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## District Size And Implementation Of High School School Improvement Grants

Marla Robinson  
Illinois State University, mjrobinson80@gmail.com

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DISTRICT SIZE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HIGH SCHOOL  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

Marla Holder Robinson

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This dissertation employs organizational theory, the history of school reform, the role school district leadership, and the impact of district size to provide a foundation for study of high school reform implemented in twenty high schools with histories of academic challenges. The Federal Department of Education School Improvement Grant Program was created to financially support reform in persistently failing schools. The schools in this study are all located in the same Midwestern state; however, they have wide-ranging student enrollments and are located in suburban, urban, rural, and metropolitan school districts of differing sizes. The mixed method study includes two phases. Phase I, a quantitative review of district and school performance on the grant's Lead Indicators, was undertaken with the goal of selecting two districts to execute face-to-face interviews with teachers, principals, and central office administrators. The interviews were designed to help glean the stories behind the statistical data. Phase II is a qualitative examination into the experiences and perceptions of ten staff members; five from each of two different districts.

DISTRICT SIZE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HIGH SCHOOL  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

MARLA HOLDER ROBINSON

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DISTRICT SIZE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HIGH SCHOOL  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

MARLA HOLDER ROBINSON

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Guy Banicki, Chair

Lydia Kyei-Bankson

Norman Durflinger

Beth Hatt

Neil Sappington

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

In *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, authors David Tyack and Larry Cuban take us on a reflective and historical view of efforts to improve America's Public School system. The title implies an ongoing effort in the United States to tweak its way to perfection via the public school system. Due to laws such as No Child Left Behind and numerous programs and initiatives which were implemented in past years and are currently being implemented in public schools in the United States, the word reform is now common educational terminology and is frequently used without much consideration to its meaning. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word reform is used more often as a verb; however, in educational settings, it is used more commonly as a noun describing a platform or program for educational change and/or school improvement. Looking at the two usages, the definition of the verb reform is quite interesting. To reform, according to Merriam Webster ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)) is to:

- make changes for improvement in order to remove abuse and injustices
- bring, lead, or force to abandon a wrong or evil course of life, conduct, and adopt a right one
- produce by cracking
- break up the molecules of
- improve by alteration or correction of errors or defects and put into a better condition
- change for the better

Synonyms are to habilitate, to reclaim, to improve, to refine, to cleanse, to redeem, to purify, to restore, to regenerate, and to rehabilitate. Most of these words imply the return to a prior and/or better state of being. While efforts to reform public schools reach deep in America's past, reflections on the history of schooling are frequently romanticized, politicized, and stylized in a way to portray either a "golden age to be restored or a dismal legacy to be repudiated" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

*A Nation at Risk; The Imperative for Educational Reform, An Open Letter to the American People*, which was released in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was a highly critical commentary of the overall effectiveness of the American public educational system. The Commission was assembled under the leadership of the Secretary of the Federal Department of Education because of his concern about the belief held by many that America's educational system was seriously flawed. The perception was that society was being eroded by increasing mediocrity which was threatening the future of America as a great nation and Americans as a people (Gardner, et. al., 1983). The report's authors clearly articulated an urgent need for change. The calls for change and reform continue to this day. An in-depth historical perspective of the call for reform is presented in Chapter II. Efforts to reform our schools are typically driven by optimism, hope, motivation, and willingness to experiment with social institutions (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). These efforts have produced mixed results. Some have positive, but limited, impacts; some are unworkable; some are cost prohibitive; and some create problems for students or staff.

While historian Lawrence A. Cremin declared that public schools and school reform are incapable of addressing international competitiveness, and characterized such beliefs as utopian, millennialist, and crude efforts to direct attention away from those responsible for addressing international competitiveness, we cannot ignore what is transpiring and what is *not* transpiring in America's public high schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The United States' public education system is not educating students equitably. Students attending schools in the country's largest

urban districts do not receive the same quality of educational opportunities as students attending schools in districts with racially and economically diverse student bodies. While reflecting upon such schools, it is clear why U.S. Secretary of Education and former Chief Executive Officer of Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan, stated in a 2011 Martin Luther King address, “Education is the civil rights issue of our generation” (Ballasy).

In December of 2009, the United States Department of Education interceded with the creation of the School Improvement Grant Program. States were invited to apply for School Improvement Grants, which were authorized under Section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. States, in turn, are required to award funds to districts that demonstrate the greatest need for the funds and with the greatest commitment to use the funds to raise substantially the achievement of students attending certain Title I schools and secondary schools that qualify for Title I funds, but do not currently receive them.

The purpose of the funds, per the Department of Education’s School Improvement Grant Guidance letter to state school officers sent by Arne Duncan, is to provide “significant amounts of funding to each state’s persistently lowest-achieving schools in order to turn around those schools”. Appendix A provides information the states were afforded by the Department of Education. The states award funding to school districts to finance school level programs and activities which will result in improved student achievement and increased scores on standardized tests. The grants are only available to schools that meet the State Board’s definition of “persistently lowest achieving schools.” In the original Request for Proposals issued by the State Board of Education in 2010, persistently lowest achieving schools were identified as “the lowest achieving 5% of schools in the state based on the three year average of the ‘All’ student group category for the percent meeting/exceeding standards in reading and math combined and demonstration of a lack of progress” on the U.S. Department of Education website (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/2010-27313.pdf>).

