

It's Not a Perfect World: Leadership Practices that Grow Collective Teacher Efficacy and Student Achievement

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Abstract

Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) is a strong predictor of student achievement, yet many school leaders have limited exposure to the research or practical strategies needed to cultivate it. This descriptive study examined the leadership practices and organizational conditions that foster CTE in high-achieving elementary and intermediate schools in Northeast Texas. Although these campuses consistently exceed expectations, they face common challenges like poverty, staffing limitations, and shifting student needs. The study offers transferable leadership strategies grounded in an asset-based perspective, focusing on successful schools. Findings highlight four key leadership moves that supported CTE: being visibly present in instructional spaces, protecting structured collaboration time, elevating teacher voice, and intentionally developing a collaborative leadership team. These practices reflect the principles of Distributed Leadership, Social Cognitive, and Organizational Learning theories and align with mentoring models that emphasize relational trust and teacher agency. Teachers demonstrated a culture of trust and respect, valuing parents, including parents as partners in student success. Implications for leadership preparation programs and practicing principals are discussed.

Keywords: collaborative leadership team, collective teacher efficacy, distributed leadership, and rural schools

Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) is the shared belief among educators in their collective capacity to support student achievement, no matter the challenges. Indeed, CTE remains one of the strongest known predictors of student learning (Bandura, 1997; Goddard et al., 2000; Hattie, 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). When teachers believe in their collective capacity, they persist with struggling students, adapt instruction, and sustain instructional practices that foster academic growth, even in the face of adversity. However, even though there is robust evidence linking CTE to student outcomes, many school leaders have limited preparation and knowledge in how to cultivate it on their campuses (Donohoo & Katz, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2019; Spillane, 2006; Voelkel et al., 2024).

Much of the scholarship to date has emphasized measurement over practice. Quantitative studies consistently confirm the relationship between CTE and student achievement (Ells, 2011; Goddard et al., 2015; Herrera et al., 2022; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004), yet

few examine what leadership can do to create the conditions that allow efficacy to grow (Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo & Katz, 2020). Moreover, research has focused mainly on struggling or turnaround schools working to use CTE as a lever to improve achievement (Donohoo et al., 2018). Far less attention has been given to how CTE operates in already successful schools that still face challenges (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Anderson et al., 2023; Donohoo & Katz, 2020).

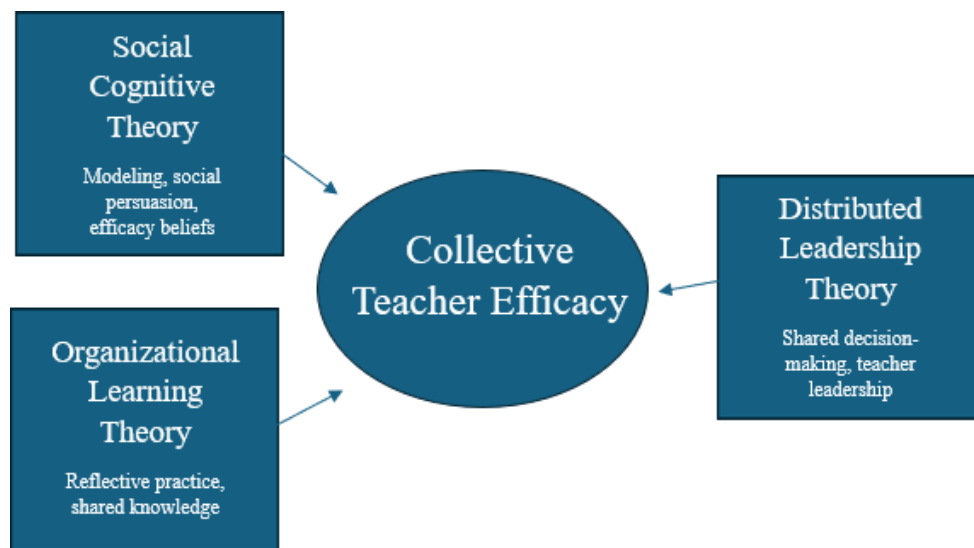
Rural schools are especially underrepresented in the literature, even though rural schools face unique challenges such as poverty, teacher attrition, and limited access to professional development (Hernandez, 2011; Showalter et al., 2023). Even under these circumstances, some rural schools consistently achieve high levels of student success while maintaining strong collaborative professional cultures. Their experiences suggest intentional, relational leadership practices can enable teachers to build and sustain collective efficacy even under resource constraints (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Lawrence & Ray,

2024). These trends reveal a clear gap in the literature: while the influence of CTE on student achievement is well documented, there is little practice-based research exploring how leaders in high-achieving, high-poverty rural schools cultivate and sustain collective efficacy over time.

