other administrators in schools throughout the diocese.

Accreditation training and service on accreditation teams increase the perception of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel concerning the necessity of the accreditation process for educational quality in Texas Catholic elementary schools. An implication for principals would be to provide opportunities for staff members to not only be trained in the accreditation process but also to provide them with opportunities to serve on accreditation teams whenever possible. These accreditation experiences would provide opportunities for peer support in understanding the totality of the accreditation process on each school campus.

Experienced educators were significantly more likely to view the self-study component of the accreditation process as a collaborative team effort as well as the accreditation process being necessary to ensure educational quality in Texas Catholic elementary schools. Implications of this research would be to provide opportunities for more experienced educators to mentor less experienced educators as they work together throughout the accreditation process to address local on-going continuous improvement efforts and to prepare for future self-study collaboration.

Since Texas Catholic elementary school personnel note improvements in the area of mission, philosophy, and goals since the last accreditation visit, principals are encouraged to annually review the school's mission statement with all constituencies to ensure that it clearly contains and articulates the school's Catholicity. Further, Texas Catholic elementary school personnel should establish annual goals and objectives that support the school's mission statement. Additionally, on-going professional development efforts in the area of faith formation should be scheduled for all school personnel. All Catholic school administrators and teachers should be required to complete catechist certification requirements as outlined in Texas Catholic Conference accreditation standards. Finally, non-Catholic employees should be provided special assistance in not only understanding the mission of Catholic schools but also in the core beliefs and values of the Catholic faith.

Overall, the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process is viewed by the 705 respondents to this research study as enhancing local continuous improvement efforts in most domains and areas of focus. However, in the comment section of the survey

instrument, 17 respondents stated that the accreditation process should not drive continuous improvements efforts; rather, these efforts should be on-going by staff as part of local school improvement planning. A final implication of this study would be an encouragement for school administrators to involve all professional staff members in the development of the local school improvement plan and to regularly review and update the contents of the plan. In addition, superintendents are encouraged to identify schools where staff members engage in successful models of continuous improvement efforts and arrange for site visits for benchmark training whenever possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research study concentrated on the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel regarding the relationship between the accreditation process and local continuous improvement efforts. Additional information about the experiences of secondary school personnel involved in the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department accreditation process may add to the understanding of secondary school personnel perceptions and provide additional implications for practice.

Further research could also be conducted by examining the size of Texas Catholic elementary schools and whether school size impacts the perceptions of elementary school personnel.

While Texas Catholic elementary school personnel perceive that key stakeholders are sufficiently involved throughout the accreditation process, further research could be conducted to

include the perceptions of parents, clergy, and advisory council members. Future research studies could also probe the perceptions of superintendents regarding the relationship between accreditation processes and local school effectiveness.

Since data were obtained through the use of an on-line anonymous survey, additional research could be designed that would employ additional strategies to achieve a higher response rate. The rate of participation by teachers and professional staff members could be strengthened by direct contact with them rather than through initiating all contact with the building principal.

By utilizing different research methodologies, future research studies could strengthen the qualitative analysis of the data received in the four open-ended questions of the survey instrument as well as further probe why administrators and teachers have different views on participation and involvement. Data obtained through further qualitative research, such as personal interviews, may allow for a deeper understanding of these differences.

Finally, future research studies on accreditation could investigate the impact of various accreditation processes on student learning. Student achievement levels could be included as an additional variable for future research studies.

APPENDIX A

Communication with Superintendents

April 27, 2009

(Name)
Superintendent of Schools
Diocese of (Name)
Street Address
City, Texas   Zip Code

Dear Name,

I am writing to inform you of my proposed research study involving Texas Catholic elementary schools and also to request your permission to contact elementary school principals in your diocese. I am a former Texas Catholic elementary school principal and served as the Associate Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Fort Worth from July, 2003 through May, 2006. In addition, I served as a TCCED accreditation trainer for both chair and visiting team training purposes and I chaired accreditation teams throughout the state from 1995 through 2006.