Department of Education School Improvement Grants are reserved solely for schools with a history of academic struggle, and they have been awarded to districts and schools all across the country. While struggling schools exist in various types and sizes of districts, many large, urban school districts have found it challenging to maximize reform efforts in order to consistently equitably educate children. Large urban school districts face challenges such as poor academic achievement, political challenges, teachers who lack experience, low expectations, watered down, weak curriculums, lack of alignment in instruction, large numbers of mobile students, and poor business practices (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002). Irrespective of the location, size and type of district or school, schools with an ongoing history of academic struggle tend to exhibit particular patterns and characteristics. These qualities are articulated by Charles Payne, author of *So Much Reform: So Little Change: the Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools*. Payne illuminates the immense power of the culture of failure which grips urban schools with a history of persistent failure. He contends teachers and other school-level staff members become dehumanized after long periods of time without experiencing what they perceive as support and success. The continued challenges lead to a level of dysfunction which deeply impacts students and staff (Payne, 2008). The dysfunction deepens to the point that it cripples and oppresses those associated with the school including students, staff, parents, and other stakeholders. What Payne identifies appears similar to what Paulo Freire (2000) describes regarding persons who are subjected to patterns of oppression. The manifestation is a cyclical pattern of dysfunction and eventual self-loathing. A general loss of hope is experienced as the norm. In order to create genuine and meaningful change in such an environment, one must address more than the culture; one must address the various organizational components and structural aspects which led, over time, to the development of the dysfunctional culture. Chapter Two will address aspects of organizational theory and culture as they impact schools.

## Problem Statement

The origin of the current comprehensive high school model, the traditional American public high school, can be traced to the 1890s (Wraga, 2001). Led by Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard University, the Committee of Ten was appointed to recommend what form and structure of education should be provided to America's young people. The work of the larger committee was accomplished primarily by convening nine subject-specific conferences. These were comprised of Latin, Greek, English, Other Modern Languages, Mathematics, Natural History, and Geography. Physics, Astronomy, and Chemistry were addressed in one conference as were History, Civil Government, and Political Economy. Each conference was charged to consider the proper limits of the subject, the preferred methods of instruction of the subject, the desired amount of time for instruction in the subject, when instruction in the subject area should commence, what portion of the study of the subject should be reserved for the last four years of schooling, and the best method to assess students' knowledge in the subject (Wraga, 2001).

The Committee of Ten issued a set of recommendations (the 1893 Eliot Report) which initiated significant changes in public secondary education. History and English language were not established secondary school subjects prior to the report of the Committee of Ten (Bohan, 2003). The committee proposed an educational program that would span ages six to eighteen years. The report listed recommendations for earlier introduction of subjects with the aim of educational programming prior to the high school years, creating the foundation for the last four years of study, before students embarked on to additional education at a college or university or into a trade or business. The committee called for increased alignment and correlation among elementary, secondary, and college programs. The committee conveyed that different subjects should be correlated, aligned and associated; the teacher of each individual subject should feel responsible for the advancement of the pupils in all subjects, and should clearly contribute to this development (National Education Association & United States Bureau of Education, 1893). With the increased educational expectations, the committee proposed that teachers needed to become



more skilled. Teachers were encouraged to use strategies which would minimize rote memorization in order to cultivate the students' minds and teach them to think. The public believed a different type of educational experience was necessary; that high schools were failing immigrants arriving in the United States, and the increasing number of American-born students for whom a college education was not a consideration (Aulbach, 1994). A desire existed to meet the needs of students not attending college after high school and those new to the United States. Only 3.5% of American youth graduated from high school in 1889-1890; however, the time during which the Report of the Committee of Ten was being written was a time of massive immigration and increasing numbers of adolescents enrolling in America's high schools. The Committee of Ten contended the social education afforded males was also owed to female students, children of immigrants, and other populations not even legally allowed to vote. Some scholars asserted that the report failed to acknowledge the great influx of sub-par young people entering the schools. In general, the community was displeased with the lock-step curriculum common in the early twentieth century. It is historically significant and socially relevant that the 1893 Committee of Ten report declared schooling should be available to all who qualify and educational programming should sufficiently prepare students whether they were pursuing additional schooling or transitioning to the world of work. According to Butts and Cremin (1953), the Committee of Ten report "determined the course of American secondary education for a generation following its publication" (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p. 390).

In 1849, the Superintendent of Public Instruction for Michigan suggested high schools serve as a link between ordinary common schools and state universities. This concept was supported by the issuance of the Kalamazoo decision from the Michigan Supreme Court in 1874. This decision, considered by many to be the Magna Carta of the American public high school model, declared the high school a "legitimate part of the system of public education (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p.289).

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education issued the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education. Increased secondary school student enrollment resulted in a need for change in secondary school programs. The Principles highlighted consideration of individual differences among students including abilities, attitudes and goals. The Principles established the concept of democracy as the guide of public education in the United States. The seven principles are Health, Command of Fundamental Processes, Worthy Home Membership, Vocation, Civic Education, Worthy Use of Leisure, and Ethical Character.

In many ways, today's public high schools have deviated very little from the original design. Ironically, just as espoused in the Committee of Ten Report, America's high schools currently strive to graduate students who are wholly prepared for entry into a vocation, career and/or college. Many of the careers that exist today did not exist fifty years ago; however, most of America's public high school students are still being educated in comprehensive high schools or Shopping Mall high schools, as labeled by the authors of *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985).