To address this gap, scholars have pointed to enabling conditions and theoretical perspectives illuminating how CTE develops. Recent frameworks focus on goal consensus, teacher empowerment, reflective practice, and structured collaboration as essential to cultivating CTE (Donohoo & Katz, 2020; Anderson et al., 2023). Other studies emphasize leadership visibility, relational trust, and shared responsibility as drivers of collective efficacy (Eckert et al., 2024; Leithwood et al., 2019; Voelkel et al., 2024). These insights align with

broader theoretical perspectives, including Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, which explains how efficacy beliefs are built through mastery experiences, modeling, and social persuasion; Argyris and Schön's (1978) Organizational Learning Theory, which highlights collaborative reflection and knowledge sharing; and Spillane's (2006) Distributed Leadership Theory, which emphasizes leadership as a practice stretched across people and routines. This framework offers a multidimensional lens for understanding how leadership behaviors and professional culture shape CTE. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how these theories collectively inform the conditions that support CTE in schools.

Figure. *Theoretical Framework Illustrating How Three Foundational Theories Inform Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE)*



Note. This figure illustrates the three theoretical lenses that collectively inform this study: Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997), Organizational Learning Theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978), and Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2006). Social Cognitive Theory explains how modeling, social persuasion, and efficacy beliefs shape teacher perceptions. Organizational Learning Theory highlights the importance of reflective practice and shared knowledge in building collective capacity. Distributed Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of shared decision-making and teacher leadership in sustaining collective ownership. The framework provides an integrated lens for understanding how CTE is developed and maintained in high-achieving schools.

To address the gap, this study explores how educators in high-achieving schools in Northeast Texas experience and sustain collective efficacy. Specifically, the study identifies leadership moves, professional routines, and organizational conditions that teachers associate with building and maintaining a strong sense of CTE (Anderson et al., 2023; Donohoo & Katz, 2020; Goddard et al., 2015).

By focusing on schools that demonstrate high academic achievement despite serving economically diverse and often high-poverty student populations, this research contributes to the growing call for asset-based studies of school improvement (Anderson et al., 2023). The findings are intended to inform leadership preparation programs and practicing principals by replacing abstract

models with observable strategies that cultivate rich collaborative school cultures (Lawrence & Ray, 2024). Ultimately, this study reinforces that CTE is not an accidental byproduct of success, but an outcome that can be intentionally cultivated through deliberate, relational, and distributed leadership moves.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive research design with qualitative components to examine how Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) is fostered and sustained in high-achieving schools. Descriptive research designs are appropriate when the goal is to explore and document existing beliefs, conditions, and practices within authentic settings, rather than to manipulate variables or test interventions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2025; Goddard et al., 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004) because this study sought to identify the leadership behaviors and organizational conditions that support CTE, a descriptive approach provided flexibility and depth in understanding participants' perspectives.

The research was guided by a pragmatic philosophical framework, which emphasizes using methods that best address the research problem and generate actionable findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pragmatism prioritizes functional solutions and values quantitative and qualitative approaches when answering real-world questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2025). The central research question guiding the study was: How does Collective Teacher Efficacy manifest within high-achieving schools in Northeast Texas? This guiding question shaped the study's design, data collection, and analysis, supporting the development of findings relevant to practicing school leaders and leadership preparation programs.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in elementary and intermediate schools located in Northeast Texas. Eligible schools met the following inclusion criteria: (1) served grades Pre-K through 8, (2) reported third-grade reading scores above the Texas state average in both the Meets and

Masters Grade Level performance categories on the 2022-2023 State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR), (3) were located within Region 7 or Region 8 Education Service Centers, and (4) voluntarily agreed to participate. Of the 30 schools invited to participate, 13 responded, yielding 127 teacher survey responses. To ensure data quality and representation, we focused on the five schools with at least a 20% teacher response rate during the initial survey phase. These schools were then invited to participate in a second survey round to increase participation and support a more robust analysis. From this targeted group, we received 67 responses that included both Likert-scale and narrative data.

