Selected South Carolina School Leaders' Experiences in Addressing Cyberbullying

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SELECTED SOUTH CAROLINA SCHOOL LEADERS’ EXPERIENCES IN ADDRESSING CYBERBULLYING

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
Sheila Finley Hilton
August 2018

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study included selected South Carolina public high school leaders’ experiences in applying district cyberbullying policies. With the increase in technology use by students, what was school-based bullying has expanded into cyberbullying, the application of electronic devices to harass and intimidate other students. Given the potential for psychological damage to students who are bullied, federal, state, and local policy-makers seek means to decrease, if not eliminate, both bullying and cyberbullying.

In our litigious society, parents on both sides of bullying incidents often explore legal options to protect their children’s rights and obtain justice whether their children bully or victimized. School leaders face ambiguous options in meting out disciplinary consequences. This ambiguity makes it critical that leaders have effective problem-solving skills. The theoretical framework used in the study focused on cognitive aspects of school leader problem solving.

In this study, I selected six public high school leaders, based upon a documentary analysis of their district policies and how closely these policies adhered to federally suggested criteria. Once selected, I used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to elicit experiences from the leaders about using their policies.

In general, these school leaders reported using district policies as a foundation for handling cases. All six of the participants used their professional discretion about procedures, which included when to involve law enforcement; the importance of the legal ages of both those who cyberbully and those who are cyberbullied; the time and location
of cyberbullying incidents; and processes of evidence collection. The evolving nature of technology, along with differences in schools’ digital infrastructure, affected how some leaders approached cases and maintained or improved their technology knowledge.

Lastly, school leaders voiced concerns about several areas of their participation in cyberbullying investigations, such as the viewing of nude pictures or sexual videos and collection of evidence from privately owned devices. While leaders worried that poorly resolved cases could lead to student self-harm or suicide, they also expressed anxiety over potential litigation. Thus, school disciplinarians must rely on their problem-solving acumen to address ambiguities with rapid technical change and the pervasive nature of cyberbullying.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father James Roy Finley, who taught me that with hard work and dedication, I could do anything. For all those little things he did to teach me – making me plot our course on a map at five-years-old as we headed to vacation destinations; asking me to read him articles from the newspaper on Sunday mornings; and allowing me to “help” fix his car. Only later in life did I understand what he was doing. The confidence he had in my abilities spurred me on to work hard and always try to make him proud. This dissertation is for you, Daddy, for always believing in me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Betty Thompson Bagley for being my colleague and friend throughout the PhD process. Without the interesting rides in her car to Greenwood, Greenville, and Clemson, it would not have been as exciting.

Thank you also to my husband Billy, who tolerated my being absent from home and not worrying (too much) about how much money I was spending on the attainment of this degree. His support has enabled me to pursue many professional dreams. I owe many of my accomplishments to him.

I would to thank Ashley Hilton Houck and B.J. Hilton, my precious children, for whom I have always wanted to set a good example. My pride in their accomplishments made me want to continue my education so that they could see one is never too old to learn something new. I also want my grandson, Weston “Elliott” Houck, Jr., and my granddaughter, Laurel James Hilton (projected birth date on August 30, 2018), to be proud that their grandmother accomplished this lifelong goal. No less important, I want to thank my daughter-in-law Chelsea Erickson Hilton and my son-in-law Weston Elliott Houck, Sr., for joining our family, making our children happy and causing life to be so much richer for us.

It is only with God’s immense blessings that I was able to have a career in education that has fulfilled me professionally and allowed me to do the work I love. Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”” Proverbs 16:3 “Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.”
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Technology presents school leaders and other professionals with challenging social and ethical dilemmas (Demers & Sullivan, 2016). Numerous incidents of social media-based cyberbullying have overshadowed the educational benefits of new media and technology. Even as I retired as a high school principal in 2014, issues related to cyberbullying were an everyday occurrence. As a high school administrator, I facilitated the development and integration of technology into curriculum and classrooms. As this technology became more prevalent, so did its misuse. From students having access to the internet, to their one-to-one computers, to most carrying personal devices – each step in technological sophistication also raised risks to student safety. School leaders exist at the crossroads of implementing digital learning advances while protecting students and the learning environment from digital invasion of both privacy and mental health.

The rise of cyberbullying presents challenges to any secondary school’s leadership team. Many reports identified cyberbullying specifically for placing children and teens at risk in public schools (David-Ferndon & Hertz, 2007; Demers & Sullivan, 2016). Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) reported that a multitude of factors influence students to bully or not to bully, including peer groups, families, schools, teacher-student relationships, cultural expectations, and neighborhoods. They recommended caution about placing students into one group or another, because students can both cyberbully and be cyberbullied. Indeed, a student sitting in any principal’s office, including mine, who claimed he was cyberbullied may have cyberbullied someone
himself, and multiple studies have demonstrated overlaps in students’ representing students who are both cyberbullied and cyberbully at a rate as high as 17% (Selkie, Fales, & Moreno, 2016).

McCallion and Feder (2013) stated that both those who cyberbully and those who are cyberbullied can experience “psychological, physical, academic, behavioral issues” (p. 5). Researchers’ findings confirm parents’ reports of the effects of cyberbullying on adolescents (DePaolis, 2015; Selkie et al., 2016). Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2006) reported that cyberbullying caused high levels of distress in children and that children who had pre-existing social problems were more likely to be cyberbullied. Among secondary students, the severity of cyberbullying effects seemed to be deeper for those secondary students who reported being both cyberbullied and engaged in cyberbullying others (Kowalski & Limber, 2012). To make matters worse, Veoga, Ferreira, Freire, Caetano, Martins, and Fiera (2017) reported that when students were cyberbullied, they tended not to tell teachers or school officials, even though their perception of school climate was more positive when they did. Practitioners face demands of ensuring learning, and student well-being, while students experience digital influences on their psychological health, along with their academic and social growth.

Prior to the advent of technology, school leaders like me dealt with face-to-face bullying, ranging from verbal to physical abuse (Cornell & Limber, 2015; McCarthy, 2014). Those incidents often required school leaders only to mediate he-said and she-said scenarios. Even with diligent reasonable efforts (Cornell & Limber, 2015), the school leader may have had hearsay evidence linked to each students’ friendships and
notoriously unreliable eyewitness accounts. Today’s school leaders might have a digital forensic trail for finding evidence of cyberbullying, but those forensics may require administrators to conquer the technical steps to search varied devices, while appropriately following the legalities of search procedures (Kowalski, Agatston, & Limber, 2012). Though educators do not have to be technological experts to deter cyberbullying, they do need training on the types of online communication that students are using (Kowalski et al., 2012). Herold (2018) stated that principals will always struggle with the rapid changes and use of social media technology and students’ use of it. The sometimes dire consequences among those students who are cyberbullied complicate school leaders’ responsibilities in identifying and deterring cyberbullying and to make their schools safe environments (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & Green, 2015; Cross, Pintabono, Hall, Hamilton & Erceg, 2004).

Traditional bullying and cyberbullying have more similarities than differences. Olweus (2003) defined traditional bullying as the occurrence of a person or group’s engagement in some type of negative communication or action intended to harm or cause distress in another individual and technology only adds to the power imbalance. Kowalski, Limber, Zane, and Hassenfeldt (2008) called attention to the fact that bullying and cyberbullying often occur for the same reasons, indicating overlap. For example, both types have one child exerting power over a less powerful child (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018; Rigby, 2003). Mainly, these two types of bullying differ in how far and when the offenders strike. School leaders know traditional school bullying well. When it occurs at times when school personnel are responsible for children, school leaders have numerous
resources and experiences with handling it (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, Erceg, & Falconer, 2011). Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, and Waterhouse’s (2012) study showed that “electronic aggression is different from traditional forms of bullying … with youth differentiating items according to mode of electronic aggression, rather than role [bully, victim, witness]” (p. 231).

Cyberbullying, however, has reached beyond the school and school events into homes and other places that students go by means of a variety of electronic devices (Li, Cross, & Smith, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Some traditional bullying, in which there are face-to-face encounters, have been replaced with cell phones, tablets, computers, and other devices serving as the media through which such communication takes place (Enoch, 2016; Reid, 2005). Though there are numerous definitions of cyberbullying, they all contain references to intentional, repetitious acts of harassment using electronic devices and yielding some level of psychological harm (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2018).

While school leaders are compelled to ensure school safety for all students, the connection between schools and media-based cyberbullying is emerging and dynamic territory. As a principal, I was accustomed to handling issues that took place on campus or at school events. When campuses extend outside the school into homes via technological devices, how do school leaders address these safety issues?

In 2008, I had my first dilemma regarding the time and place of a cyberbullying event. A fight occurred on campus that emanated from a cyberbullying event that took place on a Saturday night, in a student’s home, via his personal device. When
punishment was meted out for the fight, the parents of the perpetrator wanted to make sure that their child was not being punished for the actual text message he sent to the student victim. They felt that I had no right to question anything their child did in his own home, outside of the school day, on a device they had purchased for him. Because the student who was cyberbullied initiated the fight, the parents also felt that, in actuality, their child was the victim in the whole situation. Also, they asked if their child was entitled to his free speech rights.

I read our district cyberbullying policy over and over again. Was I making the right decisions? Was the policy providing me with the support I needed? Mattocks (2006) described educational leadership as a job that falls beneath a “giant umbrella of laws, rules, and regulations,” which he labeled “public policy” (p. 105). He stated that education law, in particular, is not only a matter of compliance with outside forces, but also an opportunity for reflection. In the case of cyberbullying, the law can offer school leaders both authority and discretion to make reasonable, appropriate decisions on each individual case (Mattocks, 2006; Stefkovich, 2014). Administrators’ opportunities for reflection come in the balancing of authority and discretion (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Mattocks, 2006; Stefkovich, 2014).

In addressing students who cyberbully, school leaders must follow laws, statutes, policies, and rules from multiple levels of government. Though Congress has enacted no federal cyberbullying laws, a group known as the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention in the U.S. Department of Education (2014) developed a set of preventative measures and recommendations for states in creating effective cyberbullying policies. This group
included representatives from many federal agencies, and they developed criteria recommended for effective anti-cyberbullying school-based policies (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). Subsequently, South Carolina used some of these criteria to create its own cyberbullying policy (South Carolina Safe Schools Climate Act of 2006, rev. 2016).

The SC legislature enacted the SC Safe Schools Climate Act in 2006, requiring all districts to develop cyberbullying policies (South Carolina Safe Schools Climate Act of 2006, rev. 2016). Presently, all districts in SC have fulfilled the requirement to have a cyberbullying policy. According to one review of the SC law (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011) the federal recommendations regarding effective anti-bullying practices were not included fully, lacking seven (39%) of the 18 suggested criteria.

**Pervasiveness of Cyberbullying**

In their development of laws and policies to address cyberbullying, states and school districts must consider the degree of cyberbullying’s pervasiveness at their respective levels and jurisdictions. In the U.S., research has shown a range of approximately 10% to 40% rates of incidents with differences attributed to the variations among studies’ definitions, along with the ages of the studied groups (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Despite common references to this range throughout the literature, some researchers have also challenged it based on dissimilarities in data collection methods (Heirman & Walrave, 2008). Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, and Oudekerk (2017) summarized research conducted in 2015, which indicated that among 12 to 18 year-old students, 21% stated that they were bullied (both in school and out of school), with more females reporting bullying than males. Approximately 19% of those who were bullied
reported it negatively affected how they felt about themselves (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). As online victimization rises, school leaders must be concerned about its effects on students.

**Effects of Cyberbullying**

DeSmet et al. (2015) acknowledged the subtlety with which some students bully or cyberbully other students and how often it travels under even concerned adults’ radars, including parents, teachers, or school leaders. Those who cyberbully often learn new techniques to taunt other students and most often do it outside of school time. School leaders may or may not have authority to issue any punishment to those who cyberbully because some will assert that such incidents fall outside of the school’s jurisdiction (Ahrens, 2012; Calvoz, Davis, & Gooden, 2013; DeSmet et al., 2015). Sometimes those who are cyberbullied quietly request transfers to other brick-and-mortar schools or online institutions, which removes them physically from those who harass them, even though they remain vulnerable online (Hayes & Herbert, 2011).

Those students who have been cyberbullied have exhibited numerous consequences of their abuse. They have been more likely to be depressed and have problem behaviors that interfere with school (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012; Soyeon, Colwell, Kata, Boyle, & Georgiades, 2018; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reported that those students who were cyberbullied (aged 10 to 17) abused drugs more than those who were not cyberbullied. Smith, Smith, Osborn, and Samara (2008) found that even though cyberbullying incidents tend toward
briefer encounters as compared to traditional bullying, those who were cyberbullied experienced trauma as serious, if not more serious, than face-to-face effects. Some researchers attributed a potential magnification of trauma because cyberbullying has a larger audience and the written attacks can remain permanently in the cyber world (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2007; Smith, Dempsey, Jackson, Olenchak, & Gaa, 2012; Smith et al., 2008). These data present school leaders with a great challenge in addressing cyberbullying with their students to ensure both safety and learning.

**Administrative Roles in Curtailing Cyberbullying**

Both district-level and school-building administrators have important roles to play in intervening with cyberbullying. Chibbaro (2007) and Eden, Heiman, and Olenik-Shemesh (2012) argued for school district boards and administrators’ delineation of clear policies with guidelines for school personnel in handling cyberbullying. Also, Chibbaro (2007) recommended sanctions for those who cyberbully, such as loss of computer privileges, along with penalties that range from detention to expulsion. Agatston, Kowalski, and Limber (2007) suggested means for developing parents’ and students’ awareness of the problem, the policies, and the consequences by “[requiring] school districts have parents and students read and sign the school districts’ policies regarding acceptable use of technology” (p. 560). These authors promoted the notion that district policies specify a range of sanctions befitting the severity of various types of cyberbullying.
Agatston et al. (2007) recommended that district policies offer school administrators discretion about sanctions for cyberbullying. They justified such a recommendation because lack of administrative discretion may prevent school leaders from making decisions that they feel are best for their students. Administrators often find themselves in positions of having to justify their cyberbullying decisions if students and parents believe the perpetrator’s free speech rights were denied (Kowalski, Agatston, & Limber, 2012). Although parents may perceive students’ free speech rights as limitless, for nearly three-quarters of a century, U.S. courts vacillated in their support for schools’ ability to limit young people’s speech rights.

In 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court received its first case of student First Amendment rights in public schools and took the stand that students were entitled to their full First Amendment rights, with only minor adjustments made due to the uniqueness of the school environment (W. Va. State Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette, 1943). Over four decades after the affirmation of students’ free speech rights, the U.S. Supreme Court shifted its opinion in favor of safe learning environments, increasing deference to school leaders’ professional discretion by recognizing developmental limitations to young people’s exercise of appropriate judgment. The Court said that students’ constitutional rights “are not automatically coextensive with the rights of adults in other settings” (Bethel v. Fraser, 1986).

Though the U.S. Supreme Court has modified its stance on student free speech, students’ use of technology to cyberbully others has changed the decision-making landscape for administrators. A set of specific guidelines from the U.S. Supreme Court
might assist or constrain administrators and policy-makers in their cyberbullying
decisions (McCarthy, 2014; Stefkovich, 2014). School-level disciplinarians typically
follow district-level policies that may, or may not, offer specific guidance in the decisions
surrounding cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005; Mattocks, 2006; McCarthy, 2014).

Stefkovich (2014) called attention to school leaders’ discretion in following
school laws and policies. She explained that there are laws and policies that require
some action, while others simply allow a certain action. She stated that the absence or
vagueness of a law or policy actually gives school leaders more discretion. She argued
that the more discretion is allowed, the more ethical decision-making can take place.
Therefore, the lack of specificity of some cyberbullying laws and policies may provide
school leaders with latitude to address these issues using increased individualization on a
case-by-case basis. Many scholars of cyberbullying and other school safety policies
prefer that disciplinary policies avoid zero-tolerance and punishment restrictions on
school professionals’ ability to discern and apply more educative interventions
(McCarthy, 2014; Cornell & Limber, 2015).

For students, cyberbullying plunges those students who were cyberbullied and
those who cyberbullied others into a swirl of negative outcomes, and drags parents and
school leaders into the morass. Both parents and school leaders have to react to situations
created by students with few options and little legal or social guidance. For school
leaders, the educational, or educative options, also seem ambiguous, if not limited.
Statement of the Problem

As a school leader, I often weighed contradictory information in incidents of cyberbullying in my school, and such contradictions affected my ability to advise our school’s assistant principals how to proceed in cyberbullying matters. Campbell (2005) and Kowalski et al. (2012) argued that educators, attorneys, and policymakers work diligently to find solutions to the unique kind of anonymous bullying that cyberbullying projects – a form of victimization that generally no longer occurs on school grounds. Without specific policies for cyberbullying, school leaders may risk potentially dire harm to students who are cyberbullied, while also perhaps violating the First Amendment freedom of speech rights of those who cyberbully. Either risk or violation can yield financial liability for the school district. School leaders face cyberbullying incidents under the weight of high stakes professional and moral dilemmas on the frontiers of legal contests over free speech and school safety (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016; McCarthy, 2014).

Multiple scholars and anti-bullying advocates (Cornell & Limber, 2015; McCarthy, 2014; McHenry, 2011) remarked about courts’ ambiguous ever-changing reactions to constantly evolving online behaviors. School leaders are currently working during a time when there has been little consensus reached on the civil rights and school safety issues related to cyberbullying (Cornell & Limber, 2015). Hinduja and Patchin (2011) suggested that school leaders should always seek to balance any legal guidance with the best interests of each victim, considering the consequences and context of each cyberbullying incident. As Stefkovich (2014) explained, school leaders should be able to
exercise their professional expertise and judgment to do what is best for every child. The complexity of these conditions begs the question of what school leaders either do or may consider in addressing the intricacies of healthy environments for learning development while combatting cyberbullying.

**Need for the Study**

In contemplating my experiences with cyberbullying, and talking with other colleagues about cyberbullying issues, I found that other school leaders reflected on the same dilemmas. Professional experiences, coupled with the statistics and research about cyberbullying, illustrate the degree to which digital aggression interferes with a positive learning environment and a sense of well-being (Agatston et al., 2007). School leaders, who are responsible for sustaining safe learning environments (Ansary et al., 2015; Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Campbell, 2005; Cross et al., 2004) face cyberbullying incidents without clear guidelines from laws and policies, and experience shifting stances by the courts on the latitude school administrators may take for ensuring school safety (Hvidston, Hvidston, Range, & Harbour, 2013; McCarthy, 2014). Today, the reach of schools and learning climates has extended into cyberspace, and school leaders often find themselves in ambiguous situations as they seek to shelter youth from cyberbullying and, and at the same time, afford them their right of freedom of speech. Although the literature explains the dilemma confronting school leaders and offers some cautions about cyberbullying’s effects on learning and lives, little explanation and no formal study of school leaders’ decision-making in cyberbullying incidents exists. Thus, this study
sought insights from practicing school leaders about their approaches and cognitive reasoning associated with cyberbullying incidents.

**Steps of the Study**

The purpose of my study was an exploration of selected public high school leaders’ experiences in following their current district policies to determine how they confront legal dilemmas and whether or how they exercise discretion in resolving cyberbullying incidents (Stefkovich, 2014). By collecting and categorizing principals’, or assistant principals’, experiences in applying their districts’ policies, I described how they evaluated the effectiveness of their policies as well as justified the extent of their discretion and problem-solving skills.

After I categorized each district’s cyberbullying policies based on their alignment with federal recommendations (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011), I selected six districts from the range of results I found (highest to lowest number of federal criteria) – two districts with five federal criteria – highest range; two districts with one criteria – lowest range; and two with three criteria – mid-range. For the next step, I selected one high school from each district, and for districts with multiple high schools, I chose the high school with the highest enrollment. I contacted district officials and school principals to ascertain which school-based leaders had the most experience with cyberbullying cases to invite those individuals to participate in an interview.

By using Flanagan’s (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT), I prompted interviewees to recall and describe two critical incidents in their handling of cyberbullying, one they considered successful and one, which they reflected, was not. I
probed their descriptions of these incidents to see how they recalled their use of district policies, what processes they used for investigation, and what aspects of the cases they considered to determine disciplinary actions and anticipate outcomes and consequences.

The literature about school leaders’ problem-solving (Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane, White, & Stephan, 2008) is limited in general and does not include school leaders’ reflections and thinking as they work through investigations and consider disciplinary responses to cyberbullying incidents.

**Significance of the Study**

Hvidston, Hvidston, Range, and Harbour (2013) opined that school leaders find themselves in an era in which case law about cyberbullying is still evolving. The U.S. Congress has not set specific laws about cyberbullying, and state laws might be ambiguous (McCarthy, 2014). District-level policies may vary, but should include detailed reporting and investigation procedures; professional development for teachers; cyberbullying education for parents, students, and community; and authority for school leaders to handle both on-campus and off-campus offenses (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011).

The courses of action that school leaders take in cyberbullying cases can involve complicated thought processes dealing with student rights, mental health, and educational effects related to both those who were cyberbullied and those who cyberbullied. My study included selected SC high school leaders’ experiences in using their current policies, which exposed ways the policies aided or hindered the complicated and potentially conflicting goals of safe schools and preservation of students’ freedom of speech.
**Research Question**

The research question for my study is as follows: what are selected public high school leaders’ experiences in applying district cyberbullying policies to cases in their schools? The overarching research question lends itself to the open-ended approach of Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) to probe selected school leaders’ reflections about their experiences.

**Theoretical Framework**

School leaders’ problem-solving expertise may be an important element of addressing cyberbullying in schools, given the ambiguities of rapid technical developments and the expansive jurisdiction of cyberspaces beyond schools’ physical campuses. Even if procedures, policies, and laws provided a solid foundation of the parameters to address cyberbullying, human beings at various stages of development cause bullying disruptions, and just as human school leaders need to exercise their professional training and experiences in mediating the incidents. Problem solving is a critical element of all school leaders’ jobs (Leithwood & Hallinger, 1993). Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008) stated that research has focused primarily on “traditional administrative problems” instead of the problems experienced by principals today (p. 436). Davis and Davis (2003) noted that leaders often must deal with uncommon and complex problems, those without simple answers. Cyberbullying presents school leaders with an oftentimes-complex problem to solve in the best interests of students, who have competing needs and interests among all sides.
As with all professions, new school principals and assistant principals confront a learning curve in developing both knowledge and expertise regarding school laws and policies and applying them to real-world situations, as with cyberbullying. The ever-changing development of apps, media, software, and new digital devices requires experienced school leaders to adapt their decision-making to complicated conditions surrounding the means of cyberbullying (Dexter, Richardson, & Nash, 2017; Yu & Prince, 2016). These complications raise questions about school leaders’ reflections and considerations for making decisions about resolving cyberbullying problems.

Nearly three decades ago, Leithwood and Stager (1989) recommended a focus on principals’ reasoning, which they justified with a recommendation that researchers share this information so that higher education and school districts could develop more effective leaders. Leithwood and Hallinger (1993) added, “Understanding of human thought and problem-solving processes has moved forward at an unprecedented rate over the past 20 years…” (p. 296). Bullock, James, and Jamieson (1997) reported that leaders’ problem-solving skills also reveal their levels of expertise.