The authors describe the comprehensive high school as a place where a curriculum is created to meet the needs of an impossibly wide range of students who have diverse and vast needs and endless interests. They enumerate the divergent components of the Shopping Mall High School: the horizontal curriculum (the actual subjects), the vertical curriculum, (the courses of differing levels within the same subject), the extracurricular program, described as a way to attach students to something that makes them feel successful, and the services curriculum, which addresses social situations deemed appropriate by the school. One important aspect of the Shopping Mall High School is that while the school offers a wide array of programs and opportunities, the parents and students are the driving forces in the choices of each particular student. This consumer-driven structure characteristically leads to increased offerings and programming as schools strive to be all things to all students (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). In some ways, this logic and the resultant processes are cyclical.

Despite preparing for a rapidly changing world, the United States continues, in most cases, to promote a dated approach to high school education in an effort to offer a very wide range of educational opportunities and experiences. At the same time, high schools have continued to struggle to effectively meet the needs of students and the overall communities. High school graduation rates have declined over the last 30 years, and public sentiment of dissatisfaction with the level of education for high school graduates is prevalent. High school dropout rates cost the country more than \$320 billion in lost wages (Harris, National Governors 'Association, Washington, DC; Center for Best Practices, National Conference of Council of Chief State School Officers, & National Association of State Boards of Education, 2008). In order for communities to be strong, they must have jobs and an employable work force. Wise (2008) cites National Center for Education Statistics data which indicate that in 2004, 42% of community college freshmen and 20% of freshmen in public four-year institutions required remedial courses in reading, writing, or math to build the skills necessary to master college-level work. Segments of the America's youth continue to graduate from high school with subpar skills. In terms of high school graduation rates, the United States ranks 16th out of the top 21 Organizations for Economic Co-Operation and Development (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). With the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, educators and other public school stakeholders learned how to disaggregate data and examine student tests scores, and other school and district data, based on the various groups of students served in a particular school. Disaggregation of data frequently reveals patterns of student achievement which reflect inequity on many levels. Natasha Ushomirsky, author of a 2011 Education Trust report expresses this directly. "Overall averages often mask huge gaps. Schools considered 'high performing' are not necessarily high performing for *all* of the children they serve" (p.1). As a part of research on schools in Maryland and Indiana, Ushomirsky & Hall (2010) established a definition of stuck schools. "A stuck school was defined as a school that started out in the bottom quartile of performance and proceeded to decline or to improve slower than 75% of other schools in the state" (p.3). While Ushomirsky's

work evidenced the variety of results and inconsistencies in school performance, there was little in the way of findings or consensus on how to consistently produce improvements (Ushomirsky, Hall, & Trust, 2010; Ushomirsky, 2011).

While pressure continues to mount for reform in America's public high schools, some growth and school improvement have been realized at the elementary school level. Research by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, University of Chicago, analyzed why 100 elementary schools showed strong gains in test scores and student attendance over seven years while 100 other elementary schools did not. The team examined longitudinal data within the schools and their respective communities. Findings articulate characteristics exhibited by effective elementary schools. School leadership that is focused on instruction and inclusive beyond the principal is an essential element for such schools. These schools were seven times more likely to produce improvement in math and four times more likely to improve in reading. Schools that are considered welcoming places by parents and are able to create strong connections between the school and local institutions were ten times more likely to improve in math and four times more likely to improve in reading. The quality of the staff also impacted school improvement. Their base beliefs and values, their level of commitment to the school, the quality of professional learning, the ability of the faculty and staff to collaborate effectively, and their willingness to embrace creativity and innovation all contribute to student success. Schools with high levels in this area were five times more likely to improve in reading and four times more likely to improve in math. Schools with environments characterized as being safe, stimulating, welcoming, nurturing, and focused on learning for all students were two times more likely to improve in reading. Schools with a curriculum that is tightly aligned are four times more likely to improve in math and reading. It was noted that weaknesses in one area can exacerbate the negative impact of weaknesses in other areas (Bryk, 2010).

Unlike elementary schools, high schools are usually characteristically, structurally, culturally, and educationally resistant to reform. Some of the issues are structural; others are part

of organizational culture. These schools can face many obstacles including students entering with low achievement levels in reading and math, increasing numbers of English language learners, a lack of safety, a shortage of effective teachers, and a lack of adequate human and financial resources. All of these distinct challenges are exacerbated by the intense focus and effort necessary to reform complicated organizations (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009).

Jeffrey Brooks (2006), of Florida State University, describes schools struggling to successfully implement reform as stuck in a rut and cites barriers to effective implementation of school reform. These include educators not being committed to the program or perceiving it as having little or no value, multilayered political issues, lack of quality and equity related to dynamics of race and gender, conflict between external and internal accountability measures, a lack of alignment of the curriculum, poor handling of financial resources, pressure caused by educational mandates and the social reality of public education, a lack of leadership at the school level, limits due to facilities, corrupt persons, corrupt systems, and mistreatment of employees in public school settings (Brooks, 2006). While reform programs and initiatives are typically complex and multidimensional, they rarely sufficiently address the nature of teacher work. Causing teachers to significantly change their practices is difficult; much of the challenge, however, resides in the design and nature of the work of a classroom teacher, as described by Dan Lortie (1975).