The five focus schools selected for this study demonstrated academic performance that met or exceeded state averages based on third-grade reading scores. The state reading achievement test categorizes student performance into four levels: Did Not Meet Grade Level, Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level. Students scoring at the Approaches level or higher have passed the assessment. For this study, all five schools surpassed the state average of 50% for students performing at the Meets Grade Level, indicating that most students achieved grade-level proficiency. Additionally, each school met or exceeded the state average of 20% for students performing at the Masters Grade Level, reflecting a substantial proportion of advanced readers. These results highlight the academic strength of each campus and support their selection as high-achieving schools for this study. Table 1 presents a demographic and academic performance overview of the five focus schools included in this study. The proportion of economically disadvantaged students at these campuses ranged from 43.5% to 79.1%, with three of the five schools serving populations above the state average of 62%. These data illustrate that despite serving diverse and, in many cases, high-need student populations, each school demonstrated strong academic outcomes. All schools were in rural areas, emphasizing their relevance as models for cultivating CTE in challenging contexts.

Table 1. *Demographic Overview of Focus Schools*

School	# Students	# Teachers	Meets or Above State (50%)	Masters or Above State (20%)	Econ. Disadvantaged (62%)
School #1	449	32.5	58%	23%	66.4%
School #2	483	35.9	61%	23%	54.2%
School #3	321	21.8	57%	20%	68.2%
School #4	401	35.0	71%	22%	79.1%
School #5	572	41.1	85%	51%	43.5%

Note: This table provides student enrollment, teacher count, and academic performance data for the five focus schools included in the study. State benchmarks are provided for comparison. All schools were classified as rural.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected in two phases using a single online survey administered through Qualtrics. School principals were emailed a secure survey link and asked to distribute it to all certified campus teachers. This strategy helped ensure broad reach and voluntary participation while maintaining confidentiality.

The survey instrument included quantitative and qualitative items to explore CTE within each campus. The quantitative portion incorporated the validated 12-item *Collective Efficacy Scale–Short Form* (Goddard, 2002; Herrera et al., 2022), which measured teachers' perceptions of their faculty's collective ability to impact student learning. Items were rated on a six-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

To complement the scale, the survey included four open-ended questions inviting teachers to reflect on collaboration, leadership support, school challenges, and how collective efficacy is sustained. A follow-up qualitative phase was then conducted with teachers from five schools with a 20% or higher teacher response rate, resulting in 67 narrative responses from those campuses. This second phase allowed additional participants from the five focus schools to contribute new insights related to themes identified in the first round of analysis, offering a richer understanding of teacher experiences.

Together, the two phases supported a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the enabling conditions for CTE. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data allowed for triangulation of findings, enhancing the study's credibility (Anderson et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and all participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate aggregate and item-level scores from the *Collective Efficacy Scale–Short Form*. Following

Goddard's (2002) guidelines, a mean scale score above 500 reflects typical levels of collective efficacy, while scores above 600 indicate higher-than-average efficacy, exceeding 84% of schools nationally. Reverse-scored items were recalibrated before analysis to ensure consistency, following best practices from recent psychometric validation studies (Herrera et al., 2022).

Qualitative data from the second phase of the survey, which included open-ended responses from teachers at five rural schools, were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase thematic analysis process. These phases included familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, theme development, theme review, definition and naming of themes, and final reporting. The research team conducted manual open coding to identify emerging patterns in participant responses, emphasizing maintaining clarity and fidelity to teachers' language. To strengthen rigor, coding techniques from Saldaña (2021) and thematic review strategies from Creswell and Poth (2018) were integrated throughout the analysis. AI tools were not used to conduct any initial coding or interpretation. After manual coding was completed, artificial intelligence was used solely to verify consistency in theme terminology and to ensure alignment in language across related data segments. The research team maintained full control of analysis decisions, and all results were independently reviewed to ensure accuracy and integrity.

To support trustworthiness, multiple strategies were implemented (Creswell & Miller, 2002). Triangulation occurred across two phases of data collection and two data types, quantitative scale items and open-ended qualitative responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing among the research team helped minimize potential bias. An audit trail was maintained throughout the study to document key decisions. Additionally, detailed descriptions of findings and their alignment with the study's theoretical framework in the discussion section help establish validity and support transferability to other settings.

Findings

The analysis includes both quantitative and qualitative data to capture a broad view of how Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) is experienced and sustained in high-achieving rural schools. Findings are presented in two sections. First, survey-based results from the *Collective Efficacy Scale–Short Form* are summarized. Then, qualitative insights were drawn from open-ended responses highlighting leadership behaviors and school conditions that contribute to strong collective efficacy.

Descriptive Analysis of Collective Teacher Efficacy

Survey results revealed consistently strong levels of CTE across the participating campuses. Aggregate scores on the *Collective Efficacy Scale* ranged from 530 to 650, with two schools exceeding the 600 benchmark that denotes higher-than-average efficacy. These results indicate

a shared belief among faculty in their collective ability to influence student outcomes, even in the face of contextual challenges.