Currently, I am a doctoral candidate at The Catholic University of America. The title of my proposed research dissertation is *The Relationship between the Accreditation Process and Efforts for Continuous Improvement in Texas Catholic Elementary Schools.* Since no formal research studies have been conducted on the Texas Catholic Conference accreditation model, I hope that my research study will contribute to the body of knowledge about Catholic school accreditation as well as Catholic education in general.

My research will attempt to answer the following questions:
1. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive that the TCCED accreditation process results in continuous improvement in their schools?
2. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers perceive that the leadership style and the involvement of the principal affect continuous improvement throughout the accreditation process?
3. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive that teacher attitudes and empowerment affect efforts toward continuous improvement throughout the accreditation process?
4. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive the involvement of the diocesan central office and of the local governing body affecting local efforts toward continuous improvement throughout the accreditation process?

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5. To what extent does the involvement of different stakeholders affect the accreditation process (i.e., principal, teachers, diocesan central office, local governing body, clergy, parents and parishioners)?
6. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive the ten-year cycle of accreditation affecting local efforts toward continuous improvement?

With your permission, I hope to contact principals of elementary schools in your diocese sometime during the upcoming school year. All schools will be eligible for participation in my study regardless of the date of the last accreditation visit.

After permission is obtained from you and each of your elementary school's principal, an anonymous on-line survey will be made available for responding to my research questions. The right to confidentiality is guaranteed for all participants and their respective schools. Results of the study will be made available to all schools and your office upon request.

In order to continue with my research, I request that you complete the enclosed permission form and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope by **Monday, April 27, 2009** or you may fax it to me at the number listed below. My e-mail address is also provided should you prefer to e-mail the requested information and your permission for this study to be conducted in your (arch)diocese.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my request. Your support for Catholic school research and my dissertation study is greatly appreciated. Should you have any questions or you would like to discuss my research, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Diane Starkovich
Doctoral Candidate, The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.

Diane Starkovich
5055 Wildeoak Trail
Douglasville, Georgia   30135
404-216-8416 (Cell)
404-775-7430 (Fax)
diane.starkovich@gmail.com

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PERMISSION FORM TO CONTACT PRINCIPALS
TEXAS CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

This document provides my permission for Diane Starkovich, Doctoral Candidate at The Catholic University of America, to contact the principals of elementary schools in my (arch)diocese during the 2009-2010 school year regarding her research study *The Relationship between the Accreditation Process and Efforts for Continuous Improvement in Texas Catholic Elementary Schools.*

The permission of each principal will also be received by the researcher prior to an on-line anonymous survey being made available to participants.

Individual teachers and administrators at each school will participate in this research study on a voluntary basis. The right to confidentiality will be guaranteed to all individuals and schools participating in the study.

The results of this research study will be made available to my office and all schools upon request.

<table>
<tr><td>_____</td><td>_____</td></tr>
<tr><td>*Superintendent's Signature*</td><td>*Date*</td></tr>
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_____
Superintendent's Name (Please Print)

_____
(Arch)Diocese

<table>
<tr><td>_____</td><td>_____</td></tr>
<tr><td>*Phone*</td><td>*E-mail*</td></tr>
</table>

Please return by Monday, April 27, 2009, in the enclosed enveloped to Diane Starkovich; you may also return this form via fax to 404-885-7430 or grant permission via e-mail to <u>diane.starkovich@gmail.com</u>.

Thank you in advance for your support of Catholic school research.

July 20, 2009

(Name)
Superintendent of Schools
Diocese of (Name)
Street Address
City, Texas   Zip Code

Dear (Name),

Earlier this year I contacted the superintendents in the State of Texas to inform them of my proposed research study involving Texas Catholic elementary schools and also to request their permission to contact elementary school principals in their dioceses. To date, I have received permission from 14 dioceses to conduct my research study in their Catholic elementary schools. I am following up with you to seek your permission so that I might have 100% participation from all of the dioceses in the state.