Subsequently, Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008) confirmed variations in how typical principals and expert principals solved problems. Spillane and colleagues (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Spillane, White, & Stephan, 2009) followed the methods that Leithwood and associates (Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995) used. Both groups of researchers gave principals structured and unstructured problems to solve and then interviewed the participants to determine their thought processes as they developed their solutions. These studies yielded similar
findings, differentiating between expert and typical approaches to problems that school leaders confront (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane et al., 2009). Principals deemed as experts in problem-solving were able to do the following: (1) analyze or frame the problem; (2) face conflict; (3) gather data relevant to the problem (4); identify and overcome constraints to solving the problem; (5) recount similar problems and how they were successfully or unsuccessfully solved; (6) plan the approach that would be used; (7) focus on the implications for the entire school program; (8) delegate the problem to others when needed; (9) keep parents informed; and (10) emphasize follow-up after the problem is solved (Spillane, et al., 2009). Typical, or non-expert, principals conversely (1) had difficulty recounting similar problems; (2) accepted constraints; (3) avoided conflict; (4) focused more on staff than students; (5) made assumptions instead of gathering data; (6) tried to keep parents happy; (7) demonstrated too much concern about feelings; and (8) and expressed concern about the implications for themselves (Spillane et al., 2009).

Although these studies used a simulated situation method to garner school leaders’ reflections, these investigations yielded a differentiation between experts and novices in these contrived cases. My study addressed reflections on experiences recalled by the participants, an advantage of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), Flanagan (1954). The CIT method offers participants the opportunity to develop insights and reveal their cognitive reasoning about events that they select as particularly meaningful as opposed to the contrived events of simulations for which participants may not have deep
connections (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Chell, 2004; Flanagan, 1954).

The approach in this study, CIT, uncovered selected school leaders’ insights and reflection on thought processes. In summary, this study may provide deeper understanding of school leaders’ reasoning skills in situations where they have to protect learning, while facing cyberbullying and its consequences. CIT offered a way to ask school leaders how they made decisions about cyberbullying and the dilemmas their options may have presented, as well as the support that a district’s policy may or may not have played in those decisions. Below I have defined the terms associated with this study’s approach to understanding leaders’ decision processes about cyberbullying.

**Definition of Terms**

To understand principals’ responses about cyberbullying, the following terms guided the conceptual aspects of this study:

**Critical incident.** In its original form, Flanagan (1954) stated that “a critical incident is any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the persons performing the act” (p. 327). As the concept has evolved, critical incidents have become specific situations, along with a description of the behaviors and actions of the key players in the incidents, and the outcomes of those incidents (Butterfield et al., 2005). In this study, I asked selected high school principals to choose critical incidents in which they used their district policies to seek resolutions of cyberbullying issues, describe the incidents in narrative form, and provide the outcome of the incident.
**Cyberbullying.** An overarching term, *cyberbullying*, includes any type of electronic, or internet harassment (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012).

**Leadership problem solving.** Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) stated that successful school leaders, who are expert problem-solvers, are in tune “to the people and contexts in which [they] work” (pp. 4-5) and have an ability to adapt their many skills to the circumstances that are presented to them. In addition, they are cognizant of their thought processes during problem solving.

**School leaders.** School leaders are principals or their designees who handle discipline within a school. Some school principals delegate this duty to assistant principals or others, such as school counselors, grade-level leaders or subject area department heads in the school.

**Sexting.** Sexting is defined as “the sending, receiving or forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, or photos to others through electronic means, primarily between cellular phones” (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014).

**Social media.** Social media include various applications, modes, and venues in cyberspace, such as networking and video-sharing websites, along with instant and text messaging programs that use computers, cell phones, smartphones, portable gaming devices, and other technology designed for communication among individuals or groups (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012).

**Design of the Study**

I selected a multi-stage design with the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) as the dominant method for this study (Chell, 2004; Flanagan, 1954; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun,
The first stage involved an analytic selection process, a document review of SC district cyberbullying policies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) using a set of federal recommendations (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). In the document review, I collected and categorized 78 of 81 SC public high school district-level cyberbullying policies by federal recommendations for suggested policy criteria (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). I then ordered the policies by frequency count across categories (from districts having the highest number of components to those with the fewest). I selected potential district sites by frequency counts as follows: (a) two districts with policies aligned with the highest number of federal recommendations, (b) two districts with the least number, and (c) two districts from the middle of the range. I then chose high schools within the selected districts based upon highest enrollment size and contacted the principals from these six schools to ask permission to conduct the study. I asked each principal about the person on the administrative staff who could best answer questions about their experiences in handling cyberbullying. Principals at all six selected schools chose to delegate to an assistant principal.

The second stage of this study focused on the selected school leaders’ recollections of cyberbullying cases and how they handled those situations with the guidance, or not, from their district policies. Through use of CIT, I elicited their narratives about situations they deemed as both critical and as examples of successful and unsuccessful resolutions (Flanagan, 1954). The school leaders’ remarks framed issues with policy and with the associated problem-solving options and processes they faced.
Limitations of the Study

Both stages of the study posed some limitations. Although I used policy criteria developed by experts at the federal level, I relied on my interpretation of the districts’ policies wording and made judgments about alignment with criteria. I relied heavily on my professional training and years of practice in making such judgments, but I did not employ a peer rater to check for my consistency in interpretation. Thus, my results may not be replicable.

This study also contains limitations common to the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). Flanagan (1954) stated that it takes “insight, experience, and judgment” to use CIT (p. 344). CIT limitations include four constraints: (1) use of self-reported information; (2) potential subjectivity on my part; (3) time-consuming categorization process; and (4) subjectivity of my analysis of the collected data (Chell, 2004; Kain, 2004). Lastly, because CIT overlaps the limitations also found in interviews, one can include these additional limitations: (1) the information collected may be subject to the degree to which respondents are willing to give their opinions openly; (2) the information collected shows snapshots rather than trends; (3) respondents may give only information that they feel is socially acceptable; (4) respondents may have fears about their anonymity; and (5) open-ended questions may be time-consuming (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015).

Another limitation of the study was that school leaders, after addressing cyberbullying incidents, concluded that if no further cyberbullying was reported, then the problem had been solved. In reality, many students do not report cyberbullying. It may
have been that students who were cyberbullied decided not to report subsequent cyberbullying events, thus the problem may not have been solved.

Despite these limitations, the point of CIT is to expose participants’ reflections about their self-chosen critical cases. Thus, the limitations of the method did not preclude the importance of these participants’ answers nor their contributions to the findings associated with the research question, which focuses on school leaders’ perceptions about their decisions.

**Delimitations**

This research was delimited to selected school leaders at six public high schools in South Carolina and their districts’ cyberbullying policies under South Carolina’s Safe Schools Climate Act of 2006 (rev. 2016). Through the CIT method, this study captured these school leaders’ self-reported memories about the criticality of the incidents and the outcomes of their problem-solving approaches (Butterfield et al., 2005; Chell, 2004). While the processes of this study can be replicated, the delimitations reflect findings from these participants’ perspectives.

**Assumptions**

This study included the following assumptions:

(1) Public high school leaders in South Carolina have handled cyberbullying issues.

(2) High school leaders have opinions about the ease or difficulty they have had in dealing with these issues when using existing district-level policies.
(3) High school leaders can explain how much discretion they have when making decisions.

(4) High school leaders are willing to discuss openly their experiences in handling cyberbullying in their schools.

**Organization of the Study**

I organized this report into five chapters. The first chapter contains subsections that explain the study background, a problem statement, study purpose, study significance, term definitions, theoretical framework, study questions, delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and organization of the research. Chapter 2 contains a literature review that summarizes research on (1) cyberbullying prevalence, (2) increased focus on cyberbullying, (3) effects, (4) administrative roles, (5) school leaders’ perceptions of cyberbullying, (6) investigations of cyberbullying, (7) First Amendment and state law, (8) court cases that establish practice, (9) administrative discretion, and (10) development of problem-solving expertise and discretion. Chapter 3 contains the methods designed for the study. It includes (1) participant selection, (2) construction of instruments, (3) collection of data, and (4) analysis plans. In Chapter 4, I present the data analysis. It contains (1) analysis results; (2) selected responses from the Critical Incident Technique (CIT); and (3) themes generated across these participants’ recollections of their critical incidents with cyberbullying. In Chapter 5, I bring together all facets of the research. As the final chapter, it contains (1) a study summary; (2) discussion of the findings; (3) implications for practice; and (4) recommendations for further research.
Summary

As a former school leader, I experienced the rise of technology use by students in this Information Age and witnessed the degree to which cyberbullying posed safety issues at school and outside the school’s physical jurisdictions of time and space. Though many disciplinary issues have traditional parameters, cyberbullying poses ongoing ambiguities. Cyberbullying exceeds traditional dimensions of schooling, such as: (a) time (during school hours or school event) and (b) location (in school or outside of school). School leaders must use their discretion in weighing school safety and students’ First Amendment, freedom of speech, rights. Except for the U.S. Supreme Court, other court systems have considered school-based cyberbullying cases, but have decided issues in contradictory ways. States and districts have created a variety of policies about bullying and cyberbullying, which by variety alone cause ambiguity for school disciplinarians. Hence, many school leaders must exercise discretion and problem solving in balancing educational considerations, student safety, and student rights in each cyberbullying incident. For this study, I asked selected school leaders to describe critical cyberbullying incidents and their perceptions about the degree to which state and district policies helped or hindered them in the resolution of these cases.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

For this research project, I sought selected public high school principals’, or other designated school leaders’, experiences in applying their district cyberbullying policies to incidents in their own schools. Reportedly, the word cyberbullying was used first by Bill Belsey, an educator from Canada (Bauman, Cross, & Walker, 2012; Belsey, 2006). Belsey created what some believe is the first anti-cyberbullying website in 2003 (Bauman et al., 2012; Belsey, 2006). The study of online verbal assaults developed in the early 1980s. At that time, researchers investigated flame wars, described as inappropriate communications or insensitivity to others online (Bauman et al., 2012; Holfeld & Grabe, 2012). Holfeld and Grabe (2012) theorized that the absence of visual cues in online communication permitted those who cyberbully a sense of anonymity, which likely contributed to subsequent increases in the pitiless attacks.

Of all of the challenges that public schools face, more and more educators report cyberbullying as one of their major concerns (Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Eden, Heiman, & Olenik-Shemesh, 2012). In March 2011, the White House held a cyberbullying conference, where President Barack Obama stated that online harassment was a serious problem facing schools in the U.S. (Khadaroo, 2011). In subsequent administration, among the next White House occupants, First Lady Melania Trump, also expressed concern about online victimization of children, and announced her plan to raise awareness of cyberbullying and other online dangers (Jordan, 2018).
Given the lack of boundaries in the cyber world, other countries also wrestle with policy definitions and the scope of potential harm to school students and general mental health (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016).

Today’s cyberbullying issues bleed into schools on a constant basis (Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Selkie, Fales, & Moreno, 2016). Students who have access to cell phones or computers can communicate at virtually any time and any place. This anywhere-anytime access makes it hard for students who are cyberbullied to avoid their harassers and increases the difficulty school leaders experience in trying to protect their students (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012).

**Prevalence**

Selkie and colleagues’ (2016) meta-analysis of 81 articles representing 58 studies in U.S. middle and high schools reported the distribution among students affected by cyberbullying as being between 1% and 41% of those who admitted bully others. Among those who reported experiencing cyberbullying, the figures range between 3% and 72%. The prevalence of cyberbullying makes it a school-student phenomenon due to ongoing social and emotional reverberations of bullying, even when the moments of such bullying take place beyond school walls and outside of school time. Unfortunately, Veoga et al. (2016) reported that students tend to tell their friends and parents of cybervictimization rather than the adults at school.

**An Increased Focus on Cyberbullying**

With cyberbullying being one of the top safety concerns for children (Eden, Heiman, & Olenik-Shemesh, 2012), school leaders, who once simply handled issues that
occurred on campus or at school events, must now deal with incidents taking place in invisible networks, where there can be an audience of thousands. Hudson (2013) stated, “Public school students and officials need to know the limits of officials’ authority over off-campus, online speech … [because] those limits are unclear” (p. 621). Abrams (2011) discussed how “parents and the disciplined cyberbully may … argue that public schools lack authority to impose discipline for messages sent from off school grounds … from the cyberbully’s cell phone, or from a computer keyboard at home” (p. 190). Those state courts, which have addressed cyberbullying, have offered varying decisions, sometimes supporting the First Amendment over school safety and vice versa (McCarthy, 2014; Yang & Grinshteyn, 2016). Of particular concern for school leaders, the U.S. Supreme Court has not heard any of these cases. Some scholars posit that if the Supreme Court would hear and rule on a cyberbullying case or set of cases, perhaps that ruling would offer school leaders some deciding principles for balancing First Amendment rights and the well-being of students (King, 2010; Levin, 2010; McCarthy, 2014).

Additionally, because most cyberbullying events take place off-campus, states and districts must consider how holding students accountable for their cyber behavior away from campus can have legal consequences, if students and their parents believe their rights have been violated (Ahrens, 2012). Yet, Hvidston et al. (2013) warned school leaders that they should not ignore cyberbullying that occurs off-campus. They warned that disregarding an off-campus location could be considered a “breach of duty to care for the victim” should the problems eventually spin into school activities (Hvidston et al., p. 308). This illustrates one of the many dilemmas school leaders face.
Another unique facet of cyberbullying is the use of online aliases, alter-egos and avatars or anonymous postings, which mask those who cyberbully and prevent students who are cyberbullied from detecting their tormentors (Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Hong et al., 2016; Kowalski et al., 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Those who bully in a tradition manner normally terrorize others during school hours, when there is physical access to the person they are bullying. Students who are bullied in a traditional manner see their tormentors in real-time confrontations. In cyber spaces, those who taunt others do so without any physical access to the person (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Reid, 2005). Also, the scope of adult supervision rarely enters cyber spaces (Hong et al., 2016; Williams & Guerra, 2007). In the cyber world, non-verbal cues are notably absent, in contrast to what is normally found in traditional bullying. Traditional remedies may be ineffective, which means that school leaders need new tactics to protect their students’ rights and well-being, as well as ensuring a positive learning environment (Cornell & Limber, 2015; Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Reid, 2005).

In addition, Korenis and Billick (2014) noted that there is a “dramatic increase in the use of cell phones and internet … [for] … sexting and cyberbullying” (p. 97). They define sexting as the “practice of sending sexually explicit material including language or images to another person’s cell phone” (p. 97) and warn that adolescents can become involved in criminal acts through sexting, if they cyberbully, and become victimized if they are receiving such material. Ricketts, Maloney, Marcum, and Higgins (2015) reported that 13% of adolescents sext, and as time passes, participation in sexting
becomes more commonplace, even with widely communicated, dangerous consequences. They suggested that sexting increases with youth’s exposure to a variety of social media (television, movies, internet), not merely mobile phones.

**Effects of Cyberbullying Victimization**

Many school-aged children suffer psychological damage due to their victimization by cyberbullying (Cross et al., 2012; DePaolis, 2015; McCallion & Feder, 2013; Nansel, Overpeck, Saluja, & Raun, 2004; Selkie et al., 2016; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). If school leaders are to protect students, they must understand the effects as well as the range of severity which cyberbullying can have on students (Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012).

Hinduja and Patchin (2007) contended that the effects of cyberbullying on today’s youth go beyond momentary unhappiness. Waves of studies report that young people potentially suffer permanent emotional and psychological damage from cyberbullying (Cross et al., 2012; DePaolis, 2015; Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Hong et al., 2016; Nansel et al., 2004). Studies indicated that the sheer act of bullying, by whatever means, can cause poor academic performance, distress and humiliation, low self-worth and depression, and physical problems (DePaolis, 2015; Hong et al., 2016; Olweus, 2003; Rigby, 2003; Salmon, James, Cassidy, & Javaloyes, 2000). Students who are cyberbullied experienced depression more often than those who had not been victimized (Demers & Sullivan, 2016; DePaolis, 2015; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Students who experienced cyberbullying appeared to internalize extreme negative feelings toward the student who cyberbullied (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Gini and
Espelage (2014) found in their research that peer victimization was a critical factor for the suicidal ideation of children and teens. Abrams (2011) also stated, “[Cyberbullied students] do not typically choose suicide, but they choose it more often than society should tolerate” (p. 225). In addition, cyberbullied students tended to struggle with relationships with people as compared to those who had not been victimized (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Hong et al., 2016). Parris et al. (2012) noted that numerous students may choose not to mention incidents of cyberbullying, mainly because some do not believe adults can help, and, possibly, adult intervention could make things even worse.

Although cyberbullying’s effects damage individuals in multiple ways, and the origination of that damage may occur off-campus, away from adult supervision, school administrators must play a role in prevention and intervention in cyberbullying. What can school leaders do to balance student rights and well-being?

**Administrative Roles**

Maintaining a balance between safety and student free speech rights has become more difficult as incidents of cyberbullying have increased. A report from the U. S. Department of Education (2015) showed that incidents of cyberbullying decreased from 28% to 22%, as recorded in 2013. Also, few cases resulted in suspension or expulsion. State and district policies often give administrators the authority to levy consequences for cyberbullying offenses (Cornell & Limber, 2015; Yang & Grinshteyn, 2016). Few school leaders feel comfortable identifying those whose rights may have been violated because those who cyberbully and those who are cyberbullied are both impacted (Demers
This weighing of rights and effects is a dilemma for school leaders. However, administrators can reduce cyberbullying by communicating a stand against such bullying through prevention programs. Tanrikulu (2017) conducted a study that “reviewed rigorous research yielding evidence-based findings about how to prevent and intervene in cyberbullying in a school context” (p. 76). Tanrikulu selected studies which had “empirical evidence about the effectiveness of the [programs]” (p. 76). He identified 17 programs for school students from ages 6 to 19. Schools provided success indicators for 16 of the 17 programs. According to Tanrikulu, successful programs included varied components, “but a clear pattern did not emerge” (p. 84), meaning that each program seemed to report different aspects of its success. He described the most important element of all the programs in the study to be “…the intention to prevent or reduce cyberbullying [by school leaders]” (p. 84). Though some schools and districts may develop their own programs, there are established prevention programs that have shown positive results. One successful prevention program is the KiVa Antibullying Program, which proved to reduce incidents of bullying and cyberbullying in schools (Williford, Elledge, Boulton, DePaolis, Little, & Salmivalli, 2013). Another successful program is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, which, “for almost all grade levels, … [showed] clear reductions in the two key dimensions, being bullied and bullying other students” (Limber, Olweus, Wang, Masiello, & Breivik, 2018, p. 56).

As school leaders address cyberbullying in their schools, cyberbullying policies can also assist them in their efforts. Hatzenbuehler, Schwab-Reese, Ranapurwala, Hertz,
and Ramirez (2015) found in their cross-sectional study that cyberbullying policies were indeed important in curbing cyberbullying. Pearce et al. (2011) agreed by stating that some of the best cyberbullying interventions are “proactive policies, procedures, and practices” (p. 6). In states that had three particular components of antibullying laws, adolescents were less likely to be bullied. These critical components included the following: (1) scope of policy; (2) description of forbidden behaviors; and (3) a requirement for districts to implement local antibullying policies. Pearce and colleagues indicated that cyberbullying policies may be effective interventions for reducing the risk of students in schools.

**School Leaders’ Perceptions of Cyberbullying**

Young, Tully, and Ramirez (2017) conducted a study of school leaders’ current perceptions of cyberbullying – with administrators describing cyberbullying as “a major challenge due to the widespread adoption of technologies” (p. 481). The researchers found three themes that resonated from administrators’ interviews: (1) leaders handled more cyberbullying than face-to-face bullying; (2) the main hindrances to their handling cyberbullying were parents and technology – features that allow aggressive behavior; and (3) administrators’ anxiety about dealing with unclear jurisdiction. Participants agreed that most parents do not know or understand their children’s online habits and generally do not understand social media. In addition, parents are hesitant to doubt their children’s explanations of cyberbullying incidents, even when both parties are guilty. In the Young et al. study, administrators reported their belief that parents made the cyberbullying problem worse by allowing social media use, especially among younger children. Young
and colleagues reported that, in an attempt to curtail cyberbullying, school leaders blocked internet sites and required students to keep their privately owned devices in book bags, but students usually found a way to circumvent these rules. Administrators understood technology’s place in teaching and learning, but also considered how it was used as an aggressive tool for some students to harm others. School leaders were often unsure about when and how to handle cyberbullying – describing jurisdictional issues connected to off-campus infractions and the procedures they needed to follow. They also described lack of understanding about prevention programs, what works and what does not. Some leaders felt that cyberbullying policies simply caused students to take cyberbullying off-campus, but the aftermath could still disrupt school, and involve all sides of the situation in disciplinary action.

**Investigating Cyberbullying Incidents**

School leaders must face another legal matters related to cyberbullying – investigations and the possible need to confiscate and search students’ electronic devices for evidence. In some cases, “schools are explicitly claiming jurisdiction to punish students for the contents of their electronic devices” (Ahrens, 2012, p. 1700). Ahrens (2012) stated that in response to increased cyberbullying in schools, states and districts have developed new laws and search policies. Many of these policies allow school leaders to search student electronic devices. Ahrens offered the following opinion:

…our sharp spike in concern over traditional bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting, and our resort to the surveillance of student devices as a response to such a concern, reflects important lessons about our collective conception of student
privacy, about the expectations parents have of the role the school will play in their children’s lives, and about the transformation of public schools into public institutions focused on criminal law and criminal-law-like approaches to perceived social problems. … [As a country we are moving] towards the reflexive adoption of surveillance and punishment as the response to any potentially serious problem. (Ahrens, 2012, p. 1669)

In addition, Ahrens (2012) noted that parents generally agree with surveillance of electronic devices for school safety reasons, but parents do draw the line when school leaders “view their kids in a state of undress” (p. 1718). The dilemma facing school leaders vacillates from recommendations about specificity in addressing cyberbullying, with cautions about intrusion outside of schools’ jurisdiction.

**First Amendment and the South Carolina Safe Schools Climate Act**

Oluwole and Green (2016) and Patchin and Hinduja (2006) maintained that school leaders must interpret and balance both the constitutional assurance of free speech to students and the right of students to be protected from any type of bullying from other students. When school leaders punish a student who cyberbullies, his or her parents believe that the child’s free speech rights have been violated. When one child victimizes another through cyberbullying, both sets of parents may demand that protection for their child from each other, from overly harsh punishment, or from violation of rights. Administrators must find a way to balance laws and policies and protect the rights of both those who are cyberbullied and those who participate in cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006) or risk litigation from either party generated from cyberbullying cases.
U. S. Constitutional Law, specifically found in the Bill of Rights, serves as the basis for one aspect of the tension over how to intervene in cyberbullying. The First Amendment reads as follows:

Amendment 1

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (U.S. Const. amend. I).

One of the administrative issues with cyberbullying is specifically concerned with the meaning of the phrase “… abridging the freedom of speech …” as applied in public schools. Calvoz, Davis, and Gooden (2013) explained that cyberbullying is more complicated than the traditional type of bullying because it involves communication through electronic devices. Courts often deem communication as “speech” (Calvoz et al., p. 362). Hayward (2011) noted that “anti-cyberbullying laws are the greatest threat to student speech because they seek to censor it anytime it occurs, using ‘substantial disruption’ of school activities as justification and often based only on mere suspicion of potential disruption” (p. 123). Yet, Calvoz et al. (2013) disagree with such an assessment because they believe that cyberbullying policies and laws provide a necessary deterrent.