Teachers responded most strongly to items that emphasized persistence with struggling students, confidence in instructional effectiveness, and shared ownership of student learning. Items with higher mean scores and low variability reflected widespread agreement, suggesting a cohesive faculty culture grounded in mutual responsibility and problem-solving. Table 2 presents item-level means and standard deviations from the *Collective Efficacy Scale–Short Form*. The highest-rated items further highlighted the faculty’s ability to overcome obstacles, support one another’s instructional efforts, and maintain a unified focus on student success.

Table 2. *Aggregate Collective Efficacy Scale–Short Form Item Analysis*

Survey Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Teachers in this school are able to get through to the most difficult students.	5.2	0.55
2. Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students.	5.3	0.49
3. If a child doesn’t want to learn, teachers here give up.	*2.3	0.71
4. Teachers in this school are skilled in various instructional strategies.	*5.5	0.38
5. Teachers in this school believe every child can learn.	5.6	0.40
6. Teachers here collaborate to solve problems related to instruction.	5.4	0.47
7. Teachers feel they are able to help students think critically.	5	0.6
8. Teachers at this school cannot do much to help students who come from troubled homes.	*2.1	0.9
9. Teachers are confident in their ability to support student learning.	*5.2	0.6
10. Teachers can help students master difficult skills.	5.3	0.5
11. Teachers in this school often give up on students.	*2.2	0.8
12. Teachers believe they can effectively support diverse learners.	*5.1	0.6

Note. Data represent item-level means and standard deviations based on survey responses from 67 teachers at five focus schools. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 Strongly Disagree to 6 Strongly Agree. Asterisk (*) denotes reverse-scored items. Items are drawn from the *Collective Efficacy Scale–Short Form* (Goddard, 2002; Goddard et al., 2000).

A comparison of school-level aggregate scores provided additional insight into variation across campuses. Each of the five schools surpassed the benchmark of 500 commonly associated with average levels of Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE). Notably, two schools reported CTE scores above 600, placing them within the top 15% of schools nationally. These results are detailed in Table 3, which outlines standardized CTE scores and participation rates across the focus

schools. These findings underscore the role of collaboration and efficacy-based beliefs in sustaining success, particularly in rural schools serving students with complex and diverse needs.

Table 3. *Collective Teacher Efficacy Scores by School*

School	Participation Rate	Likert Item Mean Score	CTE Standardized Score
School #1	27.69%	4.72	594.20
School #2	52.92%	4.37	538.85
School #3	50.46%	4.70	590.25
School #4	37.14%	4.78	602.56
School #5	36.50%	5.03	642.00

Note. This table reports CTE scores based on teacher responses from five high-achieving schools in Northeast Texas. Scores are standardized according to the Collective Efficacy Scale–Short Form (Goddard et al., 2000). Participation rate reflects the percentage of certified teachers who completed the survey at each campus. A standardized score above 500 reflects average CTE. Scores above 600 indicate CTE is higher than 84% of schools nationally.

Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses

The qualitative portion of this study included four open-ended survey questions designed to explore how teachers experience and sustain CTE in their schools. These questions invited teachers to reflect on the conditions supporting CTE, provide examples of meaningful collaboration, describe leadership actions that build trust, and share thoughts on what makes strong teacher teams.

Thematic analysis of these responses revealed four consistent themes that offer a comprehensive view of the organizational conditions and leadership practices associated with strong collective efficacy: (1) collaborative, relationship-driven cultures; (2) protected time for collaboration; (3) leadership support for teacher voice; and (4) collaborative leadership teams that support distributed leadership. These themes were consistently represented across all four survey questions and are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. *Aggregate Themes Across Open-Ended Survey Questions*

Theme	Description
Collaborative, Relationship-Driven Cultures	Teachers described trust, collegiality, and mutual support as foundations of their work.
Protected Time for Collaboration	Structured collaboration time was seen as essential to team cohesion and instructional planning.
Leadership Support for Teacher Voice	Teachers felt empowered when leadership listened, valued input, and incorporated teacher ideas.
Collaborative Leadership Teams Support Distributed Leadership	Teams of teacher leaders and coaches helped lead initiatives, solve problems, and extend principal influence.

Note. This table summarizes aggregate findings from open-ended responses across five high-achieving focus schools. Themes reflect common teacher perspectives on leadership support for collaboration.

Theme 1: Collaborative, Relationship-Driven Cultures

Teachers described their campuses as relationally rich environments where trust, respect, and collegiality formed the foundation for their collaborative work. Respondents frequently referred to their colleagues as “family” or “a second home,” underscoring the depth of their professional connections.

