Leadership Practices that Improve the Achievement of African American Students in Urban Schools

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of

San Diego State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Educational Leadership

August 8, 2013
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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Leadership Practices that Improve the Achievement of African American Students in Urban Schools

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8 - 8 - 13
Approval Date
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ABSTRACT

The author examined the leadership practices and processes used to improve the achievement of African American students at William Dandy Middle School in the Broward School District of Ft. Lauderdale, FL. The researcher explored the functions of the principal, teachers, and support staff using qualitative research techniques, including semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. Research questions addressed the nature of curricula, instruction, and relationships at the school and the roles leaders played in influencing those factors. The findings suggest that curricula at the school were focused on challenging standards, across broad curricular areas (including science, mathematics, engineering, and science), with an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills. Instruction featured high levels of student engagement and high rates of student feedback and interaction. The relationships between students and teachers were characterized by teacher concern for each student’s general being, teacher effort to ensure each student’s academic success, as well as efforts to help students succeed in areas beyond academics. Leaders at Dandy Middle School influenced these factors through the provision of intensive professional development, frequent teacher collaboration, and regular classroom observations and feedback to teachers. The study describes implications for leaders, implications for leadership preparation, and implications for future research.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my gratitude to my Heavenly Father for compelling me to apply for and complete this Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, Prek-12 Specialization at San Diego State University. He has a plan and purpose for my life and I look forward to the journeys ahead. I would like to thank my grandmother, Elizabeth Brown for inspiring me and my mother Elizabeth Villery for her unconditional love and emotional support. I want to thank my children Bethany and Noah Shedrick for their patience and understanding throughout this process. I want to thank my close friends Gwendolyn Chamberlain, Geneva Arsene, and Traci Brooks for providing motivation to complete this enormous and important work.

A very deep appreciation goes to my faculty mentor and chair, Dr. Joseph F. Johnson who encouraged me to apply and who has been a constant source of wisdom and support. His patience, expertise, and understanding as a mentor and instructor have been invaluable.

I also want to thank Dr. Cynthia L. Uline for assisting and advising me through the critical stages of this doctoral program. I appreciate your insight and knowledge.

Finally, I want to express deep appreciation to Dr. Mary R. Cannie for her willingness to assist and support me whenever I needed it. She is a wonderful model of effective leadership and one who has facilitated the achievement of African American students. I am thankful to learn from you.
To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for His peace and strength

“He who has begun that perfect work in you will be faithful to complete it.”

Philippians 1:6

To my loving father in heaven,

Robert Louis

To my encouraging and supportive mother,

Elizabeth

To my wonderful and understanding children,

Bethany and Noah
CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

In an age of rigorous school accountability, the role of the principal is critical in predicting whether students will achieve at high levels (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Traditional examinations of principal effectiveness have included assessments of principal responsibilities and job tasks or have focused on the competencies, knowledge, and skills that principals should possess (Goldring, Cravens, Murphy, Elliott, & Carson, 2008). While these studies have been useful in exploring principal leadership in general, they have not adequately explored how leaders influence improved learning results for the diverse populations of learners served in urban schools throughout the United States. In particular, there has been insufficient study of leadership in schools that generate sustained levels of high achievement for African American students.

The author examined the leadership practices and processes used to improve the achievement of African American students at William Dandy Middle School, in the Broward School District of Ft. Lauderdale, FL. The researcher explored the functions of the principal, teachers, and support staff that might have influenced curriculum, instruction, and/or relationships in ways that resulted in better learning results for African American students. The researcher used qualitative research techniques, including semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with Dandy Middle School stakeholders, observations, and document reviews.

The study informs principals, district leaders, and other school administrators serving African American students in urban areas about practices and strategies that lead to sustained growth and achievement for these learners.
Statement of the Problem

Too many students of color have not been achieving in schools as well as they could for far too long (Gay, 2000). Students of color living in high-poverty areas face serious challenges within the educational system. Many schools in high-poverty areas experience issues such as, high dropout rates, lack of language proficiency, instruction from the least experienced teachers, and lack of resources and space. African American students can experience high academic achievement; however, they have not received an equal education (C. Lee, 2008).

Wide disparities in achievement exist between African American and White students in grades K-12. These disparities underscore the need for new and innovative interventions by educational systems (Bemak, 2005). An achievement gap persists between racial groups, with African American students’ academic performance falling behind that of White students (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Thompson, 1995). The presence of such an achievement gap was one of the catalysts driving the present research to explore the leadership practices that have influenced achievement of African American students in urban schools. The National Educational Longitudinal Survey and the Common Core of Data reveal inner-city disadvantages in both family and school resources (Roscigno, 2006). These resource inequalities may partially explain deficits in attainment and achievement on standardized tests. On the other hand, there are schools such as William Dandy Middle School, where African American students outperform the average of all students in the state.

Federal, state, and local educational agencies use high-stakes assessments to hold students, teachers, principals, and school districts accountable for academic achievement.
In particular, these agencies hold each principal responsible for student achievement at the school site. School administrators may have the greatest opportunity to influence achievement. Leithwood (2004) asserted that effective leadership plays a significant and frequently underestimated role in improving student learning. Ferguson (2010) noted that principals are in the best position to develop procedures to close the achievement gap. Yet, too few principals seem to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to lead their schools toward high levels of achievement for African American students (Gay, 2008). An examination of the specific practices school leaders implemented to improve achievement for African American students was therefore warranted.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to deepen understanding of the leadership practices that influenced high levels of academic success for African American students at a high-performing, Title I middle school. In particular, the researcher sought to develop robust descriptions of the processes that influenced better learning results for African American students, including any processes that led to the teaching of more challenging academic content, any processes that promoted better initial instruction or more effective intervention when initial instruction was unsuccessful, or any processes that led to better relationships among students, teachers, parents, support staff, and administrators. Further, the researcher sought to identify and describe how the principal helped create and sustain these processes. As well, the investigator sought to identify and describe the role other teachers and administrators played in creating and sustaining these processes.
Summary of the Literature

This review of literature provides a foundation for the current inquiry. The review examined the current state of academic achievement for African American students in urban areas, and then explored key factors (content, pedagogy, and relationships) that have influenced the success of schools that generate high-achieving African American students. The literature review also examined leadership factors that influence achievement in schools that serve African American students well. This study examined systems and structures that leaders implemented and that were perceived to lead to school-wide effective instruction in a high performing and high poverty middle school.

Status of Public Education in the United States

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1988) examined the quality of the American public school education and identified many inconsistencies and deficiencies within and between public school systems. The report revealed that 13% of 17 year olds in the United States were functionally illiterate; however, the percentage was as high as 40% among students of color. The Commission made apparent that achievement levels among students of color, especially African American students, were often much lower than their White counterparts. Provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) held school districts, site administrators, and teachers accountable for ensuring that students make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in specific curricular areas through the monitoring of annual standardized tests (California Department of Education [CDE], 2009). As a result of this increased accountability and deliberate focus on instruction, state assessments revealed measurable achievement gains for all demographic groups since the implementation of NCLB in 2001 (CDE, 2009). However, a significant
achievement gap still exists between African American students and White students. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013) confirmed the gap between these two demographic groups is still substantial.

**Current State of Academic Achievement for African American Students**

African American and Hispanic sub-groups consistently perform at levels below those of White and Asian students. Several studies concur that African American and Hispanic students in urban areas are not achieving at levels comparable to their White counterparts, thus interventions and solutions are needed. Black and Latino students are, on average, two to three years behind White students of the same age in academic achievement. The data revealing gaps in academic growth between these student populations informs educational leaders of the state of education for these lower-performing students and the plight of their future, should the gaps remain. These gaps in achievement are more alarming because the percentage of Black and Latino students is increasing in the United States, and by 2023 will represent a majority of the nation’s students. Loveless (2001) reported that during the 1970s and 1980s, academic achievement and gains among African American students increased, but quickly diminished.

The achievement gap is prevalent throughout all levels of education beginning in elementary school and is evidenced in high school as well. It is prevalent in both math and language arts. Ferguson (2010) asserted in 1999, by the end of high school, only one in 100 African American 17-year-olds could read and gain information from a specialized text, such as the science section in the newspaper as compared to about one in 12 Whites.
Explanations for the Achievement Gap

According to Gay (2010) a substantial body of evidence supports the notion that urban children, placed at risk, can be very successful academically when curriculum content, pedagogy, and relationships that foster improvement are in place. Traditionally, African American students, in particular, tend to score significantly lower than White students and other higher-performing population groups.

Existing research offers various explanations for many barriers that may slow success for African American students, ultimately contributing to the gap. Ogbu (2003) reported that much of this research focuses on social, cultural, historical, economic, and racial barriers that impact the daily lives of African American students.

Teacher Preparation

Research indicates that teacher quality matters. Ferguson and Mehta (2007) reported that the variation in teacher quality accounts for more of the variation in student achievement than any other schooling input. The professional experience of teachers in urban areas may contribute to the academic success of students of color, but one factor that influences teacher quality is related to content knowledge preparation. Ferguson and Mehta (2007) found that teachers who score higher on standardized tests tend to produce students who score higher on achievement tests.

Ladson-Billings (1994) contended that a contributor to the achievement gap is the fact that most teachers have limited knowledge about how to teach African American students. She also explained that teacher preparation and credential curriculum programs do not demystify beliefs regarding history, language, or culture of African Americans. Teachers in low income, urban school settings would benefit from professional
development training on how to teach and build positive relationships with African American students. According to Spindler and Sprindler (1994), teachers bring their own beliefs and misconceptions into the classroom. Many times this is evidenced by low expectations for African American students and negative belief systems regarding their education.

**Teacher Attitudes and Expectations**

Delpit (1996) and Cohen and Steele (2002) asserted that school and teacher attitudes toward African American students, contribute to the achievement gap. They argued in their research that teacher attitudes and belief systems toward African American students are a result of teachers’ personal beliefs, shaped by the dominant culture or society.

According to Bennett (2001), teachers often base their teaching practices on their own set of cultural beliefs. This mindset forms the foundation of teacher expectations, where expectations tend to be lower in urban schools for African American students. Bennet (2001) asserted that if teacher expectations are low, then student achievement will be low as well. When teachers maintain low academic expectations they are less likely to implement rigorous curricula for African American students.

**Content that Influences Achievement Gaps**

Students of color, living in low income urban areas and attending lower-performing schools, do not typically receive rigorous, high interest, or intellectually challenging curriculum and instruction. Data revealed that achievement gaps relates to differences in the academic content that students were expected to learn. The vast majority of adults wants schools to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, computer
technology, and selected character traits, like self-discipline (Johnson, 1995). Gay (2010), added that African American students have less access to rigorous content. Content experts are scarce in urban schools, where beginning teachers are regularly hired only to leave the profession after a few years, according to Haberman, (2005). African American students are not given the same access to high quality instruction, support, and opportunities to learn.

**Pedagogy that Influences Achievement Gaps**

Success with the most challenging material can seem impossible for African American students because, in too many cases, teachers lack knowledge, skills and supports needed to make such success feasible. Ferguson (2007), concurred that even when success seems feasible, too many students are uninspired because instruction is not engaging. Teachers need better skills for diagnosing and identifying academic difficulties. They need tools and pedagogies that scaffold effectively on understandings that children bring from outside the classroom (Gay, 2008).

**Relationships that Influence Achievement Gaps**

Relational issues may influence achievement gaps, in addition to curricular and pedagogical factors, with African American students. For example, Gay (2010) explained that the lack of motivation can be a barrier to student achievement. Students may become disconnected from school for a variety of reasons. Such disengagement is associated with the achievement gap as well (Gay, 2010). When considering African American and Hispanic students, Powell and Arriola (2003) added that academic achievement was related to student motivation, positive self-regard, and a sense of internal control. In contrast, other research has shown that such self-perceptions are not
necessarily predictive of academic success for minority students placed at risk (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Effective Schools and Classrooms

There have been many studies that examined schools and classrooms in which students of color and low-income students achieve better results than anticipated (Barth, 1999; Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Reeves, 2000). These studies on effective schools suggested that schools could make a difference in the achievement of urban students and African American students. Through these studies, researchers identified characteristics of effective schools and attempted to distinguish them from schools whose achievement was declining.

According to Knapp (1995), curriculum and instruction that demand understanding produce better outcomes with minority and other at-risk students than curriculum and instruction focusing on lower order skills. Recent analyses have highlighted psychological factors that can increase education success in students at risk for academic deficiencies and educational failure. Much of the labor on effective schooling has focused on administrative and organizational issues (Firestone, 1991; Reynolds, Creemers, Stringfield, Teddlie, & Schaffer, 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

How School Leaders Influence Student Achievement

Research on educational leadership supports the claim that leadership matters when considering the achievement of African American students. Experts assert that administrative leadership remains pivotal in advancing school improvement efforts and increasing school effectiveness (Day, 2007; Griffith, 2001; Hines, 2007; Leithwood, 2005; Muijs, 2004). Many studies have been conducted on the correlation between
leadership and academic growth. Marzano et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that examined the linkages between school leadership and student achievement. They found that school leadership has a considerable, relationship to student achievement. They reported that effective leadership involves 21 key areas of responsibility that correlate with student achievement and growth.

**Instructional Leadership**

Research upholds the vital role of instructional leadership for improving academic achievement for African American students and those of color in high performing low socio-economic schools (Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Reeves, 2000). According to Blasé and Blasé (1997) an instructional leader is responsible for the formation of the school vision. A school vision helps its stakeholders to focus on the achievement of students. A principal is expected to multitask effectively and lead a school toward high achievement and consistent academic progress. An instructional leader is also charged with carrying out various instructional duties such as developing professional development opportunities for teachers to build capacity, monitoring data, being visible in classrooms, evaluating instruction and maintaining relationships with community members (Lambert et al., 1995). An instructional leader encourages instructional conversations, encourages constant reflection and provides opportunities for professional development to improve instructional practices (Blase & Blase, 2004).

**Distributed Leadership**

Dufour and Marzano (2011), contend that every person who enters the field of education has both an opportunity and obligation to be a leader. They argued that no
single person has all of the knowledge, skills, and talent to lead a district, improve a school. They also asserted that it will take a collaborative effort and distributed leadership to meet the challenges confronting schools. Dufour and Marzano (2011) also reiterated that no single person can unilaterally bring about substantive change in an organization.

**High Expectations and Leadership Behaviors**

High expectations are influenced by the school’s leadership and their response when students do not learn (Lezotte, 2011). The administrator’s influence on teacher expectations impacts the school climate and culture. MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009) explained the importance of this by asserting:

> Many studies have shown that the principal’s leadership impacts the climate and culture of the school and indirectly affects student learning. Principals have a primary responsibility to work with their staff to develop a culture that promotes and encourages student learning. They have the ability to shape values, beliefs, and attitudes that are necessary to promote a stable and nurturing learning environment that in turn positively impacts student performance. (p. 71)

This study also examined how those systems and structures impacted classroom instruction, which led to increased achievement for African American students. Further study of this topic is needed and will advance the educational enterprise because leaders will learn strategies to foster the academic achievement of African American students. Future research could examine categories, patterns, or themes that promote successful leadership practices with this demographic.
Research Questions

This study addressed four research questions within the context of a highly challenged middle school that had been successful in progressing from lower levels of student achievement to high levels of student achievement. This progression took place across all content areas for African American students. It was hoped that close investigation of these leaders could increase understanding of factors that influence the achievement of African American students in urban schools. It was hoped that the findings could be useful to other urban schools (especially those serving African American communities). The following research questions provided direction for the study.

1. What descriptions characterize curricula at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
2. What descriptions characterize instruction at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
3. What descriptions characterize relationships among students, parents, teachers, and administrators at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
4. How have leaders at the school influenced changes in curricula, instruction, and relationships at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
Research Design

Cresswell (2009) described qualitative research as follows, “Qualitative research was chosen as the design for this study because it provides a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.” (p. 179)

In this study, the researcher explored the actions and beliefs individuals and groups ascribed to the improvement of academic achievement for African American students at William Dandy Middle School. Gay and Airasian (2001) explained that, qualitative research is exceptionally suited for establishing a foundation of understanding a group or phenomenon and can address questions that cannot be answered by quantitative methods. This study sought to establish a foundation for understanding high academic achievement for African American students at one particular school. The study addressed questions that could be best addressed by gathering descriptive data revealing how changes happened at William Dandy and how various leaders influenced and sustained changes that led to improved achievement of African American students.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the catalyst in the data collection and evaluation process (Creswell (2009). This is critical because the process of qualitative research involves the following:

1. The exploration of emerging questions and procedures
2. The collection of data within the participants’ setting
3. The inductive analysis of those data, building from particulars to general themes
4. The close interpretation of the meaning of data
Case Study Methodology

This qualitative study utilized case study methodology and examined the lived experience of a school that is achieving extraordinary results for African American students. Case study methodology was applicable because there are numerous variables that impact student success and growth at William Dandy Middle School. Case study methodology allowed the researcher to explore the multiple perspectives and shared experiences of the teachers and administrators at William Dandy Middle School (Merriam, 1998). This research was grounded in qualitative case study design because the participants rest in a particular setting, subject, or event (Roberson, 2012). William Dandy Middle School, is in the most impoverished part of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

Delineation of the Case

Merriam (1998) expounded that case study research is an intensive description and analysis of a bounded system and William Dandy Middle School is the bounded system that was the focus of this case study. Particularly, the study concentrated upon William Dandy Middle School and the school factors that have contributed to the high levels of academic growth attained by African American students. The case study centered upon the leadership that influenced those high levels of achievement for African American students.

William Dandy Middle School is a high-performing school in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. The school has attained an “A” or “B” rating in the Florida state accountability system consistently for the past eight years and has achieved adequate yearly progress for seven of the past eight years (Florida Department of Education, 2012). There are 71 teachers and support staff that serve approximately 986 students in grades sixth through eighth
(Broward County Schools, 2012). The students include 914 African American students, 51 Hispanic students, 15 White students, 5 Asian students and 1 Indian student. A large number of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2008 and 2012, the school earned the National Excellence in Education Award from the National Center for Urban School Transformation because of the school’s strong academic results for all of the demographic groups of students served (National Center for Urban School Transformation [NCUST], n.d.).

The goal of the research study was to determine how the principal and leaders at William Dandy influenced the development and achievement for African American students. The study was intended to further the understanding of the leadership practices that helped to improve the achievement of students of color, especially African American students to levels greater than the average of all schools in their state. The study also intended to document how the leaders facilitated and sustained these changes over an eight-year period. The researcher pursued in-depth understanding of the leadership practices of leaders at William Dandy Middle School that have contributed to the academic success of their African American students.

**Permission to Conduct Research**

The researcher obtained access to William Dandy Middle School by contacting the Broward County Public Schools and the principal of the school. This middle school was purposely selected based on evidence of significant achievement by African American students over an eight-year period. Before research began, the researcher asked for permission and cooperation from Broward County Public School District to analyze and examine data relevant to William Dandy Middle School. In addition, the researcher
asked the principal to be the main focus of the case study, along with the other school leaders. The principal also granted access to support staff, academic coaches, teachers, parents, and community members at William Dandy Middle School. All subjects in this case study received a letter specifying the research along with the details of the interviews and observations that would take place at their school. The letter clarified the purpose of the study, the role of the researcher, and the role of the participants.

Participants

The participants selected for this case study were significant to the school’s academic success. They were deemed key informants. Gilchrist and Williams (1999) explained that a key informant is an individual who is able to provide in-depth information and knowledge that other professionals in the field of education do not have. Marshall (1996) asserted and agreed stating the qualifications and experiences of key informants make them uniquely qualified to discuss what behaviors or practices employed. Those central to this study were the principal, area superintendent/director, three vice principals, the teachers and support staff, parents, and community members. The researcher interviewed a total of two principals, one area superintendent/director, three vice principals, and fifteen teachers, five support staff. Six parents and two community members also participated in the study. The investigator observed lessons in at least three classrooms from each content area (English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science). Several elective courses were observed as well and classrooms from each grade level, (sixth through eighth) were investigated. The teachers and support staff interviewed shared varying years of teaching experiences.
With the help of the principal, the investigator invited the school’s stakeholders, including parents and community members to be interviewed. The researcher conducted a focus group interview involving six parents who participated, when research began. There were two community members present, who partnered with the school, but were not parents of children attending William Dandy Middle School.

Data Collection

Data collection included individual interviews with the current/newly hired principal, former principal, three vice principals, and the area superintendent/director. The former principal had recently been promoted to lead a high school that William Dandy Middle students would articulate to. The current/newly hired principal participated in the study at William Dandy and volunteered to share insight on the school’s educational program and her knowledge of the strategies that contribute to the school’s success. The current principal, former principal, and area superintendent/director were interviewed individually. Three vice principals (one at each grade level; 6-8) were interviewed along with the other support staff, in a focus group. Focus group interviews also involved teachers, support staff, parents, and community members. The interviews took place at mutually convenient, pre-agreed upon times in private rooms at the school. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes. For accuracy, the interviews were digitally audio-recorded, then electronically encoded and secured. During all of the interviews, interview protocols were used as guides. The interview protocols were designed to elicit discussion that would address the four research questions underpinning the study. In addition to the audio recordings of the interviews, the researcher took extensive notes. All
teachers and staff members were invited to be interviewed in focus groups. Teachers were interviewed based on their availability at various times in the school day.

Interviewees were informed that their participation in this study was voluntary and that although the nature of the questions they would be asked were not inherently personal, if at any time during the interview they began to feel uncomfortable about responding to a question, they may could opt to be interviewed individually or discontinue participation either temporarily or permanently. They were free to withdraw at any time without penalty, and if interested, they could receive an outcome brief denoting the results at the conclusion of the study. Participants signed a research consent form which documented all risks of participating in this study and each interviewee granted written permission in accordance with informed consent regulations for human subjects. The confidentiality of everyone interviewed was maintained throughout this research process (Appendices A-G).

In addition to the interviews, the researcher observed classrooms and various teacher planning meetings using observation protocols. Classroom observation protocols were used to help examine issues related to school climate and culture, curriculum, and instruction. A meeting observation protocol helped the researcher examine the dynamics of change processes and decision making at William Dandy Middle School.

The researcher conducted individual interviews and small focus group interviews. The individuals interviewed included the principals (current and former) and the area superintendent. The focus group participants included the vice principals, teachers, support staff, parents, and community members/partners. The individual interviews lasted
approximately 60 minutes. Focus group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The researcher observed at least two classrooms at each grade level. In particular, each teacher interviewed received a classroom observation. Observation notes were made directly on the observation form and on additional note paper, as necessary. The researcher tried to be as thorough as possible in completing the observation form; however, no more than 15 minutes was spent in any classroom. The investigator aimed to pay special attention to student engagement and evidence of student understanding. Particular attention was paid to the manner in which teachers related to students, the rigor of the academic work, and the strategies teachers used to help students master challenging academic concepts. The researcher noted student work displayed in the classrooms as well as all assignments observed being given to students.

During interviews, the researcher collected a school brochure that listed enrichment classes, the school’s master calendar, and the school map and classrooms list. The investigator also received a copy of the William Dandy Middle School NCUST Excellence in Urban Education Award Application, 2011-2012. The principal provided the researcher with an opportunity to review the school’s schedule of professional development training sessions for the school year, the collaboration schedules, the parent conference and training meetings, and the after-school student support program information.

In addition to interviews and observations, the research collected and reviewed artifacts, such as the school’s master calendar, bell schedule, enrichment programs, collaboration logs, and parent information, as well as data from school, district, and state
academic assessments. The school principal provided these items, at the researcher’s request. The researcher sought documents that might help explain how curricula, instruction, and school climate had changed at William Dandy Middle School. Also, the researcher sought documents that might help explain how leaders had influenced those changes.

**Safeguards and Confidentiality**

Data collected were protected via a locked briefcase and stored in a secured closet at the researcher’s office. Approval was obtained from the San Diego State University Institutional Review Board prior to any data collection and the researcher abided by the safeguards stipulated by the IRB. The researcher expressed gratitude for participants’ contributions to the research on the achievement of African American students, although participants will not benefit materially from this study. Confidentiality and sensitivity to the needs of the subjects were maintained at all times. The researcher sent thank you cards as expressions of appreciation to each of the participants.

**Data-Analysis Procedures**

All individual interviews and focus group interviews were transcribed by the a local transcription company in San Diego, CA. The investigator listened to the recording while reading the transcript to ensure accurate transcription. If transcription errors were found, the researcher would mark the error and then re-listen to the recording and cross-reference the error with the case study notes to maximize accuracy. The final transcript of the interview was then coded.

The researcher utilized the constant comparative method drawn from the grounded theoretical approach to analyze all data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Marshall &
Rossman, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Constant Comparative Method is explained below:

**Constant Comparative Method - Grounded Theory**

*Definition:* The intent of the Grounded Theory approach is to generate theories that describe how some aspect of the social world ‘works.’ The goal is to develop a theory that arises from and is connected to the reality the theory is developed to explain.

The Constant Comparative Method is a method for examining data in order to develop a grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that when used to generate theory, the comparative analytical method they describe can be applied to social units of any size.

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain it, this process involves:

- Identifying a phenomenon, object, event or setting of interest
- Identifying a few local concepts, principles, structural or process features of the experience or phenomenon of interest
- Making decisions regarding initial collection of data based one’s initial understanding of the phenomenon. Further data collection cannot be planned in advance of analysis and the emergence of theory
- Engaging in theoretical sampling -- the key question is what group or subgroups does the researcher turn to next to collect data? Subsequent sampling decisions should be purposeful and relevant.
- The rationale for selecting comparison groups is their theoretical relevance for fostering the development of emergent categories. (pp. 28-52)
The researcher performed a line-by-line analysis of the data corpus and then generated themes. The researcher also identified individual themes that surfaced. The goal was to identify possible categories across the data, along with discerning characteristics within each category. In addition, the researcher endeavored to determine how categories related to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe some flexible guidelines for coding data when engaging in a Grounded Theory analysis:

- **Open Coding** - “The process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data.” (p. 61)

- **Axial Coding** - “A set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories. This is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences.” (p. 96)

- **Selective Coding** - “The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development.” (p. 116)

During the analysis process, data coding will guide subsequent theoretical sampling decisions. After collecting additional data, the researchers return to analyzing and coding data, and use the insights from that analysis process to inform the next iteration of data collection. This process continues until a strong theoretical understanding of an event, object, setting or phenomenon has emerged.
Limitations of the Study

While beneficial information was gathered from this study, the findings have several limitations. This study is not conclusive regarding what leads to the improvement of achievement for African American students. The study described only one successful middle school and in one urban school district. It is important to understand, however, that qualitative research is not intended to provide conclusive answers. Instead, qualitative research provides in-depth perspective of a phenomenon in ways that illuminate important variables, issues, and relationships (Cresswell, 2003). Merriam (1998) asserted:

Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Humans are best suited for this task, especially because interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research. (p. 2)

Merriam (1998) also explained:

Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. Other teams often used interchangeably are naturalistic inquiry, interpretive research, field study, participant observation, inductive research, case study, and ethnography. (p. 5)

Qualitative research studies in education simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam, 1998).
Another limitation is that this study is based largely on the perceptions of various stakeholders (principals, district administrators, teachers, staff members, and parents). Although the researcher collected observational data and a variety of artifacts, the largest source of data came from interviews that focused upon what the respondents believed had contributed to William Dandy Middle School’s success and their assessment of the factors that influenced improvements in learning results for African American students. Thus, the accuracy of the findings may be influenced by the accuracy of the perceptions of the informants.

African American students are educated in a wide array of schools, many of which are not similar to William Dandy Middle School. Dandy served 986 middle school students (grades six through eight), including over 900 African American students and over 750 students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. It is an urban, public middle school within a low socio-economic area.

The study relied on responses made by urban school administrators and stakeholders at William Dandy Middle School. Respondents were not provided with surveys or questionnaires. With the interviewer present, respondents were asked a series of semi-structured questions that extended dialogue about topics of concern. As well, in focus groups, teachers and parents answered questions while other focus group participants were present. It is unclear as to whether questions would have been answered differently if respondents were given an anonymous survey. There is no guarantee that the questions were answered honestly or that participants simply followed along in agreement with the responses of others, when they actually felt differently.
Participation in the study was voluntary and therefore findings are limited to participants who agreed to be interviewed. There may have been bias on behalf of the participants causing them to report subjectively, thus compromising the study’s findings. Access is also another limitation to be considered, as the school principal helped identify the parents who were invited to participate. As well the principal helped establish parameters (dates, schedules, access to individuals and data) for the researchers visit.