I am a former Texas Catholic elementary school principal and served as the Associate Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Fort Worth from July, 2003 through May, 2006. In addition, I served as a TCCED accreditation trainer for both chair and visiting team training purposes and I chaired accreditation teams throughout the state from 1995 through 2006.

Currently, I am a doctoral candidate at The Catholic University of America. The title of my proposed research dissertation is *The Relationship between the Accreditation Process and Efforts for Continuous Improvement in Texas Catholic Elementary Schools.* Since no formal research studies have been conducted on the Texas Catholic Conference accreditation model, I hope that my research study will contribute to the body of knowledge about Catholic school accreditation as well as Catholic education in general.

My research will attempt to answer the following questions:
7. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive that the TCCED accreditation process results in continuous improvement in their schools?
8. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers perceive that the leadership style and the involvement of the principal affect continuous improvement throughout the accreditation process?
9. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive that teacher attitudes and empowerment affect efforts toward continuous improvement throughout the accreditation process?

10. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive the involvement of the diocesan central office and of the local governing body affecting local efforts toward continuous improvement throughout the accreditation process?
11. To what extent does the involvement of different stakeholders affect the accreditation process (i.e., principal, teachers, diocesan central office, local governing body, clergy, parents and parishioners)?
12. To what extent do Texas Catholic elementary teachers and administrators perceive the ten-year cycle of accreditation affecting local efforts toward continuous improvement?

With your permission, I hope to contact principals of elementary schools in your diocese sometime during the upcoming school year. All schools will be eligible for participation in my study regardless of the date of the last accreditation visit.

After permission is obtained from you and each of your elementary school's principal, an anonymous on-line survey will be made available for responding to my research questions. The right to confidentiality is guaranteed for all participants and their respective schools. Results of the study will be made available to all schools and your office upon request.

In order to continue with my research, I request that you complete the enclosed permission form and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope by **Monday, August 10, 2009,** or you may fax it to me at the number listed below. My e-mail address is also provided should you prefer to e-mail the requested information and your permission for this study to be conducted in your diocese.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my request. Your support for Catholic school research and my dissertation study is greatly appreciated. Should you have any questions or you would like to discuss my research, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Diane Starkovich
Doctoral Candidate, The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.

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5055 Wildeoak Trail
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The results of this research study will be made available to my office and all schools upon request.

_____   _____
Superintendent's Signature   *Date*

_____
Superintendent's Name (Please Print)

_____
(Arch)Diocese

_____   _____
Phone   *E-mail*

Please return by Monday, August 10, 2009, in the enclosed enveloped to Diane Starkovich; you may also return this form via fax to 404-885-7430 or grant permission via e-mail to <u>diane.starkovich@gmail.com</u>.

Thank you in advance for your support of Catholic school research.

APPENDIX B

Communication with Principals

Diane Starkovich
5055 Wildeoak Trail
Douglasville, Georgia 30135
404-216-8416

October 17, 2009

Dear Sir or Madam,

The purpose of this letter is to formally introduce my research study involving Texas Catholic elementary schools and to request your school's participation in the study. I am a doctoral candidate at The Catholic University of America and a former Texas Catholic elementary school principal. The title of my dissertation research is *The Relationship between the Accreditation Process and Perceptions of Efforts for Continuous Improvement in Catholic Elementary Schools in Texas.*

Your superintendent is aware of my research and has granted me permission to contact you to request your assistance. In addition, TCCED officials are aware of my dissertation proposal and will be provided with a copy of my dissertation upon its completion.

My survey instrument, ***Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey***, is hosted by surveymonkey.com. Participants respond anonymously to the survey and they can complete it in approximately 20-25 minutes. It is important that all **professional pre-kindergarten through eighth grade staff members** (administrators, teachers, librarians, counselors, and support staff, i.e. nurses, resource and enrichment teachers, curriculum coordinators, etc.) complete the survey, regardless of their employment status during the school's last accreditation visit. The survey instrument is designed to skip Section II – The Accreditation Process - for those who indicate they were not employed at the school during the last accreditation visit. However, their responses to the other sections of the survey instrument are very important for my research.