One teacher explained, *“We work together because we genuinely care about each other, not just because it is required. That makes a huge difference in how we approach challenges.”* Another added, *“This is a place where people help each other without being asked. No one wants to see a teammate struggle.”*

Many teachers emphasized that these relationships created a safe space for sharing ideas, admitting mistakes, and learning together. One participant shared, *“We trust each other enough to have honest conversations about what is and isn’t working for our kids.”* The importance of relational trust was reflected not only within grade-level teams but also across the campus community. Teachers consistently framed their collective strength as rooted in positive, supportive relationships.

In addition to describing supportive peer relationships, several teachers reflected a deep respect for the families they served, particularly those navigating poverty, single parenthood, or demanding work schedules. Although lack of parental involvement was cited as a challenge elsewhere in the survey, participants consistently emphasized that these circumstances were understood, not criticized. As one teacher shared, *“Our parents are doing the best they can. Just because they cannot be at every event does not mean they do not care.”* This perspective exemplified an asset-based mindset that extended beyond internal staff dynamics to how educators viewed their broader school communities. Rather than casting blame, teachers voiced empathy and appreciation for families’ efforts under difficult circumstances, reinforcing a culture of relational trust.

Theme 2: Protected Time for Collaboration

Teachers across all five schools stressed the value of having structured and protected time to collaborate with their colleagues. Participants identified weekly meetings, common planning periods, and data discussions as critical features of their collaborative routines. One respondent noted, *“Our collaboration time is sacred. Everyone knows not to schedule over it because it is when we do our best thinking together.”* Another described the role of leadership in supporting this structure, stating, *“Our principal protects our planning time fiercely. They know it’s where the real magic happens.”*

Teachers valued that collaboration was not left to chance. Instead, it was embedded in the school’s culture and schedule. As one teacher explained, *“We aren’t just told to collaborate. We are given time, space, and respect to do it well.”* Participants shared that this protected time enabled deeper conversations about student needs, instructional strategies, and collective problem-solving. It also reinforced a sense of shared ownership over student success.

Theme 3: Leadership Support for Teacher Voice

A third theme centered on the importance of leadership practices that elevated and valued teacher voice. Teachers described principals who actively sought their input, listened to their concerns, and incorporated their ideas into school decisions. One participant shared, *“We don’t just get told what to do. Our voices shape what happens here.”* Another added, *“Leadership here listens first. That builds trust because we know we’re not just being talked at.”*

Teachers expressed appreciation for having multiple avenues to share their perspectives, including formal opportunities like leadership teams and informal opportunities through everyday conversations. This openness created a sense of investment and collective responsibility. As one teacher reflected, *“When leaders trust us to lead, we step up. We know our ideas matter, and that makes us want to do even better for our students.”*

Notably, this culture of respect and relational trust extended beyond staff interactions to include the broader school community. Teachers described parents, even those facing poverty, long work hours, or single parenting responsibilities, with empathy rather than judgment. While limited parental involvement was cited as a challenge, educators framed this issue as a reflection of structural barriers, not a lack of care. This outlook reinforces the depth of the schools’ collective responsibility and signals that strong CTE is intertwined with an asset-based view of both colleagues and families.

Theme 4: Collaborative Leadership Teams Support Distributed Leadership

The final theme reflected the presence of collaborative leadership teams that distributed responsibility across the campus. These teams, often composed of teacher leaders, instructional coaches, and grade-level representatives, played a central role in aligning school goals, guiding instructional focus, and supporting collective learning. One teacher explained, *“Leadership doesn’t sit in one office. It’s everywhere — in every hallway, in every classroom.”* Another participant shared, *“Our*

collaborative leadership team is real. They actually lead things, not just meet about them.”

Teachers valued that the collaborative leadership team provided consistent guidance and allowed leadership to be shared among colleagues. These structures were seen as critical to ensuring a unified instructional vision, building capacity among teachers, and sustaining momentum through changes or challenges. Participants emphasized that these teams did not replace the principal’s leadership but complemented it. As one teacher explained, *“Our principal leads us, but we also lead each other. The team helps carry the work together.”*

Teachers valued having leadership roles embedded throughout the campus because it expanded their access to support and created a more responsive professional environment. These shared structures contributed to a culture where collective efficacy was not dependent on a single leader but sustained by a network of instructional leadership across the school.