Finally, the researcher is a novice investigator who sought to expand the research literature about the leadership practices that improve the achievement of African American students in urban schools. This is the first time that the researcher has conducted research in this area.

**Potential Significance of Study**

Few schools get strong results for African American students. Some studies have examined these schools (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011); however, we do not know enough about how leaders influenced and sustained change in these high-performing schools. Potentially, this study adds to the knowledge base regarding leadership practices and strategies that lead to sustained growth and achievement of African American learners.

The study aimed to provide rich detail in describing how changes happened at William Dandy Middle School and how various leaders influenced and sustained the changes that led to the improved achievement of African American students. This rich detail will foster a deeper understanding of the intricacies of meaningful change and will hopefully assist others in promoting similar positive changes in learning results for African American students. This study offers an examination of leadership practices that might increase student achievement at urban schools serving African American students.
This study addressed the achievement of male and female African American students. The term “African American” includes all students who were identified as such upon enrollment into William Dandy Middle School. The research highlighted the gains in academic achievement over the past eight years and the closing of the achievement gap amongst African American students at William Dandy and other demographic groups in Broward County School District.

This study may add to the general body of knowledge regarding leadership practices that support the achievement of African American students. This study examines leadership practices that lead to effective instruction in high-performing low socio-economic urban schools. This study will contribute to the ongoing search for effective instructional practices to close the achievement gap that exists between African American students and higher performing demographic groups. The use of successful leadership and instructional practices may help low-performing schools improve their instructional program, ultimately increasing student achievement for African Americans students.

Improving the achievement of African American students will also have a long-term positive effect on society. If the results achieved at William Dandy Middle School can be replicated in urban communities with large concentrations of African American students, many more African American students could achieve academic success. Ultimately, access to research-based instructional practices could lead to a better quality of life, as researchers agree education is a key determinant to future economic success (Gregory & Strambler, 2004; Morris, 2004).
Case Study Organization

Chapter One introduces and provides a rationale for studying the leadership practices within a high-performing, urban middle school that improved the achievement of African American students. Included in Chapter One is the introduction, the background of the problem, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance of the study, and the study’s limitations. Chapter Two reviews the existing research on the state of education for African American students, successful leadership practices, content in urban schools, pedagogy in urban schools, relationships in urban schools, the effects of parent involvement, and how leaders influence these areas that lead to high achievement for African American students. Chapter Three describes the methodology for the research. Chapter Four includes an analysis and discussion of each research question and the related findings. Chapter Five summarizes the findings, draws conclusions, and discusses the implications of the findings for future research. References and appendixes follow the final chapter.
CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As the nation tries to raise achievement for students across all demographic groups, urban schools face many challenges. Low test scores, high dropout rates, outdated facilities, high teacher turnover, and excessive crime are some of the many characteristics used to describe urban school districts across the United States (Gale, McNally, & Pack, 2003). Some of the nation’s most vulnerable student populations find themselves in these school environments (Cartledge & Lo, 2006). The demographic profile of urban/inner city schools is commonly Black, Brown, and poor, whereas the suburban school systems are predominantly White and middle class (Cartledge & Lo, 2006). Too often, a high-quality education remains unattainable for students of color who attend inner-city school systems (Ferguson, 2010).

The present study examined one school in which low-income, urban, African American students achieved at high levels. This study builds upon a wealth of research and scholarship that has chronicled the status of public education in the United States over the past 40 years and the reasons low achievement levels are typical among schools that serve urban, Black, and low-income students. As well, this study builds upon research that explores that factors that have contributed to the academic success of this population. Specifically, this review of literature includes four sections. The first section discusses studies that describe the status of public education, with an emphasis on the achievement of African American students. The second section examines research and scholarship that offer possible explanations for the achievement gaps between African American students and other demographic groups. Then, the review explores studies that describe schools and classrooms that generate higher rates of academic
success for African American and low-income students. Then, finally the review examines the role school leaders’ play in influencing achievement, especially in schools that serve low-income, African American students.

**Status of Public Education in the United States**

This section begins with an examination of reports that described student achievement in the last decades of the 20th century. These reports served as a basis for educational reforms that led to the No Child Left Behind Act and similar policy that addressed the disparities in achievement between African American and White students.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1988) examined the quality of the American public school education and identified many inconsistencies and deficiencies within and between public school systems. The Commission’s well-publicized, Nation at Risk Report declared that 23 million Americans were functionally illiterate and the majority of Americans had problems decoding and comprehending basic information. The report also indicated that American students performed poorly on achievement tests when compared to their counterparts internationally. On international achievement tests, American students ranked 12th among students in 19 countries and average achievement levels for U.S. students had fallen over a 26-year period. For example, scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) fell in both math and verbal areas by 40 and 50 points respectively. The overall number of students who performed in the proficient range on the SATs decreased from 1957-1982.

The report gave low rankings for the United States in several other categories. In particular, the Commission found that students identified as gifted or high performing, were not performing as well as their counterparts internationally or performing as well as
expected on American standardized assessments. Among college students, enrollment in remedial mathematics courses increased 72% between the years of 1975-1980. Even though students were accepted into colleges, the level of skills they brought with them had decreased significantly. Lastly, when exit assessments were given to students graduating from college, data indicated that their overall academic achievement was lower than those in other countries.

With the United States ranking low in several categories, it became increasingly clear that the public school system was failing when it came to educating its citizens. Other countries had not only matched the educational level in the United States but had surpassed it. While the report painted a dismal picture of education results in general, the report specifically noted greater concerns for U.S. students of color. For example, the report revealed that 13% of 17 year olds in the United States were functionally illiterate; however, the percentage was as high as 40% among students of color. The Commission made apparent that achievement levels among students of color, especially African American students, were often much lower than their White counterparts.

The study concluded that high expectations and organized efforts to meet those expectations had been lost over time, producing a citizenry functioning at a level of mediocrity. The report’s findings predicted that American citizens would not possess the skills, training, literacy, or basic competency to function efficiently and productively in a rapidly evolving society. Many Americans would not be granted the opportunity to become productive citizens, reaping the benefits of what is commonly referred to as the “American Dream.” A Nation at Risk launched a nation-wide reform effort emphasizing
“higher order” skills (and deemphasizing basic skills) to prepare citizens to compete
globally in a more technologically advanced market economy.

The follow-up report called A Nation at Risk: An Educational Manifesto (Allen, 1998) was generated 15 years later and reiterated that the state of education in America was still at risk. The report indicated that even though much time had passed, academic gains across the country had been minimal. The 1998 report mirrored the findings and conclusions of the original report. Conclusions in the follow-up report included: (1) By 12th grade most American students were still unable to read at a basic level. (2) Only one in four elementary and middle school students were proficient in math and by the time they reached high school, only one in six seniors were proficient in math. (3) These types of academic deficiencies often led struggling students to drop out of school.

This follow-up report highlighted the alarming disparity between students of color and White students who attended public schools. For example, the study asserted that over 6 million Americans had dropped out of school, with even greater dropout rates among students of color. In 1996, 13% of African Americans, ranging from 16-24 year of age, were not enrolled in school nor did they have a high school diploma. Approximately 17% of the first generation Hispanic population between the ages of 16-24 had dropped out of high school, including 44% of recent immigrant Hispanics. The findings further suggested that students of color would be ill prepared to compete in the job market because their skills would be inferior to those of Whites, implying they would be less productive than their White counterparts. This was especially apparent for African American students and students in urban school settings.
The follow-up report emphasized that recent academic gains were not substantial enough to narrow the achievement gap nor did they compare favorably to the rate of academic growth on an international level. Again, the report claimed that the educational system in the United States was deteriorating and failing its students. The data underlying these reports influenced the bi-partisan passage of the NCLB. NCLB reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in a manner that required states to implement academic standards, assessments, and accountability measures to enhance academic achievement in all American public schools (CDE, 2009). Provisions of NCLB held school districts, site administrators, and teachers accountable for ensuring that students make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in specific curricular areas through the monitoring of annual standardized tests (CDE, 2009). As a result of this increased accountability and deliberate focus on instruction, state assessments revealed measurable achievement gains for all demographic groups since the implementation of NCLB in 2001 (CDE, 2009).

However, a significant achievement gap still exists between African American students and White students. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013) confirmed the gap between these two demographic groups is still substantial.

**Current State of Academic Achievement for African American Students**

Black and Latino students are, on average, two to three years behind White students of the same age in academic achievement, and their high school graduation rates are 20% lower than the rate of White students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). These gaps in achievement are more alarming because the percentage of Black and
Latino students is increasing in the United States, and by 2023 will represent a majority of the nation’s students. As one report concluded:

As a greater proportion of Blacks and Latinos enter the student population in the United States, the racial achievement gap, if not addressed, will almost certainly act as a drag on overall US educational and economic performance in the years ahead. (McKinsey & Company, 2010, p. 11)

The combined effects of income status and race may place low-income, African American students at an even greater academic disadvantage (Barton, 2003; Manning & Kovach, 2003). Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are roughly two years of learning behind the average better-off student of the same age (McKinsey & Company, 2009). This gap persists beyond the K-12 system, as indicated by the following:

A child growing up in a family earning $90,000 annually has a one in two chance of earning a bachelor’s degree by the age of 24, but a child from a family earning less than $35,000 has only a one in 17 chance of earning that degree. (p. 86)

African American children participate in preschool programs at a higher rate than do White children, approximately 53% compared to 44% (Paterson, 1997), and perform at about the same levels on most mental and social development assessments (Howard, 2001). Nonetheless, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicate that a majority of African American students in grades 4, 8, and 12 lag far behind White students in academic achievement (Haycock, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Many of these African American students have not reached grade level proficiency in language arts, mathematics, history, and geography. In fact, less than one
quarter of African American students perform at or above grade level proficiency in these subject areas (Howard, 2001).

Loveless (2001) reported that during the 1970s and 1980s, achievement among African American students increased; however, those academic gains quickly diminished. The achievement gap is prevalent in elementary school as well as high school. It is prevalent in both math and language arts. According to Ferguson (2010) in 1999, by the end of high school, only one in 100 African American 17-year-olds could read and gain information from a specialized text, such as the science section in the newspaper as compared to about one in 12 Whites. Less than one-fifth of African Americans could read the complicated, but less specialized texts that more than half of White students could read. The patterns are true for math as well. About one in 100 African Americans could comfortably do multi-step problem solving and elementary algebra, compared to about one in 10 White students. Lastly, only 3 in 10 African American 17-year-olds have mastered the usage and computation of fractions, commonly used percentages, and averages, compared to seven in 10 White students (Haycock, 2001).

**Explanations for the Achievement Gap**

A substantial body of evidence supports the notion that urban children, placed at risk, can be very successful academically when curriculum content, pedagogy, and relationships that foster improvement are in place (Gay, 2010). Nonetheless, as discussed in the prior section, urban schools serve large concentrations of low-income students and African American students generally generate low student achievement. Traditionally, students of color, and particularly African American students, score significantly lower than White students on standardized tests (Berlack, 2001).
Existing research offers various explanations for many barriers that may slow success for African American students, ultimately contributing to the gap. Ogbu (2003) reported that much of this research focuses on social, cultural, historical, economic, and racial barriers that impact the daily lives of African American students. For example, researchers have argued that African Americans are more likely to live in poverty, which is directly correlated to student achievement (Barton, 2003; Manning & Kovach, 2003). Ogbu (2003) argued that many of these social, cultural, or economic explanations are grounded in a belief that African American students possess intellectual, cultural, or social deficits. This researcher rejects such explanations based upon the existence of schools such as the one that is the focus of the present study: schools in which African American students achieve at remarkably high levels. This review of literature focuses instead on explanations that consider factors related to schooling.

**Teacher Preparation**

Teacher quality matters. Ferguson and Mehta (2007) reported that the variation in teacher quality accounts for more of the variation in student achievement than any other schooling input factor and even rivals parental background in importance. One factor that influences teacher quality is related to content knowledge preparation. Ferguson and Mehta (2007) found that teachers who score higher on standardized tests tend to produce students who score higher on achievement tests, but schools that African American and Latinos attend often attract teachers with lower scores.

Another preparation issue may be the extent to which teachers are prepared specifically to meet the learning needs of African American students. Ladson-Billings (1994) contended that a contributor to the achievement gap is the fact that most teachers
have limited knowledge about how to teach African American students. Ladson-Billings (1994) argued that teachers are not prepared to address the needs of African American students. In addition, she explained that teacher preparation programs do not demystify beliefs regarding history, language, or culture of African Americans. Thus, teachers bring their own beliefs and misconceptions into the classroom (Spindler & Spindler, 1994).

Specifically, Ladson-Billings (1994) found that most teachers reported that their pre-service preparation did little or nothing to prepare them for today’s diverse classrooms. Although some teacher programs seek to prepare teachers to teach in schools that serve predominantly African American and Latino students few, if any, teacher education programs teach educators how to expressly meet the needs of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

LeMoine (2001) explained that there is often a divide between the home culture and the culture within the classroom. Teachers are often not prepared by their teacher preparation programs to adequately bridge the gap in the diverse classrooms that exist today.

**Teacher Attitudes and Expectations**

The lack of explicit teacher preparation for educating African American students may influence teachers to maintain negative attitudes and low expectations for their African American students. Spindler and Spindler (1994) found that teachers bring their personal cultural background, knowledge base, prejudices, and misconceptions into the classroom. When students and teachers have different cultural backgrounds, uninformed teachers may lower their expectations for student success, which is detrimental to
students (Bennett, 2001). Ogbu (2003) found that race influenced teachers’ perceptions of the intellectual abilities of their students and therefore influenced teachers’ expectations of their students.

Delpit (1996) and Cohen and Steele (2002) suggested that school and teacher attitudes contribute to the achievement gap. They argued that teacher attitudes toward African American students are a direct result of teachers’ personal beliefs, shaped by the dominant culture.

Bennett (2001) reported that teachers often base their teaching practices on their own set of cultural beliefs. This mindset forms the foundation of teacher expectations. If teacher expectations are low, then student achievement will be low as well (Bennett, 2001). When teachers maintain low academic expectations they are less likely to implement rigorous curricula, and thereby contribute to the achievement gap between African American students and higher performing groups.

Lezotte (2011) posited that expectations are personal beliefs we hold in our heads and hearts. Unfortunately, expectations, though personal, are not private. They influence our day-to-day behavior. In schools, the expectations held by the principals and teachers have a significant impact on the learners and learning by setting the learning climate of the school and its classrooms (Lezotte, 2011).

The effects of teacher expectations are captured in this observation from the Metlife Survey of the American Teacher (Harris Interactive, 2009):

Educators have long been aware of the ‘Pygmalion effect’ in schools – the process through which students whose teachers expect them to learn, do, and those not expected to learn, do not. Teacher pessimism about students in poorly
functioning schools is likely to result in the ‘Pygmalion effect’ working negatively in schools which are currently serving their students poorly. Dweck (2006) described two dominant mindsets that have a profound effect on educators’ views of the classroom and the educability of the students. Lezotte (2011) explained how these mindsets influence teacher expectations as follows:

Some educators operate from the view that student learning and student achievement are the result of fixed intelligence which is innate, unalterable, and predetermined. Other educators approach their work with a growth mindset- the intelligence develops over time through experiences and, therefore, is subject to influence. Whichever mindset educators bring to the teaching and learning setting strongly impacts their actions in the classroom and their expectations for students. (p. 45)

Lezotte (2011) further explained that the definition of high expectations for success has two critical elements:

The first element focuses on the staff’s beliefs about students’ ability to succeed. The staff believes that all students can and will obtain mastery of the intended curriculum. The second element addresses the staff’s sense of efficacy. Sense of efficacy is the belief that one can successfully achieve what one is being asked to do. In the effective school, the staff members believe in their individual and collective professional capacity to enable all students to achieve mastery. (p. 44)

A teacher’s sense of efficacy is positively related to student success in learning and achievement (Scribner, 1999; Weber & Omatani, 1994). This implies that high expectations for student success begin with teachers first having high expectations for
themselves confidence that they possess the necessary knowledge and skills to provide students with quality learning experiences (Lezotte, 2011).

Teacher expectations have been shown to relate to student achievement (Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Cawelti, 1999; Cotton, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey, 1987). Lezotte (2011), contended that teacher expectations are conveyed through specific behaviors that influence the quality and quantity of learning. These 15 specific teacher behaviors are described in Table 1.

Good (1982) identified multiple ways that teachers treat students they perceive as “high” or “low” achievers differently, including: waiting less time for low achievers to answer; giving low achievers answers or calling on someone else rather than offering clues or repeating or rephrasing questions; rewarding inappropriate behavior or incorrect answers by low achievers; criticizing low achievers more often for failure; and praising low achievers less often. Teachers often failed to give feedback to public responses of low achievers; paid less attention to them or interacted with them less frequently; called on low achievers less frequently; seated low achievers farther away from the teacher; and demanded less of them. Tests and assignments were graded in a different manner, giving high achievers, but not low achievers, the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases. Good (1982) asserted that teachers on average had less friendly interaction with low achievers, including less smiling. He also found that they provided briefer and less informative feedback to the questions of low achievers; provided less eye contact and other nonverbal communication of attention to low achievers; used fewer effective, but time-consuming instructional methods with low achievers; and showed less acceptance and use of low achievers’ ideas.
Table 1

*Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement – Fifteen Teacher Behaviors for Success*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Teacher Behavior and Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equitable Distribution of Response Opportunity</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to provide an opportunity for all students to respond or perform in classroom learning situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmation or Correction</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to give feedback to students about their classroom performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>The teacher learns the significance of being physically close to students as they work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Helping</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to provide individual help to each student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise of the Learning Performance</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to praise the students’ learning performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtesy</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to use expressions of courtesy in interactions with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latency</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to allow the student enough time to think over a question before assisting the student or ending the opportunity to respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for Praise</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to give useful feedback for the students’ learning performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Interest Statements and Compliments</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to ask questions, give compliments, or make statements related to a student’s personal interests or experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delving, Rephrasing, Giving Clues</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to provide additional information to help the student respond to a question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to apply active listening techniques with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to touch students in a respectful, appropriate, and friendly manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher-Level Questioning</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to ask challenging questions that require students to do more than simply recall information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Feelings</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to recognize and accept students’ feelings in a non-evaluative manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desisting</td>
<td>The teacher learns how to stop a student’s misbehavior in a calm and courteous manner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Content that Influences Achievement Gaps

Another explanation for achievement gaps relates to differences in the academic content that students were expected to learn. The vast majority of adults wants schools to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, computer technology, and selected character traits, like self-discipline (Johnson, 1995). They want curriculum content to have immediate application to the larger society, including the workplace. On average, African American students have less access to rigorous content (Gay, 2010). Content experts are scarce in urban schools, where beginning teachers are regularly hired only to leave the profession after a few years (Haberman, 2005). African American students are not given the same access to high quality opportunities to learn.

Typically, African American students are assigned to lower-level groups and classrooms. Students in lower-level groups and classrooms may not be exposed to important concepts that might support future learning options. Oakes (1994) contended that this drawback was a reason to abolish ability grouping and tracking. Ferguson (2004) agreed that the only way to give some students what they need academically is to move them to heterogeneously grouped classrooms. However, he argued that there are also situations in which enriching the curriculum and quality of instruction while maintaining the ability-grouped regime is the most academically responsible option.

In racially integrated schools, African American students are overrepresented in lower-level classes. Patton and Baytops, (1995) concur that Middle-class White students overwhelmingly populate the programs for the gifted and talented, college tracks, and advanced courses. Children of color and children from low-income families are overwhelmingly tracked to courses at the lowest level (Oakes, 1994). Once assigned to
these courses, students rarely advance to higher tracks. Perceptions persist as to the poor quality of instruction offered in lower-level classes compared with more advanced courses (Townsend, 2002).

For at least the past century, there have been recurring debates among educators about whether ability grouping and tracking are helpful or harmful, especially for low achievers and minority students. The most common conclusion is that children in lower ability groups (tracks) receive a lower quality of instruction that those in higher quality groups; therefore, grouping and tracking hurt students at the lower levels (Ferguson, 2004; Oakes, 1994). This argument suggests that students who perform at lower levels would receive better instruction if they were integrated with students who perform at higher levels. Ferguson (2004), however, concluded that ample evidence indicates that, even in heterogeneous, mixed-ability classrooms, low-achieving students often receive inferior treatment.

Another factor that influences differences in the academic content presented to students is the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. African American students are disproportionately relegated to special education (Harry & Anderson, 1994) and remedial education classes (Gay, 2000). In special education classes, students are less likely to have access to the academic content provided in general education and advanced education courses (Townsend, 2002). Once assigned to special education, African American students are rarely admitted to the higher-track academic courses that prepare them for college and other opportunities that improve their chances for success in life (Townsend, 2002).
**Pedagogy that Influences Achievement Gaps**

Children from every background have vast potential. The challenge for coming decades is to equip teachers with skills and tools for differentiating instruction in ways that enable and inspire children from all backgrounds to become excellent students, skilled parents, productive workers, and ultimately, fulfilled human beings (Ferguson, 2007). Success with the most challenging material can seem impossible for African American students because, in too many cases, teachers lack skills and supports to make such success feasible. Even when success seems feasible, too many students are uninspired because instruction is not engaging (Ferguson, 2007).

Teachers now and tomorrow need better skills for diagnosing academic difficulties. They need tools and pedagogies that scaffold effectively on understandings that children bring from outside the classroom (Gay, 2008). To glimpse the scope of the challenge, 56,000 urban and suburban secondary school students were surveyed in the Tripod Project for School Improvement, a research effort focused on closing achievement gaps. The data revealed that fewer than 60% of any racial group answered “mostly true” or “totally true” to the survey item:

> My teacher in this class has several good ways of explaining each topic we cover.

On another survey item, fewer than 60% (and sometimes fewer than half) responded “mostly true” or “totally true” that their teachers made lessons interesting, relevant, and enjoyable. (Ferguson, 2007, p. 48)

Making success more feasible and lessons more interesting, relevant, and enjoyable may be quite daunting for many schools. Immigrants, for whom English is a second language, will continue placing new demands on schools. Growing African
American and Latino enrollments will continue to present challenges in schools, especially suburban schools where teachers are accustomed mainly to White students from middle- and upper-income households. Explanations and problem solving strategies that worked for students, in the past, may perplex new students. Examples that seemed relevant or interesting to students in the past may seem irrelevant and meaningless to students from a more diverse range of backgrounds. In addition, Trimble (2004) addressed the importance of teachers providing students with the assistance they need to achieve at the high levels they expect and promoting student engagement in the learning process.

In addition, students in urban schools are affected by other factors as well. Predominantly urban schools have more inexperienced teachers, poorly trained and uncertified; more textbooks that are outdated; fewer computers; larger class sizes; and buildings that are in worse repair and more marked by violence (Evans, 2005). These inadequacies are a reflection of the racial inequities and context for students of color, which stem back to their historical experiences. Studies suggest that teachers sometimes have lower academic expectations for African American and Hispanic children than they do for Whites or Asians (Bennett, 2001; Kober, 2001; Ogbu, 2003). Kober (2001) warns that by setting expectations low, teachers run the risk of perpetuating the achievement gap since they do not encourage African American and Hispanic students to follow a rigorous curriculum. The low expectations grow out of a history of segregation. The lack of culturally responsive pedagogy and practice in teacher preparation programs results in less effective measures like low expectations, less rigor and increased remediation (Bennett, 2001; Gay, 2000; Kober, 2001). In fact, Evans (2005) indicates that teachers’
methods fail to address individual and cultural differences and other factors that affect learning styles, such as motivation and behavior of African American students. It appears as though teachers do not understand the relationship between culture and learning. Vygotsky’s (1978) Socio-cultural Theory of Learning suggests students’ history, language and culture must be connected to classroom instruction for learning to take place.

Shade (1982) contended that there are two distinct cultures within classrooms that serve African American children: that of the White dominant culture and that which is brought to school with the African American child. Traditionally classroom environments focus on limited movement, where individual-competitive structures and direct instruction are standard. In contrast, the African American child becomes more proficient academically when the classroom is project based, which allows him/her to be more involved, vocal, and expressive (LeMoine, 2001; Shade, 1982; Stanton-Salazar; 1997). Thus, incorporating the cultural learning styles and strengths of African American children into the classroom routine may actively involve students in their own learning process.

Mounting evidence suggests that cultural aspects of students’ learning styles can impact achievement levels in classrooms (Hollins, 1996; Irvine, 2003). One cultural aspect, highlighted by Boykin in the 1980’s and gaining renewed attention is verve. Verve is the propensity for energetic, intense, stylistic body language and expression (Boykin, 1983). Boykin, (1983, 2001) suggested that verve factors prominently within the learning styles of African American children. Teachers report students having high interest when verve is incorporated in the lesson and the vehicle in which instruction is
delivered and received. Verve involves choral class actions that foster unity and community during the learning process. However, only a small body of research exists that has indicated that there is a relationship between verve and increased academic achievement among students of color (Guttentag, 1972).

Culture is a major, if not the primary factor, affecting the development of learning styles (Shade & New, 1993). Therefore, how learning styles develop depends on the culture that has been modeled and reinforced by childrearing practices (Anderson, 1988). Upon entering school, students attempt to gather and process incoming information through strategies that have been rewarded previously in their home or community (Anderson, 1988). However, if the students’ culture is incongruent with the norms of the classroom, then poor academic performance and low self-esteem could result (Irvine, 2003). Specifically, some African American students may learn best from teaching and learning experiences that are harmonious, expressive, musically inclined, and include movement.

Hilliard (1976) found that, in general, African Americans view their environment as a whole rather than in isolated parts; prefer intuitive rather than deductive or inductive reasoning; approximate concepts of space, number and time; attend to people stimuli rather than object stimuli; and rely on nonverbal as well as verbal communication. These differences may be significant, given that Viadero (1996) reported that accommodating students’ distinct learning and communication styles makes a difference in their learning. Ultimately, if teachers were aware of the differences regarding students’ various learning styles, teachers might be more apt to deliver instruction in a way that addresses these learning styles, thereby increasing achievement in African American students.
Shade (1982) conducted a study examining the idea that changes in academic competence result from differences in culturally induced psychological, cognitive, and behavioral strategies. She examined the cultural foundations and social cognition of African Americans to explore the influences of socialization on cognition. The researcher investigated African Americans’ style of knowing, perceptual style, conceptual style, personality style and cognitive style. Her theory was similar to Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Cherry, 2013). People develop diverse cognitive strategies for processing information. The findings showed that the African American’s well-developed social cognition may not be advantageous in the object-oriented school settings.

Traditional classroom environments focus on limited movement, where individual-competitive structures and direct instruction are standard. Shade’s (1982) findings also revealed that the typical classroom is almost contrary to the learning styles and strengths of African American children. Teacher effectiveness may be influenced by their ability to adapt instruction in ways that will better accommodate the learning styles of diverse groups of students. Table 2 describes the differences between the learning styles valued by traditional school cultures and the learning styles of many African American students.

**Relationships that Influence Achievement Gaps**

In addition to curricular and pedagogical factors, relational issues may influence achievement gaps. For example, Gay (2010) explained that the lack of motivation can be a barrier to student achievement (Gay, 2010). Students may become disconnected from school due to various psychological and emotional reasons (Board on Children, Youth, and Families, 2003). Such disengagement is associated with the achievement gap as well (Gay, 2010). Powell and Arriola (2003) suggested that academic achievement was
Table 2

Learning Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Styles Valued by the Traditional School Culture:</th>
<th>Learning Styles Valued in African American Culture:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Standardized and rule driven</td>
<td>• Variation accepting and improvising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Deductive, controlled, ego-centric</td>
<td>• Inductive, expressive, socio-centric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low-movement expressive</td>
<td>• High-movement expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• View environment in isolated parts</td>
<td>• View environment as a whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Precise concepts of space, number, time</td>
<td>• Approximate concepts of space, number, time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respond to object stimulus</td>
<td>• Respond to people/social stimulus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dominant communication is verbal</td>
<td>• Non-verbal as well as verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Long concentration span</td>
<td>• Shorter concentration span</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasis on quiet</td>
<td>• Emphasis on rich verbal interplay (talkative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasis on independent work</td>
<td>• Responds to collaborate efforts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


related to student motivation, positive self-regard, and a sense of internal control, particularly among African American and Hispanic students. However, other research has shown that such self-perceptions are not necessarily predictive of academic success for minority students placed at risk (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Waxman (1997) found that students in effective urban schools reported more positive learning environments, perceived their teachers as more supportive, and reported more order and organization in their classrooms than did students in ineffective urban schools. Disproportionately high rates of suspension and expulsion among African American youth (particularly males) suggest that many African American students may not benefit from positive, orderly learning environments.
The relationship between parents and educators may also influence achievement gaps. Although parent involvement is specifically addressed in federal education legislation as a partnership that envisions parents with governance power within a democratic process (Rogers, 2006), the performance of African American students in urban schools leads to questions that warrant a closer examination into the roles, if any, that parents play in these schools.