Dan Lortie's book, *Schoolteacher, a Sociological Study*, is based on interviews with 94 teachers. The findings indicate the design of teacher work can potentially and unintentionally reinforce resistance to change. He described the issues as individualism, which is teachers not being provided with clear criteria for success and creating their own measures of success; presentism, described as teachers creating their work into small units and focusing on short-term success with little investment in ways to inform their work; and conservatism, defined as teachers being willing to accept changes only if they are based on more of the same. Of the three, Lortie considered conservatism as the strongest barrier of change (Lortie, 1975).

Research has also been undertaken to identify and characterize educational environments where reform implementation can be successful. Effective reform must encompass several organizational levels as opposed to a few empowered reform agents or a single change facilitator; all stakeholders should fully understand the initiative and change their efforts respectively. For example, school leaders must be guides, builders of consensus, and effective deliverers of constructive criticism. Staff and community members become full-fledged partners, accepting active and supportive roles; teachers must take on a new definition of their role as professionals. This role must contain instructional leadership, curriculum experts, shared participation in governance, researchers, and users of technology as well as advocates for social justice and equity (Brooks, 2006).

When looking at traditional, comprehensive public high schools, and comparing them to what is described above, it is evident that a misalignment exists between those schools and successful reform environments, processes, roles, and structures. Public high schools tend to be compartmentalized, departmentalized educational institutions. High school teachers are typically divided into departments based on the subject area taught and interaction between departments is not typically the norm. Some of the challenges stem from the structure of the high school day and high school educational programs. Students earn credits for courses completed in certain areas, and there is no natural integration of subject matter. High schools tend to have a large number of staff members and several layers of leadership including department chairs, assistant principals, and principals. High school teachers are required to master in-depth knowledge of their particular subject areas; they must be content experts. The mastery of conceptual knowledge is viewed as critical because high schools are considered responsible for preparing students to enter college (Sizer, 1986; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985) The necessity to consider child development, the individual student, and his or her characteristics is frequently overlooked in favor of an emphasis on subject matter content. This is especially true in the current educational climate where test scores seem to be constantly increasing in importance and student

performance is potentially one aspect of a teacher's performance evaluation and possibly a determinant in the teacher's compensation.

The concept of responding to the call for public school reform with knowledge based on research has not gained favor with many who consider themselves reformers. As a result, Americans pay the price by implementing a myriad of reforms that are destined, from the beginning, to fail. It is clear that, on many levels, the stakes are higher than ever. It is essential that America's public high schools be reconstructed to serve today's needs. The School Improvement Grant program was created to facilitate such improvements; beginning with the neediest of the needy schools.

With the exception of changes in instructional materials and the explosion of technology in the United States, the academic program and the general overall design of public high school program in America is fundamentally the same as it has been for decades. In an effort to be all things to all students and families, program offerings in America's high schools reflect configurations with abundant educational and extracurricular programs. In most schools, seat time is the key component to earning credits and matriculating through to graduation. Dissatisfaction with America's public high school is not new. Numerous reform efforts have been tried in a variety of locations across the country. Creating sustainable and consistent improvement continues to elude us.

Typically, public school districts are comprised of several distinct schools and facilities. While schools are sometimes viewed as fiefdoms or kingdoms, operating on an island, such is not the reality of public schools in 2014. What transpires at the district level unquestionably impacts what transpires at the school level. While the quality of education delivered to all of America's children is critically important, examination of the enrollment patterns of America's public schools demonstrates why investigation into what happens in America's larger districts is paramount. Some of our neediest students attend these districts. Larger districts tend to serve more students coping with the impacts of poverty. Reports from the National Center for

Education Statistics provide the following data from the 2003-2004 school year. Twenty-three percent of all public school students are educated in the 100 largest public school districts. These 100 districts represent less than one percent of school districts in the United States. These same 100 districts employ 22% of the public school teachers and produce 20% of students completing high school. These districts have larger average school enrollments and slightly higher median student-to-teacher ratios than average districts. The states of California, Florida, and Texas are home to 41% of the largest 100 districts. Seventy percent of students in these 100 districts are non-white, compared to 43% of students who are non-white in all school districts. Forty-three percent of the students in the 100 largest districts qualify for free and reduced-price meals as compared to 37% of all students ([http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/snf\\_report/table\\_01\\_1.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/snf_report/table_01_1.asp)). These schools are most in need of improvement, and in many cases, numerous reform efforts have been attempted in these districts over the years. Some schools have experienced so many reiterations of reform and improvement that teachers have, in some cases, simply given up; sometimes they were not given the time and adequate resources to fully implement with fidelity and are unable to keep up with the constant changes. Fidelity is a significant factor for reform success (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009). We must ponder, is that their fault or is it the fault of school or district leadership? Characteristics of effective organizations, such as school districts, have been researched. The role of school district leadership in the attainment of student achievement has been studied. Information on both concepts is shared in Chapter II.