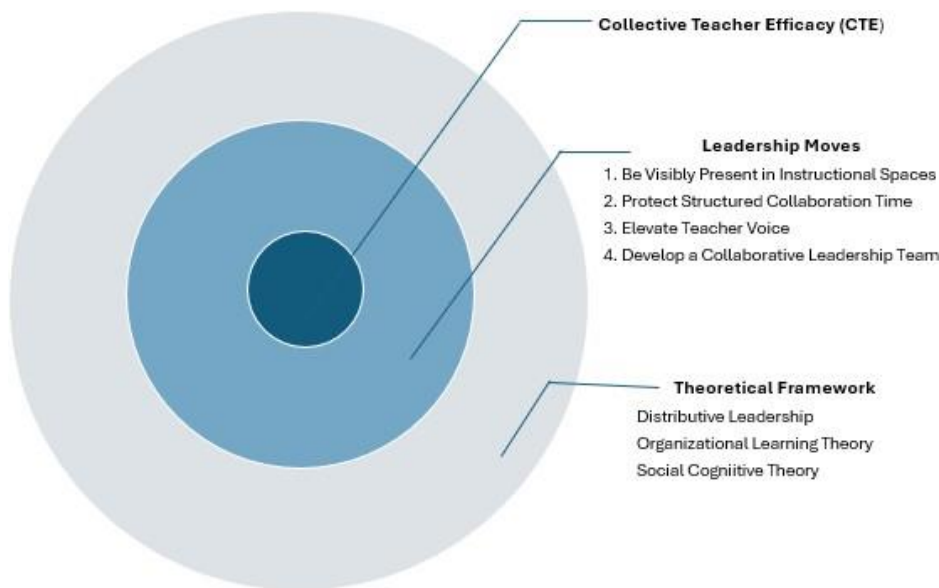
These findings provide insight into the organizational conditions and leadership practices that supported strong CTE across high-achieving schools in Northeast Texas. While each theme reflected distinct

features of campus culture and leadership, they also pointed to common strategies that fostered collaboration, trust, and shared responsibility among teachers. The following discussion considers these findings in relation to existing literature and highlights four key leadership moves that school leaders can implement to intentionally cultivate CTE in their own settings.

Discussion

Findings from this study identified leadership practices and school conditions that contributed to the development and sustainability of Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) across five high-achieving schools in Northeast Texas. While each school demonstrated unique characteristics, the aggregate analysis revealed four leadership moves that were consistently associated with strong CTE. These moves, as presented in Figure 2, included: (1) being visibly present in instructional spaces, (2) protecting structured collaboration time, (3) elevating teacher voice, and (4) developing a collaborative leadership team. Each of these practices reflects intentional actions by school leaders to foster relational trust, build collective ownership, and sustain collaborative professional cultures (Eckert et al., 2024).

Figure 2. Leadership Moves That Cultivate Collective Teacher Efficacy



Note. Four interconnected leadership practices that foster and sustain CTE, as identified in high-achieving rural schools. These moves reflect consistent, intentional actions by principals and teacher leaders that align with Distributed Leadership, Social Cognitive, and Organizational Learning theories.

In addition to these aggregate findings, one school in particular highlighted the transferability of these leadership practices across diverse contexts. School 4 reported a CTE score exceeding 600 despite serving a student population in which nearly 80% of students were economically disadvantaged. This finding reinforces the idea that CTE is not confined to well-resourced settings but can flourish in schools facing significant challenges when leadership practices create the conditions necessary for collective efficacy (Donohoo et al., 2018).

Leadership Move 1: Be Visibly Present in Instructional Spaces

Teachers across all five schools consistently emphasized the importance of leader visibility in instructional settings. Principals and other campus leaders who were present in classrooms and actively engaged in instructional conversations were viewed as approachable, supportive, and invested in the success of both teachers and students. These behaviors align with Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, which highlights modeling and observational learning as key sources of efficacy development.

Leader visibility also reflects Spillane's (2006) concept of distributed leadership, where leadership practice is stretched across everyday interactions within a school. Teachers described visibility as more than physical presence; it was relational presence. As leaders spent time in classrooms, engaged in instructional dialogue, and participated in professional learning, they fostered trust and shared responsibility for student learning.

Leadership Move 2: Protect Structured Collaboration Time

Protecting structured time for collaboration emerged as a powerful enabler of CTE. Teachers valued having dedicated, uninterrupted opportunities to engage with colleagues, plan instruction, analyze data, and solve problems collectively. This finding reflects the core principles of Organizational Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of shared reflection and collective problem-solving for continuous improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Leadership practices that protected this collaboration time signaled respect for teachers' expertise and reinforced a culture of collective ownership. Prior research has demonstrated that collaboration strengthens CTE when it is structured, routine, and embedded in school practices (Donohoo & Katz, 2020; Goddard et al., 2015). In these high-achieving schools, leaders safeguarded collaboration time not as an optional activity but as essential to instructional success.