Clark (1983) contended that parent involvement is comprised of “distinctive parent-child interactions,” namely helping students with homework, expressing their expectations of school performance, and creating emotionally supportive learning environments at home. McNeal’s (1999) work on parent involvement defined it as parent-teacher organization involvement, monitoring, and educational support measures. J. Lee and Bowen (2006) asserted that parent involvement can be situated in home contexts, which can include helping “with homework, discussing the child’s school work, and experiences at school and structuring home activities” (p. 194) as well as schooling situations which entail attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school and being involved in school sponsored activities.

Research has shown that parent involvement has a significant influence on student achievement (Barnard, 2004). Becher’s (1996) literature review on parent involvement found “substantial evidence” demonstrating that students, who have actively involved parents, have increased academic performance and overall cognitive development. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) further reveals that parents’ level of education, combined with their level of involvement in schools, relates significantly to student performance. Students with involved parents score 30-scale points
higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress compared to those students who parents were not involved (Dietel, 2006). Researchers also found that parent involvement is associated with a greater likelihood of aspiring to attend college and actually enrolling (Cabrera & Steven, 2000) as well as lower rates of behavioral problems and lower likelihood of high school dropout and truancy (McNeal, 1999). Thus, the involvement of African American parents promises to have a measurable effect on their child’s achievement.

While scholars have acknowledged the importance of parental involvement, there is less scholarship that examines what educators do or fail to do to promote the involvement of African American parents. If White, middle-class students tend to experience greater levels of parental involvement, one might wonder if the higher rates of parental involvement are due primarily to factors inherent in race and socio-economic status or if they are influenced by the ways in which educators facilitate the involvement of White, middle-class parents and/or inhibit the involvement of low-income African American parents.

Mentoring programs created by professional school counselors can be instrumental in improving the academic and social achievement of African American students. Specifically, Dappen and Isernhagen (2006) suggested that school mentoring programs assist in the reduction of alcohol and drug use, teen parenting, gang membership, and peer violence. They also reported that interpersonal skills and relationships have improved along with self-confidence, attitudes toward school, and academic achievement. Individual counseling and small group counseling represent effective strategies for promoting healthy pro-social behaviors among urban African American students.
American adolescents. Day-Vines and Day-Hairston (2005) recommended that school counselors establish relationships that exude warmth, trust, and personal respect. They found that a key to the effectiveness of mentoring programs is adherence to best practices based upon monitored program implementation.

Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) explained that students of color may feel oppressed, especially in the public educational system. They recommended that the professional school counselor should take a role that facilitates communal and collective empowerment with this population. Specifically, Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) stated:

An empowering professional school counselor encourages the oppressed student to participate in school-based activity groups or clubs -- particularly ethnic student groups. Participation in groups such as these can have many positive effects for the student’s development of identity. It also provides a forum for oppressed people to share their life experiences with those who are likely to have similar backgrounds. (p. 329)

Randolph and Johnson (2008) evaluated the effectiveness of school-based mentoring programs. Evidence of these programs can be traced back to the 1980s as instrumental for students who needed extra support in school. The authors described “extra support” as providing academic success and establishing pro-social behaviors. Most of the researched programs follow a “prevention-focused, risk and resilience framework, with a configuration of program services that incorporates recommendations from best practices models” (Randolph & Johnson, 2008, p. 177).
Effective Schools and Classrooms

Many studies have examined schools and classrooms in which students of color and low-income students achieve better than anticipated academic results (Barth, 1999; Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Reeves, 2000). These findings were in contrast to the Coleman Report, published in 1966. The Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) indicated that differences in test scores among students of color were strongly associated with differences in social class. The report implied that the environment that the child came from would make a greater impact on their educational achievement than the school they attended.

In response to the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), researchers began identifying and studying schools that served low-income, children of color; yet, achieved better academic results than schools serving similar populations (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1982; Lezotte, 1992). These effective school studies suggested that schools could make a difference in the achievement of urban students. Through these studies, researchers identified characteristics or correlates of effective schools and endeavored to distinguish them from schools whose achievement was declining. Edmonds (1982) summarized these findings in ten key areas:

1. Improving schools are different from declining schools in the emphasis their staff placed on the accomplishment of the basic reading and mathematics objectives.

2. The staff at improving schools tends to believe that all of their students can master the basic objectives. Declining school teachers, project that students’ ability levels are low therefore they cannot master the objectives.
3. The staff at improving schools has high expectations for students.

4. The teachers and principals at improving schools are much more likely to assume responsibility for teaching the basic reading and math skills, but declining schools fear there is not much that teachers can do to influence student achievement.

5. The staff at improving schools devotes a greater amount of time toward achieving reading and math objectives.

6. The principals at improving schools are more likely to be an instructional leader, more assertive in his/her institutional leadership role, more of a disciplinarian, and assume responsibility for the evaluation of student achievement. Principals at declining schools are more permissive and tend to emphasize informal and collegial relationships with teachers.

7. The improving school’s staff appears to show a greater degree of acceptance of the concept of accountability.

8. Teachers at improving schools are less satisfied when students are achieving. Declining school teachers reflect a pattern of complacency.

9. Levels of parent involvement are higher at improving schools.

10. Teachers have input into the placement of students in the classrooms and heavy paraprofessional involvement.

According to Knapp (1995), curriculum and instruction that demand understanding produce better outcomes with minority and other at-risk students than curriculum and instruction focusing on lower order skills. In short, these recent analyses have highlighted psychological factors that can increase education success in students at
risk for educational failure. Most of the work on effective schooling has focused on administrative and organizational issues (Firestone, 1991; Reynolds et al., 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

There are many lessons to learn from gap-closing schools. Johnson (2007) reported the following findings as to what leaders in high-performing schools do to improve the achievement of African American students:

1. Leaders in high performing schools believe that they can make a difference in the lives of all children.

2. Leaders in high performing schools help people reconnect with their highest motivations for working with children of color. They do more than post a mission statement on a wall they build a sense of mission in the lives of people who work in the school.

3. Leaders in high performing schools are goal-driven and keep attention to key goals at the forefront of their schools. The goals are not simply slogans: they are reasons for coming to work.

4. Leaders in high performing schools challenge disbelievers by using local data and data from similar schools to dispel myths about the academic limitations of African American children.

5. Leaders in high performing schools inspire caring by fostering climates that help students know they are valued, respected and loved. They inspire their colleagues to create a culture in which students and families are sincerely valued.
6. Leaders in high performing schools create environments in which educators feel valued. They foster powerful collaborations that make individuals feel supported and valued.

7. Leaders in high performing schools build in people a sense of efficacy: a feeling that together, they can accomplish anything.

8. Successful schools teach African American students more. They offer challenging academic content and frequently assess the growth of students.

Effective school studies continued into the 1990s and 2000s with an emphasis on schools that achieved strong results in the context of state accountability systems. Cawelti (1999) studied six high-performing schools that were in low-income neighborhoods with high concentrations of African American students and other students of color. The six schools profiled were Fredrick Douglas Academy (New York, NY), Carl C. Waitz Elementary (Mission, TX), Exeter High School (Ajax, Ontario), James Madison Elementary (Pittsburg, PA) Clay Elementary (Clay, WV) and Dodge-Edison Elementary (Wichita, KS). Cawelti (1999) found five common traits that contributed to the growth and success of these schools: a focus on standards-based instruction, accountability, instructional leadership, teacher commitment, and emphasis on change to facilitate improvement.

In a larger study, Barth (1999) surveyed 1,200 high-performing, high-poverty elementary and secondary schools in 21 states. The study highlighted several common aspects of these high-performing schools. First, Barth (1999) found that standards-based instruction drove curriculum and instruction and was the basis for evaluating student work and teacher performance. Emphasis was placed on teaching reading and math to
help students meet the standards. Next, the schools utilized professional development to improve instructional practices. Also, several of the schools implemented systems to monitor students and provide immediate intervention. The increased involvement of parents through parent education seminars and conferences was significant. Finally, the schools implemented systems that held stakeholders accountability for improving results. These various factors combined to contribute to the increase in student achievement.

Izumi (2002) studied eight successful high-performing schools in poverty-stricken urban areas in California. Schools were selected based on several factors:

1. 80% of students were in the federal free lunch program
2. Ranked seven or above on the Academic Performance Index scale of 1-10
3. The schools had a large population of African American and/or Latino students.

This study reported that factors that promote high performance include:

- Research based curriculum and instruction
- Content standards
- Frequent assessments and data analysis
- Professional development
- Teacher content and quality of instruction
- Discipline policies

Carter (2000) investigated 21 schools to determine the systems and structures that contributed to increased academic achievement in students. The study was based on schools where 75% of the students qualified for free and/or reduced-price lunch and where students scored above the 65th percentile on national achievement tests. Eleven of
the 21 schools scored at or above the 80th percentile. The researcher found that there were seven common characteristics at these higher-performing schools. The characteristics were effective leadership, measurable goals, teacher quality, assessment and analysis, discipline, parent involvement, and effort.

Reeves (2000) reported similar findings. The study became known as the “90/90/90 Schools” because 90% of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 90% of the students were of color and 90% of the students met the state and district academic standards. The five factors that were common to all of the “90/90/90 Schools” were:

- The schools emphasized academic achievement.
- They examined specifically how curriculum was used.
- Students received frequent assessments.
- The schools also highlighted the importance of writing.

Johnson and Asera (1999) examined nine high-performing schools in lower socio-economic areas to determine the practices that led to increased achievement among African American students and other students of color. The criteria for this study were based on the following characteristics:

1. The majority of students met low-income criteria (they qualified for free or reduced-price lunch).
2. The school was located in an urban area.
3. Achievement in math and reading was higher than the 50th percentile on state or national assessments.
Despite the fact that these schools were serving students of color in low socio-economic and low-income areas, the schools scored higher than most schools in their states. The practices found that led to student achievement were:

- Goal setting by the leaders and teachers
- Purposeful professional development
- Consistent discipline policies
- A system of accountability
- Standards based instruction
- Parental involvement

All of these practices were fostered by effective leadership, which had a direct correlation to high student achievement.

Providence-St. Mel School on Chicago’s west side is an example of a school that serves high-achieving African American students. For the past 25 years, 100% of the school’s high school graduates have been accepted into four-year colleges (Pressley, 2004). Pressley (2004), studied the Providence-St. Mel School using qualitative, grounded theory-approach. The data collected included observations, questionnaire responses, and document analyses. The findings were consistent with the conclusions of other effective school studies. This school had strong leadership, accountability, academic focus, and orderliness.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) found after analyzing some effective elementary schools in Chicago, Illinois, that relational trust is high among the players in effective schools. Many high-performing schools have become a reliable resource to the communities they serve. Strong leaders facilitate opportunities for families to receive
assistance with clothing, uniforms, parenting classes, basic skills training, and provide connections to community resources. In turn, parents feel valued and when the principal recognizes and utilizes their strengths. Greater trust increases with cooperation, which, in turn, increases student achievement.

Although Coleman and colleagues (1966) suggested that schools had only marginal influence on student achievement, the studies above indicated otherwise. These studies revealed that there are high-performing schools in low socio-economic areas and these urban schools share common practices attributed to student achievement.

Furthermore, the studies revealed that high-performing urban schools have similar characteristics and systems that help African American students and other students of color reach high levels of academic achievement. It is clear that there are differences, as each school is unique. Yet, as suggested in Table 3, these findings also suggest that certain systems and structures were found frequently to promote student achievement in high-poverty schools that serve large concentrations of African American students and other students of color.

Despite all of the research that exists regarding common systems and structures in high-performing schools, little is known about how systems and structures are implemented in high-performing urban schools or to what extent they are implemented. Limited research exists regarding the path that schools follow to ensure systems and structures are in place to guarantee effective instructional and leadership practices, especially in service to African American students.
Table 3

Analysis of Common Systems and Structures

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<td>Curriculum &amp; Instruction</td>
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<td>Accountability</td>
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<td>Teacher Quality &amp; commitment</td>
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<td>Effort</td>
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</table>

How School Leaders Influence Student Achievement

According to Johnson, Uline, and Perez (2011), the following was evidenced on research regarding principal leadership and student performance:

A growing body of evidence underscores a significant and positive relationship between effective principal leadership and student learning and achievement.

Recent research included qualitative case studies of highly challenged, high-performing schools (Johnson, Lein, & Ragland, 1998; Scheurich, 1998) and quantitative studies examining indirect leadership effects on student outcomes.
In fact, an extensive review of evidence related to the nature and size of these efforts concluded that, among school-related factors, leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its contribution to student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005). Further, these effects are greatest within contexts where they are most needed, that is, “the greater the challenge the greater the impact of [leader] actions on learning.” (p.31)

Experts contend that administrative leadership remains pivotal in advancing school improvement efforts and increasing school effectiveness (Day, 2007; Griffith, 2001; Hines, 2007; Leithwood, 2005; Muijs, 2004). For decades, researchers have sought empirical evidence of the connection between leadership and achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, 2005; Marks & Printy, 2003). Marzano et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that examined the linkages between school leadership and student achievement. They found that school leadership has a substantial, indirect correlation to student achievement. They reported that effective leadership comprises 21 key areas of responsibility that correlate positively with student achievement.

In studies of effective schools, leadership (e.g., an effective principal) is frequently a prominent factor in descriptions of influential factors. (Firestone, 1991; Reynolds et al., 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). A growing body of research demonstrates that the leadership of a school principal plays a critical role in closing
achievement gaps and increasing overall student performance (Chance & Segura, 2009; Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005).

**Instructional Leadership**

According to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 2012) Standards for School Leaders, the following practices are evidenced in effective school administrators:

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by:

- Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community;
- Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff profession growth;
- Ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning organization;
- Collaborating with families and communities, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources;
- Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner;
- Understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

**Nine essential characteristics of effective leaders.** The New York State Education Department’s nine essential characteristics of effective leaders are as follows:

1. Leaders know and understand what it means and what it takes to be a leader;
2. Leaders have a vision for schools that they constantly share and promote;
3. Leaders communicate clearly and effectively;
4. Leaders collaborate and cooperate with others;
5. Leaders persevere and take the long view;
6. Leaders support, develop and nurture staff;
7. Leaders hold themselves and others responsible and accountable;
8. Leaders never stop learning and honing their skills; and
9. Leaders have the courage to take informed risks.

The following 21 Responsibilities of the School Leader are taken from Marzano and colleagues’ (2005) book *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results*. These are the results of his study to determine effective practices for school leadership and a description of each responsibility.

1. **Affirmation**: When one mentions affirmation, one can describe it as communication of accountability. The school leader has the responsibility to praise and celebrate accomplishments, but yet must still have the courage to address negatives.

2. **Change Agent**: It is the responsibility of the school leader to challenge the status quo, to challenge the practices that are in place and to push towards new practices. Similar to Zygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, the leader’s responsibility is to take the staff out of their comfort zone in an attempt to develop new and better practices.

3. **Contingent Rewards**: This responsibility is reflective of Transactional Leadership, or the swapping of rewards for performance. It is fairly common
to compliment groups, but isolated when recognizing individuals and the leader needs to understand that not everyone should be treated equally.

4. Communication: Communications seems to possibly be the most important responsibility because it is integrated into most aspects of leadership.

5. Culture: Culture is the shared values, beliefs, and feelings of a community, and is evident in the artifacts and symbols that illustrate those priorities. Culture, like communication, is evident in many theories of leadership, and establishing a culture of achievement in the school might be one of the most important responsibilities of the leader.

6. Discipline: Discipline refers to protecting teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their instructional time or focus. Instructional time is paramount to teaching; more time on task, more learning, theoretically. The principal has the responsibility to decrease the amount of distractions that impact instructional time.

7. Flexibility: Conflict: Change. Flexibility is about realizing, or creating, chaos, and then adjusts to it. Leaders realize the situations and adapt their behaviors to address the situation. These traits also evident in the change agent responsibility.

8. Focus: Focus is similar to discipline in that it also associates with lessening the distractions to instructional time. Focus is the leader’s ability to communicate and reinforce the goals and vision, and to minimize the distractions to those ends.
9. Ideals/Beliefs: It is the leader’s beliefs which shape the culture of the school, and creates followership.

10. Input: A school’s effectiveness correlates to the amount, and type, of input that teachers have into the running of the school. This input builds shared sense of purpose and consensus.

11. Intellectual Stimulation: Learning about learning and inspiring the organization to grow is all about professional development. Providing the research and theories allows the staff to implement and experiment with new strategies.

12. Involvement in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: The involvement of the leader in Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment is critical to the concept of instructional leadership. The leadership should be hands on with curriculum and instruction so that knowledge of strategies and resources can be shared. Assessment practices are also important because maintaining consistent and focused assessment allows for adjustment of instruction for the content for greater student achievement.

13. Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: Having knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment allow the leader to provide specific, research-based strategies to teachers for improved instruction. While the Involvement responsibility is “hands on”, the Knowledge responsibility involves maintaining current research and theories about those areas. This also allows the leader to prescribe specific professional development opportunities for staff to increase areas of need.
14. Monitoring/Evaluating: Monitoring and evaluating are important because of the specific feedback they provide to teachers. Through this process, the feedback provided can be specific and focused to aid in achievement.

15. Optimizer: The Optimizer responsibility is the positive, inspirational emotion that the leader brings, especially when confronted with a meaningful change.

16. Order: Order is the set of processes established to allow for the flow of work to be standardized. Efficient procedures allows for effort to be focused on areas of greater importance, such as student learning.

17. Outreach: The leader is an advocate for the school and the students to the various stakeholders in the community. Communication and partnerships are required for the school to achieve in a complex environment.

18. Relationships: Relationships is central to the achievement of many other responsibilities. It is with face-to-face connections that one can build the credibility with other people.

19. Resources: It is imperative for efficient operations that one have the right tool for the task, and it is the responsibility of the leader to not only ensure that the tools are available, but that the teachers are trained to utilize the tool effectively and efficiently. “Resources” can include physical resources (stuff), monetary resources (money), and human resources (people).

20. Situational Awareness: Situational awareness is knowledge of what is going on in the school, feelings and emotions, day to day activities. This will allow the leader to anticipate any issues, or be better prepared should a situation arise.
21. Visibility: Visibility is the extent to which the leader is in classrooms and available throughout the school. By being available, the leader shows that they are interested in what goes on in the school. The leader is also able to communicate more informally with the teachers about classroom practices.

Research affirms the critical role of instructional leadership for enhancing academic achievement for students of color in high performing low socio-economic schools (Carter, 2000; Cawelti, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Reeves, 2000). An instructional leader is responsible for the formation of the school vision (Blase & Blase, 1997). The vision keeps the staff focused on student achievement. An instructional leader is also charged with carrying out various instructional duties such as developing professional development opportunities for teachers to build capacity, monitoring data, being visible in classrooms, evaluating instruction and maintaining relationships with community members (Lambert et al., 1995). Lastly, an instructional leader encourages instructional conversations, encourages constant reflection and provides opportunities for professional development to improve instructional practices (Blase & Blase, 2004).

Research also asserts professional development is one of the main components in high performing high poverty schools (Barth, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Marzano, 2003). According to Izumi (2002), professional development is the time teachers use to prepare lessons, collaborate and make connections to curriculum to facilitate effective instruction. Professional development also allows for dialogue regarding standards-based instruction, activities that align with standards, assessment and data analysis. Professional development increases content knowledge and develops staff cohesion (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Professional development is
a specified time for teachers to discuss various research-based instructional strategies and share best practices.

**Leadership characteristics.** Researchers and leaders promote a number of theories on what constitutes effective leadership. Over the past several years a number of studies were conducted to identify what is considered effective leadership characteristics in organizations and Bolman and Deal (1997) reported that the results of this research effort revealed a consensus on three characteristics of effective leadership.

The first characteristic is that effective leaders establish a vision. The second characteristic is that effective leaders have a commitment to a vision and the ability to passionately communicate that vision to others. The third characteristic that effective leaders have is the ability to inspire trust and build relationships with the organization. Kouzes and Posner (2010) have concluded that leadership is an observable, learnable set of practices. While few research studies have focused on leadership practices of African American students, little research has focused on effectiveness or on the means for increasing effectiveness of leaders (Whetten & Cameron, 1985).

Kouzes and Posner (2010) have conducted years of research focusing on what followers look for and expect from their leaders. They have identified four qualities that followers expect and ranked-ordered the qualities from most important to least important.

1. **Trustworthiness:** Followers expect leaders to say what they mean and mean what they say. Followers need to feel that they can depend on leaders to act consistently with what they say – leaders have to “walk the walk”. It may take a while for followers to trust new leaders, but each time the leaders are
perceived as acting consistently with the organization’s mission and their expressed vision, the followers’ trust grows.

2. *Competence:* Followers expect leaders to know what they’re doing and bring a repertoire of knowledge and skills to the organization. It is important that school leaders have a strong sense of efficacy about effective instruction, and be prepared to listen to and support other staff who have strengths in areas needed for school effectiveness.

3. *Forward-looking:* Followers expect leaders to be able to choose an appropriate direction for the organization. They ask that a leader have a well-defined orientation toward the future. Effective leaders examine new research, best practices, and new systems to find ways to make their organization more effective. These leaders embrace a continuous improvement mindset among followers.

4. *Enthusiasm:* Followers expect their leaders to project a spirit of optimism and excitement about the school, its mission, and prospects for the future.

**Distributed Leadership**

Spillane (2005) explained distributed leadership is often used interchangeably with “shared leadership,” “team leadership.” and “democratic leadership.” He asserted that some individuals use the term “distributed leadership” to indicate that school leadership involves multiple leaders; others argue that the term describes an organizational quality, rather than an individual attribute. Still others use distributed leadership to define a way of thinking about the practice of school leadership.
In explaining that distributed leadership is about leadership practices rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, or structures, Spillane (2005) shared that a distributive perspective focuses on leadership practices in a particular way; leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions between school leaders, followers, and their situation. Interdependency is the primary characteristic of distributed leadership among leaders.

According to Dufour and Marzano (2011), every person who enters the field of education has both an opportunity and obligation to be a leader. They argued that no single person has all of the knowledge, skills, and talent to lead a district, improve a school, or meet all of the needs of every child in his or her classroom. They also asserted that it will take a collaborative effort and widely dispersed leadership to meet the challenges confronting schools.

Dufour and Marzano (2011) stated that no single person can unilaterally bring about substantive change in an organization. Kouzes and Posner (2010) agreed, as they reported:

In the thousands of cases we’ve studied, we’ve yet to encounter a single example of extraordinary achievement that didn’t involve the active participation and support of many people. We’ve yet to find a single instance in which one talented person-leader or individual contributor-accounted for most, let alone 100 percent, of the success. (p. 47)

Distributive leadership is an idea that became prominent through the teachings and lectures of Richard Elmore, a professor of educational leadership at Harvard. The traditional notion of leadership is the vision of one person at the head of a group,
directing, teaching, and encouraging others. This notion of “heroic” leadership, however, is rapidly changing, and “post-heroic,” also known as distributive leadership is taking hold.

- Distributive leadership is the sharing of leadership between two or more individuals. This type of leadership has many names, such as shared, dispersed, relational, roving, collective, group-centered, broad-based, participatory, fluid, inclusive, and supportive leadership. In schools today, as the workload of administrators is constantly increasing, shared leadership is becoming widespread.

- Because school administrators cannot be everywhere at one time, they have begun to implement this type of leadership. Some schools distribute the leadership power between two administrators, while other schools involve teachers and parents, creating a group where there is no central leader in charge. As a result, numerous aspects of the schools or educational systems are attended to more fully and improvement is significant.

- Distributing the leadership allows administrators to focus on a few areas and really make an impact. They do a better job in a few areas than if they were over numerous activities, administrative duties, and student and teacher responsibilities. In return, administrators tend to find their jobs more fulfilling and feel like they are actually making a difference. Shared leadership may also help reduce the high number of administrators who quit their job.

- Some schools distribute leadership responsibilities between two principals. One is an instructional principal while the other is an administrative principal.
As a result, they are more effective in their jobs, and the students and teachers of the school receive more attention.

- Businesses are also starting to use this idea of shared leadership. Often, leadership on a project is distributed across a broad base of employees. Each has distinct and different responsibilities that contribute to the overall success of the company.

As with most ideas, there are a few concerns about the concept of shared leadership, such as accountability and autonomy. However, despite these setbacks, as administrators learn the skills necessary to share leadership with their co-workers, their job will become more manageable. Ultimately, as educators are able to minimize their areas of focus and work effectively as leaders, student care and school reform will improve.

According to the Centres of Innovation (2012), distributed leadership is not delegation. It is about sharing power, roles and responsibilities. The Centres of Innovation (2012) elaborated on this notion by assigning four types of responsibilities regarding distributed leadership:

1. Having responsibility, refers to having designated roles and responsibilities
2. Being responsible, refers to professional conduct, being ethical, honest and open to different perspectives
3. Taking responsibility, refers to – taking risks and challenging oneself, being innovative and trying new ways of being and doing
4. Sharing responsibility, refers to – relationships, collegiality, respect, understanding, and acceptance of differences
High Expectations and Leadership Behaviors

High expectations are influenced by the school’s leadership and their response when students do not learn (Lezotte, 2011). Lezotte (2011) emphasized that leaders must help their schools change from teacher-center institutions to learner centered organizations in which teachers have high expectations for themselves and for all of their students. Lezotte (2011) argued that school leaders must help their colleagues overcome the notion that some students will not succeed.

Lezotte (2011) listed the following research supported strategies in his review of research related to school improvement and high expectations:

- Belief that all children can succeed
- Use of data to inform instruction
- De-track the curriculum
- Develop personalized intervention plans
- Don’t accept failure

Conclusion

This review of literature provides a foundation for the current inquiry. The review examined the current state of academic achievement for African American students in urban areas, and then explored key factors (content, pedagogy, and relationships) that have influenced the success of schools that generate high-achieving African American students. The literature review also examined leadership factors that influence achievement in schools that serve African American students well. This study examined systems and structures that leaders implemented and that were perceived to lead to school-wide effective instruction in a high performing and high poverty middle school.
This study also examined how and to what degree those systems and structures impacted classroom instruction and led to increased achievement for African American students. Further study of this topic will advance the educational enterprise because leaders will glean strategies to foster the academic growth of African American students. Future research could examine categories, patterns, or themes that emerge as a result of successful leadership practices and program implementation with this demographic.
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

Too few African American students achieve academic proficiency in public schools. Perhaps this is because too few teachers and administrators know how to influence teaching and learning in ways that create high achievement for African American students. The purpose of this study was to deepen understanding of the principal leadership practices that influenced high levels of academic success for African American students at a high-performing, Title I middle school. Given the increasing complexity of the principal-ship and increased pressure on principals for increasing student achievement, this study sought to develop robust descriptions of the practices and processes principals implemented that influenced increased achievement levels results for African American students. Specifically the study sought to identify decisions principals made to:

- Increase rigor and consistency in academic content taught at the school,
- Implement better and more effective classroom instruction practices that addressed the needs of African American students,
- Identify and implement more focused and effective instructional interventions to address the learning needs of struggling students, and
- Establish and sustain better relationships among students, parents, teachers, and administrators to support a learning climate of high academic achievement.

The study described how school principals in a high-performing, Title I middle school created, implemented, and sustained processes that resulted in improved academic achievement for all its students.
Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What descriptions characterize curricula at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

2. What descriptions characterize instruction at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

3. What descriptions characterize relationships among students, parents, teachers, and administrators at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

4. How have leaders at the school influenced changes in curricula, instruction, and relationships at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

Research Design

This case study examined the lived experience of a school that is attaining strong academic results for African American students. For this case study, the researcher collected data during a three-month period between March and May 2012. All of the data were qualitative and were collected to provide insight into the processes used to increase the achievement of African American students at William Dandy Middle School.