In addition to the First Amendment, school leaders often find themselves attempting to balance students’ federally-guaranteed free speech rights with their individual state’s cyberbullying laws that reflect each student’s right to have a safe learning environment, such as the South Carolina Safe School Climate Act of 2006 (as
revised in 2016, §59-63-140). This legislation required that all SC school districts create
a policy that forbids

any type of harassment (including cyberbullying). Within this policy, each
district must ensure that the following components are included:

(1) a statement prohibiting harassment, intimidation, or bullying;
(2) a definition of harassment, intimidation, or bullying of a student;
(3) a description of appropriate student behavior;
(4) consequences and appropriate remedial actions;
(5) procedures for reporting acts of harassment, intimidation, or bullying, along
   with a provision for reporting anonymously;
(6) procedures for prompt investigation of reports of serious violations and
   complaints;
(7) a statement addressing students who retaliate against those who report
   harassment;
(8) consequences and remedial actions for students who falsely accuse another;
(9) a process for discussing district cyberbullying policy with students;
(10) a plan for publicizing the policy, including a statement that the policy
     applies at school-sponsored events;
(11) a requirement that a link to the policy be prominently posted on the home
     page of the school district’s website and distributed annually to parents and
     guardians who have children enrolled in the school district. (SC Safe School
     Climate Act of 2006, 2016, p. 1)
The SC Safe School Climate Act of 2006 (rev. 2016) does not include five of the 11 recommended components from a 2011 report to the U.S. Department of Education (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). The SC law lacks these following components: (1) requirement to keep written records of cyberbullying incidents; (2) requirement to address enumerated groups that receive specific protection (e.g., LGBT, race, gender, disabled); (3) requirement to provide mental health counseling for those who are cyberbullied and those who cyberbully; (4) requirement to monitor cyberbullying incidents and publicly report them; and (5) requirement to assure those who are cyberbullied of their state and federal legal rights (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). Also connected with SC district cyberbullying policies are other groups and agencies that provide the foundation for enacting and creating these policies.

In addition to the South Carolina Safe Schools Climate Act of 2006 (rev. 2016), the South Carolina School Boards Association (SCSBA) (2017), provided a model policy and posted it on its website as publically available to all schools. The South Carolina State Board of Education (2017) promulgated Regulation 43-279 under authority of the SC Code of Laws, §59-5-65 and §59-63-210, to establish student conduct and discipline guidelines and that regulation mentions bullying, but the word cyberbullying is not used. The policy prohibits “Inappropriate use of technology (e.g., bullying, harassing, or intimidating other students or district employees, plagiarizing copyrighted materials, and accessing inappropriate websites”) (Regulation 79, IV. B. 2.n, p. 4). This regulation does not specifically address preventative measures, as it is responsive to legislative directives to define conduct and sanctions.
In 2016, legislators provided an update to the SC Safe School Climate Act of 2006. The State Superintendent of Education, Molly Spearman, initiated the establishment of the SC Department of Education’s SC Safe Schools Task Force (2015), comprised of educators, members of law enforcement, and parents. The SC General Assembly’s House Bill 3365 (2014) enabled this task force to be created. Superintendent Spearman stated that for all students to be ready for high school, they should learn in an environment where there is respect for one another, trust in others, and an orderly atmosphere and that the task force will ensure that schools will have needed resources, strong reporting and disciplinary procedures, and effective training to combat cyberbullying (Spearman & Cooper, 2016).

With school safety and recent school shootings evoking real concerns about the state’s children, School Resource Officers (SROs) have become an integral part of many schools’ leadership teams. The final report of the task force included seven recommendations related to school resource officers:

(1) the addition of a federal definition for school resource officer (SRO);
(2) inclusion of uniform training requirements for SRO training;
(3) provision that allows trained law enforcement officers to provide SRO training;
(4) addition of a Memorandum of Understanding among SROs and school administrators;
(5) addition of online best practice interventions for teachers, school leaders, and SROs;
(6) requirement of specific school-related training in all SRO certifications;
(7) addition of positive interventions to all new principal training;
(8) requirement for all teachers and principals to obtain training in progressive behavior plans; and
(9) recommendation that schools contract with school SROs as defined by state statute. (Govan & Hayes, 2014)

As questions about the roles of SROs and campus security evolve, many state legislatures continue to wrestle with proposals with much contention and few adoptions (Thomsen, 2018; U.S. Department of Justice & Department of Education, 2016). In this focus on school violence and SRO roles, the connections to bullying and cyberbullying and school violence seem lost.

Federal efforts. At the federal level in 2011, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) requested information on the status of state cyberbullying legislation. Subsequently, the USDE distributed a report detailing information about state antibullying laws (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). The results were the following:

- 46 states have anti-bullying laws;
- 45 states simply require school districts to create policies;
- three states fail to define the prohibited behavior;
- 36 states prohibit the use of electronic media to bully or cyberbully;
- 13 states specify that bullying rules apply to cyberbullying; and
- states have from one to 16 components in their policies, an example of how varied they are. (p. x)
As of 2017, 42 states had both laws and policies pertaining to bullying and cyberbullying and eight states had only laws (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). All 50 states, thus, had either laws or policies to addressing bullying and cyberbullying.

The U.S. Department of Education suggested these key components of an effective cyberbullying policy (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011):

- a purpose statement that includes the effects of bullying or cyberbullying and declares them unacceptable;

- a statement of scope, which addresses the location of bullying or cyberbullying (on campus, at school events, on school provided transportation) and off-campus if a disruption is created at school;

- a clear explanation of the prohibited conduct;

- an explanation that bullying or cyberbullying may include acts perpetrated against those who have historically been targets, along with examples;

- the requirement that every local education association (LEA) develop and implement bullying or cyberbullying policies through a process that involves stakeholders; that components of the policy include definitions, procedures for reporting, requirement to investigate and respond to bullying or cyberbullying, written records of incidents, graduated consequences for those who cyberbully, and procedures for providing mental health services to both those who are cyberbullied and those who cyberbully;

- a required regular state review of cyber policies;

- a plan for communicating the cyberbullying policies to all stakeholders;

- training for all school employees about anti-bullying programs;

- an annual requirement that LEAs report both to the state and public the number of cyberbullying incidents, along with the actions taken by the schools; and
a statement that includes assurance that the policy in no way prohibits those who are cyberbullied from seeking other legal means to address their cyberbullying issues. (p. xii; and for this study, see Appendix C).

State efforts. McCallion and Feder (2013) noted the almost all states have enacted cyberbullying legislation. Though 50 states have created and adopted some type of cyberbullying law and or policy, most simply require districts to have policies, without any requirements to include mandates on processes or penalties. Most of the laws do not contain the complete list of key components suggested by federal guidelines.

In their concern about cyberbullying, the federal, state, and local entities have taken steps to protect students. Even so, when states and local school districts develop and implement their policies, a wide variance remains among protections these policies provide as well as school leaders’ discretion about implementation. Thus, another variable with cyberbullying reduction efforts focuses on if and how school administrators enforce such policies.

Ansary et al. (2015) stated that it is “challenging for schools to select and implement effective antibullying approaches” (p. 34). Though ongoing studies search for the best preventative measures, in practice, schools and districts do not have time to wait for these studies’ completion. Ansary and colleagues also noted, “The evident imperfections in policy … should in no way be viewed as permission for schools to skirt their … responsibility to safeguard students” (p. 34). Some schools develop or adopt bullying and cyberbullying prevention programs. Tanrikulu (2018) found that the details of successful programs varied widely, with the most important element being school
leaders’ desire to prevent cyberbullying and working diligently to communicate dangers to students.

Stefkovich (2014) called attention to the relationship between laws and policies and an administrator’s duty to apply moral and ethical constructs to decisions about students. Stefkovich stated that school leaders must understand the

… inherent limitations of the law in solving everyday problems, the broad discretion provided to school authorities by the judiciary, and the importance of self-reflection and inquiry in making ethical decisions that may, and often do, have profound influence on students. (Stefkovich, 2014, p. 4)

In essence, even when appropriate cyberbullying laws and policies exist, a school leader must make sure that such are applied with the moral and professional responsibility of what is best for students. As cyberbullying laws and policies develop, some apply principles from several court cases, which may not encompass the digital innovations of the cyber world.

**Court Cases that Establish Practice**

The U. S. Supreme Court has chosen not to hear any cyberbullying cases, hence federal, state, and local educational leaders look to the lower courts to provide precedents that may help to navigate the balancing of cyberbullying’s dilemma between free speech and school safety (McCallion & Feder, 2013; McCarthy, 2014). Some suggest that studying lower court decisions school leaders could discern an emerging framework to inform judgments about particular situations (McHenry, 2011; Stefkovich, Crawford & Murphy, 2010).
Stefkovich, Crawford, and Murphy (2010) reported that cyberbullies and their parents overwhelmingly initiate legal claims related to cyberbullying in response to the punishments they have received from school leaders. Courts must weigh the school official’s decision to punish a student who cyberbullies against his or her right to free speech, and some courts have promoted the First Amendment over punishment for cyberbullying (e.g., Hudson, 2016; McCarthy, 2014; Yang & Grinshteyn, 2016). Stefkovich et al. (2010) also found that federal and state courts addressed disciplinarians’ attempts to punish students for cyberbullying due to claims about student rights – rather than concerns of reducing or eliminating the threat or effects of cyberbullying.

McHenry (2011) stated that as cyberbullying litigation has taken place over the last two decades, several state and federal court cases have been used repetitively to support the arguments brought against school districts. The foundational case is *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), which took place long before social media, cell phones, or cyberbullying. Other cases have been used with *Tinker* to arrive at decisions that have sometimes appeared to provide clear guidance, only to be followed by other cases with contradictory decisions in various jurisdictions (Yang & Grinshteyn, 2016).

*Tinker v. Des Moines*. The U.S. Supreme Court in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) decided that administrators’ suspensions of the three Tinker children for protesting the Vietnam War by placing black bands on their arms denied them their free speech rights afforded by the First Amendment. Attorneys turn to three features of this case including, (1) where the behavior occurred (on or off campus); (2) whether the behavior disrupted the school; and (3) if the behavior interfered with the rights of others. The ruling in this
case was as follows: “A prohibition against expression of opinion, without any evidence that the rule is necessary to avoid substantial interference with school discipline or the rights of others, is not permissible under the First and Fourteenth Amendments” (p. 507). This case thus laid the foundation for the use of substantial interference and interference with the rights of others as two important components that need to be determined in free speech cases (Belnap, 2011). As school leaders address cyberbullying today, they must determine what constitutes substantial interference at school and whether or not the rights of those who have been cyberbullied have been violated (Belnap, 2011).

**Bethel v. Fraser.** In the 1980s, a student made a speech containing sexually suggestive remarks in a school assembly. School leaders punished the student for remarks they deemed inappropriate, and, ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the administration’s decision (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; McCarthy, 2014). The U.S. Supreme Court decided that students do not have the latitude to use suggestive and lewd remarks. The court cited that schools have an obligation to prepare students to be citizens in a democratic society, and students should be taught to avoid offensive, vulgar terms in their public discourse (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; *Bethel v. Fraser*, 1986).

**Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier.** The U.S. Supreme Court judges found in this late 1980s case, that the freedom of speech rights of students is not the same as adults and that student rights are moderated by the special circumstances of academic settings (Hayward, 2011). Former high school journalism students sued the school and district in federal district court because the high school administration deleted two articles dealing with pregnant students and students of divorce. District court judges found in favor of the
students. After an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, judges found that schools do not have to allow speech that is contrary to the educational goals of the school. They determined that the school newspaper, for which students had prepared the articles, was part of a journalism class. Since the school newspaper was not a public forum where everyone could share their views, the court’s justices found that administrators could have reasonable on student free speech and editorial control over school publications (Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier, 1988).

**Morse v. Frederick.** At a school-sponsored event in the late 2000s, student Joseph Frederick held a sign (across from the school) that said “BONG HiTS 4 JESUS.” The principal interpreted the sign as promoting illegal drug use, so he asked the student to remove the sign. The student chose to continue to hold it, and the principal then suspended him from school. The student sued the principal and school board alleging violation of free speech. The U.S. District Court for Alaska found favorably for the principal and district, with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit finding that the district court’s judgment was in error, and the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the original suspension. The written opinion in this case stated that schools’ areas of responsibility include caution about the dangers of illegal drugs; therefore, schools’ prohibition of a pro-drug message does not interfere with a student’s First Amendment rights. The location of the student in this case was across the street from the school, but the U.S. Supreme Court cited that the event took place during school hours, with the sign angled towards the view of the students standing on school grounds (Morse v. Frederick, 2007).
In summary, the U.S. Supreme Court’s interpretation of free speech rights for school students, the effects their speech may have on the education of others, and how and when school leaders may abridge student speech to protect educational goals provides limited guidance to either lawmakers or school leaders in handling cyberbullying at school or elsewhere. Nevertheless, lawmakers and school leaders need such guidance about providing students with fairness and upholding their rights to create and enforce cyberbullying laws and policies.

**Administrative Discretion**

Begley and Stefkovich (2004) and Stefkovich (2014) called attention to the fact that school leaders, who often depend on policies and laws to inform their decisions, must also use ethics if their problem solving is to benefit students. They stated that court systems have given school leaders much discretion when it comes to day-to-day decision-making in schools. In addition, as state courts make decisions in cyberbullying cases, the results may or may not provide adequate guidance (Hayward, 2011; McCarthy, 2014; Yang & Grinshteyn, 2016), thus school leaders must use their own discretion in solving these problems. School leaders must be aware that their own personal values will most likely influence the decisions they make (Begley & Johansson, 2003; Willower & Licata, 1997). The integration of personal and professional ethical codes, professional standards, and community ethics can lead to inevitable conflict (Stefkovich, 2014).

Stefkovich and Begley (2007) proposed a principled solution to this dilemma – in which school leaders exercise their professional discretion to do what is in students’ best
interests. They noted that not all who have studied ethics in the educational realm have included needs of pupils as an integral part of the discussion. They contended that other professions often have one basic principle driving the profession. In medicine, it is “First, do not harm.” In law, it is the assertion that all clients deserve “zealous representation.” In educational administration, we believe that if there is a moral imperative for the profession, it is to serve the “best interests of the student”. Consequently, this ideal must lie at the heart of any professional paradigm for educational leaders. (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007, pp. 24-25)

As school leaders solve cyberbullying problems, they must address an inevitable collision of laws and policies, not only between conflicting provisions among rules, but with students’ best interests (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). Campbell (1999) maintained that “central to much of … literature is the argument that educational leaders must develop and articulate a much greater awareness of the ethical significance of their actions and decisions” (p. 152). Stefkovich et al. (2010) stated that though law courses are a common requirement in educational leadership programs, they should not be taught in isolation from problem-solving strategies. If they are, then the ethical aspects of school leaders’ decision-making might suffer.

**Development of Problem-Solving Expertise and Discretion**

If laws and policies were applicable to every possible complication, would school leaders be necessary? Given the ambiguities and unique conditions of individual students and their schools, then how well do we train school leaders for problem-solving and adapting laws and policies for their contexts (Brewer & Lindle, 2014)? Hess and Kelley
(2005) studied 56 principal certification programs. They reported that formal problem-solving components in those programs were rare. Those programs ranged from prestigious to the most typical. Next, Hess and Kelley (2005) compared their curricular findings in principal certification programs (mainly learning theory, leadership theory, and historical information) with how then current principals described the duties of their jobs. They discovered a severe disconnect between the training they received in curriculum and the principals’ reports of their needed problem-solving skills (Hess & Kelley, 2005). However, at least two volumes of research about leadership (Young & Crow, 2017; Young, Crow, Murphy, & Ogawa, 2009) refute Hess and Kelley’s curriculum review, noting that course syllabi may not reveal instructional strategies as well as field-based clinical experiences that provide multiple problem-solving experiences for aspiring leaders. Scholars have probed the ways that school leaders solve problems (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane, White & Stephan, 2009).

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2001) categorized principal problem solving into (1) application of policy; (2) decisions for which there are no policies; and (3) personal action decisions. School leaders often see board policy, state, and federal law as binding their actions, thus reducing their capacity for creative problem solving. Because these laws and policies govern complex human behavior, they cannot provide prescriptions for every possible behavior. Nevertheless, zero-tolerance policies require fixed prescriptions for drugs, weapons, or assault. With zero-tolerance policies,
principals have no discretion to apply educative remedies based on student needs or best interests (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007).

Glickman and associates (2001) compared principals’ application of policies and laws to the external judicial system of judges, lawyers, contexts, and case law. Many principals and assistant principals must interpret policies, procedures, and law, and weigh those requirements against the community and cultural norms (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Glickman and colleagues (2001) also pointed to problems faced by school leaders that cannot be categorized as connected to policies or laws. They noted such problems have no guidance or precedents that school leaders can follow (Glickman et al., 2001). Glickman and associates’ (2001) work highlighted a range of problems, which school leaders face. How well school leaders problem-solve can be an indication of their levels of competency in addressing complex issues.

Research studies in principal problem solving have yielded various processes that expert school leaders use. Spillane, White, and Stephan (2009) followed up on a series of studies initiated in the 1980s by Leithwood and associates (Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). Spillane and colleagues’ results (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Spillane et al., 2009) replicated the Leithwood studies and found that school leaders deemed as experts in problem-solving could do the following: (1) analyze or frame both structured and unstructured problems; (2) face conflict; (3) gather data relevant to the problem; (4) identify and overcome constraints to solving the problem; (5) recount similar problems and how they were successfully or unsuccessfully solved; (6)
plan the approach that will be used; (7) focus on the implications for the entire school program; (8) delegate the problem to others when needed; (9) keep parents informed; and (10) stress follow-up after the problem is solved. Typical, or non-expert, school leaders conversely (1) have difficulty recounting similar problems; (2) accept constraints; (3) avoid conflict; (4) focus more on staff than students; (5) make assumptions instead of gathering data; (6) try to keep parents happy; (7) are overly concerned about feelings; and (8) are concerned about the implications for themselves (Spillane et al., 2009). In light of Stefkovich’s (2010; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007) work, the Leithwood and Spillane problem-solving studies revealed another potential implication: novice principals do not put students at the center of their decision-making, while expert principals have a broad view of strategies in problem-solving to serve the best interests of all students.

Summary

Cyberbullying has increased as use of technology has increased. The ramifications for school leaders include expectations that they will control this issue in schools, while also avoiding the deprivation of student constitutional rights. Those who have been cyberbullied can suffer substantial psychological damage from cyberbullying. Given that the U.S. Supreme Court has chosen not to hear a cyberbullying case, school leaders find very little guidance from contradictory rulings in lower courts. Moreover, state and district policies often seem vague and, at least at the state level, evidence suggests that few laws align with federal-level recommendations. Researchers stated that few school leader preparation programs offer problem-solving courses and do not indicate the degree to which problem solving might be integrated across the curriculum.
or within field-based internships. Only a few studies have delved into the cognitive processes that school leaders use to solve problems. This study gathered pertinent information on South Carolina’s district cyberbullying policies and their adherence to federal agency guidelines; school leaders’ experiences in using their policies to solve cyberbullying cases; and reflections from school leaders about their processes in trying to solve cyberbullying.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODS

Introduction

I conducted this research to discover how selected public high school leaders used their current district policies to resolve the cyberbullying incidents they faced. The research question at the foundation of my study was the following: what are selected public high school leaders’ experiences in applying district cyberbullying policies to cases in their own schools? Chapter divisions include: (a) participant selection, (b) instrumentation, (c) collection of data, and (d) analysis of data.

I used a two-phased, two method research design. The dominant design for pursuing data relevant to the research question was the Critical Incident Technique or CIT (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Flanagan, 1954; Schwester, 2014) with a document analysis phase for the purpose of participant selection (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The dominant CIT design provided a narrative-driven set of cognitive reflections from experienced school leaders regarding two sorts of cyberbullying incidents, those they related as successful and another, less conclusive experience (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Chell, 2004; Kain, 2004; Schwester, 2014).

Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided approval for this research (#IRB2016-054). (See Appendix A). With the assistance of the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance, a document was produced that provided information (including a description of the study, risks and discomforts, possible benefits,
protection of privacy and confidentiality, and contact information) to all the participants in this study (See Appendix B). In addition, I created two recruitment scripts, (Appendix C and Appendix D), with which I enlisted potential participants.

Selection of Participants

I selected participants (leaders in public high schools) based upon my judgment of how closely the contents of their particular district cyberbullying policies aligned with federal recommendations. This approach to selection required documentary analysis (Miles et al., 2014; O’Leary, 2014). My analysis included a sort of the districts’ policies based on a simple frequency count of the aligned criteria, grouped into highest count, mid-range, and lowest count. Once I sorted district documents, I then narrowed the pool of participants from identified districts’ high schools; with preference for the larger enrollment high school should the district include more than one. Finally, I filtered the selection further to the school leader who was most likely to address cyberbullying in the schools. Flanagan (1954) stated that participants should be “… a member of a group which is in an unusually good position to observe and report on [the] activity” (p. 341). The literature on CIT does not provide an established sample size and reported varying numbers of participants depending on the unique variables and conditions of each study (Gremler, 2004). I chose a sample size of six. Because I used document analysis to sort the range of federally recommended components among the district policies, the number six offered two examples from each third of that district policy sort: (a) two from among the highest third, (b) two from the middle range, and (c) two from the lowest third. In addition, with six participants providing two critical incidents each, the 12 total incidents
offered two types of school leaders’ approaches to cyberbullying: first, those examples they shared as successful and second, those they recalled as less so.

**Instrumentation**

The tools through which I elicited information in both phases of this study were critical to its validity. I used three instruments: (1) my professional experiences and expertise, which influenced my interest and role as the primary research instrument; (2) a policy component data collection form that allowed me to sort among federally recommended components I perceived within each SC district’s cyberbullying policy (Appendix H); and (3) the CIT interview questions (Appendix E). The literature base for these interview questions is included in Appendix F.

**Researcher as an instrument.** As the researcher in this study, I was an instrument because I collected and interpreted data. In this role, I affected all other instruments developed for this study, created relationships with the participants in the interview process and analyzed the data collected, which demands some reflexivity about my role (Hall & Callery, 2001; Basit, 2012). As all who engage in interviews, I carry conceptual baggage (Hsiung, 2008) that I continually reviewed throughout this investigation. My recounting of my professional experiences in education provides a sincere attempt at establishing my “biases, goals, and foibles” (Tracy, 2010, p. 841) in the course of this investigation of a “worthy topic” (p. 840).

For 35 years I was a public high school employee – an English teacher (10 years), a high school assistant principal for instruction (18 years) and a high school principal (7 years). As an administrator for 25 years, I often dealt with various types of bullying and
cyberbullying. As a high school principal, I, along with a team of assistant principals, handled approximately 700 cyberbullying cases over a four-year period (2009-2014), which has provided me with some in-depth knowledge about the issue, including its ongoing ambiguities associated with constantly evolving digital sophistication and applications (Kowalski, Agatston, & Limber, 2012). As with many districts, my district administration employed attorneys, who emphasized the legal and financial risks to the district in handling cyberbullying cases.

Subsequently, our district attorneys created a presentation on the legal aspects of cyberbullying. My own cyberbullying experiences involved complaints about students being cyberbullied, most often outside of school. Many parents and students felt that school leaders should handle cyberbullying, no matter the location of the incident (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016; DeSmet, Aelterman, Bastiaensen, Van Cleemput, Poels, Vandebosch, & Bourdeaudhuij, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006). In contrast, I often felt that my administrative arm ought not reach into students’ homes, during non-school hours, while they were using their privately-owned devices, and without a school disruption. In other words, while some parents wanted my intervention, I saw limits on my authority and, in contrast to their point of view; I had an expectation where parents needed to intervene.

Nevertheless, among the school’s administrative team, time spent on cyberbullying slowly increased. Most often, assistant principals handled the initial cyberbullying complaints. Yet, dissatisfied parents would contact me to overrule the assistant principals’ decisions. In other cases, parents or students would contact me
directly, especially when suggestive pictures or videos were involved in the cyberbullying incidents. Eventually, our administrative team tangled with cyberbullying cases for approximately one-third of each day. The pace in technology platforms developments remained rapid, making it difficult for my team to keep up with student cyberbullying (Herold, 2018).