Leadership Move 3: Elevate Teacher Voice

Another consistent leadership practice was the intentional elevation of teacher voice in decision-making and school improvement efforts. Teachers described feeling trusted, heard, and valued when their ideas were solicited and acted upon. This aligns with Bandura's (1997) assertion that social persuasion, including affirmation of expertise, strengthens efficacy beliefs.

Teacher voice was cultivated both formally, through participation in leadership structures, and informally, through regular conversations with school leaders. Empowering teachers to lead within their teams supported a culture of shared responsibility and collaborative problem-solving. Donohoo and Katz (2020) identified teacher empowerment as a critical enabling condition for CTE, and this study's findings affirm that elevating teacher voice is a relational leadership practice with tangible impact. These practices are aligned with Lawrence and Ray's (2024) relational mentoring framework, which emphasizes structured systems that empower teachers and cultivate agency through professional trust and voice.

Leadership Move 4: Develop a Collaborative Leadership Team

Finally, the presence of collaborative leadership teams emerged as a critical feature of the schools studied. These teams included teacher leaders, instructional coaches, and grade-level representatives who assumed shared leadership responsibilities alongside the principal (Eckert et al., 2024). Collaborative leadership teams reflected the distributed nature of leadership practice (Spillane, 2006), allowing instructional guidance, communication, and support to extend beyond the principal's office and into daily instructional life.

Teachers valued these teams not only for their logistical role in coordinating school improvement efforts but also for the relational trust they fostered across the school. These teams created consistency, reinforced shared goals, and built leadership capacity within the teaching staff. They were seen as essential to aligning priorities and keeping momentum steady, even during moments of challenge or transition.

Rather than operating as a single spotlight directed from the top, leadership within these schools resembled a constellation, each point of light offering direction, clarity, and shared guidance across the campus. Teachers recognized that the presence of distributed leadership structures reassured them that leadership was not confined to a single individual but lived throughout the school community. This collaborative structure made leadership

more responsive, more accessible, and ultimately more sustainable.

As noted by Donohoo and Katz (2020), the development of collaborative leadership structures is a vital enabling condition for sustaining CTE over time. Lawrence and Ray (2024) argued that comprehensive mentoring models can serve as the foundation for collaborative leadership teams, particularly when designed to elevate teacher agency and foster collective responsibility for improvement. Study findings emphasize that effective leadership is not just about direction; it is about distribution, shared responsibility, and building internal capacity that lasts.

Transferability of Findings Beyond High-Achieving Schools

Although this study focused on high-achieving schools in Northeast Texas, the findings hold important implications for schools in a variety of contexts. The leadership moves identified in this research are not dependent on school size, location, or demographic characteristics. Instead, they reflect intentional practices that can be implemented in any school where leaders seek

to foster Collective Teacher Efficacy (Karakose et al., 2024; Voelkel et al., 2024).

The case of School 4 provides compelling evidence that CTE can thrive in schools serving economically disadvantaged student populations when leadership practices cultivate collaborative cultures grounded in trust, respect, and shared purpose. This reinforces prior research suggesting that CTE is both transferable and achievable across diverse educational settings (Donohoo et al., 2018).

Leadership preparation programs and practicing principals can draw on these findings to design professional learning experiences, develop collaborative leadership teams, and create conditions that sustain collective efficacy. Table 5 provides a summary of these leadership moves, highlighting their core practices, theoretical grounding, and supporting research to guide application in diverse school settings. These practices align with Texas Principal Standards, particularly in the areas of instructional leadership, human capital development, and school culture.

Table 5. Leadership Moves That Foster Collective Teacher Efficacy

Leadership Move	Core Practice	Theoretical Connection	Supporting Research
Be Visibly Present in Instructional Spaces	Classroom presence, instructional conversations	Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997); Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006)	Donohoo et al., 2018
Protect Structured Collaboration Time	Scheduled team meetings, protected planning periods	Organizational Learning Theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978)	Donohoo & Katz, 2020
Elevate Teacher Voice	Input in decision-making, leadership roles	Social Persuasion (Bandura, 1997)	Goddard et al., 2015; Lawrence & Ray, 2024
Develop Collaborative Leadership Team	Teacher leaders, coaches, shared leadership	Distributed Leadership (Spillane, 2006)	Donohoo & Katz, 2020

Note. Table 3 summarizes four leadership moves identified in this study as enabling conditions for CTE. The theoretical connections link each leadership practice to relevant frameworks in the literature and supporting research references are drawn from empirical and conceptual studies cited throughout the manuscript. This table is intended to serve as a practical guide for school leaders and leadership preparation programs seeking to cultivate CTE through relational, intentional, and distributed leadership practices.