Qualitative Approach

Gay and Airasian (2001) explained that qualitative research was exceptionally suited for establishing a foundation for understanding a group or phenomenon and could address questions that cannot be answered by quantitative methods. This study employed a qualitative approach that allowed for practical understanding of methods and actions
(Miles & Huberman, 1994) that were implemented to address the widening achievement gap among African American students and students from other racial/ethnic groups.

A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to collect open-ended emerging data, as well as develop new themes from the data (Creswell, 2003). Also, as Creswell (2003) explained, using a qualitative approach provided the opportunity to: (1) collect rich, thick description during interviews; (2) engage in more in-depth discussions; (3) identify other open-ended emergent themes.

Miles and Huberman (1994) explained that qualitative data represent naturally occurring events in natural settings. Interviewees in natural settings offer vivid descriptions, within a real context that will be perceived as truth among readers. The emphasis of the participants’ experiences and perceptions made for an appropriate use of a qualitative approach for this study, as the sample included individuals who have had direct experience with the focus of the study (Leedy & Ormond, 2005).

**Case Study Methodology**

This qualitative study utilized case study methodology. This case study examined the lived experience of a school that is attaining strong academic results for African American students. Case study methodology was appropriate because there are many variables that influence student success at Dandy (Merriam, 1998). Case study methodology allowed the researcher to explore the multiple perspectives and shared experiences of the teachers and administrators at William Dandy Middle School (Merriam, 1998). This research was grounded in qualitative case study design because
the participants rest in a particular setting, subject, or event (Roberson, 2012); William Dandy Middle School, is in the Coral Springs neighborhood of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

The study followed a qualitative approach to gather descriptive data revealing how change occurred at William Dandy Middle School and how the principal, assistant principals, and other school leaders influenced and sustained change that led to improved achievement of African American students. Data collection included individual interviews with the principal and a district leader. Then focus group interviews were conducted with assistant principals, teachers, instructional leaders, parents, and community members.

In addition to the interviews, using observation protocols (see Appendix F), the researcher observed classroom instruction and various teacher planning meetings. The observation tools supported capturing data related to school climate and culture, curriculum, and instruction and the dynamics of change processes and decision making at William Dandy Middle School. Data included on the Florida Department of Education web site were also reviewed and analyzed to substantiate consistency in student achievement at William Dandy Middle School.

Delineation of the Case

Merriam (1998) explained that case study research is “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system.” (p. 12) William Dandy Middle School is the bounded system that was the focus of this case study. Specifically, the study centered upon William Dandy Middle School and the school factors that might have contributed to the high levels of academic achievement attained by African American students at the school. The case study focused upon the leadership that
influenced those high levels of achievement for all, but especially for African American students.

William Dandy Middle School is a high-performing school in the Broward County Public School District in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. The school has attained an “A” or “B” rating in the Florida state accountability system consistently for the past eight years and has achieved adequate yearly progress for seven of the past eight years (Florida Department of Education, 2012). The school employs 71 teachers and support staff serving approximately 986 students in sixth through eighth grades (Broward County Schools, 2012). The students include 914 African American students (90.5%), 51 Hispanic students (5.0%), 15 White students (1.5%), 5 Asian students (.54%) and 1 Indian student (.1%). Seventy-eight percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2008 and 2012, the school earned the National Excellence in Education Award from the NCUST because of the school’s strong academic results for all of the demographic groups of students served (NCUST, n.d.).

The object of the research study was to ascertain how the principal and leaders at William Dandy influenced the development and maintenance of high levels of student achievement, particularly for African American students. The study was intended to advance our understanding of the leadership practices that helped to improve and sustain the achievement of urban, African American students to levels greater than the average of all schools in their state. Furthermore, the study was intended to document how the leaders facilitated and sustained these changes over an eight-year period. The researcher sought in-depth understanding of the various practices of leaders at William Dandy that might have contributed to the academic success of their African American students.
Permission to Conduct Research

The researcher gained access to William Dandy Middle School by contacting the Broward County Public Schools and the principal of the school. This middle school was intentionally selected based on evidence of substantial achievement by African American students over an eight-year period. Before research began, the researcher requested permission and cooperation from the school district to analyze and examine data pertaining to William Dandy. In addition, the researcher asked the principal to be the main focus of the case study, along with the other school leaders at the school. The principal also granted access to support staff, academic coaches, teachers, parents, and community members at William Dandy Middle School. All subjects in this case study received a letter describing the research along with the details of the interviews and observations that would take place at their school. The letter explained the purpose of the study, the role of the researcher, and the role of the participants.

Participants

The participants selected for this case study were central to the school’s success. They were considered key informants. Gilchrist and Williams (1999) explained that a key informant is an individual who is able to provide in-depth information and knowledge that other professionals in the field of education do not have. Marshall (1996) concurred stating the qualifications and experiences of key informants make them uniquely qualified to discuss what behaviors or practices employed. Those significant to this study were the principal, area superintendent/director, the vice principals, the teachers and support staff, parents, and community members. The researcher interviewed a total of three principals, one area superintendent/director, two vice principals, and fifteen
teachers, five support staff. Six parents and two community members also participated in the study. The investigator observed at least three classrooms from each content area (English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science). Several elective courses were observed as well. Classrooms from each grade level were researched, which were sixth, seventh, and eighth.

From those that agreed to participate; teachers were interviewed based on availability during that time and selected to participate in focus group interviews. With the help of the principal, a cross-section of the school’s parents and community members were selected to be interviewed. Specifically, the principal helped identify parents of students from each grade level and the community partners and/or members.

Administrators. All administrators and school leaders were willing to participate and were interviewed. The current principal and all of the assistant principals at William Dandy, regardless of experience or gender and the district administrator who supervises the school principal, were interviewed. In addition to these administrators, the researcher interviewed the teachers at William Dandy Middle School who served in informal instructional leadership roles. The support staff interviewed included the literacy coach, math coach, writing coach, special education teachers at each grade level, the school counselors, the media center/computer lab director, and the second language specialist.
Teachers. Fifteen current teachers at William Dandy, including at least two teachers at every grade level were interviewed. In addition to interviewing these teachers, the researcher observed their classrooms using a structured observation protocol. Finally, the researcher observed teacher meetings (either department meetings, professional learning committee meetings, or other collaboration meetings occurring at the time of my visit) in which these teachers participated.

Parents. To better understand the efforts made to improve student achievement at Dandy, parents participated in the interview process. The researcher requested the principal’s assistance in identifying potential parents and community members to be interviewed. The researcher asked the principal to help identify parents of students who were struggling academically, so she could learn their perspectives regarding the help their children needed and received. The researcher also asked the principal to help identify parents of students who were achieving at high levels, so she could learn their perspectives about the school, as well. Six parents and four community members volunteered to participate and were interviewed.

Data Collection

Data collection began at the beginning of March 2012 and lasted through May 2012. Consistent with qualitative, case study research approaches (Merriam, 1998), this study employed the data collection techniques of interviews, observations, and document reviews to generate data relevant to the research questions. Qualitative researchers often use multiple forms of data in any single study, such as: observations, interviews, objects, written documents, audiovisual materials, and electronic documents (Leedy & Ormond,
The researcher used interviews, observations, and document reviews in combination to generate a set of themes relevant to the research questions.

**Nature of Interviews**

The primary means for collecting data was the use of an in-depth interview process described by Rubin and Rubin (2005). The interviewer listened, asked questions to move the interview forward, and recorded field notes. The style of interviewing used within this study was responsive interviewing, as it allowed a conversational partnership between the researcher and the respondents (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This conversational partnership also permitted the respondent to have a comfortable relationship during the course of the interview sessions. This was apparent through the following phases:

1. **Pre-Interview**: The researcher provided potential participants with clear and concise information about the study; showed flexibility with schedules and individual situations; and made modifications as needed.

2. **During the interview**: The researcher created a comfortable and safe environment with warm greetings; engaged in brief “ice breaker” conversations; requested permission again to audiotape interview; provided the interviewees with a set of questions to follow; stopping for breaks when needed; closed the interview with handshakes and expressions of thanks; and provided interviewees with next steps. During the interview, it was critical not to influence the participants with nonverbal gestures, actions, or with verbal opinions and comments that could potentially bias or taint the responses to the interview questions (Seidmen, 1998).
3. Post interview: The research shared more expressions of thanks and gratitude to the participants and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

The researcher conducted individual interviews with the former and current principals, as well as with the area superintendent/director. Each interview lasted 60 minutes. The vice principals were interviewed in focus groups, along with teachers and support staff. Each of the focus groups interviews were 30 minutes. Parents and community members were interviewed together in a 30 minute session.

Focus group interviews were facilitated by the researcher. During all interviews, interview protocols were used as guides to ensure consistency throughout the collection of data phase of the study. Consistency was further assured by audio recording interviews and the researcher taking copious notes as a means of double checking comments audibly made.

**Interview Instrumentation**

The researcher employed sets of interview questions used by the NCUST (n.d.) in their studies of high-performing urban schools. In particular, the researcher used the sets of interview questions for principals, teachers, and parents. The researcher selected questions that would be most likely to inform the research questions. Also, the researcher modified the NCUST questions, as necessary, to focus more specifically on the factors that influenced the academic success of African American students. (Appendix G). The researcher did not necessarily ask every participant to answer every question during the interviews. The questions were used as a guide in facilitating the interviews; the researcher paraphrased questions as necessary to allow for probing and re-questioning interviewees to illicit more complete answers. The tone of the interview was consistent
so that people were likely to feel comfortable sharing information. This instrumentation allowed the researcher to acquire various perspectives regarding the research questions.

**Nature of Observations**

The researcher observed at least two classrooms at each grade level. The researcher spent approximately 15 minutes in each classroom completing an observation form. (See Appendixes G, H, and I). The observation form allowed the researcher to note a variety of instructional practices including, for example:

- Was lesson objective posted and referenced
- Student friendly language
- Grade level of content
- Teacher’s mastery of content
- Student engagement
- Evidence of understanding
- Teacher skills and practices evidenced
- Instructional delivery methods
- Classroom learning environment
- Posted student work

In addition to this the researcher employed the components of Downey, Poston, Steffy, English, and Frase’s (2004), “Three Minute Walkthrough”, when observing classrooms. The key areas were:

- Orientation of the teacher and students
- Curricular decisions made by the teacher (content, context, and cognitive demand)
- Instructional practices used (by the students and teacher)
- Walk the walls – display of student work
- Safety and behavior

As described above, classrooms of the teachers interviewed, were observed. Observation notes were made directly on the observation form and on additional note paper when necessary. During the classroom observations, the researcher gave special attention to (1) the level of student engagement, (2) evidence of student understanding of content, (3) teacher interaction with students, (4) the rigor of the academic work, (5) the strategies teachers used to help students master challenging academic concepts, (6) the content of bulletin boards, and (7) the nature of assignments given to students.

Nature of Documents Reviewed

The researcher collected and reviewed a variety of documents that provided information about curricula, instruction, and relationships at Dandy Middle School. For example, the researcher examined master schedules, and teacher collaboration meeting agendas. As well, the researcher collected and reviewed documents that provided information about student achievement results at Dandy. For example, the researcher examined teacher developed data reports related to benchmark assessments, state assessment data reports, common grade level assessments, and student academic accomplishments that were posted throughout the school. Several local articles and community magazines were made available that highlighted and acknowledged the achievement gains at William Dandy Middle School. Three teachers, (one at each grade
shared a copy of their grade level’s monitoring sheet that is used to monitor student progress and success. The current principal also shared her record keeping system on student progress, teacher advances, and the areas of concern. Each vice principal was assigned to a particular grade level. Each of them evidenced student progress throughout the year and each administrator’s binder held formative and summative assessment results, so leaders could analyze achievement over time. The literacy coach, math coach, and writing coach recorded and monitored student gains in their respective areas of focus. The principal also monitored teacher growth and those that needed extra support.

The researcher was given a tour of the school’s resource room, where curricula and instructional materials were organized by grade level, content area, genre, and a resource research center. The resource room is adjacent to the collaboration room and professional development room. Materials and resources are assessable to stakeholder when planning and/or participating in professional development.

The media center and library showcased many photos, trophies, school-wide recognition awards, newspaper articles on William Dandy’s success. There was an information board with school filled with information on school-wide events where families were welcomed, students could interact with the principal, vice principals, school leaders, and teachers. Various photos of previous events were posted around the school of students appearing to be very happy and engaged. Photos of the various winning sports teams, clubs, and organizations were also highlighted. Students appeared to have a sense of pride and enthusiasm for the school.
Coherency of Design

The research design employed within the study held a strong measure of validity, largely based upon the data collection techniques that were used for qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2003):

A qualitative approach is one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e., the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern). The researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data.

(p. 181)

All interviews and observations occurred at William Dandy Middle School on dates and at times mutually convenient to the researcher and to the school principal. The interviews took place at mutually convenient, pre-agreed upon times in private rooms at the school ensuring confidentiality. In respect for the time and schedules of the interviewees, time lines were adhered to strictly. Administrator interviews lasted one hour. Teacher interviews lasted 30 minutes. Parent and community member interviews lasted 20 minutes. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded, then electronically encoded and secured. The researcher ended each interview with a thank you to the stakeholders for their participation and congratulated them on the school’s accomplishments.

Each classroom observation lasted 15 minutes. Each meeting observation lasted 30 minutes.
Data-Analysis Procedures

The interviews, observations, and document reviews generated thick descriptions to support the purpose of the study. Together, the data collection tools yielded experiences and perceptions that responded to the research questions. A case study approach utilized to apply data with this study included (1) identifying common themes; (2) identifying statements related to the topic; (3) grouping statements into meaningful sections; (4) looking for divergent perspectives; and (5) constructing narrative that provided an overall description of the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2005).

During the school day, interviews and classroom observations were conducted. At the end of each day the researcher took time to reflect upon the comments made and things observed. These issues were listed as possible themes and questions to consider for the next day’s interviews and observations.

The goal in analyzing the data was to identify possible categories across the data along with discerning characteristics within each category and how each category relates to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher utilized the constant comparative method drawn from the grounded theoretical approach to analyze all data across three coding procedures: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To begin, the researcher performed a line-by-line analysis of the data corpus and generated themes and then the researcher then identified individual themes that emerged.
Safeguards and Confidentiality

Approval was obtained from the San Diego State University Institutional Review Board prior to any data collection and the researcher abided by the safeguards stipulated by the IRB.

The researcher considered the ethical nature of the subjects and the potential political outcomes resulting from investigation processes. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, they were free to withdraw at any time without penalty, and if interested, they could receive an outcome brief denoting the results at the conclusion of the study. Each interviewee was granted written permission in accordance with informed consent regulations for human subjects. The researcher kept the identities of parents, teachers, instructional leaders, and assistant principals confidential and use pseudonyms. Data collected was protected via a locked briefcase and stored in a secured closet at the researcher’s office. The researcher expressed gratitude for the participants’ contributions to the research on the achievement of African American students, although participants did not benefit materially from this study. Anonymity and sensitivity to the needs of the subjects was maintained at all times. The researcher sent thank you cards as tokens of appreciation to each of the participants.

The researcher utilized the constant comparative method drawn from the grounded theoretical approach to analyze all data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Constant Comparative Method is explained below:
CHAPTER 4—FINDINGS

Cotton (2003) reported that the principal plays a primary role in developing the vision and goals of the school. Researchers have noted that the administrator is the key position to improving student achievement (Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Mullen, 2002; Spillane, 2005). Given the increased pressure on administrators to raise student achievement (especially in urban schools), this study sought to examine the leadership practices that have yielded high achievement results for schools serving large numbers of African American students.

The study sought to investigate the variables influencing high academic achievement for African American students at William Dandy Middle School. This chapter begins with a brief review of the methodology presented in Chapter 3 and presents a summary and discussion of the findings.

Specifically, the following research questions provided direction for the study.

1. What descriptions characterize curricula at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

2. What descriptions characterize instruction at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

3. What descriptions characterize relationships among students, parents, teachers, and administrators at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

4. How have leaders at the school influenced changes in curricula, instruction, and relationships at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
The goal was to examine the systems and structures in place at a high-performing middle school that experienced eight consecutive years of strong achievement for African American students. This study aimed to advance the understanding of the leadership practices that helped to improve the achievement of African American students. As well, the study examined how a high-performing urban school attained greater levels of achievement than most schools in their state. Hopefully, the findings will help other urban schools and principals, especially those serving African American communities replicate the practices employed at William Dandy Middle School.

**Research Design and Methodology**

This case study examines the lived experience of a school that is attaining compelling academic results for African American students. For this case study, the researcher collected data during a three-month period between March 2012 and May 2012. All of the data are qualitative and were collected to provide insight into the processes used to increase the achievement of African American students at William Dandy Middle School. Case study methodology was appropriate because there may be many variables that are influencing student success at Dandy. The author chose this method because qualitative research is exceptionally suited for establishing an understanding of a group or phenomenon. Additionally, case studies can address questions that cannot be answered by quantitative methods (Gay & Airasian, 2001). This approach allowed the consideration of the multiple perspectives regarding shared experiences of the teachers and administrators at William Dandy Middle School.

Through a qualitative approach, the researcher gathered descriptive data revealing how changes happened at William Dandy and how various leaders influenced and
sustained changes that led to improved achievement of African American students.

Data collection included individual interviews and focus group interviews involving the area superintendent/director, current and former principal, assistant principals, teachers, support staff/ instructional leaders, parents, and/or community members.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher observed classrooms and various teacher planning meetings using observation protocols. The observation tools helped illuminate issues that relate to school climate and culture, curricula, and instruction. Meeting observation protocols helped the investigator notice the dynamics of change processes and decision making at William Dandy Middle School.

**Sample**

The site was chosen initially because it won the 2008 and 2012 Excellence in Urban Education Award from the NCUST. Almost 90% of the school’s population is African American or Black and the percentage of William Dandy students achieving proficiency on the state’s academic assessments exceeds the average for all students in Florida.

The school applied for the Excellence in Urban Education Award in November 2007 and 2011. In order to apply they had to demonstrate that achievement levels were higher than those found in the majority of schools in their state. Also, the school had to demonstrate that those high levels of achievement were attained by students in all of the demographic groups they served. They had to demonstrate that attendance rates and graduation rates were high and suspension and expulsion rates were low. In 2007-2008, NCUST criteria required that schools had to have achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the prior two years and they had to provide other evidence of academic
strength. (In 2011-2012, schools had to report their AYP status, but did not have to meet all AYP criteria.) Also, schools had to demonstrate that no racial/ethnic groups were overrepresented in special education or underrepresented in advanced programs or programs for gifted students. Among the schools that met all of the NCUST eligibility criteria, 25 finalists were selected in 2007 and 28 were selected in 2011. NCUST sent a team of school leaders and researchers to conduct a one-day visit at each finalist school. Through this process, William Dandy Middle School was chosen as a winner of the National Excellence in Urban Education Award both in 2008 and 2012. William Dandy was the first school in the nation to have achieved this distinction twice. (NCUST, n.d.)

**Interviews Conducted**

The researcher conducted individual interviews and small focus group interviews. The individuals interviewed included the principals (current and former) and the area superintendent. The focus group participants and stakeholders included the vice principals, teachers, support staff, parents, and community members/partners. The individual interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Focus group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The researcher guided each interview and focus group with a list of questions designed to elicit information that might respond to the research questions; however, every question was not asked to every participant during the interviews. The investigator used her words to articulate the questions and probe for more complete answers. The researcher endeavored to keep the tone of the interview comfortable so that participants were likely to feel comfortable sharing information. As questions were asked, notes were taken on a separate notepad. If the interviewee referred to a document in their classroom
or office, a copy of the document was requested as an artifact, when the request seemed feasible and reasonable.

**Observations Conducted**

The researcher observed at least two classrooms at each grade level. In particular, each teacher interviewed received a classroom observation. Observation notes were made directly on the observation form and on additional note paper, as necessary. The researcher tried to be as thorough as possible in completing the observation form; however, no more than 15 minutes was spent in any classroom. The investigator aimed to pay special attention to student engagement and evidence of student understanding. Particular attention was paid to the manner in which teachers related to students, the rigor of the academic work, and the strategies teachers used to help students master challenging academic concepts. The researcher noted student work displayed in the classrooms as well as all assignments observed being given to students.

**Artifacts Reviewed or Collected**

During interviews, the researcher collected a school brochure that listed enrichment classes, the school’s master calendar, and the school map and classrooms list. The investigator also received a copy of the William Dandy Middle School NCUST Excellence in Urban Education Award Application, 2011-2012. The principal provided the researcher with an opportunity to review the school’s schedule of professional development training sessions for the school year, the collaboration schedules, the parent conference and training meetings, and the after-school student support program information.
School Profile

Before discussing issues related to curricula, instruction, and relationships, this chapter begins with a profile of William Dandy Middle School. In particular, this profile includes general information regarding student demographics, school budget, academic achievement, and extra-curricular activities.

William Dandy Middle School is a public school in the Broward County School District in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Located in the Coral Springs neighborhood of the city, the school serves 948 students in grades six through eight. In 2011-12, 843 (89%) William Dandy students qualified for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. In 2010-2011, 859 (88%) and in 2009-2010, 852 (88%) students received these benefits (Broward County Schools, 2012; NCUST, n.d.). As shown in Table 4, in 2011-2012, 91% of the students were Black or African American. Most other students were White (4%) or Latino (3%).

Table 4

Student Enrollment at William Dandy Middle School by Demographic Group 2011-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Demographic Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Or African American</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Or Hispanic</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Or Caucasian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students With Disabilities</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Or Reduced-Price Meals</td>
<td>843</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general William Dandy Middle School does not use selective admissions criteria, such as grade point averages, test scores, or academic portfolio scores, as criteria for determining whether students obtain or retain admission. Approximately 90% of William Dandy Middle School students attend the school because it is their neighborhood school. However, the school features a magnet program with pre-law or pre-medical content focused pathways. The school considers criteria, such as prior academic success, when students outside the William Dandy Middle School attendance area apply to participate in these programs. Approximately 10% of William Dandy Middle School students were admitted from outside attendance areas to participate in these magnet programs (Broward County Schools, 2012; NCUST, n.d.).

**School Budgets**

William Dandy Middle School received a larger Title I allocation in 2011-12 compared with the prior year; however, the total per pupil expenditures remained identical. As suggested by Table 5, decreases in non-Title I funding categories resulted in a decrease in the number of certificated/credentialed staff at the school and a decrease in the total number of school staff at the school (Broward County Schools, 2012; NCUST, n.d.).

William Dandy Middle School has performed at high levels on state assessments for the past eight years, earning an “A” grade in the Florida school accountability system. The state of Florida aggregates student performance on state assessments into a numeric index score. The school’s performance index score based on 2010-2011 data was listed as 567. The school’s performance index score based on 2009-2010 data was listed as 603 (Broward County Schools, 2012; NCUST, n.d.).
Table 5

**Student Enrollment and Title I Allocation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010-2011</th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Enrollment</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total School Title I Allocation</td>
<td>$440,784</td>
<td>$547,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Per Pupil Expenditures (all Sources)</td>
<td>$9,037</td>
<td>$9,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total # of Certificated/credentialed staff</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of school staff (all categories)</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Academic Achievement**

These performance index scores generated an “A” rating based on the relatively (compared to all Florida schools) high percentage of students demonstrating proficiency or advanced performance on state assessments. The following table lists the percentage of students performing at the proficient or advanced levels on the state assessment used for school accountability purposes for 2010-2011 (Table 6) and 2009-2010 (Table 7).

Table 6

**State Assessment Performance for 2010-11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Reading</th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Writing</th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Math</th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total School</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to strong rates of academic performance for the overall student population, William Dandy Middle School demonstrated high rates of academic proficiency for various demographic groups. Table 8 details the performance index scores
Table 7

State Assessment Performance for 2009-10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Reading</th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Writing</th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Math</th>
<th>% Proficient or Advanced in Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total School</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 8

Performance Index Scores for Demographic Groups for 2010-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Categories</th>
<th>Number enrolled in tested grades</th>
<th>2010-11 Performance Index Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>567 Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced-price Lunch</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>567 Points = an “A” School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


and Table 9 shows the percentage of proficient students in each demographic group in the 2010-2011 school years.

As Indicated in Table 4 approximately 130 English language learners attend William Dandy Middle School each year. Many of these students are from Haiti and speak French. A small group of students are from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, or Panama, and speak Spanish. Many of these English language learners are recent immigrants to the United States. As such, the State of Florida does not report their achievement data until they have spent at least one full year in U.S. schools (NCUST, n.d.). Although, few data points were reported, the school indicated that 30% of their
Table 9

*Percentage of Proficient/Advanced Students in Demographic Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Categories</th>
<th># Enrolled in tested grades</th>
<th>% Proficient or Adv. in English Language Arts</th>
<th>% Proficient or Adv. in Reading</th>
<th>% Proficient or Adv. in Writing</th>
<th>% Proficient or Adv. in Math</th>
<th>% Proficient or Adv. in Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced-price Lunch</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


seventh grade English learners advanced to a higher level of English proficiency in both 2009-2010 and in 2010-2011.

William Dandy Middle School did not achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by the state of Florida, based on 2010-2011 data. In accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, AYP criteria have risen each year so that by the 2013-2014 school years, all students must achieve academic proficiency in mathematics and reading. While William Dandy Middle School continues to outpace the state, only 85% of the criteria were met in 2011-2012. The school did not meet AYP criteria for African American and economically disadvantaged students in reading and math. (Broward County Schools, 2012; NCUST, n.d.). Similarly, the school did not achieve AYP based on 2009-2010 data. In that year, African American students did not meet improvement goals in reading.
The school continues, however, to meet the criteria for being an “A” school in the Florida accountability system. The school has maintained this accomplishment for eight consecutive years. In addition to considering the percentage of students achieving proficient or advanced performance, the Florida accountability system gives schools credit for elevating the academic performance of students who performed at the below basic or basic levels. William Dandy Middle School continues to demonstrate success in raising the performance of struggling students.

In addition to performance on state assessments, there are other evidences of academic success at William Dandy Middle School. The school maintained a rate of 95% average daily attendance in the 2010-2011 school years and a rate of 95% in the 2009-2010 school years (NCUST, n.d.). Teachers reported that on average, 500 students attend the William Dandy Middle School Saturday School consistently.

Additionally, evidence suggests that William Dandy Middle School students are successful when they advance to high school. The literacy coach asserted that the students promoted from eighth grade exhibit academic excellence in programs at the high school level. While all William Dandy Middle School students are not in pre-law and pre-medical programs, many are immersed in related studies which spark their interests in these programs. As a result, William Dandy Middle School students represent a large portion of the population feeding into magnet high schools that feature science, medical, and law-related studies in the Broward School District (Broward County Schools, 2012; NCUST, n.d.). The vice principals confirmed that high rates of enrollment in these programs have resulted in both employment and college attendance with many former William Dandy Middle School students, after graduating from high school.
One of the vice principals explained that educators at Dandy track the performance of promoted students in local high schools. The vice principal claimed that many Dandy students remain committed to a professional goal and therefore experience high rates of attendance and high grade point averages in high school.

This profile provided general information regarding student demographics, school budget, student achievement, and extra-curricular activities at William Dandy Middle School. The next section describes findings regarding curricula, instruction, and relationships at the school.

**Curricula**

The findings suggest that the curricula William Dandy Middle School students learn set them apart from students at other middle schools. The analysis of interviews, observations, and document reviews yielded several themes related to the content provided to William Dandy’s students: First, teaching at Dandy seems to be standards-based rather than textbook-based. In other words, teachers are driven, not by textbooks or materials, but by standards. They are focused on state standards, but they are also working to incorporate new common core standards. Teachers use a variety of resources to help teach students the standards. Secondly, unlike some urban middle schools, Dandy students benefit from a rich curriculum that includes STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects. For example, in mathematics, offerings include courses that enable students to earn high school credit as early as sixth grade. Thirdly, William Dandy Middle School teachers integrate the teaching of thinking skills throughout their courses. Attention to thinking skills result in a higher level of rigor. Fourth, William Dandy Middle School students are exposed to and have opportunities to
take accelerated high school courses, while in middle school. This allows students to
complete high school credits and courses, making them better prepared for high school
tasks and prepared for college much earlier. William Dandy offers 10 high school
accelerated courses. They are as follows:

- High School French 1 & 2
- High School Spanish 1 & 2
- High School Algebra
- High School Geometry
- High School Earth Science
- High School Law Studies
- High School Engineering
- High School Technology

Finally, all of the above-mentioned factors are enhanced through the frequent use
of curricular assessments. The analysis of data generated by these assessments helps
teacher ensure that they actually taught the standards students were expected to learn.
This section will describe these curricular findings in greater specificity.