As our team deciphered how to use each social media application and website, students would then move on to other ones. Cyberbullying complaints came from all directions including both parents advocating for their children who suffered from cyberbullying and from parents advocating the rights of their children who had cyberbullied others. The content of the cyber-postings became more and more sexually charged, with everything from nude photos to videos of sexual acts. Some of the more affluent students and parents threatened the administrative team with litigation, usually in situations that occurred outside of school. Generally, few questioned the administrators’ judgment about on-campus cyberbullying. Still, those threats of litigation and potential associated costs to the district posed another possible unintended consequence of how school leaders chose to handle cyberbullying. Overall, administrators in my district and school discovered workable strategies by trial and error. Still, we all had questions and often received the unhelpful answer “I don’t know,” even from some attorneys. Neither legal experts nor district leadership provided advice on balancing both the rights of those who had been cyberbullied and those who had cyberbullied.

Within my role as a research instrument in this study, my experiences provided insights into the method as well as the information from the selected participants. Due to
my background and experience with cyberbullying, I identified with the struggles expressed among the school leaders I interviewed. When they relayed their experiences with cyberbullying, I relived my own. When I selected quotes from their experiences, I tried to choose those that were recognizable, and thus, quite authentic, to those handling cyberbullying cases.

On the other hand, while these moments opened up my own memories, I had to ensure that I focused on these participants’ stories. Thus, I used field notes to establish some acknowledgement of my reactions and surface my awareness of potential differences between the participants’ reactions and mine. My acknowledgement through field-notes-based reflexivity about “subject values, biases, and [my] own inclinations” (Tracy, 2010, p. 840) required a careful balancing of the participants’ insights even as I identified with their concerns. To accomplish these goals, I focused on their stories in light of my sincere desire to create new knowledge with the following three goals: (1) Help students learn in a safe environment; (2) support school leaders in eliminating or reducing cyberbullying incidents; and (3) offer law and policy makers insights about a balance of rules and administrator discretion. My field notes and detailed transcription of CIT interviews, focused my efforts to provide readers with clear, concise, and accurate reports of my analysis in representing these participants’ words and insights. I attempted to show how participants explained their cyberbullying cases with many detailed direct quotations, using their words rather than just my own and conducted a member-check to make sure the transcriptions truly depicted what they said (Tracy, 2010).
Phase 1 -- Policy component form. From the literature review about cyberbullying policies, I uncovered a federal report (Stuart-Cassel, et al., 2011), which included 11 recommended components for use in state or district cyberbullying policies. I listed these criteria in Appendix G. From that list, I developed a document analysis form (Appendix H) per the suggestions of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) concerning data management and document forms. My policy component form (Appendix H) listed 78 (of 81) SC school districts, along with the recommended cyberbullying policy component numbers from the federal list of recommendations. I used this instrument in the first phase of my study as a means of identifying a pool of participants for the second phase, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) interviews.

Phase 2 -- CIT interview questions. To develop interview questions for participants, I applied the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954). I sought to develop questions that could elicit school leaders’ reflective responses that would assist me with answering my research question about their experiences with handling cyberbullying. Schwester (2014) indicated that CIT can be used to “understand, predict, and negotiate episodes that have deep significance” (p. 31). Chell (2004) stated that CIT also allows researchers to understand better the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive issues in situations from participants’ perspectives. As the concept has evolved over time, these reflective interviews about particular episodes have come to include recall of specific situations, a description of the behaviors and actions of the key players, and outcomes (Butterfield et al., 2005).
Chell (2004) stated that CIT interview questions should be able to identify the thought processes of the participants through their stories about the incidents they experienced. Chell noted that the stories conveyed the way participants indicated meaning as well as how those recollections affected their attitudes. The two questions I developed based upon this information are the following: (1) select a cyberbullying case you have handled that was resolved successfully for all parties and describe what happened, and (2) select another cyberbullying case that was difficult to resolve and describe it (Appendix E). I realized that the level of detail could vary with each participant, so I developed additional probes to elicit further details (Appendix E).

Creswell (2007) opined that participants in an interview will not necessarily answer questions at the depth expected by researchers. Some may even digress from the questions asked of them. Fraenkel et al. (2015) cited several limitations with performing interview-type data collection in research, including participants’ willingness or unwillingness to provide information openly; respondents perhaps only providing information they deem socially acceptable; respondents fearing exposure rather than anonymity; and open-ended questions possibly being time-consuming.

Creswell (2007) suggested that researchers prepare prompts or follow-up questions, in case participants speak off-topic or lack detail in their answers. Thus, I developed five probe questions to elicit further information from the participants, if needed. I based these probes on literature about school leaders’ problem-solving, in general, and the particular cyberbullying issues in schools. The first probe question was “What did you have to consider before making a decision about this case?” I designed
this question to elicit not only a more detailed answer, but to help assess participants’ problem-solving expertise based on studies by Leithwood and replicated by Spillane’s work in the 1980s and 2000s (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane et al., 2009). By asking this probe question (if needed), I was able to discern what participants considered as they handled cyberbullying issues, thus identifying any problem-solving processes they may have used.

The second probe question dealt with participants’ use of their cyberbullying policies. The question was, “Did your [cyberbullying] policy help or not help?” Campbell (2005) emphasized the importance of cyberbullying policies in deterring incidents of cyberbullying. I designed this question as a means of validating the selection process, which grouped the participant pool by the alignment of their district policies with the federally-recommended components (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011), and as an additional probe into the way these school leaders worked out their approaches to the cyberbullying incidents they recalled as either successfully resolved or a problematic.

For my third probe, I asked participants what actions helped them solve their cyberbullying incidents successfully or hinder them from resolving incidents successfully. I based this probe on Leithwood and Steinbach’s (1995) observation that “expert principals demonstrated a high degree of metacognitive control … in their ability to monitor the effects of their own behavior and change that behavior when warranted” (p. 116). When necessary, I used the probe to elicit the school leaders’ reflections about their decisions and whether that approach worked.
The fourth probe question was “Why do you consider this incident significant?” Tripp (1993) said that “critical incidents are produced by the way [one looks] at a situation … [and] is an interpretation of the significance of an event” (p. 8). When participants explained why they considered an incident as critical, then I had important information about what they deemed important between the two types of incidents they recalled about cyberbullying.

The fifth probe question was “What did you have to consider before reaching a solution?” Leithwood and Steinbach (1995) explained the importance of monitoring one’s own thinking and logic in solving problems. In answering this question, participants would have to identify specific difficulties and their own dilemmas in solving difficult cyberbullying incidents.

The instruments for this study generated relevant data for the research question. I both used my expertise as a former high school principal, who handled cyberbullying cases in my school and I buffered it reflexively to ensure that the participants’ narratives dominated this study’s findings. I created a policy component form, which allowed me to compare federally recommended criteria for cyberbullying policies across SC districts’ cyberbullying policies as a step in participant selection. Lastly, I created two open-ended CIT questions, which asked participants to describe one critical cyberbullying case that was resolved successfully and another that was not. In an effort, to dig deeper into participants’ thinking, I also created five probe questions, used as needed, to elicit descriptions of participants’ problem-solving skills, along with any expert or typical
decision-making. All of these instruments provided the essential instrumentation to collect information for this study.

**Data Collection**

This two-phased study involved collection of two kinds of data. In the first phase, to aid in participant selection, I collected documentary evidence. In the second phase, I collected interview data.

**Data Collection – Phase 1.**

In Phase 1 of the study, for the purposes of identifying participants, I performed a document review of SC public school district cyberbullying policies. Stuart-Cassel et al. (2011) provided information on 11 suggested components of an effective cyberbullying policy (Appendix G). I collected most of these policies from districts’ websites. Three of the 81 districts in South Carolina did not post their cyberbullying policies online, nor did they return calls or emails when I sought to have them send me a copy via email. Given these districts’ lack of response, I assessed 78 of the 81 district cyberbullying policies. I sorted these 78 policies according the number of Stuart-Cassel et al.’s (2011) report to the U.S. Department of Education of suggested cyberbullying policy components.

**Data Collection – Phase 2**

In Phase 2 (CIT interviews), I obtained consent from school leaders in selected schools (all of whom were assistant principals). I used two scripts (one for principals and one for their designees) to make initial contacts (see Appendix C and Appendix D). I sent all participants the required *Information about Participation in Research Study* form
(Appendix B). I created a schedule setting up a two-hour block of time for the interviews. Participants selected appointment times to schedule CIT interviews. I set up either on-site appointments or telephone interviews (whichever the participant chose) in order to conduct the CIT protocols.

Confidentiality was a critical element of this study. Flanagan (1954) stated, “Under no circumstances should the confidences of the participants be violated in any way” (p. 341). I selected pseudonyms for participant names, as well as fictitious names for the high schools involved. I kept all materials pertaining to this research (transcripts, data, and other research materials) secured in a locked file cabinet and in computer files that were protected by passwords.

As I began Phase 2 data collection, I audiotaped each participants’ interview. After each interview, I created field notes containing my impressions of each interview and used an online transcription service to transcribe the audiotapes. Subsequently, I sent a copy of the transcripts to participants to conduct a member check (Bryman, 2004; Tracy 2010). I asked each participant to read the content of their individual transcript, denote any inaccuracies, and then make any necessary changes. Once participants read their transcripts, they emailed any requested changes. All of these changes derived from mistakes made by the transcription service and did not affect the actual content of their interviews.

Data Analysis

Two forms of data analysis were necessary for the two phases of this study. In the first phase, the analysis involved a documentary review and data entry into a
spreadsheet. The second phase of the study, the CIT, required multi-staged approaches to transcribed interview data.

**Phase 1.** I created an Excel spreadsheet, which I used to organize district policies according to the number of federal criteria they contained (see Appendix H). In the Excel file, a 1 denoted that the criterion was present. A 0 denoted the criterion was not present. I manually added the number of criteria found in each district bullying or cyberbullying policy (because the maximum number was only 11). I then counted the number of federally recommended criteria in each participating district’s cyberbullying policy and then sorted them in descending order. From this frequency sort, I selected six districts – two districts with the highest number of federal components (top third), two districts with the lowest number of federal components (lowest third), and two districts in the middle third in the list of 78 districts – in order to choose district policies with the widest range of federally-recommended components. Since there were multiple districts with the same number of components, I identified the total enrollment of the high schools within each of the districts (SC Department of Education, 2017). I made final district selections by selecting districts with the largest high school enrollments, as compared to all the districts in the relevant third of the districts, and then applied the same highest enrollment requirement within the districts that had more than one high school. I communicated with each district office in the selected districts and asked if district permission was required prior to soliciting participants. Two districts did not want to participate. After identifying six districts whose officials consented to participate (none of which had local IRB requirements), I then began contacting high school principals. If the
high school principal with the largest enrollment declined, I then moved to the next highest until I received consent to participate from six high school principals.

**Phase 2.** The second phase of the data analysis process involved analysis of CIT interviews (Appendix J). Ryan and Bernard (2003) described a method of developing themes by using – “… informal [techniques] – spreading texts out on the floor, tacking bunches of them to a bulletin board, and sorting them into different file folders – while [also using] special software to count words or display word co-occurrences” (p. 94). While I used software in my analysis process, most of my approach was hands-on with papers and highlighters as in Ryan and Bernard’s (2003) description. Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016) provided a framework of stages of theme development. I also used NVivo (version 11, 2017) qualitative data analysis software to create reports that provided compilations of data. My approach to theme development was a combination of Ryan and Bernard’s (2003) hands-on approach with Vaismoradi and colleagues’ list of data strategies, and NVivo’s features for reports.

**Reading.** I began by reading each transcript carefully. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) suggested that researchers use a recurring immersion strategy with the transcripts. They recommended that that researchers note recurring ideas and important issues. Since my research question dealt with the use of cyberbullying policies, I focused on that topic first. I also used NVivo (version 11, 2017) to do a word search query of the word *policy.* My own reading, along with a report from NVivo, ensured that I collected every instance of the word’s appearance in the transcripts. I followed the same process for each topic that I identified in the interviews. Below is a sample of one of the many reports that I
generated using NVivo (version 11, 2017). After beginning the reading process, I
highlighted similar words and phrases in each report that participants used in describing
their experiences with cyberbullying. I used those terms for NVivo reports, such as the
following: cyberbullying, law, legal, crime, discretion, problem, problem-solving,
investigate, investigation, First Amendment, safe schools, discipline, technology, and
social media. I also generated reports that gave me the context in which these words
were used, such as the following:
Figure 3.1. This figure illustrates a report I generated in NVivo, version 11, as I searched for the word policy in interviewee transcriptions.

**Highlighting.** As I encountered words, phrases, and sentences in transcripts that were related to my research question, I highlighted them with colored markers. This allowed me to begin to code the various topics that would later be developed into themes. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) stated that coding helps reduce the amount of data into sections that are more manageable. Below is a sample of my handwritten notes and color-coded...
highlighting of one of the transcripts. Green highlighting denoted issues with younger, less experienced administrators (revealed by their responses about years of experience from interviews); yellow highlighting denoted procedures and policies that were followed; and pink denoted legal issues:

Figure 3.2. Highlighting method for hand-coding and notes taken on interviewee transcriptions.

**Writing reflective notes.** Just as I had created field notes after each CIT interview, I also made handwritten notes in the margins of each NVivo report – notes that assisted me in interpreting the data by asking questions, clarifying my thoughts, and documenting evidence (see Figure 3.1). Vaismoradi et al. (2016) said that reflective notes allow researchers to “remember, question, and make meaning of data” (p. 105).
Comparing, classifying, labeling. As I identified emerging topics in each transcript, I was able to compare participants’ stories and begin to classify topics into various categories. For example, I compared participants’ statements about if and how they used their policies. I was then able to classify and label each participant’s range of policy use – from not using their policies at all to using them exactly as stated. Through classifying, comparing, and labeling, researchers begin the “analysis process and [are able] to reach higher levels of abstraction” (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 105).

Translating and describing. After comparing and classifying, I then began to create a narrative to describe the themes I had developed, one, which was part of my research question (the use of cyberbullying policies), and the others which I identified as I followed the theme development process suggested by Vaismoradi et al. (2016).

Relating themes to the literature. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) noted that researchers do not want to “[introduce] bias and perceived notions” into the collected data by interjecting information from other sources. Thus, the memos in the margins and my field notes helped me pace the theme development with attention to the participants’ insights and then after that analysis, I returned to the literature.

Developing the narrative. Lastly, I used participants’ interviews, the raw data with which I began, and followed a theme development process that enabled me to write a “coherent story in which themes [were] described and connected” (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 107). I also connected themes to the literature presented in Chapter 2. My use of this theme development process was important in working with the data I collected, in
that it provided clear steps that resulted in succinct and organized information that I was able to easily convert into narrative form.

Summary

For the dominant design in this study, I chose a participant sense-making method, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954), that provides cognitive insights among participants’ narratives. For this set of narratives, I selected six high school leaders who recalled two critical incidents of how they used their respective district cyberbullying policies, one which they offered as successful and the other as not. Given that CIT fits the epistemology of an interpretive design, I provided an overview of ways in which my background and perceptions affected instrument development, data collection, and my analysis steps in this study. I used a two-phased process; first, to select participants, and second, to apply CIT with them. Based on the literature about document analysis, I created a form to judge the alignment of 78 district policies with federally-recommended criteria. Based on CIT literature, I created interview questions as well as probes derived from topical literature on school leaders’ problem solving. In the analysis process, I monitored my reflexivity with field notes and for the analysis of transcript, used handwritten notes, along with underlined, circled, and color-coded terms and topics connected to the research question. I also used NVivo (version 11, 2017) reports, such as a word search for terms that were important to answering my research question or common phrases often used by participants. Through this process, I created themes from the data. I listed the phrases and sentences that were similar in each interview, and created a different page of notes for each theme that I identified. I
reviewed this list of themes several times, combining some categories and eliminating those that seemed less prevalent in the interviews. I sought to bring credibility to this study, as Tracy (2010) suggested, by (1) providing detailed descriptions of participants’ stories and (2) member reflections (allowing participants to have input on their transcribed interviews) (Bryman, 2004; Tracy, 2010). The reflective notes that I used throughout the theme development process allowed me to organize data, question the meanings I derived, and remain faithful in interpreting and communicating participants’ stories (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

The final analysis of the collected data resulted in my identifying major themes inherent in the critical incidents and ultimately being able to answer my research question. Once themes were identified, I organized information into paragraphs, tables, and figures that allowed me to present it to readers in the results section of my dissertation, Chapter 4.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

My purpose in using this two-phased design was to investigate selected SC public high school leaders’ reflections about their experiences in applying district-level cyberbullying policies to incidents in their schools. They reported challenges with legal and educational aspects, and those issues aligned with my professional experiences as a high school principal. Under the conditions of rapidly changing social media, with limited official guidance for school leaders in balancing the rights of both those who had been cyberbullied and those who enacted cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005; McCarthy, 2014), this study included two phases to explore school leader reports about their problem-solving practices. In Phase 1, a documentary analysis, I filtered existing district policies based on the extent to which such policies included 11 federally recommended criteria (Safe School Climate Act of 2006, rev. 2016; Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). I sorted the counts of policy components totaled by district and divided the frequencies into thirds with higher counts, middle range, and lower counts. I selected two districts from each third to identify a pool of participants to access in the second phase of the study. For Phase 2, I used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) to elicit selected practicing school leaders’ insights on their disposition of cyberbullying incidents using associated district policy. In this chapter, I explain the findings from both phases of the study. This chapter includes the findings from each phase of this study and answers its
primary research question: what are selected public high school leaders’ experiences in applying district cyberbullying policies to cases in their schools?

**Phase 1: Policy Review**

Although South Carolina has 81 school districts, I could not access all of those policies. I obtained 78 district policies through efforts that included culling district websites and calling and emailing districts, which did not have web-posted cyberbullying policies. Despite multiple modes and repeated contact attempts, three districts did not respond. Using 11 federally-recommended criteria, I conducted a documentary analysis of the content of each policy. Many of the districts in the state had similar policies with nearly verbatim sections as compared to one another. The rate of similarity (nearly 81%) included 63 of the 78 SC district policies. Through the SC School Boards Association (SCSBA, 2017) website, I discovered a model policy for cyberbullying (Appendix I). This document seemed to be used by the majority of school districts in the state as the basis for their own policies, although several had made modifications.

In creating cyberbullying policies, federal recommendations included the involvement of stakeholders in policy development. The SC Safe School Climate Act of 2006 (rev. 2016) does not include this recommendation. None of the districts’ policies indicated collaborative development with stakeholders. Cassidy, Faucher, and Jackson (2013) said that “… parents and other relevant stakeholders, including the young people themselves, need to be included into the development of appropriate solutions [of cyberbullying]” (p. 584).
Rather than adopting SCSBA’s model policy as designed, several districts included additional criteria or deleted criteria from their policies. In all instances, in line with Stuart-Cassel’s and colleagues’ (2011) validation of criteria for federal guidance on cyberbullying policies, those districts that included more of the federal criteria in their policies, presumably strengthened them. Those who omitted criteria from SCSBA’s model policy, included fewer federal recommendations, which presumably weakened their policies.

Table 4.1 shows the most and least applied federal criteria among the 78 policies. As shown in Appendix D, only one South Carolina district included 9 of the 11 criteria in its policy, but that district chose not to participate. Two districts had only one of the federal criteria in their policies. The middle third of SC district cyberbullying policies contained either 3 or 4 federal criteria.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Adopted Federal Criteria Among SC District Policies</th>
<th>SC District Adoption Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#3 – List of prohibited conduct</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1 – Purpose statement</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 – Communication plan</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Adopted Federal Criteria Among SC District Policies</th>
<th>SC District Adoption Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#5 – Development and Implementation with stakeholders</td>
<td>No districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># 7 – State review of local policies</td>
<td>1 district</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Besides not involving stakeholders in the development of their policies, the
singly adopted policies included one district each that made statements about the
following criteria: (a) references to a state review of cyberbullying policies; (b)
transparency in monitoring and reporting; and (c) communication to those who had been
bullied or cyberbullied that they have a right to other legal recourse.

Given these results from the documentary analysis, I selected (1) the two districts
with a single criterion (least number of federally-recommended criteria); (2) two districts
with five federal criteria (most number of federally-recommended criteria), and (3) two
other districts with three criteria each from the middle range of federally-recommended
criteria. In these districts, when there was more than one high school, I chose the high
school with the largest enrollment. After receiving consent from selected school districts
and high school principals, I also asked for a designee who had the most direct
experience with cyberbullying in the school. In all cases, the district and high school
personnel nominated an assistant principal. With confirmation that a particular school
leader agreed to participate in the second phase of the study, I assigned pseudonyms to
those high schools. Table 4.2 shows the enrollments among the selected high schools.
Table 4.2

Pseudonyms of Selected High Schools by Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected High School Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birch HS</td>
<td>2420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pine HS</td>
<td>2305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elm HS</td>
<td>2037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maple HS</td>
<td>1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poplar HS</td>
<td>1844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hickory HS</td>
<td>1257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Enrollments obtained from the South Carolina Department of Education (2017) website.*

With more than a thousand adolescents in each of these schools, teenage developmental concerns, school safety and student behavior likely are ongoing educational issues. I re-evaluated each school’s district policies for additional criteria found in the federal suggestions (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011) and beyond the lists in the SCSBA’s model policy. Table 4.3 shows an array of additional federal provisions not necessarily indicated in the state organization’s guidance, along with schools’ omitted criteria which was found in the state-recommended criteria.
Table 4.3

*Schools Whose Districts Added or Omitted Federal Criteria to State-Recommended Criteria*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal Criteria</th>
<th>Schools Whose Added Federal Criteria to State-Recommended Criteria</th>
<th>Schools Who Omitted Federal Criteria from State-Recommended Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#4 - Enumerated groups <em>Note</em></td>
<td>Elm, Poplar</td>
<td>Pine, Maple, Birch, Hickory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1 - Statement of purpose</td>
<td>Elm, Poplar, Pine, Maple</td>
<td>Birch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9 - Training for all stakeholders</td>
<td>Elm, Poplar, Pine, Maple</td>
<td>Hickory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Enumerated groups refer to cyberbullying based on disability, race or color, nationality, sexual orientation, or gender.*

Two school districts added information about enumerated groups, which “explains that bullying may include … acts based on actual or perceived characteristics of students who have historically been targets of bullying, and provides examples of such characteristics” (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011, p. 6). Four school districts added a statement of purpose, which “declares that any form, type, or level of bullying is unacceptable, and that every incident needs to be taken seriously by school administrators, school staff …, students, and students’ families” (p. 6). In addition, four districts added stakeholder training, which includes “training for all school staff, including … teachers, aides, support staff, and school bus drivers, on preventing, identifying, and responding to
bullying … and encourages districts to implement age-appropriate school and community-wide bullying prevention programs” (p. 6). Some districts chose to omit federal recommendations from the state model policy, including four school districts who omitted the criteria that allow schools to handle off-campus cyberbullying; one that omitted a plan to communicate their cyberbullying policy; and one that deleted the consequences for cyberbullying.

**Phase 2 -- CIT Interviews**

Prior to conducting the CIT interviews, I created pseudonyms for participants. Table 4.4 indicates information about the participants’ backgrounds by their schools and their pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were selected from a website that listed the top ten most common last names in the U.S. (Infoplease, 2010). Two participants had worked in middle school prior to moving to the high school level, so I provided information on years of experience at both levels.

Table 4.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>School Leader Name</th>
<th>Years’ Experience</th>
<th>Grade Level Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birch</td>
<td>Mr. Smith</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elm</td>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hickory</td>
<td>Ms. Johnson</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Middle &amp; HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maple</td>
<td>Ms. Brown</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Middle &amp; HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pine</td>
<td>Ms. Miller</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poplar</td>
<td>Ms. Williams</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Participants’ Pseudonyms and Backgrounds by Experience and Grade Level
Participants each provided two critical incidents, one that was resolved successfully and the other that proved more difficult, pertaining to their use of district policies in handling cyberbullying issues. Some provided much detailed information, while others were not as forthcoming. I used probing questions to elicit more details (see Appendix G).