These leadership moves are not merely theoretical ideals; they are grounded in observable practices that shaped the professional culture of high-achieving schools in this study. When implemented with consistency and relational intentionality, these moves can strengthen CTE in schools facing a wide range of contextual challenges (Donohoo & Katz, 2020; Goddard et al., 2015). As leadership preparation programs and practicing principals reflect on their own school settings, Table 5 offers a starting point for developing systems and routines that enable teacher collaboration, shared responsibility, and collective agency (Lawrence & Ray, 2024; Spillane, 2006).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research that views Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) not as an accidental byproduct of success, but as an outcome that can be intentionally cultivated through deliberate leadership practice (Donohoo, 2017; Donohoo & Katz, 2020). Findings from five high-achieving schools in Northeast Texas demonstrated that specific leadership moves fostered and sustained strong collective efficacy among teachers. These moves included being visibly present in instructional spaces, protecting structured collaboration time, elevating teacher voice, and developing a collaborative leadership team (Spillane, 2006; Voelkel et al., 2024). Together, these leadership practices created enabling conditions where educators felt connected, supported, and collectively responsible for student success.

Importantly, the leadership practices identified in this study were not dependent on school demographics, size, or available resources. The case of School 4, which reported a CTE score exceeding national benchmarks despite serving a predominantly economically disadvantaged student population, underscores the transferability of these leadership moves. This finding reinforces that when leaders build relational trust, protect collaborative routines, and distribute leadership across the campus, CTE can flourish in a variety of educational settings (Goddard et al., 2015; Lawrence & Ray, 2024). Schools serving economically disadvantaged students or those facing resource constraints can create collaborative cultures when intentional leadership practices support collective responsibility and relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Limitations of the Study

As with all research, this study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted within a specific geographic region, Northeast Texas, and focused exclusively on high-achieving elementary and intermediate schools. While these settings provided valuable insight into enabling leadership practices, the findings may not fully capture the

experiences of secondary schools or schools located in urban or suburban contexts. Expanding future research to other geographic areas or school types would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how CTE functions in varied environments.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from teachers, which may reflect personal perceptions rather than objective observations. Although strategies such as triangulation and member checking were employed to strengthen trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), it is possible that some responses were shaped by social desirability or local norms. Collecting additional data through classroom observations, student outcome measures, or leadership artifacts could provide further insight into the specific practices that foster CTE (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

Finally, while this study utilized a survey design with qualitative components to explore teacher perceptions of CTE, the design did not directly measure student-level academic outcomes. Future research would benefit from examining how leadership practices that foster CTE ultimately impact student learning over time (Hattie, 2018). Tracking changes in CTE alongside measures of student performance would provide a fuller understanding of the influence of collective efficacy on school improvement.

Implications for Future Research

This study points to several avenues for future research. First, additional studies are needed to examine how the leadership moves identified here operate within secondary schools, urban districts, or other geographic regions (Voelkel et al., 2024). Research that explores the sustainability of CTE during leadership transitions or changing school demographics would provide further insight into the resilience of collective efficacy over time (Dahlkamp et al., 2017).

Second, future research should consider longitudinal designs that trace the development of CTE and its relationship to student outcomes across multiple years. Examining how shifts in leadership practice influence teacher beliefs, professional collaboration, and student achievement over time would deepen understanding of the processes that sustain CTE (Goddard et al., 2015). Finally, studies that explore the preparation and development of collaborative leadership teams would provide valuable guidance for leadership preparation programs. Investigating how principals identify, develop, and support teacher leaders within collaborative leadership teams could strengthen both theoretical and practical knowledge in the field (Lawrence & Ray, 2024; Spillane, 2006). Additionally, research that examines how aspiring school leaders learn to create enabling conditions for CTE

during their preparation programs would support the bridge between theory and practice (Leithwood et al., 2019).

Overall, this study affirms that Collective Teacher Efficacy is not confined to particular types of schools or conditions. Instead, it is built through relational, instructional, and structural leadership practices that foster trust, collaboration, and collective ownership of student success.

As schools continue to navigate complex challenges, the ability of leaders to cultivate these enabling conditions will remain essential to school improvement and to sustaining professional cultures where teachers thrive.

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