Standards-Based Curricula

For the past eight years, state standards and the mastery of them has been at the
core of curricular planning at Dandy, according to the Literacy Coach. While all schools
have responsibilities related to state standards, at William Dandy Middle School, teachers
seem to be driven by the desire to help students’ master state standards. The day-to-day
decisions about what is taught are influenced less by textbooks or materials and more by
teachers’ desire to ensure that William Dandy students master key academic standards. A science teacher explained:

There are so many standards that the students need to learn in order to be successful on the FCAT and in the next grade level. There isn’t enough time in the school year to teach all of the standards the state says our students need to know. We at Dandy have spent time in collaboration and planning meetings to determine the most essential and most important standards for our students to learn. We look at the standards and analyze it against what is covered on the FCAT, what areas our students need the most support in, and look ahead at the next grade levels curriculum. Instead of teaching each and every standard, we pull out only those that we feel our students must master. We pace ourselves and allow time to re-teach if we need to. The standard is seen as the basic level of learning. We really want our students to go beyond the basic standard. We want them to master the essential standards and show us what they’ve learned by applying the concepts in other areas. Our teachers also look for students who evaluate information and use Bloom’s higher order thinking around the standard. (Teacher 2, personal communication)

This science teacher, like other William Dandy teachers, explained that teachers did not simply attempt to “cover” every standard. Instead, teachers sought to help their students develop mastery of the most important standards.

The quest for mastery of state standards has led educators to deliberately seek evidence that their students have learned the standards well. One of the vice principals explained:
Our educational program stands out and shines in comparison to other middle schools. In fact, we are achieving at higher levels than many high schools. Our teachers collect evidence and students’ work samples from each of those essential standards. They show the samples to parents and it gives the families a better idea of whether the student is mastering the standard, approaching the standard, or needing more support. (Vice Principal 2, personal communication)

Many educators at William Dandy Middle School see their focus on state standards as a segue to the pursuit of the common core standards. The same vice-principal explained:

This [focus on the mastery of state standards] is extremely helpful, because as we move closer to implementing the common core standards, teachers will have had lots of experience looking at a variety of ways that students can show they understand the standard and can move on. Dandy has a high standard regarding what we teach. We teach from the beginning of the day until the end. We don’t waste time. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to teach the essential standards and to start incorporating what skills students will need in order to comprehend the common core standards. We don’t just teach what is popular or the new program on the block. We talk about curriculum in detail and discuss how to best meet the needs of William Dandy students. Sometimes we use the state and district adopted textbooks and sometimes we don’t. (Vice Principal 2, personal communication)
Dandy’s standards-based approach was initiated by Principal Stanley and then strengthened by Principal Robinson. The continuity of efforts may be an important factor related to the quality of implementation. A lead English teacher asserted:

We believe that the standards-based curriculum was in place with Mrs. Stanley and continued with Mrs. Robinson. We may have done some tweaking to better tailor the lessons to fit the students who are here at this time, but we believe that Mrs. Stanley left a legacy of curriculum as she left for Dillard High School. We were a school that was proficient in the former curriculum and knew how to adequately teach the concepts to our students. We were known for having all of our materials and we knew how to teach our students well. Then Mrs. Robinson came in and did not make a lot of changes, but she just tweaked what was already in place. She helped us to focus on how to better teach the curriculum and how to develop a plan to assess our students more frequently. So we took it from there and continued with it. She allowed us to use the district curriculum, as well as supplements of teacher-created lessons, assessments, projects, and intervention strategies that fit our population and was more tailored to our students’ needs. Our curriculum is unique in that it incorporates the state standards, district standards, and the William Dandy Standards. That means our students are exposed to STEM curriculum and are taught how to think while keeping the 21st century skills in mind. (Teacher 1, personal communication.)

While many or all schools might purport to address state standards, Dandy may be different in that teachers seem to be driven to prove to themselves that students have mastered the standards. The researcher visited various classrooms and observed teachers
using strategies that helped students gain the knowledge and skills described in the standards taught that day. Teachers consistently provided instruction that used time effectively and flexibly to achieve learning goals related to the standards. The eighth grade vice principal explained the importance of this:

Teachers at William Dandy Middle School stand out in comparison to others in our district because they engage students in active learning; they build on prior knowledge and experiences during lessons. We try to help students develop conceptual and procedural understanding, along with student independence. (Vice Principal 2, personal communication)

A sixth grade math teacher asserted:

We use projects and assignments that require students to integrate and apply their learning in meaningful contexts and to reflect on what they have learned. Teachers at our school, adapt the learning environment so that all students may attain the standards. (Teacher 3, personal communication)

The researcher observed teachers using various strategies designed to help students demonstrate their mastery of the specific academic standards that were the focus of the day’s lesson. Some of the strategies observed including the following:

1. Identifying similarities and differences – Students were given opportunities to analyze similarities and differences among various elements. This objective was accomplished by comparing and contrasting stories. Students were also observed classifying items to determine their importance and key attributes.

2. Note taking – Students were taught that verbatim note taking was ineffective. One of the science teachers told students that they needed to analyze incoming
information and describe it in their own words. She shared that notes are always “a work in progress” and should be reviewed and revised. Students also learned that note taking should be used as a test prep tool and that there is a strong relationship between the amount of information in the notes and student achievement on tests (the more notes, the better students perform).

3. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition for progress in mastering standards– Teachers asked students to chart their effort and achievement related to the mastery of specific standards. Teachers shared samples of one-on-one conference data sheets that are used school-wide to confer with students regarding their progress. The literacy coach explained the rationale for the widespread use of this strategy at Dandy. She explained:

We at William Dandy want students to be intrinsically motivated in school. Rewards work well when they are connected to performance standards, but tangible rewards such as money and candy have proven to be ineffective with our students. We recognize the hard work, effort, and progress of students regularly. They are proud to be students at one of the highest performing middle schools in Florida.

Homework and Practice – The researcher observed a social science teacher reviewing the homework assignment for a group of students. The homework assignment required the students to practice application of the standard they learned in class.

These observations combine with teacher interview comments to describe instruction that is focused on helping students’ master specific academic standards.
Dandy teachers and students know specifically what students need to learn. Lessons are designed to ensure that students will learn the standards well.

**Emphasis on STEM**

Teachers at William Dandy integrate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) into their curricula. The former principal shared that it is part of the school’s mission to develop high levels of academic success in the areas of STEM and to build a strong knowledge base and skill set in the STEM disciplines. Evidence of STEM curricula was displayed around the school and in all of the classes where science, technology, engineering, and math were taught. This researcher observed display cases with pictures from the school’s science fairs, visits from veterinarians who work with zoo animals, and classroom experiments showing high student engagement and excitement. Other displays included awards that students received for their accomplishments on some of the computer programs in the technology lab, examples of students using smart boards and computers to conduct research in project-based learning groups, and student led/directed videos of various projects. From engineering classes, displays included robots, pictures, medals, and awards that represented the competitions in which Dandy students had participated.

Students take the core courses of science, history, reading/language arts, and math. Students also take technology education (engineering) and computer science classes. The lead science teachers shared, “The importance of reading to be informed and to engage with the units of study is essential pieces of the STEM program. Students read texts and novels that are relevant to their topics of study in science to help ‘make the connection’” (Teachers 4 & 6, personal communication).
At William Dandy Middle School student coursework is highly focused on STEM, yet students have the opportunity to take electives throughout their three years of middle school, including foreign language, art, band, and chorus. Students also take physical education and health as a part of their coursework. This allows the students to develop a strong background in engineering and computer programming, but also lets them explore other electives without sacrificing the core components of STEM. An eighth grade math teacher asserted the following:

Students are able to see the connections between areas of study as they relate to an essential problem or question. We guide students to create projects that have ties to the community, which helps students understand the importance of STEM as a powerful educational experience. (Teacher 4, personal communication)

The STEM program at William Dandy Middle School has been able to obtain resources from the district that help teachers develop high-interest, high-rigor problem-based units. One of the lead science teachers described how the Dandy STEM program was designed to help students master new, more rigorous academic standards. She commented:

How is our STEM program different? The William Dandy Middle School STEM program fits nicely with the Next Generation Science Standards and the Common Core State Standards that emphasize science and engineering practices as well as reading and writing comprehension and skills through engagement with content. (Teacher 6, personal communication)
The sixth grade vice principal added:

The curriculum is also based on the current Florida State Standards; the difference is the thematic problem-based and project-based learning approach, when teachers cover the content. All of the unit designs within the program are driven by the grade-level science curriculum. (Vice Principal 1, personal communication)

The vice principal further explained that each team of teachers plans the units around an overarching question or problem that meets the following criteria (Vice Principal 1, personal communication):

1. The problem is valid.
2. Students can relate to the problem.
3. There can be multiple paths to a solution.
4. The problem can be applied to the various classes to truly integrate the unit across the grade-level curriculum.

For example, teachers shared that they were planning a seventh grade unit around the study of bacteria and viruses. The problem the students would attempt to solve was: “How do we keep our friends from getting sick?” Students would participate in brainstorming sessions to address the issue. These sessions would often generate other questions that students must investigate within the unit to help clarify their misconceptions, beliefs, or doubts. By starting every unit in this way, teachers shared that they would be able to gauge the students’ understanding of the topic. The teachers further explained that they would use the information they acquired about students’ understanding of the topic to drive their instructional practices. In this particular unit, the lessons would focus on bacteria, viruses, diseases, epidemics and pandemics,
vaccinations, medications, and prevention. Lab experiments (culturing bacteria) and simulations such as The Great Flu Game (an online activity) and a role-playing simulation about an E. coli outbreak at a town fair would be central to the unit. These activities would require the students to work in teams to diagnose, treat, and prevent future outbreaks based on their experiences during the simulation. Students could also play the board game Pandemic, which would be another opportunity for them to learn, experience, and problem solve based on the unit’s theme.

Students would continue their exploration of this topic through their other classes, as well. In history class, they would study the conditions of colonial America and the impact of poor sanitation and the lack of medical knowledge. In their reading/language arts class, they would read non-fiction texts about diseases, such as the novel Fever 1793, which focused on the yellow fever outbreak in America.

Using the background knowledge they develop from reading these texts, teachers would expect the students put various diseases “on trial” for crimes against humanity. Through this activity, students would be exposed to the court system and expand their knowledge of the topics discussed in their science class.

Continuing with this theme in technology education, students would look at how civil engineers designed towns and cities taking into consideration the possibility of something like an epidemic. This trans-disciplinary approach would develop a deep and rich understanding of the content.

With every unit designed, teachers expressed a desire to include guest speakers and field trips to give the students the opportunity to engage with the content beyond the classroom. The researcher learned that teachers sometimes invited doctors from local
hospitals who specialize in infectious diseases to speak to the students about the
dangers and the risks associated with bacteria and viruses. One teacher explained, “This
could also be an opportunity for our guests to talk to the students about the importance of
pursuing a STEM-related career” (Teacher 2, personal communication).

The researcher learned that the immersion of students in this type of rich content
allowed them to understand in context the importance of what they were learning and
how it affects not only them but also others in their community.

Efforts to expose William Dandy students to STEM professionals also were found
in the area of robotics. Engineering professionals served as judges or evaluators of
projects Dandy students created. One teacher explained, “STEM immersion requires
our STEM students to defend their robotic planetary rover designs (working robots) in
front of the local professional and scientific community after weeks of research and
engineering” (Teacher 2, personal communication). These connections with community
professionals helped William Dandy students remained focused on high levels of rigor,
problem/solution applications, and the continual development of 21st century skills they
need for future employment.

Focus on STEM at William Dandy also includes intensive attention to
mathematics. In the 2010-2011 school year, 79% if Dandy students were at or above
grade level in math, as tested on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (Florida
Department of Education, 2010). 81% of students made at least one year worth of
progress in math, and among the students who had been deemed to be struggling in
mathematics, 78% made learning gains as defined by the State of Florida (Broward
County Schools, 2012).
One reason for Dandy’s success in mathematics may be that William Dandy offers math courses in which students can earn high school credit, if those classes are passed successfully with grades of A, B, or C. Students are offered algebra I in sixth grade, algebra II or advanced algebra in seventh grade, and geometry in eighth grade. All of these courses can be taken in high school, but if passed in middle school, students have greater opportunities to take AP (advanced placement) and honors classes, which prepare them for college requirements and expectations.

Some of these more rigorous high school courses are offered through a virtual classroom program. A vice principal explained the following:

We try to expose our students to components of the coursework they will receive in high school, while they are still in middle school. The students’ interest in pursuing courses at the secondary grade level has peaked by the virtual classroom selections. This allows students to take high school courses for credit, thus creating an environment of competency and success before they leave William Dandy and move onto local high schools. Many of our former students have gone on to continue this pattern and have taken college level courses while they are still in high school, which puts them ahead of others and they report that they felt better prepared for college once they were enrolled at universities. (Vice Principal 3, personal communication)

In contrast, only 32% of the school’s students scored at or above grade level in science. William Dandy Middle School educators aim to improve science performance through a multi-pronged approach: science camps, daily teacher professional learning communities, and the use of technology.
**Science camps.** The science camps are planned and conducted to allow students to research topics, study subjects, explore ideas, and create things in the science classroom. The science teachers plan assignments and labs geared toward providing students hands-on activities. Students have opportunities to learn from scientists who visit the school and doctors who discuss details of their job and how they problem solve to help patients. One of the seventh grade teachers shared that the science camps are exciting to students because they interact with students who may not be in their normally scheduled class and they foster supportive cooperative learning. Science camps are planned for the end of units and sometimes include an activity for students to share what they have learned. Students follow the components of the scientific method when researching and answering questions. Teachers shared that they go out of their way to get feedback from students on what topics or subjects they are interested in. That feedback is taken into consideration when planning the science camps. Finally, science camps also include fieldtrips off campus to various places such as aquariums, hospital tours, science labs, the city zoo, and university tours.

**Daily professional learning communities.** Teachers at William Dandy Middle School meet in PLCs daily for thirty minutes before school starts. They meet to plan lessons, design assessments, analyze data, and collaborate on how to incorporate the new common core standards and STEM curriculum into their instructional schedule. A newer 6th grade English teacher shared that these meetings have been most helpful to her and attributes the PLC work to her success at William Dandy:

Before coming to William Dandy, I had little experience involving PLC work and purposeful professional development. Meeting each day allows me to learn from
my colleagues and hear strategies that have been successful with them. I am able to tweak lessons before I teach them and learn how to create assessments that will give me the information I need to help my students achieve. Our literacy, math, and writing coaches also meet with us and help teachers with valuable resources. Everything we plan and learn in our PLC meetings are helpful and my students benefit from them. I feel that I have become a better teacher because of the consistent collaboration and it has helped me have a very successful year.

(Teacher 2, personal communication)

**Use of technology.** William Dandy Middle School also uses Gizmo and IMac virtual labs to promote the development of STEM knowledge and skills. Teachers reported that both tools were helping students master challenging academic standards. Gizmo is the name of an interactive online simulation for math and science education from Explore Learning. Teachers reported that the program supports inquiry-based learning environments for 21st century learners. They explained that Gizmos are interactive and engaging and do a great job of providing students with an opportunity to carry out scientific inquiry and test their understanding of concepts. This software is used on the computers throughout the school.

The researcher read a school brochure on Gizmos that claimed that Explore Learning offers the world’s largest library of interactive online simulations for math and science education in grades 3-12. These simulations (called Gizmos) are intended to be fun and easy to use, research-based, and correlated to both existing state standards and common core standards.
IMac Virtual Labs allow teachers to present demonstrations and conduct labs that they might not otherwise be able to afford. They can help present abstract ideas that might be hard to visualize or explain. This program is used in conjunction with the Gizmo software.

It is important to note that Dandy is pursuing these efforts to improve the integration of technology while the district is lacking in technological resources. When asked about how technology is utilized, the Area Director indicated that William Dandy Middle School educators are committed to taking advantage of the resources they have. She responded:

I’ll just be honest, our district overall is hurting in the area of technology. Our budget for what we call capital dollars is separate from our general revenue so you have to spend money to update and upgrade technology with your capital dollars. I will say if we were to rewind back to two, three, maybe four years ago, this school was state-of-the-art but as we continue and the technology is outdated, this school struggles like every other school because our state has been cutting our capital expenditures and we’re not buying as much technology because we don’t have the expenditure dollars. But …, of course students interact with laptops, there are some classrooms here with the smart boards (some people call them Promethean Boards), some kids have the interactive ELMOS, the kids interact with technology and she [the principal] maximizes it as much as she can with the money/resource that she currently has. (Area Director/Jane Doe, personal communication)
Thinking Skills

In almost every classroom visited, the researcher observed students being exposed to open-ended questions that required them to explain, describe, detail, or show how they arrived at the answers they chose. For example, in an English class, students were sitting in a circle discussing a text and listening intently as the teacher guided them through thought provoking questions that required them to draw on prior knowledge, make inferences, refer to the text for evidence, and defend their stance regarding a particular issue. Students were discussing the text and comparing the experiences of the characters to their own individual experiences. Some references were made to other characters in previously read books as well.

The principal reported that such open-ended questions are typical at Dandy because teachers know that she expects to see such questioning in her regular classroom visits. The principal asserted:

I listen carefully to the questions teachers ask when I am observing classrooms. How have teachers incorporated questions that require higher level thinking skills into the lesson? Most importantly, have students been taught those questions and how to interpret them? Do students know the difference in the various levels of Bloom’s and how it applies to what they are learning? I wonder do students know how to use the higher level vocabulary correctly and in context? If students haven’t been exposed to these tools, they won’t apply them independently or in other lessons. Students have to be given opportunities to share what they know in a way that teachers will know that they truly understand it. (Principal/Sara Doe, personal communication)
Similarly, the vice principals at Dandy emphasize questioning strategies when they conduct their classroom observations. One of the vice principals explained:

What I look and listen for is how does the teacher check for meaning? How do the children share their thinking? Does the teacher think out loud when teaching, so that students have a model of what questions they should be asking themselves? Then teachers should expose students as to how to think critically because all of this practice is going to prepare our students for what will be expected when the National Common Core Standards and Assessments are implemented. We want Dandy students to know how to conduct research and find the evidence to questions. (Vice Principal 2, personal communication)

Teachers at Dandy may be more inclined to promote critical thinking because of some of the teaching practices that are frequently used. For example, a vice-principal explained how Dandy teachers have learned to utilize Socratic Seminars:

One of the instructional practices that help our students do well at thinking critically is the use of Socratic Seminar. Many of our students have learned to listen carefully to others, consider other perspectives, how to ask meaningful questions or those related to the topic, and how to support their answer or believe through the evidence or tools given. As a result, our students continue to improve in reading comprehension. (Vice Principal 1, personal communication)

As well, the school has incorporated the components of Project Based Learning (PBL) into their curricula. When describing how PBL guides students to think more critically, a lead social studies teacher shared:
Project Based Learning is a good way for our students to ask deep questions and discuss them. It also teaches them how to develop questions in groups, research them together, and then collectively answer the questions, with supporting evidence. Choosing projects that are of high interest in the content areas seems to make answering the questions easier. (Teacher 7, personal communication)

The current principal reported that teachers are expected to incorporate the components of Bloom’s Taxonomy and integrate questioning strategies so that students can access higher order thinking skills to problem solve and comprehend at high levels. She also shared that, the goal is to differentiate instruction to make sure all students are accessing the concepts given their learning style. The majority of the lessons feature high order questioning, constant monitoring for comprehension, and checking for meaning. Teachers pride themselves for checking the lexile strength of the material offered, noting that just because a student can read quickly, does not mean they comprehend all they have read. Teachers asserted that they wanted students to be able to understanding information in complex texts. They claimed that the ability to do so influenced learning gains.

Curricular Assessments and Data Analysis

Perhaps, Dandy students succeed at challenging academic standards because of the ways in which Dandy teachers constantly monitor student progress. Dandy teachers monitor student achievement weekly in collaboration meeting. Grade level teams, content area groups, support teachers, and the literacy and math coaches analyze data frequently. Data are collected by the administrative team and discussed in monthly one-on-one
conferences that teachers have with either a vice principal or the principal. School
leaders seek to learn whether the content assessed matches what was actually taught. The
math coach shared:

We look for trends and patterns with the data. We ask questions and guide
teachers toward purposeful reflection so that they can truly understand what the
data are telling us about their class. We guide teachers in developing assessments
that relates to our curriculum program. We want our students to understand how
important it is for them to always put forth the best effort when taking an
assessment. Our students don’t seem to be intimidated by assessments. They have
bought into the fact that they do better when they understand how to analyze their
own growth and what areas they need to do better in. We have a data analysis
PLC that looks at all of the data and helps to decide what is shared with parents
and what is presented at our professional development meetings. (Academic
Coach 2, personal communication)

The district and state are transitioning from the former state standardized test to a
new version. Educators at Dandy are preparing for what they anticipate to be a more
challenging assessment. The area director explained:

Right now our state is going through an overhaul, things are getting more
complex, and we’ve gone from the FCAT 1.0 to what we call the FCAT 2.0.
There is more emphasis on complex text, more emphasis on thought complexity,
and basically we’re asking the kids more moderate and highly complex questions.
(Area Director/Jane Doe, personal communication)
The district has supported the analysis of student progress through the development of assessments called Benchmark Assessment Tests (BAT). The Area director explained:

We have a BAT 1 that’s given in the fall and it’s a baseline test given in September about maybe three to four weeks after the kids’ report and we have a BAT 2 which is given right in December before they go out for the holiday break and it measures the progress between the September and the BAT 2. Those two tests are district administered, but the schools have to do a progress monitoring plan, where they progress monitor even between the BAT 1 and the BAT 2. Based on the specific benchmarks they have been focusing on, they [teachers] have assessments that they give to the kids. Sometimes the kids know it’s an assessment and sometimes they don’t because we don’t want to “FCAT them to death” so to speak. Right within their content, they [teachers] may give them an assessment assessing their reading and mathematics benchmarks that they have covered. (Area Director/Jane Doe, personal communication)

It is important to note that the district structure of benchmark assessments provides schools both flexibility and support. The benchmark assessments provide a general structure for gauging student progress; however, schools also have the flexibility to plan how they will use teacher-made assessments to ensure that the specific standards presented in class were actually learned. The Area Director continued to explain the general district structure for use of the BATs:

Our district is divided into three areas, I’m in the central area and Dandy’s in the central area and quarterly they have to give us progress monitoring data. In the
beginning of the year, they have to look at their five-year data trends and then give us their predictions at the end of the year and as they turn in their progress monitoring data four times a year we look at that based on how they did on BAT 1 and how they did on BAT 2, what their goals and predictions are for the spring, and we have conversations and the expectations here are always that they are going to do better than they did in previous years. (Area Director/Jane Doe, personal communication)

Perhaps, Dandy excels beyond other district schools, at least in part, because of the ways in which they use their content area coaches to help teachers engage in in-depth analysis of student data from the BATs, as well as from school-developed assessments. A math teacher explained how the coaches help create assessments and analyze the data:

The mock assessments are created by our coaches on a monthly basis. After those assessments have been graded at the department level, the data are projected and our coaches go through them by grade level, and by teacher. Then the data are broken down and compared to previous scores. That data are also presented when we have our curriculum council meetings, once a month. It’s also brought to the leadership group, the department chairs, the coaches, the principals present at that time, for math, science, writing, and reading. All of the different subjects are presented as well, so we are all accountable. Each teacher’s statistics scores are there and it’s put out there for everyone to see. So the teachers at William Dandy continually ask themselves, “Are my kids getting it?” “How did my kids do as compared to another teacher’s class on the same grade level?” So it’s very real and at that point. Reflection has to come in. As a professional you have no choice
but to reflect and ask, “What I can do differently?” (Teacher 8, personal communication)

All of this attention to data leads to actual changes in what teachers do in their classrooms. Teachers discussed that an important part of this process is learning the areas where students are deficient, determining whether students are “getting it”, and examining how students are letting teachers know how well they understand. One teacher explained, “When children say, ‘I don’t understand or I don’t know what’s going on,’ teachers stop teaching, back up, and reevaluate where or what they need to do in order to reach each child” (Teacher 9, personal communication, March 5, 2012). A special education support teacher added, “Data-driven instruction makes us accountable as teachers and lets us know what we need to re-teach.” (Teacher 10, personal communication)

Another special education teacher shared the effectiveness of data charts that the school uses to monitor student test results. She reported:

At the beginning of the year, we always have a chart that Mrs. Robinson actually created and the district is getting ready to adopt it. She lets us know what subcategories we’re lacking in, how many areas need improvement, and then we identify the lowest quartile so every teacher is aware of all struggling students.

(Teacher 11, personal communication)

A newer teacher shared her observations upon joining the William Dandy community. She emphasized:

These teachers are very competitive because I came from another school and once I began here, I saw that all of the teachers were very serious about what they were
doing. They knew where they were and where the kids were and what they needed to do. So by the principal having that sheet which let each person know who their lowest quartile students were or who was 10 points away from the next letter level, had a lot to do with our success in analyzing data, because everybody knew where they were and what they needed to do. (Teacher 12, personal communication)

**Instruction**

While the content of instruction at Dandy is aligned to rigorous academic standards, focused on higher-order thinking skills, designed to support the mastery of STEM subjects, and constantly influenced by student data; the manner in which teachers deliver instruction is also important. Interviews and observations suggested that instruction at Dandy was characterized by high levels of student engagement and high rates of student feedback.

**High Levels of Student Engagement**

Stakeholders at William Dandy attributed students’ academic success to interesting and engaging instruction. A number of factors may have contributed to the prevalence of this type of instruction. There were physical aspects of the classrooms that promoted student interest and involvement. Teachers planned lessons that students were likely to perceive as relevant. Many lessons featured the use of technology. Also, many lessons engaged students in collaborating with each other.

**Physical classrooms.** Some of the physical aspects of the classrooms contributed to making academics interesting and engaging. For instance, the classrooms observed were rich in print, creating interesting, stimulating learning environments.
Many of the charts, posters, and displays could have easily been used as learning tools by students. Student work was displayed in all of the classrooms observed and many of the assignments posted were examples of work that students might have found interesting and relevant. For example, student writing was displayed where students had discussed and then wrote about how they would approach a situation in which a close friend was caught possessing, using, or selling cocaine on campus. The display featured evidence of brainstorming activities and thinking maps used to organize students’ thoughts.

Displays such as this were common in classrooms. These displays were celebrations of students’ learning and accomplishment, but they were also learning tools that students could refer to as they tackled new tasks.

**Relevant and interesting lessons.** The aforementioned writing task related to drug use was likely to be perceived by middle school students as interesting and relevant. Another example of a high-interest lessons involved students engaged in role play where they were to interview for acceptance into medical school. Students conducted research on the essentials of a successful interview. They planned interviews to convince a panel of judges (acting as doctors) as to why they should be accepted into the program. Teachers provided an opportunity for students to incorporate what they had learned in the pre-med classes into their arguments about why they should be admitted. Students were creative in their preparation and shared personal experiences. The researcher observed one student who shared that his family members were immigrants from the Caribbean where his grandfather was a doctor and his grandmother a nurse. He shared that he has always wanted to help others be healthy and find cures to help the sick. He was inspired
by his grandparents and was driven to do well in the pre-med and science classes so that he could reach his dreams. He spoke about how the biology course helped him understand the way the body works and that he would be a great candidate for medical school.

According to one of the vice principals, lessons like these are common at William Dandy Middle School. She shared that the school took pride in creating high interest and engaging lessons so students would be more likely to experience personal connections to the learning and comprehend at a higher level.

**Use of technology.** Another factor that contributed to high levels of student interest and engagement was the use of technology. Several uses of technology were described previously in this chapter. Additionally, in math classes the researcher observed teachers engaging students in using electronic chalkboards, called slates. The slates allow learners to interact with the teacher’s smart board and display answers for the class to see. The math teachers called upon students to use their slates to help them explain their thinking and model for other students. Similarly, students in science classes worked online to complete activities in an IMac Virtual Laboratory. The technology was used in ways that sustained students’ active attention, participation, and thinking.