Participants included two male assistant principals (Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith) and four female assistant principals (Ms. Williams, Ms. Brown, Ms. Miller, Ms. Johnson). I conducted four face-to-face interviews and two by phone upon their request (Ms. Miller, Ms. Johnson). One of the phone interviews occurred while the participant traveled by car (Ms. Johnson).

Of the six CIT interviews, five provided incidents from the high school level, while one assistant principal provided predominantly middle school incidents. Those middle school incidents came from Ms. Brown, (field notes, January 19, 2017) who is now a high school administrator, but new to the high school level. I used probing questions, but I did not redirect the selection of middle school incidents to those at the high school, because it was her choice in which cases she wanted to share. She had chosen both critical incidents because they were important to her, and I did not want to redirect her to cases that may have been less important. Her telling of the middle school incidents was much more detailed and her delivery much more animated and confident (field notes, January 19, 2017). Because the locale and age of the students were different
from the other 10 CIT cases, this particular interview fit the analytic dimensions of a
deviant case (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Berg-Schlosser, De Meur, Rihoux, and Ragin (2009) suggested that the inclusion
of cases that may not fit the original criteria can facilitate comparisons in research.
Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) encouraged researchers to embrace contrasting
cases:

Any given finding usually has exceptions. The temptation is to smooth them
over, ignore them, or explain them away. But the outlier is your friend. A good
look at the exceptions, or the ends of the distribution, can test and strengthen the
basic finding. It not only tests the generality of the finding but also protects the
researcher against self-selecting bias and may help to build a better explanation.

(Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 301)

Given such guidance about deviant cases, this set of middle school incidents seemed
informative to this study. These reflections about middle school cyberbullying issues
provided a comparison between how school leaders handle high school cyberbullying
versus how middle school leaders handle it with younger adolescents.

Phase 2 of the study involved the collection of critical incidents from six assistant
principals who were designated by their high school principals to participate in this study.
They chose where and when their interviews would take place. Some were more
forthcoming than others. Their demeanors during interviews varied – from congenial and
expressive to brief and anxious to return to their duties, which they signaled by looking at
clocks and watches. Mr. Jones was the only participant who chose his personal office as
the location for the CIT interview (field notes, September 26, 2016). This interview was one hour longer than the other interviews, and he was relaxed and detailed in the information he provided. He did not appear anxious to return to his duties and expanded his critical incidents by explaining his professional background as a military parole officer, and its relationship to how he addressed cyberbullying in his school, along with other information volunteered, rather than elicited from my questions. Mr. Smith (field notes, November 28, 2016), however, chose the school’s front office for his CIT interview. His demeanor was serious and business-like. He often looked at the clock on the wall. Ms. Williams (field notes, December 5, 2016) chose to stop by my office, since she had traveled to my area for a meeting. She was relaxed and detailed in her accounts of two cyberbullying incidents. Of all participants, she was the most emotional about students had been cyberbullied, since she had experienced bullying as a child.

After all CIT interviews were completed, I had them transcribed and then entered these transcriptions into NVivo 11, version 11 (2017) analytic software, which allowed me to conduct more in-depth levels of analysis on the qualitative data I had collected. I conducted an NVivo query on the words policy, cyberbullying, law, legal, crime, discretion, problem, problem-solving, investigate, investigation, First Amendment, safe schools, discipline, technology, and social media, which identified each instance of the words being used in the CIT interviews. Identification of specific words assisted me in locating particular language in the transcripts that would facilitate the theme-making process I followed.
Critical Incidents

I collected twelve critical incidents from six public high school assistant principals (see all 12 in Appendix H). All of these participants reported that they handled cyberbullying on a daily basis. Their experiences were often similar in content.

Participants’ successfully resolved cyberbullying incidents are labeled $A$, and their unsuccessfully resolved incidents are labeled $B$.

Participants used varied criteria in describing their cases as successfully and unsuccessfully resolved. Below are the reasons that participants felt their cases were successful or unsuccessful:

Table 4.5

Participants’ Determination of Successful and Unsuccessful Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Reason for Designation as a Successful Case</th>
<th>Reason for Designation as an Unsuccessful Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>#1A – No further cyberbullying reported at school</td>
<td>#1B – Unable to retrieve nude picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Williams</td>
<td>#2A – No further cyberbullying reported at school</td>
<td>#2B – Unable to retrieve nude picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Johnson</td>
<td>#3A – No further cyberbullying reported at school</td>
<td>#3B – Unable to retrieve nude picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Brown</td>
<td>#4A – No further cyberbullying reported at school</td>
<td>#4B – Parents wanted to return son’s school-issued computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Miller</td>
<td>#5A – Participant stopped fight caused by cyberbullying</td>
<td>#5B – Unable to retrieve nude picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Smith</td>
<td>#6A – No further cyberbullying reported at school</td>
<td>#6B – Victim assaulted perpetrator before AP could intervene</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After analyzing all of the transcripts, I selected six incidents, three deemed successful and three deemed unsuccessful, for which to provide a summary in this report. I chose only six because they were representative of the total. I also elected to represent one of each of the participants’ critical incidents. I presented these narratives in the order in which I interviewed the participants.

The following incidents are those that Mr. Jones, Ms. Williams, and Ms. Johnson recalled as successful. They shared a perspective that these incidents were successful examples given closure to the altercations in the sense that consequences produced no further reports of incidents and seemed to have the intended effect of stopping the problem at school.

**Critical incident #1A (Successful resolution).** Mr. Jones, an assistant principal (AP) at Elm High School, described an incident, which began as a fight on a bus between a male and female student. The fight resulted from the male student posting a nude photo of the female on social media. Originally, the female student freely sent that photo to the male, while the two had been in a romantic relationship. The male distributed the photo after the couple’s relationship ended. Mr. Jones, after consulting with the school resource officer, reported that no crime had been committed because the female student had provided the picture to her boyfriend. Both of the students were 17-years-old, thus neither was considered a juvenile at the time of the fight, according to the SRO. However, the boyfriend took the photo when the female student was a minor. When Mr. Jones learned the female’s age in the photo, he wondered about the possibility that the photo might indicate child pornography. Again, Mr. Jones spoke with the SRO, who stated that the
photo would not be considered child pornography. Mr. Jones gave both students five
days of suspension for the fight, a penalty found in the district disciplinary policy with
discretion left to the school leader as to the number of days. He did not levy a
punishment for distribution of the nude photo. Mr. Jones felt that this cyberbullying
incident had a successful resolution because there were no further incidents at school
from these two students. Mr. Jones reported that, although the parents of the female
student were upset that the male student had distributed the picture, they were more upset
with their daughter for sending a nude photo of herself to anyone.

**Critical incident #2A (Successful resolution).** Ms. Williams recalled a
successful critical incident in which students taught her how subtle cyberbullying could
be. A female student told Ms. Williams that another female student shamed her on a
social media site. When Ms. Williams looked at the posts, she did not see any direct
reference to the alleged victim nor did she see anything that looked like cyberbullying.
The victim then explained how the perpetrator was making derogatory remarks about her.
The victim said that she had been dating a particular boy. They eventually broke up, and
he began dating another girl. The new girlfriend despised her, so she would write
comments on social media, such as, “Feel sorry for people not out with their boyfriends
on Friday night at the movies.” To anyone unfamiliar with the situation, this statement
would seem innocent, but, after Ms. Williams talked to the two girls, both understood that
the new girlfriend was insulting the former girlfriend, who probably did not have a date
on Friday night. Once Ms. Williams learned the background story, she then understood
how the multiple comments were intended to be derogatory in nature. Ms. Williams
solved this incident by calling the perpetrator in and advising her that she needed to stop. Though the district’s cyberbullying policy allowed her to levy a punishment for this cyberbullying incident, she used her discretion to try a warning with the perpetrator first. There were no further complaints by the victim, so she felt that the resolution of this cyberbullying incident was successful.

**Critical incident #3A (Successful resolution).** Ms. Johnson recounted a critical incident in which two girls, then current ninth graders, had a disagreement pertaining to an exchange of text messages. The victim reported harassment via these texts to Ms. Johnson. This disagreement began the year before when the girls were in middle school. Mrs. Johnson talked to both girls, warned the perpetrator to stop the harassment, and advised the victim to report any further cyberbullying issues. Later that same week, the girls were almost involved in a physical altercation in a restroom, as was reported by another student. Ms. Johnson suspended both girls from the school campus for one day, but the drama continued because their boyfriends caused a disruption on the day of their girlfriends’ suspensions. After questioning both boys and assigning detentions, Ms. Johnson called parents of both girls and held separate conferences, explaining to each mother and daughter that the harassment and possible physical altercations had to cease before she determined more serious consequences. Ms. Johnson listed the potential range of punishments as more suspension days, expulsion from school and possible assault charges from the SRO. Ms. Johnson reported that the district cyberbullying policy allowed her to use such a range, even though it did not state specific sanctions for particular cyberbullying infractions. During the conference, the mother of one girl said...
that her daughter only became involved because she was receiving threatening messages via text. When Ms. Johnson asked to see them, the mother said that her daughter had deleted them all. Because Ms. Johnson had seen this scenario before, where an alleged victim deleted the evidence that could prove that she was being cyberbullied, she decided to share an insight with the mother. Ms. Johnson stated that when a student deletes threatening messages, it is possible to delete inappropriate replies. In other words, Ms. Johnson’s experiences led her to believe that deletions cover-up a two-sided altercation where no one is an innocent party in the incident. Ms. Johnson advised the mother to ask her daughter to take a screenshot of any cyberbullying type of communications and bring it to an administrator, should an incident occur again. Though the district policy does not include steps for obtaining a screenshot, Ms. Johnson established that request based on her prior investigations of cyberbullying incidents.

A few weeks later after the conference, Ms. Johnson recalled the same victim returned to complain about derogatory postings about her by the same perpetrator on a social media site. Yet, given the particular social media site’s 24-hour display limit on posts and the victim’s failure to take a screenshot when she first discovered it, the derogatory remarks had already disappeared. At that point, the victim could not provide the assistant principal with the evidence she had requested. This incident took place off-campus during non-school hours, so Ms. Johnson warned the girls – individually in her office – that if any problems occurred on school grounds, then she would handle it as a recurring disciplinary matter, which meant more serious consequences than the one-day suspension they had already served. Since Ms. Johnson had no tangible evidence to
prove that the perpetrator had cyberbullied again and the school campus situation remained peaceful, she felt that all she could do was warn both girls again. Ms. Johnson felt constrained by the district’s cyberbullying policy, which required a disruption at school before any disciplinary action against off-campus cyber incidents. After those warnings, Ms. Johnson said there were no other disciplinary incidents at school with these two girls. Though she believed that there was still some ongoing cyberbullying going on outside of school on the same social media site with timed-deletions, the girls kept their conflict outside of school, or at least they did not report any further problems to her.

While incidents labelled #1A, #2A, and #3A represent three of the participants’ self-described successful resolutions, the following incidents (#4B, #5B, and #6B) exemplify problematic resolutions. I chose those less successful incidents described by Ms. Brown, Ms. Miller, and Mr. Smith.

**Critical incident #4B (Problematic resolution).** Ms. Brown, a new high school administrator with middle school administrative experiences, provided a critical incident from her middle school years. She said that a male student (10 or 11-years-old) used a social media site to send a shirtless picture of himself, with his school-issued computer, to a female student. The female student received his shirtless picture, in which he was flexing his muscles, in the middle of a class during the school day. She was afraid that she was going to get in trouble for having this picture on her phone, so she showed the picture to Ms. Brown. Ms. Brown had conferences with both sets of parents and levied a punishment against the male student of two days of in-school suspension (ISS). District
cyberbullying policy allowed a range of punishments for this infraction, so the assistant principal used her discretion. The parents of the male student then requested that the school retrieve the school-issued computer from their son. The parents had not provided their son with any electronic devices. The only device he had – which allowed him to cyberbully – was the computer issued by the school. They felt that he was too immature to have access to such a device, and, since the school or district had not configured the computers in such a way to make cyberbullying impossible, then, in the parents’ view the school and district as partially responsible for their child’s misbehavior. The school had issued the computer for curriculum and instruction purposes, but the parents wanted the school to provide their son the curriculum via textbooks and other printed materials. Ms. Brown was perplexed as to how forbid access to technology that was critical to this student’s education. This conflict about an inappropriate digital exchange raised another conflict between the parents’ values and beliefs concerning schooling, which contradicted the district’s efforts to provide 21st Century education to middle school students.

Critical incident #5B (Problematic resolution). Ms. Miller provided a critical incident involving a video of a male and female student having sex, which the male distributed to his friends via an online messaging site. Some of those friends then distributed the video further to other students. The male had videotaped this encounter without the knowledge of the female. One of the girl’s friends told her about the video and then reported its existence to Ms. Miller, since it was being widely distributed to students. As Ms. Miller investigated, she determined that law enforcement needed to be involved because of the nudity and sex acts contained in the video, which seemed
pornographic. She worked with her school resource officer (SRO) to file a police report and suspended the perpetrator for five days, per district cyberbullying policy that gave Ms. Miller discretion over the number of days. Ultimately, the male student faced no legal action, and Ms. Miller said that they only filed the police report to protect herself and the school, should the victim’s parents complain that she had not done enough. Even without an official legal charge, the police visited the male student’s home and asked that he delete the offensive video from his phone, which he did. However, since many other students had this video, its distribution continued. Some students made derogatory statements to the victim during the school day, after seeing or hearing of this video. The victim’s friends reported the ongoing harassment, but she did not. Ms. Miller met with the female student’s mother, a single parent, and explained that she could not retrieve the video or do anything about students having seen it. Ms. Miller commented that most students who find themselves in this situation often withdraw and find another school to attend. At the date of the interview, the female student remained on school roster, but the situation probably will never resolve, given the enduring nature of cyber-posting and distribution.

Critical incident #6B (Problematic resolution). Mr. Smith described a cyberbullying incident that took place between a female student and at least one other student in the school, unknown to him at the beginning of the investigation. Mr. Smith described the victim in this case as “a large girl,” who reported to him that pictures and videos of her were being posted on social media sites by someone in the school. The victim provided Mr. Smith with screenshots as evidence. These images included captions
with derogatory comments about the girl’s weight. These images showed school locations suggesting that someone was following her in the hallways as she walked to and from classes, and that someone photographed, or alternately videotaped her, from behind. What Mr. Smith could not tell from the screenshots was the identity of the person or persons who were cyberbullying. Because of the camera focus on the victim, Mr. Smith said the case seemed more difficult to solve. After suffering some frustration, Mr. Smith noticed the time-stamp on one of the pictures as 10:35 am on a particular day. He accessed the school’s camera system for the time stamped and viewed the victim, along with those around her. From that vantage point, Mr. Smith saw one female student with her phone out, using it to take a picture. Simultaneously, one of the victim’s friends told her who the perpetrator’s name. The victim sought out the perpetrator and beat her badly. The school nurse had to provide medical assistance. Immediately after the fight, the victim asked a friend of hers to take a picture of the badly injured girl and wasted no time posting the picture on social media. As a result, the SRO became involved, and the victim, who had now become a perpetrator, received an assault charge. Mr. Smith followed district policy on physical assaults and suspended both girls. Yet, neither student received a sanction for cyberbullying, even though district policy allowed it. The parents of the victim went to court and subsequently assault charges were dropped because of the long-term cyberbullying of the original perpetrator. Mr. Smith labeled this incident as unsuccessful because the victim beat the perpetrator before he could intervene.
When I compared the successful cases to the unsuccessful ones, a trend emerged. Most of the cases that participants deemed successful were ones in which no further reports of cyberbullying occurred after students were warned or punished. Participants did know, however, that students often did not report cases of cyberbullying to them. Only one of the six participants followed up with students to make sure that the cyberbullying had actually ceased. In four of the six unsuccessful cases, nude and sexually explicit pictures or videos had been distributed and could not be recalled or deleted, so everyone understood that the images existed for online viewing.

The genders of those who were cyberbullied and those who had cyberbullied are shown below. All of those students who had suffered cyberbullying in each of the 12 critical incidents were females. In successful cases, four of the six students who had cyberbullied were female. In unsuccessful cases, four of the six students who had cyberbullied were male. Also, in the unsuccessful cases, all five of the cases involving sexually explicit photos or videos had females who were cyberbullied and males who had cyberbullied them, with three incidents involving only nude females, one involving a shirtless 10-year-old male, and one involving both a male and female having sex.

Table 4.6

Victim and Perpetrator by Gender in Successful and Unsuccessful Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Victim and Perpetrator in Successful Cases</th>
<th>Victim and Perpetrator in Unsuccessful Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>#1A – Female victim and male perpetrator</td>
<td>#1B – Female victim and male perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Victim and Perpetrator in Successful Cases</td>
<td>Victim and Perpetrator in Unsuccessful Cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Williams</td>
<td>#2A – Female victim and female perpetrator</td>
<td>#2B – Female victim and male perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Johnson</td>
<td>#3A – Female victim and female perpetrator</td>
<td>#3B – Both female – mutual combatants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Brown</td>
<td>#4A – Female victim and multiple female perpetrators</td>
<td>#4B – Female victim and male perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Miller</td>
<td>#5A – Both female – mutual combatants</td>
<td>#5B – Female victim and male perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Smith</td>
<td>#6A – Female victim and female perpetrator</td>
<td>#6B – Female victim and female perpetrator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I chose six of the critical incidents to provide a sampling of the cyberbullying cases that school leaders handled on a daily basis. Students could often be blatant or subtle with their postings. Students’ use of social media site features allowed them to remain anonymous when they cyberbullied and selective in the social media sites they used, choosing often to use the ones where posts were automatically deleted after a specified lapse of time (Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Hong, Lee, Espelage, Hunter, Patton, & Rivers, 2016; Kowalski, Agatston, & Limber, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Those who were cyberbullied in these incidents often suffered psychological effects that were devastating (Cross, Shaw, Epstein, Monks, Dooley, & Hearn, 2012; DePaolis, 2015; McCallion & Feder, 2013; Nansel, Overpeck, Saluja, & Raun, 2004; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). School leaders also often found themselves in legal ambiguity when they tried to determine whether they had jurisdiction to address a cyberbullying incident, whether they needed to involve law enforcement, and whether
their action or inaction could result in an unsuccessfully resolved cyberbullying case—one that could interfere with their duty to keep students safe. The work of school leadership makes 100% success unlikely, and thus, no one need expect perfect success in handling all cyberbullying incidents. Nevertheless, these school leaders strived for high success and expressed their frustration over situations where students’ safety remained at risk. Participants’ experiences in using their cyberbullying policies allowed insight into how useful or not useful their policies actually were.

**Theme Development**

Each of these six representative critical incidents illustrated how and when school leaders incorporated their district cyberbullying policies into their decision-making. It was evident that they had discretion in whether or not to follow their policies, and, if they did, how light or harsh the punishment could be. As participants told their stories, I could witness all of the elements they considered before making decisions, thus watching their problem-solving skills in action. After following Vaismoradi and colleagues’ (2016) process for theme development, I developed three themes from the data presented through CIT interviews: (1) usefulness of bullying and cyberbullying policies; (2) discretion; and (3) expert and typical problem solving.

**Usefulness of Bullying and Cyberbullying Policies**

In the CIT interviews, I specifically asked four of the six participants if their cyberbullying policies helped them in handling cyberbullying cases through a probe question. I did not have to use that probe with two of the participants who addressed the topic as they communicated their critical incidents. In addition to using the transcribed
interview, I also used a word query report from NVivo (version 11, 2017) to view quotes in which participants used the word *policy*. I looked at these in terms of the frequency of federally recommended criteria (Stuart-Cassell et al., 2011) appearing in the participants’ district cyberbullying policies. I selected participants by sorting district policies from highest to lowest frequencies of components and filtering the results into thirds. I selected two high schools in the top third (both with five criteria) of 78 SC public high schools, two schools in two different districts from the middle range (each with three criteria), and two with one criteria each (lowest third). In all six selected high schools, the participants served as assistant principals in schools with the largest enrollments. Despite this selection process, none of these participants revealed perceived differences of opinion about the usefulness of their districts’ cyberbullying policies. Participants generally agreed that district policies simply provided a baseline of information about what student behaviors were prohibited as well as soft-guidance about possible consequences. In other words, participants had their full professional discretion in handling these cases, and their policies were not limiting or prescriptive (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; McCarthy, 2014; Stefkovich, 2014).

I chose the quotes below as representative samples of all participants’ opinions about the usefulness of their policies. I selected the order in which the quotes appear by how often the particular opinion was noted in the data, with the most prevalent first. The number of federal criteria in these district policies did not appear to have any meaningful connection to how and when, for example, Mr. Jones and Ms. Brown chose to follow the guidelines of their policies more closely. Mr. Jones shared the following:
Our policy gives us direction and guidance as far as [cyberbullying not being] tolerated. Our handbook at one particular point was very detailed [about cyberbullying rules]. If you did X, you got Y. Over the years that’s changed because attorneys like it vague. You know, all attorneys like to go vague. … [We] take regulations and policies … and try to balance them, trying to do what’s good for the school but also what’s good for the student. (Critical Incident #1A, Successful, Five Federal Criteria)

Ms. Brown described the usefulness of her cyberbullying policy by explaining:
[Our cyberbullying policy] helps a good bit because it does give us a guideline … and we also have our children sign [the technology use form] and their parents at the beginning of the school year. We all stray from [the policy]. (Critical Incident #4B, Unsuccessful, Three Federal Criteria)

Overall, the participants did not punish cyberbullies each time an incident occurred. They used their professional judgment to determine when the potential consequences of cyberbullying needed to be enacted (Begley & Stefkovich, 2004; Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Stefkovich, 2006; Stefkovich, 2014).

Because none of the participants’ policies included step-by-step processes to follow, all engaged in exercising their professional discretion and problem-solving strategies. Each participant reported on-the-job learning about options in cyberbullying investigations from colleagues serving as school leaders in their own and other districts. Their cyberbullying policies were silent on investigative strategies. Mr. Smith explained the following:
[Our policy] does help, but [cyberbullying] is constantly evolving and changing.
… There is no black and white. … We constantly just use good old common
sense. … I’m not going to tell you that we go by the [policy], bullet by bullet,
because we just don’t. Just depends on the situation. (Critical Incident #6B,
Unsuccessful, One Federal Criteria)

Ms. Johnson expressed that her cyberbullying policy lacks details that could assist her
with the process of handling cyberbullying cases:

There’s a lot of gray area with this stuff, a whole lot of gray. Our district … has
an attorney, and we have meetings once a month to discuss all kinds of different
issues like this. Actually, I am pulling out my policy. It just says bullying, not
cyberbullying. … So, I mean there are steps to take, but as far as details on how to
go through those steps, I guess not much. (Critical Incident #3A, Successful, One
Federal Criteria)

Among the participants’ explanations about their policies, these quotes illustrate
their awareness that technology changes and situations include such unique aspects, that
the policies could not be anything but “gray”. They stay in touch with colleagues on a
regular basis, but they also have to use their own sensemaking in each situation
(Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Leithwood
& Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane, White, & Stephan, 2009).