It is time, conversely, for research to investigate if large districts are struggling to reform and equitably educate our children because these districts are too large to be effective, and determine if they are incapable of providing high-quality service to large numbers of America's neediest young people. The School Improvement Grant program was designed specifically to assist these schools, to give them a boost, as described by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Thus far, little research has been executed to determine if the School Improvement Grant Program is having the desired long-term effect. More importantly, there is no information on



how the size of the district or school factors into the successful implementation of the school improvement program as specified in the grant proposals. Finally, there is no qualitative account of experiences and perceptions of staff involved in implementation of the school improvement grant activities.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to investigate school districts' implementation of the School Improvement Grant programs and their effectiveness as measured by the Lead Indicators required by the grant. Second, the aim was to determine whether there was a connection between performance on the Lead Indicators and district size and school size. In addition, staff experiences perceptions related implementation of the School Improvement Grant were explored. In this study, the focus is specifically on high schools located in one Midwestern state. The findings of the study will help illuminate the extent to which the size of districts or schools is related to the ability to effectively implement School Improvement Grant programs.

The research questions for the study are as follows:

1. What is the effect of implementation of school improvement grant programs on the effectiveness of districts and schools?
2. To what extent does the level of effectiveness differ by the size of the district?
3. To what extent does the level of effectiveness differ by the size of the school?
4. What are district and high school staff perceptions of School Improvement Grant reform initiatives?
5. What are the experiences of district and high school staff related to attempts to direct school reform efforts articulated in School Improvement Grants?
6. Does district size influence the experiences and perceptions of district and high school staff?

## **Design**

This was a mixed-method, exploratory study that was conducted in two-phases. Phase I involved a document analysis of the grant proposals and the annual performance reports from public school districts awarded School Improvement Grants in first and second funding cycles (Cohort One and Cohort Two, respectively). All schools in Cohort One and Cohort Two were contained in Phase I of the study. The information gathered from the document analysis represented trend data on the progress districts made toward meeting the grant's accountability goals. School district performance on the nine Lead Indicators was examined quantitatively for possible differences in performance across district size. Due to the small number of schools and districts in the data set, the performance on the nine Lead Indicators was also examined quantitatively for possible differences across school size. The trends and patterns identified through Phase I informed the choice of districts to use for data collection in Phase II of the study.

Phase II of the study, the qualitative phase, included interviewing district staff involved in the implementation of the School Improvement Grants. Purposeful sampling was used to determine which districts should be part of Phase II of the study. Interview participants were teachers, coordinators, data coaches, and school and district-level administrators. The purpose of the interviews was to gather perception data from specific district staff related to the implementation of the high school reform activities, programs, and initiatives funded by the School Improvement Grant.

## **Significance of the Study**

As a result of this study, further research may occur to examine the impact of district size on the implementation of School Improvement Grant programs and its influence on the effectiveness of America's public schools. This study connects and investigates three areas not previously linked. The relationship of this study to existing theory and research is based on several areas which will be addressed in the next chapter. First, a review of organizational theory will be provided. School districts are important, complex, and in some ways, unique

organizations. Organizations have been shown to possess certain characteristics and to typically respond in certain predictable patterns. Second, a review of research on the role of district-level leadership will offer an additional perspective in terms of the function of those charged with guiding the organization. School districts vary in size, typically based on the numbers of students enrolled in the district and the number of schools in the district. Research on the impact of district size on student achievement is provided to address this key aspect of public school education. Finally, the review will highlight research on past efforts to improve America's public high schools. This study combines all of these areas as it seeks to examine the impact of district size and school size on a specific, grant-funded school reform initiative.

This research has the potential to impact all stakeholders connected to public school education, including taxpayers, students, families, staff members, and politicians. If district size can be removed as barrier to student academic success, some of the neediest children in the United States have a chance at a high-quality education and a more stable adult life. The current accountability movement grew out of a desire to hold school districts accountable for the education of their students. When school districts can significantly improve student achievement, as described by the Secretary of Education, taxpayers are more likely to be willing to provide the financial support and resources necessary to support public schools. Over time, the ability to consistently and systemically improve the academic achievement of our students will lead to changes in our communities, our cities, and neighborhoods; changes such as reduction in unemployment and increases in educational attainment. The current labor trends indicate a demand that a high school diploma is necessary, but not sufficient, preparation for entry into the workforce (Harris, National Governors' Association, Washington, DC; Center for Best Practices, National Conference of Council of Chief State School Officers, & National Association of State Boards of Education, 2008 .)Most critically, perhaps the study can give hope to the many hard working public school staff members who work in the largest districts in the United States and give all they can to educate our neediest children.

## **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The limitation of this study is that it focused on one Midwestern state awarded School Improvement Grants. Schools in all fifty states received grants. Each state varies; specific accountability measures, characteristics, and demographics impact district and school practices and student academic performance. The level of funding for each state varies, which impacts what each grant recipient school is able to implement and accomplish. No factors, beyond school and district size, are taken into consideration with this study. With education, it can be difficult to isolate and connect activities and outcomes. Because of this, further research is needed to determine if the findings in this study apply to other states, districts, and schools. Another limitation is the fact that the data are pre-existing and incomplete. Since they were not developed specifically for this study, further study would be needed to potentially replicate the outcomes.

The study did not include every district funded in the selected Midwestern state. This study included all 20 of the schools awarded grants in the first two funding cycles. The state recently funded its fourth group of schools. The findings in the study took time to develop due to the time required for grant planning and implementation and the subsequent formative and summative assessments of the impact of the reform activities and initiatives. Additional research would need to be conducted to examine whether the experiences for the newer cohorts of schools and districts are any different from the first two cohorts, the ones in the study. The first two cohorts were unique in that they were the first two groups funded.