**Student collaboration with peers.** With or without the use of technology, students at William Dandy frequently collaborate with their peers in small groups and communicate their learning to the class. Some of this small group collaboration occurs through the project-based learning activities discussed frequently. As one teacher explained, project-based learning activities help students “learn while doing.” One community leader reported that through project-based learning, students are able to make
real-world connections to the content covered, which makes the curriculum relevant and meaningful. One teacher explained how project-based learning increases the level of student interest and engagement. She noted:

Students are eager, engaged, and interested in the subject matter so they put in the extra effort at solving problems. Working as a team also pushes them to use the higher-level thinking questions we model and how to guide each other to think of or explain things in a variety of ways. I notice a greater sense of confidence in my students when it comes to having discussions about topics those others may consider touchy or too difficult for middle school students. (Teacher 14, personal communication)

Some Dandy teachers explained that they arrange for student-led lessons, during which students must teach, explain, and share solutions with their peers. These types of lessons promote high levels of engagement both from the students who are playing teacher roles, as well as students who are playing learner roles.

In summary, in the classrooms the researcher observed, Dandy students were more likely to be actively involved in interesting activity and less likely to sit passively listening to the teacher. Students were frequently engaged in discussions with other students. They were frequently using technology and they were frequently discussing their thinking and the rationale behind their thinking. These observations were triangulated by the comments of teachers as they described how they provide instruction on a daily basis.
High Rates of Student Feedback

While Dandy students were frequently engaged in interesting instruction, they were also engaged in ways that required them to provide feedback about their learning. Both classroom observations and teacher interviews provided evidence that Dandy teachers frequently required students to share information about their thoughts and their thought processes. For example, in the researcher’s classroom observations, typically, teachers called upon several students to share their thinking. This researcher observed students talking with each other, discussing their goals based on test data, sharing the challenges of homework and how they arrived at correct answers, and considering what areas where they should spend more time to practice for mastery. A lead math teacher explained the rationale behind teacher efforts to get students to provide feedback. The teacher explained:

When the students are getting it, they pretty much let us know. You can see more classroom participation, students raising their hands wanting to answer the questions. The students even ask if they can go up and help present the lesson. Students are asked open-ended questions so that they can think critically. When the class is able to describe the answers, explain why the answer is what it is, tell me how they arrived there, and show evidence to back it up, then I have a better idea of whether they really understood the lesson or not. When students are able to articulate clearly what they have learned and learned from each other, that’s what makes you proud as a teacher and that’s when you know that they’re getting it. (Teacher 8, personal communication)
The comment from this lead math teacher and similar comments from other teachers suggest that teachers are not asking students to provide feedback as a meaningless routine. Instead, teachers are purposefully seeking student feedback so that they can adjust and improve their instruction.

One of the vice principals elaborated:

I’ve gone into classrooms and have seen students using white board slates, interacting with smart boards, showing their work on the white board, and turning to evidence in a book to support their answer. Teachers are heard asking why certain answers were true and why wouldn’t others work? Students have to show that they understand the concepts. This in turn allows the teacher to determine his or her next steps. They reflect on the lessons and ask, “Have the students mastered the standard? How do I know?” (Vice Principal 3, personal communication)

It may also be important to note that many Dandy teachers asked students to provide feedback that required higher-level thinking skills. The researcher observed teachers asking questions that required more than a one-word response. For example, in several observations, teachers asked questions that began with words like “why, how, or explain.” Teachers pushed students to respond at all levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. They provided open-ended questions that required students to describe and explain the rationale for their answers. The principal explained that this type of questioning was expected throughout the school. She explained that such questioning raises the cognitive demand and will help prepare the school for the National Common Core Standards and Assessments.
A special education support staff member reported that students want to participate when they understand the lesson and content taught. Dandy teachers continuously sought evidence that their students understood. They sought this evidence from many, if not all students and they used the evidence to help them improve instruction so that more students would understand the lesson content.

**Relationships**

The parents interviewed reported that teachers at William Dandy Middle School cared about the students they served. In several interviews, parents remarked, “The teachers care.” The analysis of parent and teacher interviews, classroom observations, and various documents suggests that this perception of caring may be due to specific factors that influence the relationship between students and the school. First, educators at Dandy build personal connections with students. Secondly, teachers work persistently with students in ways that help students achieve academic success. As teachers help students master important academic skills, students and parents perceive teacher efforts as evidence of caring. Students may be willing to work harder and parents may be more eager to be supportive because they perceive that school personnel care enough to do whatever is necessary to help students succeed academically.

Thirdly, educators at William Dandy Middle School provide a variety of programs that help students excel in other areas of endeavor beyond academics. These efforts to address students’ interests and skills may be perceived by students and parents as additional evidence of caring. Students may be more interested in coming to school and investing effort because of the school’s efforts to support their growth and
development in ways that go beyond the academic mission of the school. Evidence related to these three themes will be presented in this section.

**Building Personal Connections with Students**

Parents reported that William Dandy teachers “went out of their way” to build trusting relationship and make personal connections to the students and their struggles. They described several kinds of evidence in support of this notion. First, parents explained that teachers spoke to their children with “caring tones” that yielded high levels of engagement. Parents reported that they heard teachers being assertive and firm, yet respectful with high expectations. Parents explained that they knew about the way teachers interacted with their children because of the school’s physical transparency. They shared that classrooms have large windows that overlook outdoor hallways, allowing visitors a view inside the classrooms at all times. Parents also reported that whenever they visit the school, they often see 100% of the students in classes on task and giving teachers their full attention.

The parents of William Dandy Middle students expressed appreciation for the efforts teachers made to develop strong relationships with their children. Parents spoke about some of the influences their children face on a daily basis and the positive impact Dandy teachers make. For example, one parent explained:

You have to be an inspiration. Kids follow inspiration and that’s why it’s a great counterbalance here at William Dandy, to what they have to follow nowadays, for instance, pop culture, the gangster rappers, the materialism that’s going on in the media. You know everything that they say is more important is what kind of shoes you wear, what kind of gold necklace you have around your neck. That
stuff has to be counterbalanced with a family-value-oriented type of foundation. And if you have that, we won’t have any problems in urban schools. If the State of Florida had a mentoring program established for at-risk schools where kids are at risk, starting with elementary school and on up, they wouldn’t have problems with gangsters. You know there’s like over 60,000 gangsters in South Florida alone. That’s a lot of competition that parents have to face. (Parent 1, personal communication)

In discussing the relationships between William Dandy Middle School teachers and students, parents described the teachers as mentors. In particular, one parent asserted:

And the thing is with Dandy teachers, you know when you have good instructors, not only are the teachers teaching, but they have some kind of element to be like a mentor, someone students can look up to. That’s also a key part. That’s part of the culture. Teachers’ salaries aren’t the best. So they must be doing it because they love inspiring students. (Parent 6, personal communication)

**Helping Students Experience Academic Success**

Parents reported that William Dandy Middle School teachers persist in helping their children succeed academically. The parents perceived this persistence as evidence that Dandy teachers cared sincerely about their children. One parent shared the following example:

My son used to be a follower. When he first came here, he followed everything the other kids would do. He’d talk back and be rude, but his teacher was so determined to not give up on him, because she saw his potential and said ‘he’s a
smart boy.’ She [the teacher] would call me all the time and report his misbehavior. She never got tired of him, no matter how rude and disrespectful he was. She was always patient with him, and now he’s back on track. He used to get D’s and F’s, now he gets A’s and B’s, because his teacher didn’t give up. (Parent 5, personal communication)

The Area Director asserted:

William Dandy has a culture of high standards. High standards for students have been institutionalized into the culture. William Dandy Middle School is in the 33311 zip code. It is the most poverty-stricken area in our district so our kids do come with needs. They get lots of academic support. (Area Director/Jane Doe, personal communication)

Perhaps, the relationships between teachers and students provide a critical support that helps students meet those high standards. As students perceive that teachers are giving them the support they need to excel, students may be more committed to working hard for their teachers.

**Data chats.** One important way William Dandy teachers support student success is “data chats” with every student. One teacher explained:

A valuable component to our instructional program is conducting data chats. Yes, we call it “data chats.” We set goals, and we push the kids, and they drive themselves, and we do a great job at increasing numbers, helping students make gains and move up the ladder. (Teacher 15, personal communication)
An English teacher shared the importance of setting aside time during each school day to communicate and conference one-on-one with students about their data. A math teacher attributed some of the students’ academic success to this practice and concurred that students achieve at higher levels when teachers help them set learning goals based on their individual data. Another teacher shared:

We create individual learning plans for them [students], with their data results.

We tell them to work hard and every child is familiar with what they need to do to pass the FCAT. I think that’s really different because we take the time out and we partner in their learning. (Teacher 7, personal communication)

**Success days.** Another important support for students’ academic success at William Dandy is what Dandy stakeholders call “success days.” Success days happen when teachers are paired to provide intensive teaching to students for extended learning times, in an area where students’ need extra assistance. Success days take place a few days out of the month and become more frequent as the state test begins. Teachers utilize success days after students have completed the learning in a particular unit or chapter. Teachers plan how they will co-teach concepts in detail. The lessons are structured to best reach the struggling students.

Teachers reported that much of their academic success came from providing this extra dose of instruction on success days. One reason the strategy may be effective is that teachers are required to collaborate and reflect on their practice weekly and utilize a teamwork approach to reaching students who have difficulty comprehending content. Together, pairs of teachers solve problems about how to ensure that students learn concepts that they did not master initially. On success days, students receive an
additional 30 minutes of instruction, but the instruction is strategically focused on the subjects and concepts where students struggle the most. Additionally, students benefit from a team of teachers who have worked together to determine how to best meet the students’ needs:

One of the math teachers described the value of success days in the following terms: One of the things we do here at William Dandy is “Success Day.” Let’s take math for example. Two teachers will combine classes so one math teacher may have 20 students and the other math teacher may have 20 to 25 students and we put both of those classes in one classroom. What happens is one teacher will be teaching her students but you always have that one student or maybe two who are having a hard time understanding the work or just can’t get it… Success days allows those other students to learn the same lesson from a different teacher. And then all of a sudden that one student will say “Oh now I understand. Now I get it.” So on Success Days we combine classes and it allows students to learn the same subject from a different teacher to see if they can actually understand it or if it’s presented differently then it will hit them in a different way and then it will help them get past that lesson. Success days have actually been a part of our eight-year success of becoming an “A” school. (Teacher 8, personal communication)

**Extended hours.** While Dandy teachers provided a variety of important academic supports during the school day, the perception of the teachers’ persistence may have also been influenced by the extended hours teachers spent with students. Parents reported that teachers were generous with their time, planning for and holding tutoring sessions after school and on Saturdays. Specifically, one parent reported:
They [teachers] stay after when the school day is over, for an hour and review important information for those students who didn’t understand it in class. And Saturday school, which my daughter is happy to attend, is a great way for students to learn because they have more time to complete assignments or can master a skill in an enrichment course. Students at William Dandy are known for rising early on Saturdays to come to school. No other middle school has a successful program like this one. (Parent 3, personal communication)

The current principal reported that up to 33% of the school population participates in after school sessions each day. Teachers reported that their engagement in after school tutoring is evidence of the connection that teachers have with students. Also a teacher suggested that their ability to lead students to seek out more instructional time is evidence of positive teacher/student relationships. So, the provision of extra support may be building positive relationships with parents and students; but the positive relationships with students might also be increasingly the likelihood that students participate in extra instructional time.

The relationship between William Dandy Middle School educators and their students does not end when students are promoted to high school. One of the vice principals explained that educators at Dandy track the performance of promoted students in local high schools. The vice principal claimed that many Dandy students remain committed to a professional goal and therefore experience high rates of attendance and high grade point averages in high school. In addition, the literacy coach explained that the students have a strong sense of attachment to William Dandy and report back on their successes in life, including their success at colleges and universities.
Helping Students Excel beyond Academics

The Area Director explained that educators at William Dandy help students build connections to the school by creating an enriched environment, which includes academics and the pursuit of hobbies in an enrichment setting. Critical thinking skills are infused throughout these enrichment activities. Teachers continually look for new opportunities to reach and teach students. The enrichment program runs every Friday, with over 40 clubs in which students participate. Some clubs are geared toward teaching students about how to accomplish goals and compete in the global society. The Area Director asserted that the clubs emphasize the skills needed for students to function in the 21st century, such as collaborating, critical thinking, and communicating effectively.

Students find the enrichment day classes to be an exciting feature of the school. The researcher observed the student’s excitement as the teacher of the cake decorating class reviewed what students would learn during the next session. Students clapped, gave each other high fives, and raised their hands enthusiastically to ask questions about the next class.

In addition to the Friday enrichment classes, Dandy offers Saturday school. A parent of newer students explained that their children remind them continually when their favorite class or subject is being offered during Saturday school. The parent shared that the children rise early those Saturdays and are so eager to get to class on time. “They ask to get out [of the car] and walk to school, once they see that the line of cars leading up to William Dandy is long!” the parent exclaimed (Parent 4, personal communication).
Through Saturday classes students are able to explore their passion for a hobby, with 50 classes to choose from. The school integrates students across grade levels to receive instruction on subjects such as cake decorating, using an iPad, dancing, learning Chinese, and fishing. These highly engaging classes may help explain Dandy’s high attendance rate. Parents shared their belief that children perceive these sessions as evidence that their teachers care and that the school wants to reach the whole child.

Dandy teachers are asked to teach an enrichment course that they are highly interested in, so there is buy in from all involved. Parents shared a deep appreciation for the time teachers and school leaders put into developing relationships with students.


**How Leaders Influenced Changes in Curricula, Instruction, and Relationships**

The factors that characterize curricula, instruction, and relationships at William Dandy Middle School emerged over several years. Teachers, district leaders, parents, and others credited the school leaders with playing major roles in influencing these changes. Leaders influenced these changes primarily by promoting high quality teacher
collaboration, providing job-embedded professional development, and by monitoring classroom instruction and offering feedback.

**Leaders Influenced Changes by Promoting Teacher Collaboration**

William Dandy Middle features collegial environments whereby teachers are engaged in learning about and sharing best practices for improving student learning. Each morning, teachers and staff participated in some form of professional development or school improvement collaboration.

Dandy Teachers reported that they collaborate daily in common planning times and see themselves as a team. They meet each morning for 30 minutes to review weekly data and to calibrate lessons. Content area coaches and support staff added that they encourage teachers to support each other in planning lessons. A science teacher explained, “We just enjoy the sharing. We share lessons, best practices within the classroom, we team teach, and we share helpful techniques or strategies that work” (Teacher 6, personal communication).

In addition to the daily meetings, teachers meet weekly with content area coaches to plan lessons and to meet in grade level groups. During the weekly meetings, lessons and lab routines are discussed. Teachers discuss ideas about how they will incorporate the various levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy into their lessons. Teachers make decisions regarding the use of Success Days so that students are more likely to master important academic skills.

Teachers reported that the quantity and quality of collaboration at Dandy have been influenced substantially by the past two principals, Mrs. Stanley and Mrs. Robinson.
A math teacher who had worked for many years at Dandy offered this detailed information about how the principals influenced changes in teacher collaboration:

About 10 years ago, a few teachers would get together and plan lessons together or look at our student data. Many teachers worked in isolation and helped when asked to, but most never initiated it for fear of appearing to know it all. When Mrs. Stanley came to William Dandy, her expectation was that we would come together frequently and plan lessons in grade level teams and she would provide a structure and agenda for us to follow so that we stayed on task. Initially we met once a week. After the first year, we started to see the benefits of our planning pay off because we gave each other tips and shared strategies that worked. Teachers started to buy into the fact that planning together helps us teach better and helps our students understand the content. Within the next four years we were planning and meeting in collaboration teams at least two to three times a week. Now when Mrs. Robinson came to Dandy, the foundation had already been laid. She [Mrs. Robinson] then provided us with specific areas to consider and focus on as it related to our students’ achievement. Mrs. Robinson tweaked our collaboration meetings by incorporating a different objective each day. Her leadership influenced changes that proved successful because she convinced us that the 30 minutes we spent collaborating each day was meant to help inform how we taught that day. (Teacher 8, personal communication)

It is important to note that teacher collaboration at Dandy has influenced every factor that characterizes curricula, instruction, and relationships at the school. Teachers reported that they collaborate on how they address both state standards and new common
core standards, how they incorporate STEM concepts and higher-order thinking skills into their lessons, and how they might adjust their lessons in response to student data. As well, they collaboratively plan how they will engage students and maximize opportunities for student feedback. Teachers also described how, through their collaborative meetings, they built upon each other’s best practices for connecting with students and helping students succeed both academically and in other endeavors.

To promote teacher collaboration, first, leaders had to ensure that adequate time would be available. The master schedule has been designed by the administrators, so that groups of teachers who taught similar courses would have common preparation times. Principals made sure that every subject-area team would have 30 minutes of planning time each day.

Regularly structured time for collaboration was essential, but not sufficient. Teachers shared that collaboration was effective, at least in part, because of the positive, solution-oriented dialogue that was modeled by Dandy administrators. Teachers, support staff, and school administrators described collaboration, led by their administrators, as dynamic, active, and action-oriented dialogue. They claimed that the administrators promoted a direct and constant flow of new ideas that fostered an effective educational environment for all students.

It is also important to note that collaboration at Dandy has been driven by attention to student data. Leaders have influenced the way that teachers assess students to determine whether mastery was achieved and what next steps need to be taken. Mrs. Robinson provides guidance by reminding teachers to test and assess only what they have taught. Teachers receive feedback on common assessments that content area teams create.
and how the assessments can yield detailed information on students’ retention of essential standards. Teachers reported that many of their collaboration meetings are spent analyzing data and determining what students learned and did not learn and how to provide more effective instruction.

Before Mrs. Stanley and Mrs. Robinson were appointed to Dandy, the school relied on district assessments and state mandated tests that provided information that was too broad to influence daily classroom instruction. These principals saw the importance of creating assessments that measured specifically what Dandy students should have been taught. Essential objectives and standards are covered in the assessments and teachers are expected to develop common assessments so comparisons can be made regarding strategies used. Often those common assessments are developed in collaborative meetings. Leaders also require content area teams to discuss and analyze assessment data so that the results inform next steps.

Teachers claimed that their work in collaborative groups was an important contributor to the school’s consistent improvement over several years. Collaboration has shaped the professional culture of the school. A social studies teacher offered the following explanation:

Our instructional effectiveness could have been challenged, because at times we have had new teachers. New teachers to our school community were brought into the “William Dandy Way.” Everyone goes out of their way to show, shape, and help new teachers. We want them to be successful so ultimately, students will learn and we will go on to be a high-performing school. They [new teachers] are welcomed and treated like they are a part of our family. New teachers naturally
buy into our philosophy and that has helped to fortify our ability to remain an
“A” school. They see our dedication and how committed we are to teaching our
students and how we are determined to help them as well. We all go out of our
way to make sure new teachers learn the strategies that most of us have used so
that they can be successful too. We take them under our wing and partner with
them in our weekly professional development or collaboration meetings. Teachers
at Dandy want everyone’s instruction to be strong and effective. We won’t leave
any teacher behind. Learning how to make our instruction stronger has been
extremely helpful to us and our students continue to achieve at high levels, so we
know we are doing something right. If student achievement starts to decline, then
we will just have to revamp and reflect on what we can do better. (Teacher 5,
personal communication)

**Leaders Influenced Change by Promoting Professional Development**

Curricular and instructional practices at William Dandy have been influenced by
regular professional development. Both of the last two principals played substantial roles
in focusing professional development on critical issues and helping educators integrate
the concepts into their regular work with students.

The Area Director insisted that professional development is significant to William
Dandy’s success. She described the school as a place where everyone wins: teachers,
leaders, community, but most importantly students. The Area Director claimed that the
principal at Dandy stood out in comparison to other administrators because Mrs.
Robinson “knows that teaching and supporting teachers is one of her primary goals.” The
Area Director emphasized that if teachers are taught well and provided support and
resources needed to push students toward excellence, then students will respond and do well. She claimed that Dandy leaders have influenced the way that teachers view professional development, and their practice as teachers has improved.

The Area Director explained:

At William Dandy, the principal and vice principal determine what the students need to be taught based on data and the state standards. They plan the training meetings together and include an agenda. Leaders have learned that the PD had to be meaningful and teachers need to see how it connects to what they are teaching. How it will benefit them. The professional development drives the instructional program at Dandy. The leadership team understands the importance of training teachers in strategies that lead to student achievement. They take time to look at other successful schools throughout their district, county, and nation. They then bring those key points and introduce those ideas to their teachers and support staff. They have a solid professional development plan where teachers come to staff training and collaboration meetings eager and open to new ideas. The agenda for the meeting is given about a day or two ahead of time. Teachers are prepared for the meetings and they base decisions on sound research. The staff puts in a lot of planning time to analyze and study both teacher data and student data to prepare for each professional development session and that’s what makes this place a goldmine. That’s what sets our leaders [at Dandy] apart from other principals in this area or our district. (Teacher 5, personal communication)
Even though professional development occurred frequently, topics remained focused on critical issues related to what the principal wanted to ensure that Dandy students learned. For example, often when Dandy teachers or administrators discussed professional development in interviews, they made clear that a major topic of professional development was related to the implementation of standards-based curricula. Principal Robinson shared with this researcher articles, books, and online resources that she provided to her teachers regarding the national common core standards and assessments that will be implemented in the next few years. She also shared that she emphasized the importance of teachers following standards-based curricula so that students learn the essential objectives and teachers “don’t waste time teaching standards that aren’t critical” (Former Principal/C. Robinson, personal communication). Now that most states have decided to implement common core standards, her plan is to provide the support, curricula, and instructional feedback teachers will ensure that Dandy students are ready and prepared when knowledge of common core standards is assessed.

The professional development provided at Dandy gives teachers the practical tools they need in order to teach critical concepts or utilize important strategies. Related to the implementation of common core standards in English, the Area Director explained how professional development at Dandy gave teachers useful skills that were essential in helping them be able to teach the more challenging standards, even when publishers did not provide adequate resources. She explained:

The teachers at Dandy have been trained to take the literature pieces that they research on the internet or from other resources and evaluate them based on text complexity. If those resources don’t come with rigorous and thought-provoking
questions, the staff knows how to write them. They’re [The teachers are] good because they design curriculum to push students and challenge them to think more critically. (Area Director/Jane Doe, personal communication)

A teacher confirmed this assertion saying:

Our students are exposed to effective strategies starting on the first day of school. We don’t wait until testing time to teach our students the skills they need. We look at data results and plan lessons and units that incorporate the higher-level thinking skills that students will need to be successful on the FCAT and in the next grade level. Our goal is to introduce and teach students how to analyze texts, not be afraid of its complexity, and prepare them for the reading they will need to do in high school and in college. (Teacher 5, personal communication)

Leaders and teachers at William Dandy continually review how they plan lessons and how they deliver instruction. In collaboration meetings, they reflect on what worked, and determine next steps to ensure students have success when reading complex texts. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) suggested if teachers know what makes a text difficult, they can plan lessons to deal with those difficulties. Leaders at Dandy understand this and have provided professional development on what this looks like in the classroom, thus students are better prepared when they face texts that challenge them and have higher self-efficacy when completing reading tasks.

Another important professional development focus at Dandy has been the teaching of STEM subjects. School leaders have focused on making sure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need in order to teach STEM subjects well. One of the vice principals asserted:
Mrs. Robinson started leading Dandy in 2008. She knew back then that STEM curriculum and aligning it to state standards would help our students master the basic state expectations for achievement, but also be better prepared to use 21st century learning skills. She sent the teachers to conferences around STEM, developed a PLC whose focus is STEM, and provided the school with the teachers needed to teach STEM curriculum such as strong science teachers, skilled technology instructors, robotics experts to teach us about engineering, and the math coach to create a solid mathematics program. Under her leadership, our students now do well on science benchmarks, are very tech savvy and know how to interact with smart boards, and compete in robotics competitions against other schools. Our middle school students learn from a highly qualified group of math teachers. Our students compete in math competitions and take high school math credits here such as Algebra II and Geometry. We tell our students that they will be farther ahead than other students in high school and college having this STEM foundation and introduction at middle school. The superintendent and area director support our STEM program and have now decided to use Dandy as a model of success. Whenever they speak publicly about STEM, William Dandy is referred to as a school headed in the right direction. (Vice Principal 2, personal communication)

Teachers also made clear that professional development at Dandy was linked to teacher collaboration activities. Professional development often provided background that teachers were expected to utilize in their collaboration with peers. Collaboration activities offered teachers opportunities to help each other practice and further develop
important content knowledge and/or teaching strategies. One of the math teachers offered the following example:

Mrs. Robinson and the vice principals knew that some of the teachers needed to be paired with experienced teachers so that they could learn effective strategies and teaching techniques. We appreciate the opportunities they give us to plan together. Sometimes substitute teachers are brought in so that we can collaborate all day in teams. I learned early on that Mrs. Robinson is a leader who respects our time and makes sure that the times we meet will be beneficial to us and not a waste of time. The vice principals have learned a lot from her as well, because whenever they meet with our grade level, content area, or enrichment PLC, the topics discussed are needed and valuable. Mrs. Stanley and Mrs. Robinson implemented standards-based curricula and expected teachers to plan lessons with the essential standards in mind. When Mrs. Stanley was here, she started the process of guiding teachers from teaching thematic units and projects about animals toward incorporating the state standards into their lessons that students needed to master in order to achieve. Mrs. Robinson expects all teachers to teach the most critical standards and to assess students in those areas so that teachers know who has mastered them, who hasn’t, and when they need to re-teach the concepts. (Teacher 8, personal communication)

**Observing, Modeling, and Providing Feedback**

While teacher collaboration and professional development were major levers of curricular and instructional change at Dandy, they would not have been as effective if the school leaders did not devote a considerable amount of time to observing instruction,
modeling best practices, and providing teachers practical feedback. Both teachers and administrators reported that the administrators spend a majority of their time supporting and teaching teachers, through frequent classroom walkthroughs and feedback sessions.

Dandy administrators spent considerable amounts of time in classrooms observing to ensure that teachers were teaching the content and implementing the strategies that were the focus of both collaboration meetings and professional development sessions. These observations gave administrators an opportunity to (1) gauge teacher progress in implementing desired approaches, (2) assess the extent to which teachers might need additional support, (3) determine if students were learning critical concepts and skills, (4) provide immediate support by modeling teaching strategies and techniques, and (5) provide positive acknowledge for teachers’ efforts.

An example of the connections between teacher collaboration, professional development, and leaders’ classroom observations and feedback is related to the teaching of higher-order thinking skills. The principal and vice principals presented training on how curricula should be differentiated to meet the needs of all students and how teachers can extend lessons so that all students feel challenged and use higher-level thinking skills. They trained teachers on recognizing various learning modalities and on how to ask students questions that would deepen students’ understanding of the content, in ways that they learned best. Teachers received professional development on 21st century learning skills and how to incorporate them into middle school curricula. In collaboration meetings, teachers worked together to plan how they would utilize higher-level thinking skills to advance student understanding of specific concepts and skills.
In addition to the professional development and teacher collaboration, the principal and vice-principals spent considerable time observing classrooms and noting the extent to which teachers were implementing the strategies well. For example, the principal reported:

I listen carefully to the questions teachers ask when I am observing classrooms. How have teachers incorporated questions that require higher level thinking skills into the lesson? Most importantly, have students been taught those questions and how to interpret them? Do students know the difference in the various levels of Bloom’s and how it applies to what they are learning? I wonder do students know how to use the higher level vocabulary correctly and in context? (Principal/Sara Doe, personal communication)

Similarly, one of the vice principals explained:

What I look and listen for is how does the teacher check for meaning? How do the children share their thinking? Does the teacher think out loud when teaching, so that students have a model of what questions they should be asking themselves?

(Vice Principal 1, personal communication)

These observations provide more than just an opportunity to check compliance. They also give administrators an opportunity to assess teacher and student needs and provide immediate support. A science teacher explained:

Mrs. Stanley and Mrs. Robinson have always asked us to walk around and listen to the dialogue [among students]. [The principals expected us to] Walk around and determine if students were thinking critically. I think many teachers would give students assignments and rarely check for understanding. The leaders at
Dandy model how we can jump in and support a student during a lesson when we perceive that they are not on the right track. The leaders are really hands on and sometimes ask questions where the students can go deeper, but teachers learn in that moment how to ask questions that make students think more critically and where we can assess their comprehension of the idea or lesson objective.