All participants expressed their concern about the degree of jurisdiction they
could exercise over cyberbullying incidents, but four of their respective district policies
offered no specific guidance. Below is a list of the schools whose district cyberbullying policies addressed off-campus cyberbullying offenses:

Table 4.7

*District Policies and Off-Campus Cyberbullying*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Policy Contains Reference to Off-Campus Cyberbullying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Smith</td>
<td>Birch High School</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>Pine High School</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Johnson</td>
<td>Elm High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Brown</td>
<td>Maple High School</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Miller</td>
<td>Poplar High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Williams</td>
<td>Hickory High School</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only Mr. Jones and Ms. Williams worked in districts whose policies contained “a statement that covers off-campus behavior that creates a hostile environment at school” (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011, p. 9). The other four participants’ policies did not contain reference to off-campus cyberbullying. Mr. Jones warned about jurisdictional concerns:

You have to … make sure you have jurisdiction [to handle a cyberbullying incident], because there are cases where the school jumps because [of] all the media [attention] and then all of a sudden the school’s in trouble or the school’s being sued civilly because they suspended a student when they shouldn’t have. (Critical Incident #1A, Successful, Five Federal Criteria)
District policies provided these participants with a few guidelines, but regardless of the number of included federal recommendations, all of the participants indicated that they had to handle each situation with their own approaches in resolving the issue. Not surprisingly, they knew that they faced some risks in addressing the unique challenges of cyberbullying.

**Discretion**

Participants often used discretion in following their cyberbullying policies (or not) and levying consequences (or not). These selected assistant principals acknowledged that there were policies and regulations related to cyberbullying in their schools, but they sometimes disregarded them when the cyberbullying policy did not seem appropriate in certain situations. For example, Ms. Miller made this statement, “We make up consequences according to what we feel is appropriate. We really don’t have a policy set in stone” (Critical Incident #5B, Unsuccessful, Three Federal Criteria). Participants used their discretion in some capacity in all 12 of the critical incidents that they chose to relate.

These six school leaders expressed a need for balance in handling cyberbullying and suggested that a strict adherence to policies does not always result in doing what is best for children. They expressed a belief in favor of administrative prerogative to make adjustments in light of policies with harsh punishments. They favored fairness for the best interest of each child (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Stefkovich, 2014). Participants often chose not to follow the policy when students cyberbullied but had no previous infractions of school rules or had some minor ones. Mr. Smith expressed the following:
Like I said, if a girl’s never been in trouble, or a guy [has] never been in trouble, and they come to us and it turns out something’s going on … [I ask] … where is this coming from? Turns out [it is a situation like] ‘she broke my heart, she cheated on me, he cheated on me’ [I provide them] with some counseling and almost always it ends positively. (Critical Incident #6B, Unsuccessful, One Federal Criteria)

Discretion and level of problem-solving skills (typical or expert) are closely related, in that each participant had to make a decision as to when discretion was appropriate and when cyberbullying policies needed to be used as written (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Stefkovich, 2014). These participants indicated they approached these situations with care about the students, and some concerns about the effects of cyberbullying (Ansary, Elias, Greene, & Green, 2015; Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Cross, Pintabono, Hall, Hamilton, & Erceg, 2004; Oluwole & Green, 2016).

**Expert and Typical Problem-Solving.**

As part of the theoretical framework for this study, school leaders’ problem-solving skills were important in their ability to use their cyberbullying policies (or not) to protect students (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Spillane et al., 2009). The complexity of this task is evident; as they have to take into consideration multiple pieces of information (time, place, jurisdiction, ages of students, and involvement of law enforcement) in order to choose the appropriate courses of action. Even though these assistant principals may have used expert problem-solving approaches, such expertise may not have influenced their designation of an incident as successful or a failure.
Among these participants’ cases of cyberbullying, several participants still designated the critical incidents as unsuccessful. Often, the resolution of the incidents seemed beyond their control, as with the irretrievable nature of explicit images distributed through social media. Given those irresolvable conditions, some of the participants still expressed concern that despite their efforts, the incident did not end in bettering students’ experiences.

**Expert problem-solving.** Participants often made statements that indicated their level of problem-solving expertise (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane et al., 2009). For example, Ms. Miller’s description of one of her critical incidents provided an illustration of how she processed aspects of the persistent problem of boundaryless jurisdiction:

…the dilemma is, when it is off-campus – and even the wording [of the policy] is confusing, because you can handle it at school if a disruption is caused at school. The actual law says *substantial disruption*, which of course [is] interpreted a million different ways. (Critical Incident #5B, Unsuccessful, Three Federal Criteria)

She grappled with the location of the cyberbullying incident (on or off-campus), the wording of her policy (which she interpreted as confusing and not helpful), and the decision about whether or not a serious disruption had been caused at school (substantial or not). She sought to make decisions about each of these issues prior to deciding whether she had jurisdiction to handle this particular cyberbullying case. This is an example of expert problem-solving because she analyzed the jurisdictional element of the
problem, gathered the data she needed, identified any constraints to solving the problem, and accepted those constraints by working through them (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane et al., 2009).

Ms. Brown (Critical Incident #4A, Successful, Three Federal Criteria) provided examples of confronting conflict with parents of cyberbullies, which is an expert problem-solving skill (Spillane et al., 2009). In this critical incident, four female students sent in excess of 120 text threats to another female student in the same grade. She involved her SRO and explained individually to the cyberbullies’ parents, “If these folks [parents of the victim] decide to press charges [against the cyberbullies], here are the files [of threatening texts], … and there could be legal ramifications.” She explained to the parents of the student who cyberbullied the legal implications of their daughters’ actions. She also reminded the parents about signing, with their daughters, anti-bullying information sheets at the beginning of the school year, an action that signified each and all of their understanding of the school’s bullying and cyberbullying rules with consequences.

Ms. Johnson (Critical Incident #3A, Successful, Three Federal Criteria) explained one critical incident in which two female students had an ongoing text-based cyberbullying altercation. Though one girl was initially the victim and the other was the perpetrator, after investigating the incident, Ms. Johnson surmised that both girls were involved in mutual cyberbullying text messages. Ms. Johnson explained to the mother of the girl who had complained that the child had deleted all of the texts from her phone that would have provided Ms. Johnson with actionable evidence. The mother defended her
daughter based on her child’s statement that she only responded to the threatening text messages she was receiving. Ms. Johnson rejected the self-defense texts notion, with an alternative point to the mother, “When one deletes threatening messages, then she [the victim] is probably not an innocent party in the [cyberbullying] incident.” She advised the mother (as she had the daughter) that she and her daughter should take screenshots of all threatening messages and notify school administration immediately. This illustrated Ms. Johnson’s willingness to confront the parent about her child’s involvement in a cyberbullying incident, which is evidence of an expert problem-solving skill (Spillane et al., 2009). Additionally, Ms. Johnson’s implicit rejection of retaliation texting demonstrated that she focused on stemming the ongoing cyberbullying more than appeasing the mother, another example of an expert approach (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane et al., 2009).

All six participants described cybersexting stories in their critical incidents (Korenis, & Billick, 2014; Ouytsel, Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2015). The participants shared similar incidents of various forms of cybersexting, including suggestive photos and videos between couples, which many, beyond the couples, also received. As Mr. Smith stated:

One specific thing we deal with, young ladies like to send [explicit] pictures of themselves to their boyfriends. [They] break up. [The boys] have pictures of their former girlfriends’ body parts and will show their friends. [The former girlfriend] will come to us all upset. (Critical Incident #6A, Successful, One Federal Criteria)
This distribution of explicit images places school leaders in the position of having to view them during an investigation.

All of the participants were anxious about viewing sexual photos and videos in their cyberbullying investigations, but decided to do so because they wanted to seek resolution for those who were cyberbullied and help curtail cyberbullying in their schools. In order to reach this resolution, participants needed to view the photos and videos to analyze the problems and choose the steps necessary to stop such occurrences. In addition, parents may object that school personnel viewed explicit pictures of their children during investigation of cyberbullying incidents. Analyzing the problem and overcoming constraints are both expert problem-solving skills (Spillane et al., 2009). However, participants’ feelings about implications for themselves may indicate a novice-level of problem analysis.

Mr. Jones explained how complex cybersexting can be. Cybersexting linked administrators with law enforcement, because it could easily be considered a crime, depending on the images, the ages of those who were cyberbullied and those who cyberbullied, and how the images were obtained. Mr. Jones offered the following opinion:

The hard part [to handle] is – when was the [nude] picture actually transmitted? Has a law been broken? Because [the victim] sent [the picture] to [her boyfriend] freely, there is nothing [that we can do to him]. Because [the picture] was not explicit in nature, it … lessened the [offense]. We had our SRO talk … to the
solicitor … and the sex crimes unit. (Critical Incident #1A, Successful, Five Federal Criteria)

Mr. Jones’s process of problem-solving involved asking himself questions so that he could analyze the problem. Some of the questions he reviewed included the following five considerations:

(a) how was the image transmitted;
(b) has a law been broken;
(c) was the image sent freely or obtained without the victim’s knowledge;
(d) was the picture explicit enough to be considered pornography; and
(e) with which other organizations did he need to confer to make sure he had not overlooked a criminal offense?

Mr. Jones’s list of questions provides an example of expert problem solving. Like other experts, Mr. Jones analyzed the problem, gathered relevant information, accepted the constraint of viewing explicit images, and conferred with law enforcement before making his final decision (Spillane et al., 2009).

Ms. Williams, in addressing one female student who was cyberbullying another female student, found that the perpetrator was the new girlfriend of a male student and the victim was the former girlfriend. The perpetrator was sharing detailed information about her Friday night dates with her boyfriend, while also feeling sorry for those girls who were without a date, a subtle way of harassing the former girlfriend. At first, Ms. Williams did not see evidence of cyberbullying because the perpetrator never used the victim’s name, thus she felt she had no. After speaking with the victim, she was able to
understand how the girl who complained perceived the social media posts as directed at her (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012). Still Ms. Williams encountered negativity from the perpetrator’s parents because, “They’re resistant to the idea that their dear, sweet child would [cyberbully].” Ms. Williams said that she “first [called the parents] in and [made] them aware of [the incident]. She then explained that “… suspension will result if [cyberbullying] continues … [and] expulsion [if it continues after that].” In an effort to see the broader implications of her actions, she explained, “I must handle the cyberbullying issue if it [is going] to [impact] the school environment negatively.” In this case, Ms. Williams provided evidence of expert problem-solving skills by analyzing the problem, gathering information (and continuing to investigate, even though initial findings did not appear to be cyberbullying), and facing conflict when parents of the student who cyberbullied did not believe the evidence (Critical Incident #2A, Successful, Five Federal Criteria) (Spillane et al., 2009).

Mr. Smith insisted that follow-up was important to empower those who are cyberbullied to extract themselves from further incidents. He often spoke again to students (both those who had been cyberbullied and those who had cyberbullied) after a cyberbullying incident was resolved. In recounting one of his incidents, Mr. Smith described his method:

[When I follow-up with students] I tell them, ‘Use me. Use me.’ Tell [those who bully or cyberbully who provoke a confrontation] that Mr. Smith has called me to the office; Mr. Smith won’t change my schedule; Mr. Smith is the one who called my mama. (Critical Incident #6B, Unsuccessful, One Federal Criteria)
Mr. Smith’s expert problem-solving skill illustrated here is following up with students after a cyberbullying incident had occurred (Spillane et al., 2009)

Given the complexity of cyberbullying, these six school leaders used a number of strategies to resolve the issues they encountered. Although the expert approaches first identified by Leithwood and colleagues (Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood and Steinbach, 1995) and then replicated in work by teams of researchers led by Spillane (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Spillane et al., 2009), the participants also reported tactics that fit earlier studies’ findings on typical and novice principals’ approaches to school problems.

**Typical problem-solving.** Ms. Brown’s district cyberbullying policy did not contain any reference to cyberbullying that took place off-campus. She stated, “There’s nothing in our policy [about incidents that take place off school grounds]. We do not get involved in that if it is off school grounds” (Critical Incident #4B, Unsuccessful, Three Federal Criteria). Though she was not required to address such an incident, three other participants, whose policies also lacked reference to off-campus cyberbullying, chose to talk with students about their cyberbullying as a means of taking preventative action. In this instance, though Ms. Brown interpreted her policy as meaning she should not address off-campus cyberbullying. In doing so, she accepted the policy as a constraint. In contrast, the other participants without specific policy jurisdiction proactively chose to speak to cyberbullies so that they could prevent future problems.
As is common, frustration with student behavior in general (and with cyberbullying, specifically) can cause an administrator to lose composure. Mr. Smith’s response to a cyberbullying incident included the following statement:

[If talking does not work to stop cyberbullying], [I] just flat out say, ‘You gonna knock it off or you’re not going to be in this school. It’s up to you. Choose. I don’t care.’ There’s a lot of these parents that drive me insane. All right, but I like to feed my children so I don’t go around cursing them out, because my kids like to eat. (Critical Incident #6B, Unsuccessful, One Federal Criteria)

Mr. Smith’s harsh response to a student exhibited a personal conflict – with his feelings of frustration about his job responsibilities bumping into his personal responsibilities with a job as a means to support his own family. This personal stance indicates a typical to more novice-level, problem-solving approach according to Spillane et al. (2009).

In another example of typical problem solving, Ms. Miller handled a case in which a male student videotaped himself and his girlfriend having sex, without the victim’s knowledge, and then distributed the video to his friends. Ms. Miller stated, “I don’t think charges were filed. We just … did it as … a documentation to just CYA [an acronym for cover you’re a**] to cover us and to appease the parents of the female [victim]” (Critical Incident #5B, Unsuccessful, Three Federal Criteria). Spillane et al. (2009) explained that taking action to keep parents happy, rather than making the decisions to do what is best for students, is a typical problem-solving skill.

The participants exhibited their problem-solving skills through discussion of the decisions they made in their cyberbullying cases. I found that participants, who may
predominantly use expert problem-solving skills, sometimes used typical or novice-level skills as well (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood and colleagues, 1989, 1995; Spillane et al., 2009).

**Prevention Programs**

Noticeably absent from five of six of participants’ stories was the topic of prevention programs (Ansary et al., 2015; Cross et al., 2004). Although the participants described individual warnings and interventions to prevent further conflict on school grounds, only Ms. Johnson mentioned a specific programmatic approach. Ms. Johnson described a prevention program that her school developed, which other schools in the district then adopted. Ms. Johnson stated:

We saw a need to address [cyberbullying]. … [Our] … awesome drama department wrote a play [whose purpose was to prevent cyberbullying]. … The district took notice of it … and it kind of blew up [from there]. Our district actually has an app … a very efficient and quick way to report something. Reports can be [communicated] … anonymous or not. And honestly this year [I] probably only had, gosh, four incidents reported through the app. (#5A, Successful, One Federal Criteria)

Teachers and students developed a play that they modified and performed each year in Grades 6 through 12. The prevention program also included a district application, or *app*, for students to download on their devices to report bullying and cyberbullying (and other offenses). The app automatically sends complaints to the school’s district officials, who then send it to the appropriate administrators in individual
Tanrikulu’s study (2018) showed that 16 of the 17 cyberbullying prevention programs he studied were successful in reducing cyberbullying. Each of the 16 successful programs differentiated in the following: (a) originated in nine different countries; (b) consisted of different theoretical backgrounds; (c) varied in session frequency and duration; (d) included technological and non-technological strategies, or both; (e) aimed to prevent cyberbullying, intervene in cyberbullying, or both; and (f) were mostly effective in preventing and intervening in cyberbullying (Tanrikulu, 2018). Tanrikulu (2018) suggested that the details of the programs appeared to matter less than school leaders’ desire to prevent cyberbullying and working hard to communicate the dangers of cyberbullying to self and others.

Procedural Steps Used by School Leaders

For a number of reasons, this group of school leaders exercised discretion and effective problem-solving skills in addressing what they recalled as critical incidents. Associated with ongoing changes in technology and media, participants reported procedures that they developed on their own or with colleagues as they dealt with cyberbullying issues. Without prompts or probing questions, all participants described steps for investigating incidents, such as asking students for printed screen-shots and always questioning the student who allegedly cyberbullied. These six assistant principals explained the following procedural steps, not necessarily required by policy but developed through trial-and-error in addressing cyberbullying in their schools: (a)
Involvement of law enforcement officers; (b) clarification of location and time of incidents; and (c) school leaders’ technology proficiency.

**Involvement of law enforcement.** Even with policies and procedures, school leaders must determine when it is appropriate, or necessary, to involve law enforcement in any disciplinary event. Among these six assistant principals’ cyberbullying cases, consulting with law enforcement proved helpful, especially given the large enrollment sizes of these selected high schools. In the cases where cyberbullying involved explicit pictures or videos, school leaders reported consulting their SROs, who could also confer with their law enforcement colleagues. Mr. Jones reported an example of the usual occasion for contacting law enforcement officials, who could explain changes in laws or details about particular infractions, such as explicit images:

> I think since [this cyberbullying incident], the laws have changed. I think there’s actually a law now, and I may be mistaken, [that deals with explicit pictures sent] once a break-up happens [and] they call it *revenge sexting.* …We also learned that … it has to do with the pose in the picture. Because [in some pictures] it wasn’t an explicit [picture] or sexual in nature, so [it would not be considered illegal].

(Critical Incident #1A, Successful, Five Federal Criteria)

School resource officers provided information to these school leaders about the potential criminal charges inherent in some cyberbullying cases. The SROs used the ages of students (both victim and perpetrator) to determine if laws had been broken as juveniles or as adults.
**Determination of location and time of cyberbullying.** School leaders reported their consideration of jurisdiction, as determined through time and location of each cyberbullying incident (Abrams, 2011; Ahrens, 2012; Hvidston et al., 2013; Hudson, 2013). Only two of the selected high schools had district policies that included a suggested federal criteria related to *scope*, a “statement that covers off-campus behavior that creates a hostile environment at school” (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011, p. 9). These two high schools represented the schools with five of the 11 recommended criteria, the next highest number of such criteria among the South Carolina district policies analyzed in Phase 1 of this study. The one district with nine of the criteria declined to participate.

The other four high schools had no reference to off-campus cyberbullying. These four schools represented the middle range and lowest number of federal criteria. Though none of the four districts’ policies mentioned off-campus cyberbullying, three of the four assistant principals (Ms. Miller, Mr. Smith, and Ms. Johnson) intervened in off-campus incidents with one-to-one meetings with those who had been cyberbullied and those who had cyberbullied, to explain consequences should offenses cause a disturbance on school grounds. In this example, Ms. Johnson handled an off-campus cyberbullying incident:

[If the case] occurred off school campus, not during school hours, we call the students in and say, ‘We’re asking you to take [the offensive message] down.’ We give them some advice about it all, the whole thing, the whole issue … and basically say, ‘If it spills over into school then it becomes our business, so this is your choice if you want to continue to do it and the problems erupt here, then you
know, we’re handling it’. (Critical Incident #3A, Successful, One Federal Criteria)

Another participant, Ms. Brown, made the following comment to a parent:

[If cyberbullying takes place off-campus], I will say, ‘I will let you talk to [the victim’s] SRO, and he can certainly let you know what steps you need to take if it didn’t happen on school grounds and it’s not a school device.’ That is the route that we go with that. Our policy does not address [off-campus cyberbullying, outside of the school day]. (Critical Incident #4B, Unsuccessful, Three Federal Criteria)

Ms. Brown’s comment relates directly to one of the federally-recommended criteria, which suggests that cyberbullying policies should include a statement of scope – “which establishes where legislation applies and what conditions must be present for schools to have authority over student conduct” (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011, p. 23). Districts that provide school leaders authority in off-campus cyberbullying (when it causes a hostile school climate) allow administrators more latitude to handle incidents that may cause issues at school.

All participants expressed some ambivalence about their roles in intervening with off-campus cases (Abrams, 2011; Ahrens, 2012; Hvidston et al., 2013; Hudson, 2013). One important concern, even from those participants who had policies with reference to off-campus offenses, was how substantial the disturbance had to be to address it, with at least a few of these participants attempting to prevent disruptions on school premises. Yet
another concern participants addressed was their ability to handle the technological elements of cyberbullying.

**School leader technology knowledge.** School leaders described how they and members of their schools’ administrative teams had varying levels of technological expertise in trying to curtail cyberbullying. Due to these skills, or lack thereof, and the rapid changes in digital devices, apps, and social media, administrators had to pool knowledge. Even with their pooled knowledge, they found it difficult to manage the interconnection between digital development and students’ social media use and misuse (Dexter, Richardson, & Nash, 2017; Herold, 2018; Kowalski, Agatston, & Limber, 2012).

Mr. Smith explained how his administrative team deals with varying levels of technological expertise,

> I stalk these kids on [some social media sites]. Now my boss doesn’t do it. [A fellow administrator], he’s not a social media guy. He leaves that to [me]. I show the other guys how to find stuff on cell phones and computers. I like searching for stuff like this. (Critical Incident #6B, Unsuccessful, One Federal Criteria)

Ms. Williams, in explaining her first incident with cyberbullying, said that she had a complaint from a female victim that she was being cyberbullied on a particular social media site that allowed comments to another person without ever mentioning the intended recipient’s name or internet persona. When Ms. Williams viewed the victim’s screenshot, she could not understand how the victim considered the messages as being cyberbullying. She stated:
I … opened [an] account myself to get up to speed on [that site]. ... I was really baffled because I saw nothing inappropriate. [The student] explained how the site worked (allowing a subtext of messages to be sent to an unmentioned user). … I had no idea [what she was talking about]. I didn’t know what [was going on]. I had to look [the site] up and [study] how it worked and ask the other APs to help me. (Critical Incident #2A, Successful, Five Federal Criteria)

In summary, study participants used the leeway within their district policies to exercise their discretion and problem-solving skills. They included SROs’ expertise and legal connections to discern legal and criminal aspects of jurisdiction. They pooled digital knowledge with other administrators, in a team approach, to confront the rapidly changing technical conditions of cyberbullying. While these participants expressed their resourcefulness in the incidents they recounted, they also expressed ongoing uneasiness about recurring aspects of these incidents.

**School Leaders’ Professional Concerns about Cyberbullying Investigations**

School leaders expressed concerns about several elements inherent in the investigation of cyberbullying cases. Though school leaders’ execution of disciplinary policies often placed them in negative situations with parents and students, cyberbullying appeared to offer its own special challenges. They all cited the increase in the number of cases over past years (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Demers & Sullivan, 2016) and the legal or criminal remedies that parents and students often threatened to employ (Abrams, 2011; Kowalski, et al., 2012). Administrators expressed three elements of cyberbullying investigations as areas of concern for students and for themselves: (a) the safety of those
who had been cyberbullied; (b) how to handle explicit evidence appropriately; and (c) the question about school leaders’ jurisdiction over students’ personal devices.