The study did not include interviews for all twenty of the schools in the data set. Resources and time did not allow for additional interviews. Two districts were targeted for interviews. Five people from each district were interviewed. It is not known if the Phase II findings would have been different or confirmed if interview participants included staff from each of the 20 schools funded in cohorts one and two.

## Definitions of Terms

**Intervention models.** The four school reform strategy options offered by the Federal Department of Education to schools/districts seeking the grant. The models are Turnaround, Restart, School Closure, and Transformation (see appendix B).

**Lead indicators.** The nine data points that grant-funded districts are required to annually report to the State Board of Education. These are discipline incidents, distribution of teachers by performance level on the local education agency (district) teacher evaluation system, dropout rate, number and percentage of students completing advanced coursework, number of minutes within the school year, student attendance rate, student participation on the state achievement exam in reading/language arts and mathematics by student subgroups, teacher attendance rate, and truancy rate (see Appendix C).

**Research-based reform models.** Comprehensive school reform models approved based upon quantitative research methods. Improvement was demonstrated utilizing pre and post test data.

**School improvement grant.** Through the United States Department of Education, funds are presented to states to create grants to award school districts. The grant is designed to help the state's lowest performing schools substantially raise the achievement of their students.

**Secondary school.** For the purpose of the grant, a secondary school is defined, based on state law, as an attendance center serving students in any combination of grades 9 through 12 (although it may also have students enrolled in grades below grade 9).

## Organization of the Study

Chapter I presented the problem and its background. Criticism of America's public schools is not a new phenomenon. This chapter explained the rationale behind the creation of the Federal Department of Education School Improvement Grant program. The goals of the program, its intended audience, and important definitions are explained in Chapter I. Basic

information about the design of the two-phase, mixed-method exploratory study is provided in Chapter I.

The literature review in Chapter II is structured in four sections. The first section provides an in-depth look at past movements to improve America's public schools. The history begins before the 1900s and spans many years up through the well-funded reform efforts sponsored by Bill and Melinda Gates. This chapter includes recently released information from the Department of Education related to the implementation and effectiveness of the School Improvement Grant Program. Next the chapter provides information on the three foundational aspects of the study. Organizational theory is described based on the works of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, Edgar Schein, and Peter Senge. The impact of district size is a core component of this study. Chapter II provides a summary of areas impacted by the size of school districts. Information is also included about recent efforts to incentivize smaller districts to consolidate. The last part of Chapter II provides an in-depth look at specific efforts to reform public high schools in America. Summaries are provided of reform movements in a few of the largest school districts in the United States.

Chapter III provides details into how the two-phase, mixed method exploratory study was executed. Explanations are provided on how the data were collected and analyzed in Phase I and Phase II. Information about the researcher is provided to acknowledge the situatedness of the author. Explanations of possible ethical issues and trustworthiness are included.

Chapter IV presents the findings from Phase I and II. This includes the presentation of qualitative data including descriptive statistics and qualitative data. The qualitative data were produced by the coding of interview transcripts. Several different types of coding were utilized. A description of the study context, based on school site visits, is included.

Chapter V consists of four sections: summary, discussion, recommendations, and conclusion. This section of the study connects back to the research questions and the literature review in order to provide guidance and recommendation for future study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The relationship of this study to existing theory and research is based on several areas which will be addressed in this chapter. First, a review of organizational theory will be provided. Organizations have been shown to possess certain characteristics and to typically respond in certain predictable patterns. School districts are important, complex, and in some ways, unique organizations. Second, a review of research on the role of district-level leadership will afford an additional perspective in terms of the function of those charged with guiding the organization. School districts vary in size, typically based on the numbers of students enrolled in the district and the number of schools in the district. Research on the impact of district size on student achievement is articulated to address this key aspect of public school education. Finally, the review will highlight research on past efforts to improve America's public high schools. This study combines all of these areas as it seeks to examine the impact of district size and school size on the implementation of Department of Education School Improvement Grants.

#### **Historical Perspective**

School reform is not a new phenomenon, a product of the current accountability movement, nor a result of the law known as No Child Left Behind. Efforts at school reform reside deep in America's past. In the 1840s Horace Mann spoke of the social disaster ahead if the common school was unable to save America from itself (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). At the time, the popular thought was that progress was the priority in education because better education would guarantee a better society. Such paradigms are firmly planted in the history of public education in the United States. This historical perspective begins with an explanation of how the evolution of public schools included heavy influences of scientific management and organizational

bureaucracy; laying the foundation for structures which remain difficult to dismantle. America was experiencing many changes in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Prior to the turn of the century, the number of students attending public schools was relatively small. The best teacher was considered the Head Master; which afforded the responsibility to train the younger teachers. The relationship and model were similar to that of a craftsman and an apprentice (N. Sappington, personal communication, April 21, 2014). At the turn of the century, the number of students attending public schools increased due to passage of laws prohibiting children to work and large numbers of immigrants coming to the United States. From 1890 through 1930, almost three million children immigrated to the United States. It was not uncommon for more than one hundred new students to arrive to a school in one day. This influx of children; mainly immigrants, inundated the schools and strained the educational structures, organizations, and practices. Upon arrival to Ellis Island, many of these children were given examinations, such as intelligence tests, to determine their educational ability levels. Naturally, these children did not speak English and performed poorly on these assessments; this practice impacted their academic performance and subsequent educational experiences. Many of these children were labeled and considered “less capable” (Stone Lantern Films, 2009). This sudden increase of students and the unique needs of the non-English speaking students presented public schools with new and unique challenges. In 1900, fifty percent of America’s children attended school for an average of five years. Six percent of students graduated from high school (Stone Lantern Films, 2009).