(Teacher 4, personal communication)

In addition to the frequent observations, administrators at Dandy also provide feedback to teachers. A science teacher described how Mrs. Robinson provides feedback through individual teacher conferences. The science teacher explained:

Mrs. Robinson conferences with teachers’ one on one to point out how they can incorporate higher-order thinking into lessons and how to plan effective questions to ask so that students have opportunities to think critically about the content.

Students are asked to go beyond the literal meaning and draw on their real world knowledge and prior experiences to make inferences or to make conclusions.

Students enjoy sharing their thinking and how they solved problems. (Teacher 4, personal communication)

The observations, modeling, and feedback provided by Dandy administrators has helped establish a professional culture in which teachers know that they are truly expected to implement the concepts and strategies that are the focus of professional development and collaboration efforts. Teachers knew that their administrators would be in their classrooms frequently to watch them implement the concepts they learned in professional development sessions and the activities they planned in collaboration meetings. Teachers reported that they knew that they were expected to demonstrate
improvement both in their teaching and in the results their students achieved. At the same time, teachers reported that they knew that their administrators were available to support them as they tackled challenging concepts and difficult teaching strategies.

Teacher collaboration, professional development, and administrator observations worked in unison to improve teaching and learning at William Dandy Middle School. This researcher sat in on collaboration meetings with content area groups where the principal, vice principal, math and literacy coaches provided guidance to teachers in the collaboration meetings, teachers focused on standards based curricula, STEM curricula, how to develop strong thinkers, and how to adequately and effectively assess the curriculum taught. These were all frequent topics for teacher professional development at the school. Leaders organized and/or provided purposeful and engaging professional development. Teachers were seen writing in professional development journals and taking notes on principal directed and created planning sheets. Principals were seen passing out achievement data and test results. Leaders had charted essential questions and bulleted important points for teachers to consider (many of which were based on their observations of teachers). Teachers were being trained on how to monitor student progress and determine if students mastered the concepts. Leaders reviewed prior agenda topics and tied what teachers were learning to former next steps as it related to student achievement. Professional development, collaboration, and classroom observations were all integrated purposefully in ways that helped improve learning results for Dandy students.
CHAPTER 5—SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Too many students of color have not been achieving well in schools for far too long (Gay, 2000). Wide disparities in achievement exist between African American and White students in grades K-12. (Bemak, 2005) Many schools in high-poverty areas experience issues such as, high dropout rates, lack of language proficiency, instruction from the least experienced teachers, and lack of resources and space. African American students have the potential to excel academically; however, they have often not received an equal education (C. Lee, 2008).

Even though, as a group, African American students may achieve less, there is tremendous variation; some students achieve very well while others not at all. Though the problem of African American underachievement is one of long-standing concern, satisfactory explanations continue to elude educators and social scientists (Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996). African American adolescent achievement may be better understood by explaining the variation that exists within the population instead of through racial comparison studies. Once determinants of African American achievement are understood, perhaps achievement can be promoted by targeting these determining factors.

Many educational reforms have been initiated to improve the academic performance and achievement of inner-city students; however, school reforms alone are not enough to overcome the continuing achievement gap between White, middle-class students and their minority and lower-class counterparts. Federal, state, and local agencies use high-stakes assessments to hold students, teachers, principals, and school districts accountable for academic achievement. These agencies hold each school
administrator responsible for student achievement at the school site. School administrators have the greatest opportunity to influence achievement. Principals are in the best position to develop procedures to close the achievement gap. Yet, too few principals seem to be demonstrating the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to lead their schools toward high levels of achievement for African American students. Leithwood, (2004) asserted that successful leadership can play a highly significant and frequently underestimated-role in improving student learning. The present study was designed to increase understanding of how a school leader influences changes that result in high levels of academic achievement for African American students.

**Background of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to deepen the understanding of the leadership practices that influence high levels of academic success for African American students at a high-performing, Title I middle school. In particular, the researcher sought to develop robust descriptions of the processes that have influenced better learning results for African American students, including any processes that might have led to the teaching of more challenging academic content, any processes that might have promoted better initial instruction or more effective intervention when initial instruction was unsuccessful, or any processes that might have led to better relationships among students, teachers, parents, support staff, and administrators. The researcher expected to identify and describe how the principal helped create and sustain these processes. As well, the researcher expected to identify and describe the role teachers, support staff, and other administrators have played in creating and sustaining processes that consistently yield high test results.
Methodology

This study was completed over a three-month period. Data were compiled based on four research questions. The researcher sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What descriptions characterize curricula at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
2. What descriptions characterize instruction at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
3. What descriptions characterize relationships among students, parents, teachers, and administrators at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
4. How have leaders at the school influenced changes in curricula, instruction, and relationships at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

This case study examined the lived experience of a school that is attaining strong academic results for African American students. All of the data was qualitative and was collected to provide insight into the processes used to increase the achievement of African American students at William Dandy Middle School. Case study methodology was appropriate because there are many variables that influence student success at William Dandy Middle School. The author chose this method because, “Qualitative research is exceptionally suited for establishing a foundation of understanding a group or phenomenon and can address questions that cannot be answered by quantitative methods.” (Gay & Airasian, 2001, p. 163). This approach allowed her to consider the
multiple perspectives and shared experiences of the teachers and administrators at William Dandy Middle School.

The study followed a qualitative approach to gather descriptive data revealing how changes happened at William Dandy and how various leaders influenced and sustained changes that led to improved achievement of African American students. Data collection included individual interviews and focus group interviews involving the principal, area superintendent/director, vice principals, teachers, support staff, parents, and community members.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher observed classrooms and various teacher planning meetings using observation protocols. The observation tools helped her notice issues that relate to school climate and culture, curriculum, and instruction as well as the dynamics of change processes and decision making at William Dandy Middle School.

**Connections between Key Findings and the Research Literature**

The findings described in Chapter 4 suggest that this school that attained strong academic results for African American students found ways to avoid the pitfalls described in research literature as common among low-performing schools. As well, this school developed strengths that were similar to many of the strengths described in studies of high-performing urban schools. This study may have added depth to our understanding of how leaders influence the development of these strengths. The connections between this study’s key findings and the research literature are evident in the areas of curricula, instruction, relationships, and the role leaders play in influencing improvements in those areas.
Findings Related to Curricula

Gay (2010) found that African American students have less access to rigorous content. Generally, African American students are not given the same access to high quality opportunities to learn. Instead, Oakes (1994) reported that African American students are often assigned to lower-level groups and classrooms in which students may not be exposed to important concepts that might support future learning options. Simultaneously, African American students are underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented, college tracks, and advanced courses (Patton & Baytops, 1995). The research suggests that African American students typically learn less because they are taught less, challenged less, and given less rigorous academic content. If these are legitimate explanations for the low achievement of many African American students, then high levels of academic success at Dandy are easily explained.

The current study revealed substantial evidence of rich, rigorous academic curricula. Students were being challenged to learn current state academic content standards, but they were also being taught the national common core standards in mathematics and reading that were yet to be fully implemented by the state. As well, students were being taught next generation science standards that had not yet been adopted by the state. The focus on challenging standards influenced the planning, content, and delivery of daily lessons. A standards-based focus was also a central theme of other studies of high-performing urban schools (Barth, 1999; Cawelti, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Asera, 1999).

Edmonds (1982) found that educators in high-performing schools were more likely than educators at low-performing schools to expect that their students could
succeed in high-level courses. The nature of curricula at Dandy reflected high expectations for the school’s predominately African American population. Instead of participating in low-level courses, Dandy students benefited from challenging offerings in STEM disciplines. Students participated in challenging courses in science, computer science, engineering, and mathematics. Often challenging concepts were addressed in units that crossed curricular areas and gave students an opportunity to explore concepts in greater depth. Students were offered an array of options for completing courses that generated high school credit and prepared students to perform well in college preparatory high school courses.

While Oakes (1994) suggested that students in low-level classes are often asked to perform tasks with low levels of cognitive difficulty, Dandy teachers pushed their students to demonstrate high-level thinking skills. Teachers frequently asked open-ended questions that required students to analyze, apply, differentiate, and evaluate. Students were expected to explain their thinking (orally and in writing). Dandy’s emphasis on higher-order thinking skills coincides with findings from Knapp (1995) that indicated that minority students produce better outcomes when curriculum and instruction demand higher levels of understanding rather than lower-order skills.

Dandy teachers deliberately endeavored to ensure that every student demonstrated mastery of the challenging standards they attempted to teach. Teachers collected and charted data that gave evidence of each student’s mastery of various concepts and skills related to each standard. Teachers carefully analyzed these data, shared them with students, and used the data to plan lessons that would best respond to student learning needs. This deliberate attention to each student’s mastery of challenging skills reflects
not only high expectations for student success (Edmonds, 1982), but also a commitment to ensuring that every child meets those expectations (Barth, 1999; Cawelti, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Reeves, 2000).

Findings Related to Instruction

Shade (1982) reported that traditional classroom environments limit student movement and require students to learn by listening passively and working independently, often in competition with peers. In contrast, Shade (1982), Stanton-Salazar (1997), and LeMoine (2001) contended that African American students become more proficient academically when the classroom is project based, allowing students to be more involved, vocal, and expressive.

The present study found that instruction at Dandy was highly engaging. Teachers planned lessons and delivered instruction so that students had opportunities to think critically, collaborate with their peers in small groups, and communicate their learning to the class or at designated events. The physical classroom environments celebrated student learning and accomplishment, while providing students useful tools to advance their learning. Students were frequently involved in projects that required their engagement. Often, those projects included opportunities for students to use technology. In math classes, students used electronic chalkboards, called slates. The slates allowed learners to interact with the teacher’s smart board, display answers for the class to see, and explain their thinking and model for other students. In science classes, students worked online to complete activities in an IMac Virtual Laboratory. Projects and experiments focused upon issues that students perceived as meaningful. Throughout all academic disciplines,
daily classroom instruction featured cooperative learning activities that engaged students in working their peers.

Dandy teachers provided instruction that required all of their students to provide feedback and demonstrate their levels of understanding. One might argue that teachers at Dandy instructed their students as if they were all high achievers. Good (1982) identified multiple differences in how teachers treat students they perceive as “high” or “low” achievers. Teachers called on low achievers less frequently; often failed to give feedback to public responses of low achievers; paid less attention to them or interacted with them less frequently; seated low achievers farther away from the teacher; and demanded less of them.

In contrast, teachers called upon Dandy students to engage, provide feedback, and demonstrate their levels of understanding frequently. Both classroom observations and teacher interviews provided evidence that Dandy teachers frequently required students to share information about their thoughts and their thought processes. Teachers sought to know what students understood and they sought to understand the rationale behind student conclusions. As one teacher explained:

Students are asked open-ended questions so that they can think critically. When the class is able to describe the answers, explain why the answer is what it is, tell me how they arrived there, and show evidence to back it up, then I have a better idea of whether they really understood the lesson or not. When students are able to articulate clearly what they have learned and learned from each other, that’s what makes you proud as a teacher and that’s when you know that they’re getting it. (Teacher 2, personal communication)
Importantly, teachers required students to engage and provide feedback that demonstrated higher-order thinking skills. Teachers did not simply ask students to respond to “yes/no” questions or questions that required students to recall facts, memorize events, or recite algorithms. Instead teachers asked questions that required students to think deeply and compare, distinguish, interpret, scrutinize, dissect, incorporate, and perform other intellectual functions that required a more meaningful understanding of the concepts being presented. One could argue that students at Dandy learned more because instruction required them to think more.

**Findings Related to Relationships**

Waxman (1997) found that students in effective urban schools reported more positive learning environments, perceived their teachers as more supportive, and reported more order and organization in their classrooms than did students in ineffective urban schools. Relatedly, Johnson (2007) reported that educators in high-performing urban schools fostered climates that helped students know they were valued, respected and loved. This study of William Dandy Middle School adds depth to these findings.

Teachers at Dandy built personal connections to their students. Parents reported that William Dandy teachers “went out of their way” to build trusting relationship and make personal connections to the students and their struggles. Parents explained that teachers spoke to their children with “caring tones” that yielded high levels of engagement. Parents reported that they heard teachers being assertive and firm, yet respectful with high expectations. These parent reports were consistent with the researcher’s classroom observations.
It is important to consider the possibility that these personal connections might have been less meaningful if Dandy teachers did not also direct considerable effort to helping their students experience academic success. Dandy teachers interacted with their students in ways that communicated an expectation that academic success was attainable with effort. Teachers provided “data chats” that helped students know specifically what concepts they had mastered and which skills they still needed to learn. Teachers devoted extra hours before school, after school, and on Saturdays to help students achieve academic success. As well, teachers structured “success days” that were designed to help students master specific learning objectives. Caring at Dandy was characterized by teachers’ persistence as they worked to ensure that each student would achieve academic growth and success.

Gay (2010) emphasized that culturally responsive teachers demonstrate care for their students’ academic and personal success. At Dandy, teachers demonstrated care for their students’ academic success, but they also helped students excel in other areas, beyond academics. Dandy teachers provide enrichment classes on Fridays and Saturdays that include instruction on subjects such as cake decorating, using an iPad, dancing, learning Chinese, and fishing. Students also have opportunities to participate in athletics, music, and a variety of other extra-curricular activities. Parents saw these activities as additional evidence that educators at Dandy cared sincerely about their children.

**Findings Related to the Influence of Leaders**

The factors that characterize curricula, instruction, and relationships at Dandy did not occur by coincidence. Leaders at Dandy (especially the two principals who led the school during the past decade) played a major role in influencing improvements at the
school. Teachers, district administrators, parents, and other school administrators credited the principals with influencing change at Dandy. The principals influenced these changes primarily by promoting high quality teacher collaboration, providing job-embedded professional development, and by monitoring classroom instruction and offering feedback. These findings coincide with findings from other studies of high-performing schools.

Kouzes and Posner (2010) argued that leaders do not change organizations by themselves. Instead, they engage a wide array of stakeholders in contributing to the change process. DuFour and Marzano (2011) emphasized the importance of teacher collaboration and professional learning communities in the development of high-performing schools. At Dandy, leaders promoted daily teacher collaboration first, by scheduling time to ensure that collaboration occurred and secondly, by working with teachers to ensure that the quality of the collaboration yielded improvements in curricula, instruction, and relationships. Collaboration was grounded in data related to student learning. Simultaneously, it was focused on promoting improvements in teaching and learning so that students achieve high academic standards (including state standards, common core standards, and next generation science standards). Bryk and Schneider (2002) emphasized the importance of relational trust in high-performing schools. At Dandy, collaboration occurred in a manner that was positive and solution-oriented, inspiring greater trust.

Several studies have acknowledged the role that school leaders played in promoting high quality professional development opportunities (Barth, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson & Asera, 1999). Leaders at Dandy supported rich professional
development opportunities for the school’s faculty. The professional development
provided at Dandy gives teachers the practical tools they need in order to teach critical
concepts or utilize important strategies. Professional development was focused on a few
important topics and sustained over time. It is also important to note that the professional
development was linked to both teacher collaboration activities and the monitoring of
instruction by principals and vice principals.

A variety of studies emphasized how leaders of high-performing schools provided
instructional leadership by monitoring teaching and providing feedback (Carter, 2000;
Cawelti, 1999; Izumi, 2002; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Reeves, 2000). At Dandy,
principals expended large percentages of each day in classrooms observing instruction
and providing feedback. Dandy administrators spent considerable amounts of time in
classrooms observing to ensure that teachers were teaching the content and implementing
the strategies that were the focus of both collaboration meetings and professional
development sessions. These observations gave administrators an opportunity to
(1) gauge teacher progress in implementing desired approaches, (2) assess the extent to
which teachers might need additional support, (3) determine if students were learning
critical concepts and skills, (4) provide immediate support by modeling teaching
strategies and techniques, and (5) provide positive acknowledge for teachers’ efforts.

Limitations of the Study

While beneficial information was gathered from this study, the findings have
several limitations. The study focused upon one successful middle school and in one
urban school district. Further, the study is limited to administrators’ and stakeholders’
perceptions of what they believe has contributed to William Dandy’s success and their
assessment of the skills and knowledge needed for others to replicate this program. Thus, the results may not be a true reflection of administrators’ skills or knowledge. The study included only a sampling of teachers and parents and did not include interviews with students. So, results may not be as accurate as they would have been if more teachers and parents were included or if students were included. Finally, the study was conducted by a novice researcher. Although the researcher had considerable experience as a teacher and principal in urban schools, the researcher had limited prior experience in collecting data for research purposes.

**Implications and Discussions**

Although this study presents limitations, the results may have significant implications. In particular, this section considers implications for principals, implications for the preparation of principals, and implications for further research.

**Implications for School Principals**

Although obviously impossible, if every African American middle school student in Florida attended William Dandy Middle School, there would be virtually no gap between the achievement of Florida’s White middle school students and the achievement of Florida’s African American middle school students. Researchers have noted that principals play key roles in improving student achievement (Gurr et al., 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Mullen, 2002; Spillane, 2005), so the work of the William Dandy principals should be important to any principal who wishes to improve learning results for African American students. There are implications related to curricula, instruction, and relationships.
Implications for Curricula

The findings from this study emphasize the important role that leaders play in helping define curricula (what gets taught at school). At Dandy, the principals worked to ensure that students learned challenging academic standards, across a variety of disciplines (including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and in ways that emphasized higher-order thinking skills. Principals provided rich professional development that helped teachers understand these curricular ideas in practical ways. Professional development was intensive enough to help teachers understand the rigorous standards (both state standards and common core standards) that the principals expected Dandy students to learn. Teachers had abundant opportunities to discuss, learn about, and see examples of standards being taught in ways that incorporated the use of higher-order thinking.

Additionally, principals provided teachers abundant collaboration opportunities that helped them design lessons based on the standards, rather than based on textbooks. Principals assigned leaders (instructional coaches and vice principals) who could help teachers use collaboration to consider recent, relevant classroom performance data. Collaboration helped teachers design lessons that were likely to result in deeper levels of understanding for all students.

As well, principals at Dandy “inspected what they expected.” They spent considerable time in classrooms observing classroom instruction and helping teachers implement standards-based instruction, across the disciplines, with an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills. Principals helped teachers by modeling questioning
strategies, helping teachers reflect upon their practice, and acknowledging gains in student learning.

Principals who wish to support improvements in the achievement of African American students must consider how they will influence changes in the academic content students have the opportunity to learn. Principals should consider how professional development, teacher collaboration, and frequent observations can be tools in changing classroom curricula.

Implications for Instruction

While the content of instruction at Dandy is aligned to rigorous academic standards, focused on higher-order thinking skills, designed to support the mastery of STEM subjects, and constantly influenced by student data; the manner in which teachers deliver instruction is also important. Interviews and observations suggested that instruction at Dandy might be characterized by high levels of student engagement and high rates of student feedback.

Stakeholders at William Dandy attributed students’ academic success to interesting and engaging instruction. A number of factors may have contributed to the prevalence of this type of instruction. There were physical aspects of the classrooms that promoted student interest and involvement. Teachers planned lessons that students were likely to perceive as relevant. Many lessons featured the use of technology. Also, many lessons engaged students in collaborating with each other.

In the classrooms the researcher observed, Dandy students were more likely to be actively involved in interesting activity and less likely to sit passively listening to the teacher. Students were frequently engaged in discussions with other students. They were
frequently using technology and they were frequently discussing their thinking and the rationale behind their thinking. These observations were triangulated by the comments of teachers as they described how they provide instruction on a daily basis.

It may also be important to note that many Dandy teachers asked students to provide feedback regarding instruction and student learning, that required higher-level thinking skills. The researcher observed teachers asking questions that required more than a one-word response. For example, in several observations, teachers asked questions that began with words like “why, how, or explain.” Teachers pushed students to respond at all levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. They provided open-ended questions that required students to describe and explain the rationale for their answers. The principal explained that this type of questioning was expected throughout the school. She explained that such questioning raises the cognitive demand and will help prepare the school for the National Common Core Standards and Assessments.

Culturally responsive principals have characteristics unique to their leadership styles. They also have a commitment to diversity and encourage themselves as well as their teachers to recognize the belief systems of students and parents. As instructional leaders, principals utilize leadership practices that include tenets of Gay’s (2002) culturally responsive theory. Mrs. Stanley, Mrs. Robinson, and the current principal at William Dandy Middle School, Mrs. Davis, understand the importance of establishing culturally relevant and responsive practices and incorporating these tenets into curriculum and instruction.
Implications for Relationships

According to the Area Director, William Dandy has a culture of high standards. High standards for students have been institutionalized into the culture. William Dandy Middle School is in the 33311 zip code. It is the most poverty-stricken area in our district so our kids do come with needs. They get lots of academic support.

Perhaps, the relationships between teachers and students provide a critical support that helps students meet those high standards. As students perceive that teachers are giving them the support they need to excel, students may be more committed to working hard for their teachers. The Area Director explained that educators at William Dandy help students build connections to the school by creating an enriched environment, which includes academics and the pursuit of hobbies in an enrichment setting. Critical thinking skills are infused throughout these enrichment activities. Teachers continually look for new opportunities to reach and teach students.

Parents reported that William Dandy teachers “went out of their way” to build trusting relationship and make personal connections to the students and their struggles. They described several kinds of evidence in support of this notion. First, parents explained that teachers spoke to their children with “caring tones” that yielded high levels of engagement. Parents reported that they heard teachers being assertive and firm, yet respectful with high expectations. Parents explained that they knew about the way teachers interacted with their children because of the school’s physical transparency. They shared that classrooms have large windows that overlook outdoor hallways, allowing visitors a view inside the classrooms at all times. Parents also reported that
whenever they visit the school, they often see 100% of the students in classes on task and giving teachers their full attention.

The parents of William Dandy Middle students expressed appreciation for the efforts teachers made to develop strong relationships with their children. Parents spoke about some of the influences their children face on a daily basis and the positive impact Dandy teachers make.

**Implications for the Preparation of New School Leaders**

According to Hopkins (2000), many possible candidates view the task of an administrator as undesirable and/or impossible to perform. A recent study showed that principals are seeking help for their increased responsibilities in issues of special education, increased student achievement on standardized tests, data driven decision-making, assessment using multiple criteria, and strategies for faculty and staff development (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

A systematic, formal training program would be the most beneficial for administrators to not only gain knowledge and skill to become an effective instructional leader, but also to understand how to implement their knowledge and skills. A systematic approach to training would include the identification of specific leadership tasks, assessments and achievement goals that need to be developed. In addition, the supports needed to carry out the goals would have to be in place to ensure implementation. The support systems need to include not only training but also evaluation of implementation and results. Given that urban schools sometimes have limited resources, it would be important to include lead teachers and prospective administrators in the training as well, so that urban school educators become the staff developers for their district as well as to
develop a pipeline for administrative succession in urban school districts. Since
Dandy administrators and teachers emphasize the benefits of learning from mentors,
support should include district coaches or resource teachers who visit schools
periodically to work with the administrators on implementation of specific skills and who
provide ongoing collegial discussions.

It is important to keep in mind that administrators training must be focused on
preparing them to be the instructional leaders in light of NCLB and state mandates.
Beginning in the 1970’s, research around effective schools identified the critical role of
the principal as an instructional leader . The 1970’s marked the beginning of the Effective
School Movement based principally on research conducted by Edmonds (1982). Further,
Lezotte (1990) indicated that the school leader transitioned from manager to instructional
leader.

Broward School County District understood the importance of placing a strong
instructional leader in their lowest performing schools. Dandy is a prime example of how
urban schools benefits from having leaders who have been adequately trained for the
challenges students face in lower-socioeconomic areas and who is culturally proficient at
creating supportive learning environments.

Implications for the Support and Professional Development of Current School
Principals

DiPaola and Tshannann-Moran (2003) stated that too often administrators begin
the job underprepared to assume the fundamental responsibilities of their new role. They
further noted that most administrators are concerned about issues of student learning in
their jobs, indicating that 90% of administrators say they need more staff
development in order to meet the expectations of their role.

Following are recommendations regarding the enhancement of leaders’
knowledge and skills necessary to improve academic achievement in their urban schools:

- **Districts should develop leadership programs.** The staff development
  opportunities should include the skills identified by research and the national
  leadership standards. It should to be accessible either via online system or
  provided on-site. Attendance to the training must be mandatory and
  supported, then integrated into the culture of the school. The leadership
  program needs to include the development of a plan for improved student
  achievement and the responsibilities that the school leader must implement
  throughout the process. Broward School District implements a rigorous
  program for aspiring leaders to follow. Placement in urban schools is carefully
  planned to ensure the principal, teachers, and students are successful.

- **Districts should identify mentors/coaches when possible.** The mentor or coach
  needs to be a skilled administrator which provides opportunities for new
  administrators at the school to have open discussions about situations and/or
  implementation of newly learned skills.

- **Districts should monitor and evaluate the leadership program.** The progress
  and ongoing implementation of newly learned skills and strategies should to
  be monitored. This could be accomplished by an experienced administrator,
  an Area Director/Superintendent, a district, or an administrator from the
  county office of education. The district and school leader must determine if
there is adequate progress in the implementation of skills. This could be measured by the improvement of teachers’ teaching skills, student achievement, and feedback from the parents and community members, such as those on the School Site Council (SSC) who analyze data monthly in relation to the implementation of Title I funds. Assessments for teacher improvement could be monitored through an instrument developed to monitor teacher instruction, district benchmark exams, and state assessments for students.

Implications for Future Research

It is evident that the role of school administrators has evolved from school manager to one of school instructional leader. As our country focuses on educational reform that will increase student achievement, principals are faced with changes in leadership practice and their responsibilities to lead schools that meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This is especially true and often difficult in low-performing urban schools that serve students of color. Specific skills have been identified by various researchers to improve achievement of African American students. In addition, this study has revealed that too few administrators in urban schools are leading schools that yield high results for at risk African American students. Too few leaders while are knowledgeable in skills needed to increase student achievement, while others have not implemented strategies focused on the achievement of this sub-group in urban schools. It is also evident that administrators and teachers found coaching and mentoring as meaningful staff development opportunities. It would be beneficial for continued research on implementing and assessing staff development opportunities that include workshops and mentoring focused on skills that increase achievement for African
American students. Large urban school districts such as San Diego Unified School District, in San Diego, California created a taskforce whose goal was to develop a blueprint of strategies for district leaders, principals, and teachers to utilize in meeting the needs of low-performing African American students. This blueprint also provides opportunities for training as it relates to cultural proficiency and how principals and teachers can create learning environments that are supportive and effective for African American students.

Further research that determines the on-going academic success of William Dandy students in high school or college would add to the literature and confirm that the educational program they offer leads to sustained achievement beyond 8th grade at Dandy.

Finally, this study suggests that further qualitative studies should be undertaken to gain more specific, about administrators in other urban, suburban, and rural school districts to investigate how successful they have been at educating African American students and the strategies they employ or the activities known to be effective.

**Conclusions**

According to Martin and Martin (2007) the underachievement of African American students is one of the most consistent findings in social science research. As shown in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), black students are achieving well below the national average (Hale-Benson, 1990). A few researchers have noted that there is a need for studies that examine within-group variation (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2007). Therefore, it would be valuable to determine the factors that explain the variations in academic achievement within the African American student
population. Identifying the factors that are positively or negatively associated with higher academic achievement of African American students may prove beneficial in our effort to, first understand why so many of our nation’s black students fare so poorly in our educational system; and secondly, find solutions to help correct this societal issue.

The goal was to examine the structures in place at a high-performing middle school that has experienced eight consecutive years of strong achievement for African American students. This study aimed to advance the understanding of the leadership practices that helped to improve the achievement of African American students. As well, the study examined how a high-performing urban school attained greater levels of achievement than most schools in their state. Hopefully, the findings will be used to help other urban schools, especially those serving African American communities, replicate the practices of stakeholders at William Dandy Middle School.
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APPENDIX A

Research Questions

1. What descriptions characterize curricula at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

2. What descriptions characterize instruction at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

3. What descriptions characterize relationships among students, parents, teachers, and administrators at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?

4. How have leaders at the school influenced changes in curricula, instruction, and relationships at a school that has achieved high levels of academic achievement for African American students?
APPENDIX B

Interview Consent Form for Superintendents and District-Level Administrators

San Diego State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K – 12
Leadership Practices That Improve the Achievement of African American Students

Interview Consent Form for Superintendents and District-level Administrators

Researcher and Institution

Reashon Loreese Villery

San Diego State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K-12

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study is to advance our understanding of the leadership practices that help to improve the achievement of African American students and how a high-performing urban school attains greater levels of achievement than most schools in their state, or even the nation. The findings will be used to help other urban schools (especially those serving African American communities) replicate the practices of William Dandy Middle School Middle School. Additionally, I hope to collect evidence that will allow me to identify the leadership practices and factors that improve the achievement of African American students.