**Fear of student suicides or self-harm because of cyberbullying.** Four of the six participants were worried about students who may kill themselves because of cyberbullying. They appeared to be conscientious in their efforts to investigate every case and perform their due diligence for students. Still, they feared, even if they did their best, that a student was going to choose to take his or her own life because of cyberbullying (Abrams, 2011; Gini & Espelage, 2014). Mr. Smith expressed the following:

They’re so emotionally bankrupt, a lot of these kids. They don’t know how to deal with any kind of rejection. … What they do to escape, they put things out on social media. ‘I’m going to kill myself, I can’t stand you, I’m going to kill you, too.’ A lot of that is not serious, [but] we take … all of that serious[ly]. … We bring them in … and get them some counseling. (Critical Incident #6B, Unsuccessful, One Federal Criteria)

Mr. Jones shared a similar concern:

[Addressing cyberbullying] is not as easy as our media and civilian population [make it seem]. We, a lot of times, see the tragedies on TV – that Jane or Sam was bullied so much that they committed suicide, which is an ultimate tragedy in our society. The media makes out like the schools just did nothing to prevent it. But what if we didn’t know about it? What if we were investigating [a cyberbullying incident] and just did not get finished with it before some kid
decided to commit suicide? We are always going to be blamed, no matter what
the facts of the case are. It’s scary for me. None of us want some kid to take their
life. (Critical Incident #1B, Unsuccessful)

**Explicit evidence.** Leaders made several comments about the necessity of
viewing evidence of some explicit cyberbullying sexting photos or videos (Ahrens, 2012;
Korenis & Billick, 2014; Ouytsel, Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2015; Ricketts,
Maloney, Marcum, & Higgins, 2015). Both male participants expressed a higher level of
concern because in their experiences, the explicit photos were of females, not males.
Rarely, if at all, did any of the assistant principals have to view pictures of nude males.
Ms. Williams shared one of her critical incidents concerning a male student who took a
nude photo of himself and a female student at a party, while they were engaged in sexual
activity. Ms. Williams explained:

> When a friend of the female student showed me the nude picture that had been
posted and distributed, I called in both students in the picture [individually] and
gathered the details about how and when the picture was taken. … The male
student had distributed the picture. The girls’ parents were upset, not only that
other students had viewed the photo, but that I had viewed the photo. They then
questioned why I had the authority to view explicit things on devices that did not
belong to me or the school. … The parents of the male student were upset with
him and had no questions about my viewing of the picture. The two sets of
parents had completely different reactions to the picture. (Critical Incident #2B,
Unsuccessful, Five Federal Criteria)
Device ownership. Besides the explicit materials, the question about device ownership also worried principals to an extent mentioned in the literature (Hvidston, Hvidston, Range, & Harbour, 2013). Four of the six participants expressed concern about viewing evidence on students’ personal devices. These assistant principals worried about parental complaints regarding administrators’ inspection of social media on students’ devices that could bring legal repercussions. Ms. Miller explained the following:

I will tell you, the first thing that worries me is always, you know, ‘Do I really have the right to take this student’s phone and look through it, for screenshots and for pictures and videos that they allegedly have on their [devices]?’ That makes me very nervous. I mean, every time I get into a situation, I’m like, ‘Here we go.’ You know, ‘How is the parent going to react? Am I going to have the parent that’s supportive, or am I going to have the parent that’s [making the argument] ‘Well you didn’t have a right to go through it anyway.’ (Critical Incident #5A, Successful, Three Federal Criteria)

Overall, school leaders’ major concern was about the safety of their students. They worried about students’ ability to handle rejection, who may choose to end their lives when cyberbullied. They were uncomfortable when their cyberbullying investigations required their viewing explicit photos and videos of their students, concerned about parents’ reactions to administrators having seen their children in such compromising situations. Lastly, they were concerned about searching students’ privately owned devices, bringing into play search and seizure issues. All participants’
critical incidents, their difficulties and concerns, proved to provide insight into the challenges they face in protecting their students.

**Summary**

I conducted a two-phased study in an exploration of school leaders’ approaches to handling cyberbullying incidents including how much their districts’ policies supported their work. In Phase 1 of the study, I conducted a documentary analysis of 78 of the 81 SC districts’ cyberbullying policies to identify six high school leaders. Additional selection criteria included the varying levels of adoption of federally-recommended criteria surrounding these high school leaders’ parameters for addressing cyberbullying in their schools. I also used the largest available enrollment size as another selection criterion among pool of districts. In Phase 2, I used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to elicit one successfully resolved cyberbullying case and one unsuccessfully resolved case from each of the six participants, yielding 12 incidents from these six participants. In their responses, they provided a snapshot of the elements and procedures applied as they addressed each incident. Because I specifically asked, school leaders shared their opinions and feelings about whether their cyberbullying policies helped or hindered them in handling cyberbullying cases. All felt that their cyberbullying policies simply provided a baseline for unacceptable cyberbullying behaviors and related consequences. Through their stories, I was able to identify examples of expert and typical problem-solving skills, as well as some in-house procedures they developed for handling cyberbullying. In addition, school leaders identified aspects of cyberbullying as professional concerns – fear that some who had been cyberbullied would take their own lives and their viewing of
explicit photos and videos. In all instances, every participant in this study expressed their overwhelming concern for the safety and well-being of their students and the immeasurable damage that cyberbullying had done to many.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This study was an investigation of six, selected South Carolina high school leaders’ reflections about what they deemed as critical experiences in their work addressing cases of cyberbullying within their districts’ cyberbullying policies. I posed the overarching research question as what are SC public high school leaders’ experiences in applying district cyberbullying policies to cases in their schools? I used a two-phased study to identify a pool of potential participants based on a documentary analysis of district policies, and, in the second phase, I used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) to elicit their experiences and insights in their problem solving about how to settle cyberbullying incidents.

Summary of the Study – Phase 1

The purpose of the first phase of this study was to identify a pool of potential secondary-level school leaders based on the degree to which their district policies on cyberbullying contained suggested components based on a report to the U.S. Department of Education about recommended policy criteria (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). I was able to obtain and sort 78 of South Carolina’s 81 school district policies for the degree to which each policy included any of 11 recommended policy features (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). In the document analysis, I discovered some verbatim similarities, not specifically traceable to the report’s policy recommendations (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011) and tracked those passages to a model policy promulgated by the SC School
Boards Association (SCSBA, 2017). I used a sum per district of each policy’s frequency of alignment with the report’s 11 suggested criteria to establish three pools of potential participating high school leaders. The first pool included the top third of districts with between five and nine of the federally suggested criteria aligned in their policies. The middle pool was a range between three and four criteria of one-third of the 78 districts. The last third included a range of zero to two criteria among the districts’ policy document analysis of alignment with federally recommended criteria. The district that had nine of the 11 federal criteria had only one high school and did not consent to participate in the study. The final six districts selected included two schools with five criteria, two schools with three criteria, and two schools with one criteria. When there was a tie in the number of criteria, I turned to the high schools with the higher enrollments. The selected high schools’ enrollments ranged from over 2400 students to 1800 (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017).

**Summary of the Study – Phase 2**

Based on consent from each of the districts, along with clarification of which high school-based leaders most likely handled cyberbullying incidents, I contacted the referred disciplinarians. Not surprisingly, all held the title of assistant principal. Six assistant principals (two males and four female) provided their consent to be involved in the second phase of the study, where they related self-selected critical incidents – with cases of cyberbullying of two types: (a) those the participants deemed successfully resolved cases and (b) those they described as unsuccessful. I conducted these CIT interviews in various venues based on the participants’ schedules and location preferences. I recorded,
transcribed, and compiled all of the interviews. I analyzed them, looking for similarities and differences among them, and focused on answering the research question (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). I developed themes using a development process described by Vaismoradi and colleagues (2016). I found themes associated with the CIT results which addressed the research question about these participating school leaders’ reflections on cases of cyberbullying and the role their respective district policies played, or not, in their resolutions, successful, or not.

**Discussion of Findings**

I based this study on a theoretical framework about problem-solving skills of school leaders in relation to the complexity of cyberbullying and district policy parameters. After documenting and reviewing the decisions that participants made pertaining to use of their district policies to curtail cyberbullying, all of them exhibited predominantly expert-level skills (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995: Spillane, White, & Stephan, 2009). These skills included being able to analyze and frame each cyberbullying problem, a primarily unstructured and complex situation); gather relevant data; identify and confront constraints; and focus on the implications for students (Spillane, White, & Stephan, 2009).

Participants’ reported that their policies provided only guidance but not specified steps for every cyberbullying scenario they encountered. Thus, their use of professional problem solving and judgment added an ethical dynamic to their decision-making
These school leaders addressed each unique case of cyberbullying by following the policies’ basics, while also modifying or ignoring some aspects where policies seemed vague or silent. In making decisions about how and when to use their cyberbullying policies, all participants shared their desire to prevent students in their schools from being cyberbullied and their fear of the emotional and mental crises that could occur for those who suffered the repercussions of cyberbullying (Abrams, 2011; Demers & Sullivan, 2016; Gini & Espelage, 2014; Kowalski, Limber & Agatston, 2012). All school leaders in this study described their cyberbullying policies as providing them with a baseline pertaining to cyberbullying. In addition, school leaders identified the following common problems they had to solve to be able to address incidents of cyberbullying:

**Problem # 1 – Jurisdiction.** All of the participants worried about their decisions concerning jurisdiction (Abrams, 2011; Ahrens, 2012; Hvidston, Hvidston, Range, & Harbour, 2013; Hudson, 2013; Young, Tully, & Ramirez, 2017). Though two participants had policies that permitted them to handle incidents of cyberbullying that occurred off-campus (if a disruption was caused at school), all school leaders worried if they had the official status necessary for any of their decisions to address off-campus incidents.

**Problem # 2 – Processes and procedures.** Participants found that their cyberbullying policies did not provide explicit guidance about processes and procedures for investigating cyberbullying incidents. They also reported that they lacked training in
such investigation techniques. Each participant, sometime alone but more often with colleagues, developed processes and procedures on-the-job in their day-to-day dealings with students. This finding contrasts with the suggested federal recommendation that school leaders received specific training and guidance about investigational procedures (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). Participants expressed concerns about search and seizure of students’ electronic devices, and sometimes, the courts have rendered consequences to school leaders in handling students’ property (Kowalski, Agatston, & Limber, 2012).

**Problem # 3 – Necessary technical digital expertise for investigations.** School leaders’ cyberbullying policies lacked any reference to the electronic skills for cyberbullying investigations. In most of the reported incidents, participants needed a forensic evidence trail. All school leaders in this study mentioned the challenge of the technical aspects of cyberbullying investigations, including searching varied devices and understanding the intricacies of evolving social media sites (Kowalski, Agatston, & Limber, 2012).

**Implications for Practice**

The six participants in this study described the complexities and dilemmas they experienced when they addressed cyberbullying in their schools. Their stories, along with supporting research on cyberbullying, suggest that there are four elements that could improve their efforts to keep students safe and provide a proper learning environment – (a) stronger district and legal support; (b) creation of a list of investigative procedural suggestions; and (c) development or adoption of prevention programs.
Because the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to hear any cyberbullying cases and lower courts have decided cases in a contradictory fashion, some authors recommended that districts and their legal counsel provide school leaders with stronger support for navigating this particularly complex disciplinary issue (McCallion & Feder, 2013; McCarthy, 2014; Yang & Grinshteyn, 2016). Among the 12 critical incidents, the six participants reported a lack of support from their districts’ legal advisors. Instead, these assistant principals reported that they developed cyberbullying investigative procedures generally on their own, sometimes with the assistance of their School Resource Officers (SROs) and those individuals’ connections with law enforcement. Among these participants, rather than access to either policy or legal advice, each reported using indirect advice about procedures and options from law enforcement perhaps a couple of conversations removed from the school. Kowalski et al. (2012) noted that training on procedural elements that would not only better protect students (which is always the primary focus), but also reduce possible legal issues for school leaders and potential litigation against the school district. Lack of specific policy guidance or training may affect new administrators, whose resources seem limited to fellow administrators, SROs, or even second-hand advice from law enforcement.

On the other hand, experienced school leaders may prefer to handle the complexity of their particular school’s and students’ situations with some leeway, rather than rigid adherence to a checklist because discipline matters settle better with personal relationships with students and parents (Brewer & Lindle, 2014; Dexter, Richardson, & Nash, 2017; Stefkovich, 2014; Yu & Prince, 2016). The “gray” areas of the policies allow
school leaders to adjust to their specific conditions, and with their colleagues, they can adapt their investigations as both technology advances and with considerations for their own conditions (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane, White & Stephan, 2009). As importantly, policy permissiveness permits school leaders latitude in building the necessary school and community relations essential to positive and safe learning environments (Brewer & Lindle, 2014).

Only one of the six districts included in this study used a bullying and cyberbullying prevention program. With many such programs being successful (Tanrikulu, 2017), it would be preferable to prevent cyberbullying than to address it after it has already occurred (Kowalski et al., 2012). Tanrikulu (2017) found that successful bullying and cyberbullying prevention programs had a variety of components, making them quite different from each other, with the most important element being the desire of school leadership to curtail bullying and cyberbullying. According to this single study, the school leader has an important role communicating prevention of any bullying to all stakeholders. A requirement that all schools have an effective cyberbullying prevention program (either created or adopted) could substantially reduce cyberbullying incidents (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, Erceg, & Falconer, 2011). Additionally, school leaders need to make their stance against all forms of bullying known widely (Tanrikulu, 2017).

These three implications for practice could provide school leaders with more support from districts and their legal staffs, procedures to use in their cyberbullying investigations, policies that were collaboratively developed with each school’s
stakeholders and bullying and cyberbullying prevention programs for their schools. Each of these implications for practice would give school leaders more resources to use as they try to keep their students safe. However, with cyberbullying as a constantly changing issue, that follows technology upgrades as well as students’ increasing access to devices; research must also continue.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The goal of this research was to investigate selected SC public high school leaders’ experiences in applying district cyberbullying policies to cases in their schools. I used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to elicit school leaders’ responses. Advancement of bullying and cyberbullying studies is necessary if school leaders are to improve policies, intervention practices, and deter students from tormenting their peers. The areas of suggested research include (a) accurate data on the prevalence of cyberbullying; (b) student experiences with cyberbullying using CIT data; (c) increase of problem-solving expertise in school leaders; and (d) the relationship between laws and policies and cyberbullying prevalence.

**Accurate data on prevalence.** Information on the prevalence of cyberbullying is, at best, confusing. When researchers and practitioners attempt to obtain this data, they often find a percentage range anywhere from 1% to 40% (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012; Selkie, Fales, & Moreno, 2016), with little or no information on prevalence among specific groups of students. Such researchers attributed the wide range to study definitions and the ages of the participants, along with other dissimilarities in data collection methods. As scholars refine their techniques and definitions, school leaders
and others can have more specified information about the prevalence of these kinds of school disruptions.

**Student and parent experiences with cyberbullying using CIT.** This study focused solely on the perceptions of school leaders and future work should include students and parents as participants. Using the Critical Incident Technique, researchers could study students’ and parents’ cyberbullying experiences in their schools, including their perceptions of how school leaders address cyberbullying incidents. CIT can allow researchers to understand better students’ perspectives (Chell, 2004; Schwester, 2014), not only on cyberbullying in general, but also how students understand the reporting process as well as what actions school leaders may take.

**Increase of problem-solving expertise in school leaders.** Study participants, in telling their CIT stories, provided evidence of their problem-solving ability. The majority of the decisions made by these six assistant principals were expert in nature, with occasional lapses into typical problem-solving skills (Spillane et al., 2009). In particular, school leaders in this study worried about the potential for litigation, and how lawsuits coupled with their districts’ reactions might affect their jobs, a novice consideration in both Leithwood and Spillane’s studies (Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Spillane, White, & Stephan, 2008). A possible research question remains about the cognitive approaches to developing school leaders’ problem solving at an expert level (Spillane et al., 2009).

**Relationship between laws, policies, and cyberbullying prevalence.** Chibbaro (2007) and Eden, Heiman, and Olenik-Shemesh (2012) advocated for clear policies,
along with guidelines for school personnel, to address cyberbullying. While these recommendations remain, some gaps remain for information on the connection between law, policies, and the effects they may have on cyberbullying prevalence in schools. A report by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) (2013) suggested more research focused on “how laws and legal policies related to bullying and harassment are understood and perceived” (p. 33). The organization indicated little published knowledge about how cyberbullying policies affect students (both the innocent and the guilty). The AERA’s (2013) monograph reported three cyberbullying policy issues that need further research: (1) which provisions in cyberbullying policies (if any) actually reduce cyberbullying; (2) how stakeholders react to cyberbullying policies and if that reaction affects policy success; and (3) how cyberbullying policies combine with other systems-level factors provide safer schools (p. 33).

Conclusions

The results of this study, in which I investigated six SC public high school leaders’ experiences in using their district cyberbullying policies, elicited important information about participants’ experiences. Their deep concern for the safety of their students was at the foundation of all of the CIT interviews. They described using their professional discretion when using their cyberbullying policies so that they could do what was best for their students. As they told their stories of successful and unsuccessful cyberbullying incidents, their problem-solving techniques became apparent, with all exhibiting predominantly expert skills. They felt apprehension about actions that could result in legal problems for themselves and their districts – such as determination of
jurisdiction, the search of students’ private devices, and the viewing of explicit pictures of their students. They, along with their colleagues, developed day-to-day procedures for cyberbullying investigations, which they hoped would make their students safer and avoid litigation.

Through this study, there are several contributions to existing knowledge about the issue of cyberbullying in schools, such as the following:

(a) some school leaders may need more support in the legal and procedural aspects of cyberbullying investigations and consequences;

(b) South Carolina’s state cyberbullying law does not include the complete list of federal cyberbullying policy recommendations, omitting criteria such as stakeholder involvement, in cyberbullying policy development;

(c) all of the six participants investigated cyberbullying incidents of a sexual nature (sexting) and communicated their distress at having to view explicit images of their students, indicating the prevalence in their individual schools of this type of cyberbullying; and

(d) all school leaders communicated their fear of students committing suicide related to their being cyberbullied, even when the circumstances surrounding such incidents would have been beyond their control.

This information, gleaned from participant interviews, can help other school leaders to improve their practice and assist schools and districts with improving their efforts to deter cyberbullies and provide needed support for their administrators.
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direct responses that are equitable and effective in addressing this special form of

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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Thursday, February 18, 2016 at 7:45 PM Eastern Standard Time

Subject: IRB2016-054 Approval for “Selected South Carolina Public High School Leaders”

Date: Thursday, February 18, 2016 at 3:37:36 PM Eastern Standard Time

From: B. Elizabeth Chapman

To: Jane Lindle

CC: Sheila Hilton

Dear Dr. Lindle,

The Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the protocol identified above using exempt review procedures and a determination was made on February 18, 2016 that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt under category B2 based on federal regulations 45 CFR 46. Your protocol will expire on June 30, 2017.

Please find attached the approved consent document to be used with this protocol.

Please note that some schools and districts may require a site letter; therefore, data collection at those sites cannot be initiated until a letter is obtained. Please refer to our guidance on research site/support letters for more information, http://media.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/research_site_letters.pdf.

Please note that Sheila Hilton’s human subjects training will expire in April. She will need to complete the refresher course for “Group 1 Investigators Conducting Social and Behavioral Science Research (SBIR) at Clemson University” available at www.citiprogram.org before the due date. More information about the training is available on our website at http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/training.html.

The expiration date indicated above was based on the completion date you entered on the IRB application. If an extension is necessary, the PI should submit an Exempt Protocol Extension Request form, http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/forms.html, at least three weeks before the expiration date. Please refer to our website for more information on the extension procedures, http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/guidance/reviewprocess.html.

No change in this approved research protocol can be initiated without the IRB’s approval. This includes any proposed revisions or amendments to the protocol or consent form. Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects, any complications, and/or any adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance immediately. All team members are required to review the IRB policies on “Responsibilities of Principal Investigators” and “Responsibilities of Research Team Members” available at http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/regulations.html.

The Clemson University IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. Please contact us if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth

B. Elizabeth Chapman ’03, MA, CACII
IRB Coordinator
Clemson University
Appendix B

Information about Participation in Research Study
Clemson University

SELECTED SOUTH CAROLINA PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL LEADERS' EXPERIENCES IN ADDRESSING CYBERBULLYING

Description of the Study and Your Part in It
Ms. Sheila F. Hilton and Professor Jane Clark Lindle invite you to participate in a research study. Ms. Hilton is a PhD Candidate in Educational Leadership and Professor Lindle is E.T. Moore Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. The purpose of this research study is to examine South Carolina public high school leaders’ experiences in using their bullying and cyberbullying policies to handle cyberbullying situations among students.

Your part in the study will be to participate in an interview, either in-person or over the phone, at your convenience, in which you share memorable cyberbullying incidents that have occurred at your school. With your permission, we would like to audio record your interview, which would then be transcribed. You will have an opportunity to review the transcript. It will take you about two hours to participate in this study.

Risks and Discomforts
We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits
We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, this research may help us to understand the effectiveness of district and school bullying and cyberbullying policies from the perspective of school leaders who must use those policies.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality
We will do everything we can to protect privacy and confidentiality. You have the option of selecting a pseudonym or having one assigned to you. We will not tell anybody that you were in the study or what information we collected from you in particular. No district names, school names, or participant names will be listed in any printed materials. No student names will be reported.

Choosing to Be in the Study
You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.
**Contact Information**
If you have questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Jane Clark Lindle at Clemson University at 864-508-0629 or jlindle@clemson.edu.

If you have question or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.
Appendix C

Recruitment Script A

Hello. My name is Sheila Hilton, and I am a student at Clemson University in Clemson, SC. I am currently seeking a PhD in Educational Leadership. My dissertation topic is Selected South Carolina Leaders’ Experiences in Using District Policies to Handle Cyberbullying Cases. The purpose of my call is to speak with you about participating in my research study. You are eligible to be in this study because of the components in your district cyberbullying policy that are recommended by the U. S. Department of Education and possibly by the enrollment in your school. I obtained your contact information from your school’s website.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do one phone interview with me concerning two cyberbullying case you have handled. I would like to audio record your phone interview and then I will use the information to understand your experiences in handling cyberbullying issues using your district cyberbullying policy.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you’d like to participate, we can go ahead and schedule a time for our interview. If you believe another school leader at your institution would have more information or experience in handling cyberbullying cases, would you give permission for me to speak to that person and ask for his or her participation in the study? If you need more time to decide if you would like to participate, you may also call or email me with your decision.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

If you have any more questions about this process or if you need to contact me about participation, I may be reached at 864-643-8898 or sheilafhilton@gmail.com.

Thank you so much.
Appendix D

Recruitment Script B

Hello. My name is Sheila Hilton, and I am a student at Clemson University in Clemson, SC. I am currently seeking a PhD in Educational Leadership. Your principal has referred me to you because he or she felt that you had more knowledge and experience in handling cyberbullying cases in your school. My dissertation topic is *Selected South Carolina Leaders’ Experiences in Using District Policies to Handle Cyberbullying Cases*. The purpose of my call is to speak with you about participating in my research study. You are eligible to be in this study because of the components in your district cyberbullying policy that are recommended by the U. S. Department of Education and possibly by the enrollment in your school. I obtained your contact information from your principal.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do one interview with me concerning two cyberbullying case you have handled. I would like to audio record your phone interview and then I will use the information to understand your experiences in handling cyberbullying issues using your district cyberbullying policy.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate, we can go ahead and schedule a time for our phone interview. If you believe another school leader at your institution would have more information or experience in handling cyberbullying cases, would you give permission for me to speak to that person and ask for his or her participation in the study? If you need more time to decide if you would like to participate, you may also call or email me with your decision.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

If you have any more questions about this process or if you need to contact me about participation, I may be reached at 864-643-8898 or sheilafhilton@gmail.com.

Thank you so much.
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

[Review the Informed Consent and Information documents.]

The purpose of this study is to investigate selected public high school principals’ experiences in using their district cyberbullying policies to handle cyberbullying problems. Schools were selected based upon characteristics of their cyberbullying policies, and school leaders were selected based upon the recommendations of principals (principals could self-select themselves). I have some questions about your experiences with cyberbullying. I would like to make an audio recording of your answers, as well as making notes of our interview.

What pseudonym would you prefer? _________________________

Questions:
1. Select a cyberbullying case you have handled that was resolved successfully for all parties.
2. Select another cyberbullying case that was difficult to resolve and describe it.