The United States was in the midst of an Industrial Revolution; mass producing its first automobiles. One critical aspect of the Industrial Revolution was the keen focus on efficiency based on the work of Fredrick Taylor, a man known as the first efficiency expert in modern times (Rees, 2001). His work resulted in the development of processes utilized to get the most production from employees working in manufacturing. For example, Taylor’s theories and practices resulted in workers moving away from doing many tasks in a given day to doing the same task over and over. His goal was always to find “the one best way” (Rees, p.1.) This belief



in “the one best way” led some to promote these concepts in settings beyond manufacturing, in order to benefit workers and the larger society. In 1913, Franklin Bobbit, John Wall and J.D. Wolcott expressed that the field of education was behind in recognizing and developing the principals related to effectiveness and efficiency. They felt this lag could plausibly be attributed to the newness of the larger public schools in America. The authors went on to assert that other organizations with more experience in these areas owed it to the United States to share their expertise in using organization to create strength and supervision to crate effectiveness (Bobbit, Hall, & Wolcott, 1913).

Subsequently, these concepts began to impact educational practice. Scientific management, an outgrowth of Taylor’s philosophy, became an influence in public education. In depth examination of how educators used resources such as time, spaces, and buildings was common (Rees, 2001). Schools became larger and grade levels were created. This reflected a batch processing of children for the purposes of efficiency. Standards were established to give teachers and school supervisors a guide for how much growth should be expected to occur as a result of education; they provided a goal to work toward. The belief was that education alone could produce growth, but that more growth was attainable through the use of predetermined targets or standards of growth. This would allow the superintendent and others to compare schools within the city to each other and to schools in other cities. University of Chicago Professor Franklin Bobbit, directed supervisors to distribute the time of the teacher in order to make sure sufficient time was provided for all of the desired activities, to increase efficiency and to ensure the intensity of the work was maintained without exhausting the teacher (Bobbit, Hall, & Wolctt1913). Teachers were no longer under the tutelage of a head master; the school leader was expected to be a supervisor, a creator of efficiency. Teachers utilized newly created teacher-proof materials to help them instruct the children. These materials were developed based on the belief that teachers, if left to their own devices and emotions, would make distinctions in students that would potentially inhibit equal opportunity (Beyer & Apple, 1998). The materials were

typically directive and designed, in theory, to produce an efficient presentation of concepts and materials; regardless of the skill level or the lack of skill of the individual teacher.

As the school system grew, so did the level of organizational bureaucracy. Rather than a one-room school with one teacher teaching a mixed age group of children and children working with each other; students were separated. Instruction was also separated; teachers were employed to teach specific subjects. Teachers teaching the same subject were clustered into departments. Each department needed a supervisor or manager (Stone Lantern Films, 2009). The batch grouping of students was supported by Dr. Edward Cubberly, head of the Department of Education at Stanford and the person responsible for training administrators in the Science of School Management. The sorting of children into these different groups was often based on intelligence tests, such as the Chicago Group Intelligence Test, which was developed to facilitate social efficiency. Cubberly contended that one type of educational program did not fit the needs of all students; some children were meant to be workers while others are meant to be leaders (Stone Lantern Films, 2009). It was deemed wasteful to teach students anything for which they had no future use. Advanced mathematics, for example, did not need to be taught to a student who would never need to utilize anything beyond basic math as an adult (Beyer & Apple, 1998). This practice supported the concept that it was much more efficient and effective to educate the students in different groups based on their future destiny. The leaders would be the best leaders possible and the workers would be the best workers possible because they had been fully prepared for that specific role. The influence of this theory and others related to scientific management remain evident in our current secondary schools' practices of creating tracks such as college preparatory and vocational. The foundation for the current emphasis on standardized test scores in public education was laid in the 1920's, an era referred to as an "orgy of evaluation" (Rees, 2001; Stone Lantern Films, 2009).

Many of the structures and practices described above, or their descendants, remain in America's public high schools. These include grouping students in batches or categories, highly

bureaucratic organizational structures, tracking, and a heavy emphasis on standardized tests. These structures are not simply typical for most public high schools; their existence is deeply entrenched, the norm, practically key components of secondary education. While evidence exists to show that improvement has been made at the elementary school level and in some middle school settings, bureaucracy and lethargy continue to haunt America's public high schools (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002.). Comprehensive high schools are strapped by the bureaucracy of various structures such as tracking of students, large student populations, a wide range of specialized programs and courses, and multiple levels of bureaucracy in school and district leadership.