Description of the Study

The study is comprised of a week-long visit to William Dandy Middle School Middle School, one of the winners of the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) Excellence in Urban Education Award. During the visit, you will be invited to be interviewed. The interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped for transcription. If you do not want to be audio-taped, the information shared will be recorded in hand written notes. The interview will take place at your district office, in the school library, in the school’s staff professional development room,
a private conference room or wherever is convenient for you and the school, taking into account staff and schedules. Additionally, the site visit will include classroom observations during which data will be collected (through field notes) regarding instruction, student engagement, and classroom environment.

**Risks or Discomforts and Risk Management**

While the nature of the questions you will be asked is not inherently personal, if at any time during the interview you begin to feel uncomfortable about responding to a question, you may opt to be interviewed individually or discontinue participation either temporarily or permanently.

**Benefits**

By participating in this study, you may be contributing to the improvement of our nation’s urban schools. It cannot be guaranteed, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study. Your participation will benefit the learning community and help to deepen the understanding of the leadership practices that influence high levels of academic success for African American students at a high-performing Title I middle school. This study seeks to develop robust descriptions of the processes that have influenced better learning for African American students. Therefore, the information gleaned will benefit the knowledge base surrounding the leadership practices that improve the achievement of African American students.

**Confidentiality/Privacy**

Confidentiality will be maintained as required by law. Your interview will be recorded and reported confidentially where no one will know specifically who you are or what area of the district in particular you serve, when you are referenced regarding this study or when information is taken from interview notes. Direct quotations from this interview will not be used. Research files and audio-tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office at Crawford High School, where she currently serves as principal, in the San Diego Unified School District. Files will be destroyed within 12 months of the completion of the research. Only the principal investigator, the principal investigator’s university supervisor, or persons on the research team will have access to the research data. By participating in this interview, you understand that you will only be referenced or identified as an area superintendent/director or district leader during presentations or publications associated with this research. You will not be referenced or identified by name. Your identity and confidentiality will be carefully maintained and protected.

It is also suggested that you should not share information that is talked about within the interview, to others outside of the interview. In addition, it is suggested that you should not share any information you are uncomfortable with others knowing.
Incentives and Costs for Participation

You will not be paid to participate and there are no costs to participate in this study.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher and San Diego State University. Participation in this study is voluntary and your responses or discontinuance will not affect your position or status with your school district and will not jeopardize your employment.

If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact me, the principal investigator, at (telephone: 619-559-3268 or email: rvillery@sandi.net) or my dissertation chairperson/adviser, Dr. Joseph F. Johnson at the National Center for Urban School Transformation, San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-7905 or e-mail: jjohnson@mail.sdsu.edu). You may also contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622 or irb@mail.sdsu.edu) to report problems or concerns related to this study.

Consent to Participate

Your participation indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions that you may have about the study. Your participation also indicates that you agree to be interviewed for this study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. Your consent to participate also indicates that you have been given a copy of this agreement.
APPENDIX C

Interview Consent Form for Principals and Vice Principals

San Diego State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K – 12
Leadership Practices That Improve the Achievement of African American Students

Interview Consent Form for Principals and Vice Principals

Researcher and Institution

Reashon Loreese Villery

San Diego State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K-12

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study is to advance our understanding of the leadership practices that help to improve the achievement of African American students and how a high-performing urban school attains greater levels of achievement than most schools in their state, or even the nation. The findings will be used to help other urban schools (especially those serving African American communities) replicate the practices of William Dandy Middle School. Additionally, I hope to collect evidence that will allow me to identify the leadership practices and factors that improve the achievement of African American students.

Description of the Study

The study is comprised of a week-long visit to William Dandy Middle School, one of the winners of the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) Excellence in Urban Education Award. During the visit, you will be invited to be interviewed. The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped for transcription. If you do not want to be audio-taped, the information shared will be recorded in hand written notes. The interview will take place in your office, the library, the school’s staff professional development room, a private conference room or wherever is convenient for you and the school, taking into account staff and schedules. Additionally, the site visit will include classroom observations during which data will be collected (through field notes) regarding instruction, student engagement, and classroom environment.
Risks or Discomforts and Risk Management

While the nature of the questions you will be asked is not inherently personal, if at any time during the interview you begin to feel uncomfortable about responding to a question, you may opt to be interviewed individually or discontinue participation either temporarily or permanently.

Benefits

By participating in this study, you may be contributing to the improvement of our nation’s urban schools. It cannot be guaranteed, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study. Your participation will benefit the learning community and help to deepen the understanding of the leadership practices that influence high levels of academic success for African American students at a high-performing Title I middle school. This study seeks to develop robust descriptions of the processes that have influenced better learning for African American students. Therefore, the information gleaned will benefit the knowledge base surrounding the leadership practices that improve the achievement of African American students.

Confidentiality/Privacy

Confidentiality will be maintained as required by law. Your interview will be recorded and reported confidentially where no one will know specifically who you are or what area of the district in particular you serve, when you are referenced regarding this study or when information is taken from interview notes. Direct quotations from this interview will not be used. Research files and audio-tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office at Crawford High School, where she currently serves as principal, in the San Diego Unified School District. Files will be destroyed within 12 months of the completion of the research. Only the principal investigator, the principal investigator’s university supervisor, or persons on the research team will have access to the research data. By participating in this interview, you understand that you will only be referenced or identified as one of the principals or vice principals who has served the school, during presentations or publications associated with this research. You will not be referenced or identified by name. Your identity and confidentiality will be carefully maintained and protected.

It is also suggested that you should not share information that is talked about within the interview, to others outside of the interview. In addition, it is suggested that you should not share any information you are uncomfortable with others knowing.

Incentives and Costs for Participation

You will not be paid to participate and there are no costs to participate in this study.
**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher and San Diego State University. Participation in this study is voluntary and your responses or discontinuance will not affect your position or status with your school district and will not jeopardize your employment.

If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact me, the principal investigator, at (telephone: 619-559-3268 or email: rvillery@sandi.net) or my dissertation chairperson/adviser, Dr. Joseph F. Johnson at the National Center for Urban School Transformation, San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-7905 or e-mail: jjohnson@mail.sdsu.edu). You may also contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622 or irb@mail.sdsu.edu) to report problems or concerns related to this study.

**Consent to Participate**

Your participation indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions that you may have about the study. Your participation also indicates that you agree to be interviewed for this study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. Your consent to participate also indicates that you have been given a copy of this agreement.
APPENDIX D

Interview Consent Form for Teachers and Support Staff

San Diego State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K – 12
Leadership Practices That Improve the Achievement of African American Students

Interview Consent Form for Teachers and Support Staff

Researcher and Institution

Reashon Loreese Villery

San Diego State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K-12

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study is to advance our understanding of the leadership practices that help to improve the achievement of African American students and how a high-performing urban school attains greater levels of achievement than most schools in their state, or even the nation. The findings will be used to help other urban schools (especially those serving African American communities) replicate the practices of William Dandy Middle School Middle School. Additionally, I hope to collect evidence that will allow me to identify the leadership practices and factors that improve the achievement of African American students.

Description of the Study

The study is comprised of a week-long visit to William Dandy Middle School Middle School, one of the winners of the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) Excellence in Urban Education Award. During the visit, you will be invited to be interviewed. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Teachers and support staff will have the option to be interviewed individually or in small focus groups for approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped for transcription. If you do not want to be audio-taped, the information shared will be recorded in hand written notes. The interview will take place in the library, in the school’s staff professional development room, a private conference room or wherever is convenient for you and the school, taking into account staff and schedules. Additionally, the site visit will include classroom
observations during which data will be collected (through field notes) regarding instruction, student engagement, and classroom environment.

**Risks or Discomforts and Risk Management**

While the nature of the questions you will be asked is not inherently personal, if at any time during the interview you begin to feel uncomfortable about responding to a question, you may opt to be interviewed individually or discontinue participation either temporarily or permanently.

**Benefits**

By participating in this study, you may be contributing to the improvement of our nation’s urban schools. It cannot be guaranteed, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study. Your participation will benefit the learning community and help to deepen the understanding of the leadership practices that influence high levels of academic success for African American students at a high-performing Title I middle school. This study seeks to develop robust descriptions of the processes that have influenced better learning for African American students. Therefore, the information gleaned will benefit the knowledge base surrounding the leadership practices that improve the achievement of African American students.

**Confidentiality/Privacy**

Confidentiality will be maintained as required by law. Your interview will be recorded and reported confidentially where no one will know specifically who you are or what area of the district in particular you serve, when you are referenced regarding this study or when information is taken from interview notes. Direct quotations from this interview will not be used. Research files and audio-tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office at Crawford High School, where she currently serves as principal, in the San Diego Unified School District. Files will be destroyed within 12 months of the completion of the research. Only the principal investigator, the principal investigator’s university supervisor, or persons on the research team will have access to the research data. By participating in this interview, you understand that you will only be referenced or identified as a teacher or support staff person, during presentations or publications associated with this research (i.e., math teacher). You will not be referenced or identified by name. Your identity and confidentiality will be carefully maintained and protected.

It is suggested that you should not share any information you are uncomfortable with others knowing. It is not guaranteed that what is disclosed during the focus group interviews will not be discussed by other interviewees outside of the interview, so it is also suggested that you should not share information that is talked about within the interview or focus group, to others outside of the interview or focus group.
Incentives and Costs for Participation

You will not be paid to participate and there are no costs to participate in this study.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher and San Diego State University. Participation in this study is voluntary and your responses or discontinuance will not affect your position or status with your school district and will not jeopardize your employment.

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Consent to Participate

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APPENDIX E

Interview Consent Form for Parents and Community Members

San Diego State University

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K – 12
Leadership Practices That Improve the Achievement of African American Students

Interview Consent Form for Parents and Community Members

Researcher and Institution

Reashon Loreese Villery
San Diego State University
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program K-12

Study Purpose

The purpose of the study is to advance our understanding of the leadership practices that help to improve the achievement of African American students and how a high-performing urban school attains greater levels of achievement than most schools in their state, or even the nation. The findings will be used to help other urban schools (especially those serving African American communities) replicate the practices of William Dandy Middle School Middle School. Additionally, I hope to collect evidence that will allow me to identify the leadership practices and factors that improve the achievement of African American students.

Description of the Study

The study is comprised of a week-long visit to William Dandy Middle School Middle School, one of the winners of the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) Excellence in Urban Education Award. During the visit, you will be invited to be interviewed. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Parents and community members will have the option to be interviewed individually or in small focus groups for approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped for transcription. If you do not want to be audio-taped, the information shared will be recorded in handwritten notes. The interview will take place in the library, the school’s staff professional development room, a private conference room or wherever is convenient for you and the school, taking into account staff and schedules. Additionally, the site visit will include
classroom observations during which data will be collected (through field notes) regarding instruction, student engagement, and classroom environment.

**Risks or Discomforts and Risk Management**

While the nature of the questions you will be asked is not inherently personal, if at any time during the interview you begin to feel uncomfortable about responding to a question, you may opt to be interviewed individually or discontinue participation either temporarily or permanently.

**Benefits**

By participating in this study, you may be contributing to the improvement of our nation’s urban schools. It cannot be guaranteed, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study. Your participation will benefit the learning community and help to deepen the understanding of the leadership practices that influence high levels of academic success for African American students at a high-performing Title I middle school. This study seeks to develop robust descriptions of the processes that have influenced better learning for African American students. Therefore, the information gleaned will benefit the knowledge base surrounding the leadership practices that improve the achievement of African American students.

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It is suggested that you should not share any information you are uncomfortable with others knowing. It is not guaranteed that what is disclosed during the focus group interviews will not be discussed by other interviewees outside of the interview, so it is also suggested that you should not share information that is talked about within the interview or focus group, to others outside of the interview or focus group.
Incentives and Costs for Participation

You will not be paid to participate and there are no costs to participate in this study.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher and San Diego State University. Participation in this study is voluntary and your responses or discontinuance will not affect your position or status with your school district and will not jeopardize your opportunities to volunteer, participate at the school, or attend school and district events.

If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact me, the principal investigator, at (telephone: 619-559-3268 or email: rvillery@sandi.net) or my dissertation chairperson/adviser, Dr. Joseph F. Johnson at the National Center for Urban School Transformation, San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-7905 or e-mail: jjohnson@mail.sdsu.edu). You may also contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622 or irb@mail.sdsu.edu) to report problems or concerns related to this study.

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APPENDIX F

Site Semi Structures Questions

Superintendents and District-level Administrators

1. What can we expect to see at this school that is different from what we would likely see at other urban schools serving similar communities?

1A. Alternate to Item 1 for schools that have turned around in recent years: What are we likely to see at this school today that is substantially different from what we would have found at this school several years ago?

Probes for Item 1 or 1A: (Select from among these to fill gaps the interviewee did not address)

What differences are we likely to see in:
- How teachers work with students? With parents? With each other?
- How students work, contribute, or behave?
- The services offered?
- The curricula/materials/programs used?
- The quality of teachers and/or the quality of classroom instruction?
- How technology is used?
- Facilities or in how facilities are used?

Follow-up (Pick one or two differences that the interviewee cited and ask the following):
- What role did the district play in bringing about this change?

2. How does the district select principals for schools? Describe the process and who is involved? Was that process used to select the current principal at the finalist school? If not, why?

3. How are teachers selected to work at schools in this district? Describe the screening and selection process. Was that process used to select the current teachers at the finalist school? If not, why? Does the district do anything special to help ensure that high-need schools get the best teachers? If so, please explain.

4. How does the district know that students at this school are making academic progress throughout the school year? Is this school likely to achieve the same academic results this year as they achieved last year? Why or why not?

5. How does the district help principals be more effective educational leaders?

6. How does the district help teachers be more effective instructors?

7. In your opinion, why has this school achieved such impressive results?
School Administrators (Principals/Assistant Principals)

1. What can we expect to see at your school that is different from what we would likely see at other urban schools serving similar communities?

1A. Alternate to Item 1 for schools that have turned around in recent years: What are we likely to see at your school today that is substantially different from what we would have found at your school several years ago?

Probes for Item 1 or 1A: (Select from among these to fill gaps the interviewee did not address)
What differences are we likely to see in:
- How teachers work with students? With parents? With each other?
- How students work, contribute, or behave?
- The services offered?
- The curricula/materials/programs used?
- The quality of teachers and/or the quality of classroom instruction?
- How technology is used?
- Facilities or in how facilities are used?

Follow-up (Pick one or two differences that the interviewee cited and ask the following):
- Is this a new change? How did the change come about?
- Who was involved? What role did you play?

2. Describe something that you endeavored to change at this school, but the change did not come easily. What was difficult and how did you deal with the difficulty?

3. How are teachers chosen to work at this school? Describe the screening and selection process.

4. How do you know if teachers are experiencing difficulty in getting students to achieve academic expectations? What do you do to support those teachers? What happens when struggling teachers fail to improve?

5. Is your school likely to achieve the same academic results this year as you achieved last year? Why or why not? How do you know?

6. If we were to visit your school two years from now, what would we see that is different or better? Why?
Probes for Item 6:
- What are you doing to help make this happen?
- What are the barriers you anticipate? How are you addressing those barriers?
- How do you know/will you know if you’re making progress?

7. What role(s) has your district played in supporting your school’s success?
Teachers/Support Staff/Counselors

1. How are teachers, support staff, and/or counselors chosen to work here? Why do they choose to stay or teach here?

2. Why do parents choose to enroll their child here?

3. What can we expect to see in your classroom/program that is different from what we would likely see in classrooms in other schools serving similar communities?
   3A. Alternate to Item 3 for schools that have turned around in recent years: What are we likely to see in your classroom/program today that is substantially different from what we would have found in your classroom several years ago?

Probes for Items 3 or 3A (Select from among these to fill gaps the interviewee did not address)

What differences are we likely to see in:
- How you work with students? How students work, contribute, or behave?
- How you work with parents?
- The homework your students receive?
- How you work with your colleagues?
- Your classroom instruction? How you use technology? The rigor of the content taught?

Follow-up (Pick one or two differences that the interviewee cited and ask the following):
- Is this a new change? How did the change come about?
- Who was involved? What role did you play?

4. During the school year, how do you know if your students are learning the content they need to master? How do you know if they are falling behind?

5. What happens when students fall behind academically? Do they receive extra help? How?

6. Describe the professional development you have received.

How do other educators (including grade level teachers, specialists, support staff) at this school influence your work and how do you influence the work of your colleagues at this school?

Probes (Select from among these to fill in gaps the interviewee did not address)
- When does this collaborative work occur?
- Describe what happens when you come together?
- How do educators here feel about working together in this manner?
Parents

1. How many children do you have who attend this school? What grade/s?

2. Is this a good place to be a student? Why? What makes it so?
   
   Probes for Item 2:
   - Do you believe the teachers at this school care about your child’s/children’s success? Why or why not?
   - Do your children like this school? Why or why not?

3. What is your child learning now or what has he/she learned recently that you’re especially excited about or proud of?
   
   Probe for Item 3:
   - Do you believe your children are learning the material they should learn? Why/why not?

4. What does this school do to help your child learn and succeed in school?
   
   Probes for Item 4:
   - What happens within your child’s class(es) that is particularly helpful?
   - Is there any support outside of your child’s classes that is particularly helpful? If so, what?
   - What support is available for gifted or academically talented students?
   - What support is available for children who are struggling?
   - What does the principal do to help your child succeed?
   - What do teachers do to help your child succeed?

5. Is this a good place to be a parent? Why? What makes it so?
   
   Probes for Item 5:
   - Describe what opportunities are there for parents to be involved in their child’s education.
   - How easy is it for parents to communicate with teachers and administrators about their children’s progress? How is this generally done?
   - Are there other ways the school support parents? How?
APPENDIX G

Research Classroom Observation Form

School: ____________________ Room #: ____________________ Time observation began: ____________________
Grade level(s): ____________________ Subject: ____________________ # of students in class: ____________________

Lesson Objective/Rigor
What objective was being taught/learned?

Was the objective posted? _____ In student-friendly language? _____
The lesson content was generally ____below grade level ____at grade level ____above grade level
Primarily, the lesson required students to (Check one):
___ Recall/memorize/practice facts and words
___ Comprehend concepts and ideas
___ Apply concepts learned to solve real problems or simulations of real problems
___ Analyze, synthesize, and/or evaluate information and concepts

The most challenging task posed/question asked was:

# students asked by observer about the lesson objective: ___
# students who could tell you what they were learning: ___
# students who could tell you why what they were learning was important: ___
Observer comments/notes:

Did the teacher provide instruction in a manner that reflected his/her mastery of the content being taught? ____ If not, please explain:

Student Engagement (Check the appropriate line)
Among the students observed, what percentage: 0-20 21-40 41-60 61-80 81-100

Asked their own questions regarding the objective: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____
Assumed leadership roles in lesson activities: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____
Displayed enthusiasm for learning the objective/task: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____
Displayed intense concentration on the objective/task: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____
Interacted with peers regarding the objective/task: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____
Participated in discussion related to the objective: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____
Remained on-task throughout the lesson: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

Took notes: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

Used academic vocabulary related to the objective: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

Observer comments/notes:

**Evidence of Understanding**

What percentage of students demonstrated evidence that they understood the objective? ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

**Teacher Skills/Practices Evidenced (Check the skills/practices the teacher demonstrated consistently and effectively):**

- Acknowledging student effort
- Building upon prior knowledge/experience
- Calling on all or almost all students
- Consistently, fairly enforcing rules
- Delivering content in an organized manner
- Demonstrating courtesy/respect
- Demonstrating enthusiasm
- Encouraging student-to-student conversation
- Explaining in ways that helped students relate
- Minimizing transition times
- Probing/delving for student thoughts
- Prompting use of academic vocabulary
- Prompting higher-order thinking
- Providing greater challenge when appropriate
- Providing individual assistance
- Providing specific praise
- Re-directing off-task behavior
- Scaffolding challenge when appropriate
- Using graphic organizers
- Using technology effectively

Observer comments/notes:

**Instructional Delivery Methods Observed (Check primary methods observed):**

- Class discussion
- Cooperative learning
- Experiments/lab work
- Guided reading
- Graphic organizers
- Group reading/discussion of text
- Hands on work with manipulatives
- Independent reading of textbook
- Independent reading of other material
- Individual student conferences
- Learning centers
- Learning games
- Lecture
- Problem-based/project-based learning
- Question and answer sessions
- Small group work
- Student presentations
- Technology assisted instruction
- Worksheets (completed independently)
- Worksheets (guided by teacher)

Observer comments/notes:
Classroom Learning Environment (Check all that apply):
___ Visual aids and resources that could facilitate student learning were posted/present.
___ Classroom design was likely to be conducive to the learning of the students served.
___ The classroom was attractive and clean.
Observer comments/notes:

Posted Student Work:
Approximately how many items of student work were posted within/outside of classroom? ___
These posted items of student work represented how many different assignments? ___
For how many of the assignments were scoring guides/rubrics/exemplars posted? ___

Check the appropriate line: 0-20 21-40 41-60 61-80 81-100
% of posted items with dates less than one month old ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
% of posted items that required more than recall ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
% of posted items reflecting grade level work or above ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
Submitted by: Reashon L. Villery
Name of School Visited: William Dandy Middle School Middle School
District: Broward School District
City/State: Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
Date of Visit: March 5-7, 2012
Interviews Recorded:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position Interviewed</th>
<th>Recorder Number</th>
<th>Folder and File Number</th>
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This form, all observation forms, interview notes, audiotapes, and other documents obtained from the school will be submitted to be analyzed for research findings.
# RESEARCH CLASSROOM OBSERVATION SUMMARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School:</th>
<th>District:</th>
<th>Grades observed:</th>
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## Number of observations: Date:

### Lesson Objective/Rigor

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<tr>
<th>In how many classrooms was the lesson objective posted?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>In student-friendly language?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>In how many classrooms was content below grade level?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<th>In how many classrooms was content at grade level?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In how many classrooms was content above grade level?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</table>

### How many lessons primarily required students to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recall/memorize/practice facts and words</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehend concepts and ideas</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apply concepts learned to solve real problems/simulations</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>___</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyze, synthesize, and/or evaluate information/concepts</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>___</td>
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</table>

### Total # students asked about the lesson objective: ___  # students who could tell what they were learning: ___  # students who could explain importance of their learning: ___  

### Key observer comments/notes:

### Teacher Mastery of Content

How many teachers provided instruction in a manner that reflected their mastery of the content being taught? ___  Percentage ___

**Student Engagement (Write school totals for each percentage category.)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0-20</th>
<th>21-40</th>
<th>41-60</th>
<th>61-80</th>
<th>81-100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asked their own questions regarding the objective:</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
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<td>___</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assumed leadership roles in lesson activities:</td>
<td>___</td>
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<tr>
<td>Displayed enthusiasm for learning the objective/task:</td>
<td>___</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displayed intense concentration on the objective/task:</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacted with peers regarding the objective/task:</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in discussion related to the objective:</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remained on-task throughout the lesson:</td>
<td>___</td>
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<tr>
<td>Took notes:</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used academic vocabulary related to the objective:</td>
<td>___</td>
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</table>

**Observer comments/notes:**

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**Evidence of Understanding (Write school totals for each percentage category.)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0-20</th>
<th>21-40</th>
<th>41-60</th>
<th>61-80</th>
<th>81-100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What percentage of students showed evidence that they understood the objective?</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
<td>___</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Teacher Skills/Practices Evidenced** (Write school totals for each skill/practice.)

The teacher demonstrated consistent, effective use of the following skills/practices:

___ Acknowledging student effort
___ Building upon prior knowledge/experience
___ Calling on all or almost all students
___ Consistently, fairly enforcing rules
___ Delivering content in an organized manner
___ Demonstrating courtesy/respect
___ Demonstrating enthusiasm
___ Encouraging student-to-student conversation
___ Explaining in ways that helped students relate
___ Minimizing transition times
___ Prompting use of academic vocabulary
___ Prompting higher-order thinking
___ Providing greater challenge when appropriate
___ Providing individual assistance
___ Providing specific praise
___ Re-directing off-task behavior
___ Scaffolding challenge when appropriate
___ Using graphic organizers
___ Using technology effectively

Observer comments/notes:

**Instructional Delivery Methods Observed** (Write school totals for each method.)

___ Class discussion
___ Cooperative learning
___ Experiments/lab work
___ Guided reading
___ Graphic organizers
___ Group reading/discussion of text
___ Hands on work with manipulatives
___ Independent reading of textbook
___ Independent reading of other material
___ Individual student conferences
___ Learning centers
___ Learning games
___ Lecture
___ Problem-based/project-based learning
___ Question and answer sessions
___ Small group work
___ Student presentations
___ Technology assisted instruction
___ Worksheets (completed independently)
___ Worksheets (guided by teacher)

Observer comments/notes:
Classroom Learning Environment (Write school totals.)

___ Visual aids and resources that could facilitate student learning were posted/present.
___ Classroom design was likely to be conducive to the learning of the students served.
___ The classroom was attractive and clean.

Observer comments/notes:

Posted Student Work (Write school totals.)

Approximately how many items of student work were posted within/outside of classroom? ___

These posted items of student work represented how many different assignments? ___

For how many of the assignments were scoring guides/rubrics/exemplars posted? ___

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of posted items with dates less than one month old</th>
<th>0-20</th>
<th>21-40</th>
<th>41-60</th>
<th>61-80</th>
<th>81-100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| % of posted items that required more than recall | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |

| % of posted items reflecting grade level work or above | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ | ___ |

Observer comments/notes:
APPENDIX I

Supportive Evidence to Research Questions

1. **What evidence from observations, interviews, or documents suggests that students are learning challenging/rigorous academic content that might exceed typical grade level expectations and develop deeper levels of understanding than typical? What counter-evidence did you find?**
   - What evidence indicates all students (including English learners, students with disabilities, and other students experiencing learning challenges) are developing deep understanding of concepts and skills?
   - What evidence indicates that students have opportunities to extend their learning beyond what is typically required to perform well on standardized assessments?
   - What evidence indicates that challenging concepts and skills are being introduced successfully at earlier grades than typical?
   - What evidence suggests that systems are in place to identify promptly students in need of extra assistance and provide timely assistance that has a high likelihood of improving results?
   - What evidence suggests that students are regularly challenged to engage in more complex thinking, emphasizing application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation?
2. What evidence from observations, interviews, or documents suggests that teachers are using instructional methods that lead students to become excited about learning and more engaged in the pursuit of academic knowledge and skills? What counter-evidence did you find?

- What evidence suggests that teachers are demonstrating skill at teaching challenging standards in ways that promote learning for all of the diverse populations of students they teach?
- What evidence suggests that students at all ability levels perceive that learning is fun and exciting and that they are making strong academic progress?
- What evidence suggests that students are not only attending class regularly and paying attention in class, but are also keenly interested in mastering the content they are learning?
3. What evidence from observations, interviews, or documents suggests that there are quality relationships among school personnel, students, and families that positively influence student learning? What counter-evidence did you find?

- What evidence suggests that educators are helping students believe that educators care and care deeply about them?
- What evidence suggests that educators are helping parents believe that educators care and care deeply about their children?
- What evidence suggests that educators believe that their colleagues care about them, respect their efforts, and offer sincere support?
- What evidence suggests that educators believe that their school administrator(s) care about them, respect their efforts, and offer sincere support?
- What evidence suggests that all stakeholders perceive that they are part of a cohesive team that is working constructively to make important differences for students?
4. **What evidence from observations, interviews, or documents suggests that school personnel are constantly improving their educational efforts, such that achievement results are likely to continue to improve in the future? What counter-evidence did you find?**

- What evidence suggests that teachers and other educators perceive they are part of a team engaged in the exciting, rewarding work of improving their school, even beyond the levels of success currently attained?
- What evidence suggests that administrators and teachers have clear strategies for building upon their strengths and addressing areas where improvement is desired?
- What evidence suggests that there are systems in place to ensure that progress is closely monitored and that achievement continuously improves?
5. Beyond the evidence cited in items 1-4 above, please list evidence of other impressive strengths of the school that might be influencing high levels of academic achievement.
6. Please list evidence of your concerns regarding the school.