Probes:
3. What did you have to consider before making a decision about this case?
4. Did your policy help or not help?
5. What do you believe helped you resolve this problem successfully or hinder you from resolving the case successfully?
6. Why did you consider this case significant?
7. What did you have to consider before reaching a solution?
### Appendix F

**Interview Protocol – Literature Base**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIT and Probe Questions</th>
<th>Foundation with Quotation</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select a cyberbullying case you have handled that was resolved successfully for all parties and describe what happened.</td>
<td>The Critical Incident Technique, through unstructured interview questions, can identify the thought processes and feelings of a participant about an incident that he or she has experienced (Chell, 2004). Those using this technique should be able to elicit the feelings about each incident that has some meaning for the participant.</td>
<td>Chell, E. (2004). Critical incident technique. In G. Symon &amp; C. Cassell (Eds.), <em>Qualitative methods and analysis in organizational research: A practical guide</em> (pp. 51-72). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Select another cyberbullying case that was difficult to resolve and describe it.</td>
<td>The Critical Incident Technique, through unstructured interview questions, can identify the thought processes and feelings of a participant about an incident that he or she has experienced (Chell, 2004). Those using this technique should be able to elicit the feelings about each incident that has some meaning for the participant.</td>
<td>Chell, E. (2004). Critical incident technique. In G. Symon &amp; C. Cassell (Eds.), <em>Qualitative methods and analysis in organizational research: A practical guide</em> (pp. 51-72). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you have to consider before making a decision about this case?</td>
<td>Cognitive science can afford researchers keen insight into the expertise of those in administrative positions. By asking a probe question elicited information about participants’ thought processes, I was able to discern what they considered as they handled cyberbullying issues. This allowed some insight into the level of expertise</td>
<td>Leithwood, K., &amp; Steinbach, R. (1995). <em>Expert problem solving: Evidence from school and district leaders</em>. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.</td>
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<td>CIT and Probe Questions</td>
<td>Foundation with Quotation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did your policy help or not?</td>
<td>Cognitive science can afford researchers keen insight into the expertise of those in administrative positions. By asking a probe question elicited information about participants’ thought processes, I was able to discern what they considered as they handled cyberbullying issues. This allowed some insight into the level of expertise the participant might have (Leithwood and Steinbach, 1995).</td>
<td>LEITHWOOD, K., &amp; STEINBACH, R. (1995). Expert problem solving: Evidence from school and district leaders. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you believe helped you resolve this problem successfully or hinder you from resolving the case successfully?</td>
<td>“Expert principals demonstrated a high degree of metacognitive control; this was evident, for example in their ability to monitor the effects of their own behavior and change that behavior when warranted” (Leithwood &amp; Steinbach, 1995, p. 116).</td>
<td>LEITHWOOD, K., &amp; STEINBACH, R. (1995). Expert problem solving: Evidence from school and district leaders. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you consider this case significant?</td>
<td>“Critical incidents are not ‘things’ which exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an</td>
<td>TRIPP, D. (1993). Critical Incidents in Teaching. Developing Professional Judgment. London, UK: Routledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIT and Probe Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you have to consider before reaching a solution?</td>
<td>“Expert principals demonstrated a high degree of metacognitive control; this was evident, for example in their ability to monitor the effects of their own behavior and change that behavior when warranted” (Leithwood &amp; Steinbach, 1995, p. 116).</td>
<td>Leithwood, K., &amp; Steinbach, R. (1995). <em>Expert problem solving: Evidence from school and district leaders</em>. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgment we make, and the basis of that judgment is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident” (Tripp, 1993, p. 8).</td>
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</table>
## Appendix G

*U. S. Department of Education Recommended Critical Components of Cyberbullying Policies (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011, p. xii)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Subcomponents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Statement of purpose</td>
<td>Purpose of the prohibitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Statement of scope and location</td>
<td>Where policies apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Prohibited conduct</td>
<td>Specific behaviors defined as bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Enumeration of specific characteristics</td>
<td>Targeted groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.Development of local policy</td>
<td>Development and implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Components of local policy</td>
<td>Definition, reporting, investigations, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.State review of local policy</td>
<td>State reviews policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.Communication plan</td>
<td>Policy communicated to stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.Training and prevention education</td>
<td>Prevention and training for stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.Transparency and monitoring</td>
<td>Monitoring incidents and reporting them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.Rights to other legal recourse</td>
<td>Victims’ rights to pursue legal remedies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H

Recommended Federal Criteria Found in SC Cyberbullying Policies (by District)

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<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>CRI 1</th>
<th>CRI 2</th>
<th>CRI 3</th>
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*Note.* The number 1 denotes that the criterion is present in the policy, and 0 denotes that the criterion is not present. The first column is not alphabetized. Districts are in order by the number of federally-recommended criteria they have in their cyberbullying policies.
Appendix I

SCSBA Model Policy

HARASSMENT, INTIMIDATION, OR BULLYING

Code JICFAA Issued MODEL

The board prohibits acts of harassment, intimidation, or bullying of a student by students, staff, and third parties that interfere with or disrupt a student’s ability to learn and the school’s responsibility to educate its students in a safe and orderly environment whether in a classroom, on school premises, on a school bus, or other school-related vehicle, at an official school bus stop, at a school-sponsored activity or event whether or not it is held on school premises, or at another program or function where the school is responsible for the student.

For purposes of this policy, harassment, intimidation, or bullying is defined as a gesture, electronic communication, or a written, verbal, physical, or sexual act reasonably perceived to have the effect of either of the following:

• harming a student physically or emotionally or damaging a student’s property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of personal harm or property damage
• insulting or demeaning a student or group of students causing substantial disruption in, or substantial interference with, the orderly operation of the school

Any student who feels he or she has been subjected to harassment, intimidation, or bullying is encouraged to file a complaint in accordance with procedures established by the superintendent. Complaints will be investigated promptly, thoroughly, and confidentially. All school employees are required to report alleged violations of this policy to the principal or his or her designee. Reports by students or employees may be made anonymously.

The district prohibits retaliation or reprisal in any form against a student or employee who has filed a complaint or report of harassment, intimidation, or bullying. The district also prohibits any person from falsely accusing another as a means of harassment, intimidation, or bullying.

The board expects students to conduct themselves in an orderly, courteous, dignified, and respectful manner. Students and employees have a responsibility to know and respect the policies, rules, and regulations of the school and district. Any student or employee who is found to have engaged in the prohibited actions as outlined in this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including expulsion in the case of a student or
termination in the case of an employee. Individuals may also be referred to law enforcement officials. The district will take all other appropriate steps to correct or rectify the situation.

Students, parents/legal guardians, teachers, and staff members should be aware that the district may take disciplinary actions for conduct initiated and/or created off-campus involving the inappropriate use of the Internet or web-based resources if such conduct poses a threat or substantially interferes with or disrupts the work and discipline of the schools, including discipline for student harassment and bullying.

The superintendent will be responsible for ensuring notice of this policy is provided to students, staff, parents/legal guardians, volunteers, and members of the community, including its applicability to all areas of the school environment as outlined in this policy.

The superintendent will also ensure that a process is established for discussing the district policy with students.

Cf. GBEB, JIAA, JICDA

**PAGE 2 - JICFAA - HARASSMENT, INTIMIDATION, OR BULLYING**

Legal references:

A. SC Code, 1976, as amended:
   1. Section 16-3-510 - Organizations and entities revised (hazing unlawful; definitions).
   2. Section 59-19-90 - General powers and duties of school trustees.
   4. Sections 59-63-210 through 270 - Grounds for which trustees may expel, suspend, or transfer pupils; petition for readmission; notices and parent conferences; expulsion for remainder of year and hearings; transfer of pupils; corporal punishment; regulation or prohibition of clubs or like activities on school property.
   5. Section 59-63-275 - Student hazing prohibited.
   6. Section 59-67-240 - Other duties of bus driver; discipline of students for misconduct.

B. Federal Cases:

C. State Board of Education Regulations:
1. R43-279 - Minimum standards of student conduct and disciplinary enforcement procedures to be implemented by local school districts.
Appendix J

Participant Critical Incidents – Successful and Unsuccessful
(arranged by date of interview from earliest to latest)

<table>
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<th>Participants</th>
<th>Critical Incidents</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td><strong>#1A (Successful resolution).</strong> Mr. Jones, an assistant principal (AP) at Elm High School, described a successful incident, which developed as a fight on a bus between a male and female student. The fight resulted from the male student posting a nude photo of the female on social media, a photo that had been freely sent by the female to the male initially. The two had been in a romantic relationship, but had recently broken up. Mr. Jones, after consulting with the school resource officer, reported that no crime had been committed because the female student had provided the picture to her boyfriend. Both of the students were 17-years-old, thus neither was considered a juvenile at the time of the fight, according to the SRO. However, the boyfriend took the photo when the female student was a minor. When Mr. Jones learned that the female’s age in the photo he wondered whether the photo would be considered child pornography. Again, Mr. Jones spoke with the SRO, who stated that the photo would not be considered child pornography. Mr. Jones gave both students five days of suspension, which he said was found in district disciplinary policy (with discretion left to the school leader as to the number of days). He did not levy a punishment for distribution of the nude photo. Mr. Jones felt that this cyberbullying incident had a successful resolution because there were no further incidents at school from these two students. Mr. Jones reported that, although the parents of the female student were upset that the male student had distributed the picture, they were more upset with their daughter for sending a nude photo of herself to anyone (Mr. Jones, Critical Incident A).</td>
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| Mr. Jones    | **#1B (Unsuccessful resolution).** Mr. Jones described that one of the hardest types of cyberbullying cases to solve are pictures of sexually explicit female students. During the previous year, a mother and daughter came to see him to say that there was an explicit picture of the daughter being distributed on a social media site. He asked how the picture arrived to the social media site and added that there are only two ways – someone took the picture of the student and sent it out or the student herself took the picture and sent it out. The student’s explanation was that someone had taken a nude picture of a female from the internet and manipulated the picture to have her head on it – so it was not really her, only her head. He asked, “Do you have a copy of this picture?” She replied that she did not, and he subsequently asked, “Then how do you know it’s out there?” She
replied that a friend told her. He asked her to get a copy from this friend or have the friend come by his office so he could see the picture. He then told the mother that he would look at the picture, and she responded, “Okay, because it’s not her body, so we’re okay, right?” Mr. Jones interjected that he once got a secretary to look at such a picture, so that he would not have to do so, saying that “... he would look at it if [he] had to go to court.” He further explained that he has been questioned even when he handles dress code issues. If he says, “Your daughter’s blouse is cut too low,” the mom will say, “Why are you looking at my daughter’s breasts?” Mr. Jones then continued with his second critical incident. He said that the mother and daughter were sitting in his office crying, and he assured them he would work on it. Two weeks pass, and Mr. Jones still has not received the picture. The friend had not come by, so he talks with the student and mother again. Finally, when no one brings him the picture, he knows that there is something abnormal about the student’s story. Though he does not explain how, he says the truth came to light when the girl admitted that it actually was a picture of her that had been taken in middle school, which she had sent to her boyfriend. When the mother found out, she brought her daughter to Mr. Jones’s office to apologize for wasting his time. He said that the story went from a distraught female victim, who was being cyberbullied by someone else, to a student who was guilty of the distributing the picture to her boyfriend. Mr. Jones said that it showed the importance of conducting a thorough investigation and not stopping until it is resolved. Unfortunately, there is not much resolution when a picture is floating in cyberspace. It cannot be retrieved, so the pain for the student continues.

Ms. Williams

#2A (Successful resolution). Ms. Williams recalled a successful critical incident in which students taught her how subtle cyberbullying can be. A female student told Ms. Williams that another female student shamed her on a social media site. When Ms. Williams looked at the posts, she did not see any direct reference to the alleged victim nor did she see anything that looked like cyberbullying. The victim then explained how the perpetrator was making derogatory remarks about her. The victim said that she had been dating a particular boy. They eventually broke up, and he began dating another girl. The new girlfriend despised her, so she would write comments on social media, such as, “Feel sorry for people not out with their boyfriends on Friday night at the movies.” To anyone unfamiliar with the situation, this statement would seem innocent, but both girls understood that the new girlfriend was insulting the former girlfriend, who probably did not have a date on Friday night. Once Ms. Williams learned the background story, she then understood how
the multiple comments were intended to be derogatory in nature. Ms. Williams solved this incident by calling the perpetrator in and advising her that she needed to stop. Though the district’s cyberbullying policy allowed her to levy a punishment for this cyberbullying incident, she used her discretion to try a warning with the perpetrator first. There were no further complaints by the victim, so she felt that the resolution of this cyberbullying incident was successful (Ms. Williams, Critical Incident A).

Ms. Williams

#2B (Unsuccessful resolution). In her second critical incident, Ms. Williams described a female student who had attended a party on the weekend, where she had taken an explicit picture with herself and a boy, what Ms. Williams described as a “selfie.” Both students were clearly nude, but the picture was not as graphic as it could have been. The picture did show enough of the female’s face that others could identify her. She intended for the picture to be one that was only shared with “her guy.” Unfortunately, he distributed to some of his friends as a way of showing others his “hot” girlfriend. From there, the picture became widely circulated. Several female students who viewed the picture online, made disparaging remarks about the female in the picture. A friend of the girl in the picture initially notified Ms. Williams, because she was afraid for her friend and the picture was being distributed to more and more people and the comments being made at school and online were getting more distressing. The victim was ready to handle the situation with physical confrontation, mainly towards the girls who were calling her names online. The picture was causing ongoing harassment for the female involved – that is until Ms. Williams investigated further. The initial victim had also been sending disparaging remarks to one of the female students who had been commenting about the picture online, even before the boyfriend had distributed the picture. Both girls were guilty of cyberbullying. Ms. Williams involved the school SRO to talk with the male student who had initially distributed the picture. His parents were also notified. Though the female who was in the picture did not want her parents notified, Ms. Williams called them anyway. All three students were suspended for two days. She issued warnings about what the consequences could be if there were any further incidents. Ms. Williams said that the three were not involved in cyberbullying again that year.

Ms. Johnson

#3A (Successful resolution). Ms. Johnson recounted a critical incident in which two girls, then current ninth graders, had a disagreement pertaining to an exchange of text messages. The victim reported to Ms. Johnson that she was being harassed. This disagreement began the year before when the girls were in middle
school. Mrs. Johnson talked to both girls, warned the perpetrator to stop the harassment, and advised the victim to report any further cyberbullying issues. Later that same week, the girls were almost involved in a physical altercation in a restroom, as was reported by another student. Ms. Johnson suspended both girls from the school campus for one day, but the drama continued because their boyfriends became involved on the day of their suspension. Ms. Johnson called parents of both girls and held separate conferences, explaining to each mother and daughter that the harassment and possible physical altercations had to cease before there were more serious consequences, such as more suspension days, expulsion from school, or assault charges from the SRO. Ms. Johnson reported that the district cyberbullying policy allowed her to use a range of consequences, even though it did not state specific consequences for particular cyberbullying infractions. During the conference, the mother of one girl said that her daughter only became involved because she was receiving threatening messages via text. When Ms. Johnson asked to see them, the mother said that her daughter had deleted them all. Because Ms. Johnson had seen this scenario before, where an alleged victim deleted the evidence that could prove that she was being cyberbullied, she decided to share with the mother that when one deletes threatening messages, then she is probably not an innocent party in the incident. Ms. Johnson advised the mother to ask her daughter to take a screenshot and bring that to an administrator, should an incident occur again. Though requesting a screenshot is not found in district policy, it is a procedure that Ms. Johnson learned from investigating cyberbullying incidents.

A few weeks later after the conference, Ms. Johnson recalled the same victim returned to complain about derogatory postings about her by the same perpetrator on a social media site. Yet, given the particular social media site’s 24-hour display limit on posts and the victim’s not making a screenshot when she first discovered it, the derogatory remarks had already disappeared, thus the victim could not provide the assistant principal with the evidence she had requested. This incident took place off-campus during non-school hours, so Ms. Johnson warned the girls – individually in her office – that if any problems occurred on school grounds, then she would handle it as a recurring disciplinary matter (which meant more serious consequences than the one-day suspension they had already served). Since Ms. Johnson had no tangible evidence to prove that the perpetrator had cyberbullied again and no disruption had been caused on the school campus, then she felt that all she could do was warn the perpetrator again. The district’s cyberbullying policy stated that off-
certain campus cyberbullying had to cause a disruption at school before disciplinary action can be taken against those who cyberbully. Ms. Johnson said there were no other disciplinary incidents at school with these two girls. Though she believed that there was still some ongoing cyberbullying going on outside of school (with one of the girls using a social media site where postings are automatically deleted after a specified time), the girls kept their conflict outside of school (Ms. Johnson, Critical Incident A).

| Ms. Johnson | #3B (Problematic resolution). Ms. Johnson described a cyberbullying incident between a male and female student. The male student had videotaped a girl during some sexual activity, “outside of school, at his house, after school.” He decided to show his friends, after an athletic banquet, while he was still on school grounds. Ms. Johnson received a call about the incident that same night, but she was not able to investigate until the following morning. They investigated quickly, because if they did not, then the student could hear that administration knew and delete the video. Ms. Johnson involved the SRO and the two of them finally located the person who originally distributed the video. The SRO decided not to charge the young man, but Ms. Johnson did suspend him because the video was shared on school grounds. As it turned out, the video had not been distributed to anyone, but the male student had showed the picture (from his phone) to other boys at the banquet. |
| Ms. Brown | **#4A (Successful resolution).** Ms. Brown offered her first critical incident and described it as the first one she ever handled in middle school. She said that four students, who were using their school-owned, one-to-one devices, found a way to circumvent the school’s internet “fire wall” in order to threaten another female student because she liked a male student that one of the four girls also liked. They took turns sending the victim threatening text messages and videos of fights, so as to frighten her. The victim did tell her parents (rather than coming directly to an administrator). The parents notified Ms. Brown and met to show her their daughter’s computer so that she could see the threatening messages and images. There were over 120 communications in all, sent over a period of three or four days. Students and parents had been trained at the beginning of school on the proper uses of the school devices. After printing the threatening messages, Ms. Brown had tangible evidence of cyberbullying. She called the parents of the student who had cyberbullied to the school and showed them the messages. She also shared the school policy on cyberbullying. Because there was such a large number of threatening messages, Ms. Brown decided to suspend the girls for five days, though she contemplated 10 days or expulsion because the policy describes some cyberbullying as “severe,” which she believed |
Ms. Brown described this incident. She ultimately decided that because of their young ages, she would suspend them for five days. She involved the SRO, and he told the parents of the student who had cyberbullied that “if [the victim’s parents] decided to press charges, this is what could happen.” He also let the victim’s parents know that they could press charges as well, which they decided against.

Ms. Brown **#4B (Problematic resolution).** Ms. Brown, new high school administrator with middle school administrator experiences, provided a critical incident from her middle school years. She said that a male student (10 or 11-years-old) used a social media site to send a picture of himself, without a shirt, to a female student – using his school-issued computer. He was flexing his muscles in photo. The female student received the picture in the middle of a class during the school day. She was afraid that she was going to get in trouble for having this picture on her phone, so she showed the picture to Ms. Brown. Ms. Brown had conferences with both sets of parents and levied a punishment against the male student (two days of in-school suspension (ISS)). District cyberbullying policy allowed a range of punishments for this infraction, so the assistant principal used her discretion. The parents of the male student then requested that the school retrieve the school-issued computer from their son, a problem since the school delivered its curriculum via the computer. The parents had not provided their son with any electronic devices. The only device he had – which allowed him to cyberbully – was the computer issued by the school. They felt that he was too immature to have access to such a device, and since the school or district had not configured the computers in such a way to make cyberbullying impossible, then the school or district was partially responsible for their child’s misbehavior. They wanted the school to provide their son the curriculum via textbooks and other printed materials. Ms. Brown was perplexed as to how forbid access to technology that was critical to this student’s education (Ms. Brown, Critical Incident B).

Ms. Miller **#5A (Successful resolution).** On the very day of the CIT interview with Ms. Miller, she handled a cyberbullying incident between two female students, who were insulting each other on a social media site. After trading insults, they made a plan to meet near the gym to fight each other. This online dispute had been going on for a long period of time, but no one had notified an administrator. Their exchanges included statements like, “I’m going to kick your butt,” and “Meet me at the mall [to fight].” On this particular day, Ms. Miller found out about the plan to fight, and she and the SRO were able to intervene before the fight began. However, she still suspended the students for three days because they had disturbed school with a verbal altercation. Students in classrooms and teachers overheard this
altercation, so classes were interrupted. Ironically, when their mothers arrived to pick them up at school after their suspension, they, too, got into an altercation in the front office, where the SRO had to intervene again. No other incidents occurred with these students (or their mothers).

Ms. Miller

**#5B (Problematic resolution).** Ms. Miller provided a critical incident involving a video of two students (male and female) having sex, distributed to students by the male perpetrator via an online messaging site and sent to the male’s friends. Some of those friends then distributed the video to other friends. The male perpetrator had videotaped this encounter without the knowledge of the female. One of the victim’s friends told the victim about the video and then reported its existence to Ms. Miller, since it was being widely distributed to students. As Ms. Miller investigated, she determined that law enforcement needed to be involved because of the nudity and sex acts contained in the video, which could be considered pornography. She worked with her school resource officer (SRO) to file a police report and suspended the perpetrator for five days, per district cyberbullying policy, with Ms. Miller having discretion as to the number of days. No charges were brought against the male student, and Ms. Miller said that they only filed the police report to protect herself and the school, should the victim’s parents complain that she had not done enough. Police visited the male student’s home and asked that he delete the offensive video from his phone, which he did. However, since many other students had this video, it was impossible to stop its further distribution. Some students made derogatory statements to the victim during the school day, after seeing or hearing of this video. Ms. Miller met with the female student’s mother, a single parent, and explained that she could not retrieve the video or do anything about students having seen it. The female victim continued to have students make negative comments to her. Ms. Miller commented that most students who find themselves in this situation often withdraw and find another school to attend. At the date of the interview, the female student was still enrolled at the school (Ms. Miller, Critical Incident B).

Mr. Smith

**#6A (Successful resolution).** Mr. Smith’s first critical incident was actually a description of one type of case he handled most often – among females who are harassing each other via social media. He began by distinguishing between cases that occur off-campus and those that occur on-campus. If they occur off-campus, he calls the students in and “counsels” with them. He says, “Look girls, I don’t know what is going on. Obviously, you don’t like each other…. We’re not going to bring [this cyberbullying] back to school.” He gets his SRO involved and tells them, “There are laws as far as what
you can use this device for …. Listen, you get in trouble outside of school for this and you have to have a restraining order [brought against you], that could affect your standing in school, even if it happens outside of school.” He says that that advice usually scares them. He says that he does have policies that deal with cyberbullying, but he and other administrators take into consideration how much trouble students have been in before the cyberbullying incident. If they have not been in trouble, he starts with counseling. He calls the girls in and their parents. He does not get the girls together at the same time, but individually. He assesses the magnitude of the incident – what has been said and done – and if there is a direct threat, he gets the SRO involved and levies a punishment.

| Mr. Smith | #6B (Problematic resolution). Mr. Smith described a cyberbullying incident that took place between a female student and at least one other student in the school, unknown to him at the beginning of the investigation. The victim in this case was described by Mr. Smith as “a large girl,” who reported to him that pictures and videos of her were being posted on social media sites by someone in the school. The victim provided Mr. Smith with the screenshots as evidence. These images were captioned with derogatory comments about her being overweight. It was obvious that someone was following her in the hallways, as she walked to and from classes, and photographed or videotaped her from behind. What Mr. Smith could not tell from the screenshots was the identify of the person or person who had cyberbullied. After suffering some frustration, Mr. Smith noticed that one of the pictures was sent at 10:35 am. He accessed the school’s camera system for the time stamped and viewed the victim, along with those around her. From that vantage point, Mr. Smith saw one female student with her phone out, using it to take a picture. Simultaneously, a friend of the victim told her who the perpetrator was. The victim proceeded to seek out the perpetrator and beat her badly. The school nurse had to provide medical assistance. Immediately after the fight, the victim asked a friend of hers to take a picture of the badly injured girl and wasted no time posting the picture on social media. Resource officers were involved, and the victim was charged with assault. Both girls were suspended from school, per the district policy on physical altercations. Neither student was given a school punishment for their cyberbullying, even though their district policy allowed it. The parents of the victim went to court and subsequently assault charges were dropped because of the long-term cyberbullying of the perpetrator (Mr. Smith, Critical Incident B). |