Please provide **the following link** to the above mentioned professional staff members in your school:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=eDp8xuc1jQsHzmJarr6gFg_3d_3d

To assist in the distribution of the survey to your professional staff members, I will forward you a direct electronic link if you contact me at the e-mail address I have provided. You will also need to provide your staff members with the **year of the school's last accreditation** visit since that is part of the demographic information I am gathering. In consideration of the demands that participation in this survey will place on your time and on your professional staff as well, perhaps my request for your school's participation in this survey could be completed during an early dismissal for professional development?

The survey link will remain active through **November 30.** Once the link has been forwarded to your professional school personnel, I would appreciate you completing and mailing the enclosed self-addressed and stamped post card so that I may track school participation throughout the State of Texas.

Thank you in advance for considering my request for participation in this research study. Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have. Your support for Catholic school research is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Diane Starkovich
Doctoral Candidate, The Catholic University of America
diane.starkovich@gmail.com

Postcard

The Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey

Electronic link has been forwarded to my faculty on:

_____
Date

_____
Name of School/(Arch)Diocese

_____
Name of Principal

Diane Starkovich
5055 Wildeoak Trail
Douglasville, Georgia   30135

First follow-up e-mail to principals

November 10, 2010

Dear Principal:

Approximately 3 weeks ago I mailed a letter of introduction and an electronic link asking that you and your professional staffs participate in my above referenced doctoral research study. While individual responses to the survey remain anonymous, I am able to track school participation through the return of the post-card included with my letter and by requests for the electronic link which I have received at this gmail account.

To date, 10% of the principals in the Diocese of (Name) have notified me that they have forwarded the link to their professional staff members. The state wide average of Catholic elementary school participation is 22%.

Sincere thanks to those of you who have taken the time to complete the survey and forward it to your staff members.

If you have not participated, please consider completing the online survey. Survey results will not only add to the general knowledge of research in Catholic education, but they will also be provided to TCCED as it considers future revisions to the accreditation process used in all Catholic schools in the State of Texas. By completing the survey, you can help advance this important work. Please take 15 minutes of your time to complete the survey; I also appreciate you forwarding the link to your professional staff members:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=eDp8xuc1jQsHzmJarr6gFg_3d_3d

May I please request that you return the self-addressed and stamped post card to me or reply to this e-mail if you choose to participate in this research study? The electronic link to the survey will remain active through November 30, 2009.

A copy of my research results will be forwarded to TCCED and all diocesan offices when completed.

Thank you for your leadership and service in Catholic Schools.

Sincerely,

Diane Starkovich
Doctoral Candidate
The Catholic University of America

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Second follow-up e-mail to principals

November 23, 2010

Good evening,

Recently I contacted you regarding my research study and asked you to participate by completing an on-line survey regarding the relationship between the TCCED Accreditation Process and Local Efforts for On-Going Continuous Improvement.

To date, 30% of the Catholic elementary schools throughout the State of Texas have participated in this study; 40% of the Catholic elementary schools in the Diocese of (Name) have participated - thank you!

In order to gather as much data as possible and to strengthen my research findings, the deadline for participation in the study has been extended through Monday, December 7. If you have not completed the survey, please consider participating in this research study. Should you decide to forward the following link to your professional staff members, please respond to this e-mail or return the self-addressed stamped post card provided in the original mailing.

A shorter, more user-friendly link has been provided by SurveyMonkey.Com:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/MWB9CCS

Thank you again for your consideration of this request.

Diane Starkovich
Doctoral Candidate
The Catholic University of America

APPENDIX C

Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey

Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey

1. Introduction and Demographic Information

The purpose of this survey is to investigate the perceptions of Texas Catholic elementary school personnel (administrators, teachers and support staff) concerning whether the accreditation process as defined by the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department leads to substantiated efforts toward on-going continous improvement.

Please note that your participation in completing this survey is voluntary and that your confidentiality is guaranteed.

1. Year of school's last accreditation visit:

◯ 2009

◯ 2008

◯ 2007

◯ 2006

◯ 2005

◯ 2004

◯ 2003

◯ 2002

◯ 2001

◯ Earlier than 2000

2. My primary current role in this school:

◯ Principal

◯ Assistant Principal

◯ Other Administrator

◯ Teacher

◯ Counselor

◯ Librarian

◯ Support Staff

3. I have been trained to serve as a Visiting Team Member for accreditation visits:

◯ Yes

◯ No

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4. I have served as a Visiting Team Member on an accreditation visit:

◯ Yes

◯ No

5. I have been trained to serve as a Visiting Team Chairperson:

◯ Yes

◯ No

6. I have served as a Visiting Team Chairperson:

◯ Yes

◯ No

7. What is your gender?

◯ Male

◯ Female

8. How long have you been employed at the school?

◯ First year

◯ 2-5 Years

◯ 6-10 Years

◯ 11-15 Years

◯ More than 15 Years

9. How long have you held your current position in the school?

◯ First year

◯ 2-5 Years

◯ 6-10 Years

◯ 11-15 Years

◯ More than 15 Years

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10. How long have you been an educator?

- ( ) First Year
- ( ) 2-5 Years
- ( ) 6-10 Years
- ( ) 11-15 Years
- ( ) More than 15 Years

11. Highest degree earned:

- ( ) Non-degreed
- ( ) Associate
- ( ) Bachelors
- ( ) Masters
- ( ) Specialist (Ed.S.)
- ( ) Doctoral

12. Are you certified in Texas or another state?

- ( ) Texas
- ( ) Other state
- ( ) Specialist in the field
- ( ) Non-certified

13. I was employed at this school during its last accreditation visit:

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

2. SECTION II - ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The accreditation process is designed to be a positive validation of a school's program while using objective criteria to set goals to attain even high levels of performance.

Please answer the following questions concerning the accreditation process by indicating your degree of agreement with each statement. Check the box that most accurately matches your perceptions concerning THE SCHOOL'S MOST RECENT ACCREDITATION VISIT. Please be assured that your responses will be kept confidential and only shared in aggregate results.

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1. I was a member of the steering committee that directed the writing of our school's self-study:

◯ Yes

◯ No

2. My primary role in the school during its last accreditation visit:

◯ Principal

◯ Assistant Principal

◯ Other Administrator

◯ Teacher

◯ Counselor

◯ Librarian

◯ Support Staff

3. Accreditation standards and expectations were made clear.

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

4. Adequate training occurred before the process began.

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

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5. The (arch)diocesan office provided sufficient assistance throughout the accreditation process.

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

6. The self-study component was a collaborative staff effort.

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

7. The following groups were sufficiently involved in the accreditation process:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not applicable
Teachers	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Staff	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Parents	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Council Members	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Parish Members	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Clergy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

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8. Please rate the level of involvement of each of the following throughout the accreditation involvement:

	Very Involved	Somewhat Involved	Only Slightly Involved	Not Involved
pastor	◯	◯	◯	◯
diocesan central office	◯	◯	◯	◯
principal	◯	◯	◯	◯
local advisory council/board	◯	◯	◯	◯
teachers	◯	◯	◯	◯
parents	◯	◯	◯	◯
parishioners	◯	◯	◯	◯

9. The accreditation process is necessary to ensure educational quality:

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

10. The accreditation process is necessary for continuous improvement:

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

11. The quality of education found in Catholic elementary schools in Texas is dependent upon the school's participation in the TCCED accreditation process.

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

12. I believe that the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process allows for short-term improvements in the school:

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

13. I believe that the ten-year cycle of the accreditation process results in long-term improvements for the school:

◯ Strongly Agree

◯ Agree

◯ Somewhat Agree

◯ Somewhat Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Strongly Disagree

14. The accreditation process is too time-intensive for the school staff:

- ◯ Strongly Agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Somewhat Agree
- ◯ Somewhat Disagree
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly Disagree

15. Meeting the standards of the accreditation process is difficult for my school given the resources available:

- ◯ Strongly Agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Somewhat Agree
- ◯ Somewhat Disagree
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly Disagree

16. My perception of the accreditation process changed because of my experience with it:

- ◯ Strongly Agree
- ◯ Agree
- ◯ Somewhat Agree
- ◯ Somewhat Disagree
- ◯ Disagree
- ◯ Strongly Disagree

3. SECTION III - SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The purpose of accreditation is to ensure that every school in each (arch)diocese maintains a level of quality in its operations and makes efforts toward improvement.

Please indicate your degree of agreement with each statement concerning areas for school improvement by checking the box that most accurately matches your perceptions concerning the school's most recent accreditation visit. Please be assured that your responses will be kept confidential and only shared in aggregate results.

Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey

1. As a result of our last accreditation visit, the following were strengthened:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
the mission and philosophy of our school	○	○	○	○	○	○
the goals of our school	○	○	○	○	○	○
the integration of Gospel values in our school	○	○	○	○	○	○
prayer and worship in our school	○	○	○	○	○	○
our Catholic identity	○	○	○	○	○	○
respectful teacher-student relationships	○	○	○	○	○	○

2. Since the last accreditation visit occurred:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
the school has become more family-oriented	○	○	○	○	○	○
parent communication has improved	○	○	○	○	○	○
education programs for families have increased	○	○	○	○	○	○
programs for staff spiritual formation have increased	○	○	○	○	○	○
programs for student spiritual formation have increased	○	○	○	○	○	○
commitment to service opportunities has increased	○	○	○	○	○	○
community-building activities have increased	○	○	○	○	○	○
the school has become better known in the local civic community	○	○	○	○	○	○
the school has become better known in the larger Catholic community	○	○	○	○	○	○
the school enjoys more support from the pastor	○	○	○	○	○	○
the school enjoys more support from the governing body	○	○	○	○	○	○
the school enjoys more support from parent organizations	○	○	○	○	○	○

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3. Following the last accreditation visit:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
resources are allocated for school needs	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
the work environment improved	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
administration focuses attention on the needs of the school community	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
school leadership focuses the school community on accreditation recommendations	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
administration leads school improvement efforts	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
school goals and objectives are reviewed more frequently	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
the school's strategic plan has been updated	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
professional development opportunities improved	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
collaborative planning improved	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
professional conversations increased	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
teachers share ideas and methods more regularly	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
staff communication has improved	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

4. As a result of the last accreditation visit:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
teaching methods have improved	○	○	○	○	○	○
teaching is more student-centered	○	○	○	○	○	○
teaching includes more group work	○	○	○	○	○	○
interactive learning has increased	○	○	○	○	○	○
students are challenged more	○	○	○	○	○	○
expectations for student success are clearer	○	○	○	○	○	○
individual student needs are better addressed	○	○	○	○	○	○
learning styles are better addressed	○	○	○	○	○	○
high-level thinking skills are stressed	○	○	○	○	○	○
instruction, curriculum and assessment are more aligned	○	○	○	○	○	○
instructional decisions are more data-driven	○	○	○	○	○	○
there are additional resources to support the instructional program	○	○	○	○	○	○

5. Since the last accreditation visit:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Certain
technology has improved	○	○	○	○	○
counseling services are more available	○	○	○	○	○
library usage has increased	○	○	○	○	○
health services have improved	○	○	○	○	○
additional student services are offered	○	○	○	○	○
extracurricular programs have increased	○	○	○	○	○
physical facilities have improved	○	○	○	○	○
school safety procedures have changed	○	○	○	○	○

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4. Section IV - COMMENTS

Texas Catholic Elementary School Accreditation Survey

Please take a few minutes to provide descriptive responses to the questions listed below. Your feedback and comments provide important information for this study.

Please be assured that your responses will be kept confidential and only shared in aggregate results.

1. Please describe what you believe are the greatests strengths of the TCCED Accreditation Process.

2. How do you believe the accreditation process could be strengthened?

3. Please provide any specific examples that illustrate how the accreditation process impacted the quality of education at your school.

4. Do you have any other comments not covered by any section of this research study?

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