The provision of public education to all students set the United States apart from most other countries (Bohan, 2003). This period in American education enabled the status of the United States to increase as a global power. However, not all educators supported the practices related to emphasis on scientific management, efficiency and organizational bureaucracy. A movement for education to reach the whole child was led by John Dewey. The Progressive Education Association Foundation was established in 1919. This approach was also driven by educators who were part of the first generation of teachers trained in newly established schools of education. Historians referred to a modern public school in Detroit which they believed was no longer a prison, having been transformed into a utopia for children (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Naturally, a period of freedom, flexibility, and openness would be followed by a shift in the opposite direction. Up through 1950, reforms took a predictable path devoted mostly to rules and structures designed primarily to organize the work of instruction. Examples are age-based grouping of students, dividing knowledge into separate and distinct subject areas, and self-contained classrooms where one teacher works with one group of students at a time. When change or reform was initiated during these times, it was typically made as an add-on to the basic program or structure or by taking new mandates and blending the new with the old (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

After the 1957 Russian launch of Sputnik, the American government became gravely concerned about education programs and practices in mathematics and science. This evolved into content experts, who were not typically trained as educators, becoming heavily involved in curriculum development and design with the ultimate goal being to ensure the development and provision of a public education which would ensure the United States continue its status as a world leader (Apple, 2004). During this same time period, Raymond Callahan, professor of education at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, researched the field of school administration from the 1900s to the 1930s and published *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* in 1964. His findings push against the positivist approaches frequently used after Sputnik. These practices had evolved from scientific management and organizational bureaucracy. This critical book addresses the nebulous practice of merging education and business and industry management concepts, philosophies and practices into schools. Within this paradigm, the first priority was economy and efficiency. Personal autonomy for school leaders is severely compromised because of the dichotomy of emphasis on expectations and production of results and prioritization of efficiency. In short, efficient does not necessarily coincide with effective. While this impacted dedicated, student-centered leaders, some educators took advantage of the theory, using it as an excuse to attempt to present efficiency as effective regardless of the impact on children.

While Callahan wanted his book to cause the re-examination of schools and public education with a movement away from expecting them to operate as business enterprises, it did not; this type of educational dysfunction deepened as described by Callahan (Kridel, 2000). As this philosophy evolved, it was used to drive the way students' needs were addressed including the elimination of students and promotion of students. The cry of efficiency became an excuse for leaders and a means to manipulate data. Callahan names Leonard Ayers, author of a 1909 study entitled *Laggards in our Schools*, as one of the first educators to view schools as factories and apply industrial and business values and practices in a systemic manner. The use of

efficiency as a primary measure of educational matters such as cost to educate students and their progression through the school system was attractive to stakeholders including school board members and superintendents because the principals can be applied in a quick and easy fashion. Despite heavy criticism by some, the American School Board Journal actually endorsed these reports and recommended they be studied by every school board member (Callahan, 1964).

This educational climate at the time of Callahan's writing, the early 1960s, incorporated emphasis on scientific and positivist approaches, including allowing content experts to influence educational programs and curriculum. This was an important time, a period when the United States was, unknowingly, headed into a climate of unprecedented freedoms in society as a whole. Such changes in culture and societal norms have direct and indirect impacts on educational programs and schools overall. The 1960s and 1970s ushered in openness in many aspects of education and unprecedented social and societal freedoms. Buildings were designed with open spaces and school districts were encouraged to expose students to highly creative educational opportunities and programs. One example is the Comer School Development Program, founded by Dr. James Comer in 1968, his first year on the Yale medical faculty.

Dr. Comer is currently the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Student Center. The Comer School Development program is based on the collaboration of parents, educators, and the community to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for children and thereby helping the children to experience increased success in school. The Comer School Development Program, known as the School Development Program, has been implemented in elementary, middle, and high schools, but is most frequently associated with the elementary school level.

At the time of the program's development, many educators and non-educators, including scientists, viewed socially marginalized and/or low-income students as lacking the social capital to experience success in school. Comer's team did not support this paradigm. The team believed these students were merely underdeveloped due to a lack of pre-school and out-of-school

experiences which were critical to ongoing success in the school setting. Comer's team's approach also differed from others in the way behavioral problems were viewed and addressed. Such challenges were typically expected for students still in the process of brain maturation. However, the actions were typically viewed as intentional and normally managed through punishment, counseling, or treatment. Comer's team believed that such strategies did not aid brain maturation nor promote student development.

The Comer Model is based on creating within the school relationships, experiences, and a school culture designed to help students grow in six areas deemed critical for school success. These areas, known in the model as pathways, are social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, cognitive, linguistic, and physical. The goal is to supply the student with the type of social capital required for school success, and more importantly, the kind of social capital that most mainstream students developed before school enrollment and outside the school setting, thereby providing marginalized and/or low-income students with the kind of social capital most mainstream students receive before and outside of school. *The Social Skills Curriculum for Inner-City Children*, a program featuring an integrated approach to simultaneously foster child development and encourage the attainment of academic content, was created. The program involves parents and students in the planning of learning units which immerse students in experiences to develop executive functioning and social skills many other students learn in their homes from their families.

The Comer Model gives participating schools support in terms of the organization, management and communication for planning and managing all the activities of the school. These activities are customized and based on the developmental needs of the students in that specific school. The School Planning and Management Team, the Student and Staff Support Team, and the Parent Team play a central role in the school. Teams are required to use the following three guiding principles as they work: No Fault Problem-Solving, Consensus Decision-Making, and Collaboration.

Researching the effectiveness of the School Development Model was a fascinating journey. The goal was to investigate the impact of the model in high school settings. The organization's website makes general claims supported by articles which have not been peer-reviewed. Further research revealed an article about three high schools: West Mecklenburg and Myers Park in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Timberland High School in Berkeley County, South Carolina (Ben-Avie, 1998). In this article, Michael Ben-Avie shares the stories of the three different implementations and experiences. All three of the schools embarked on the school reform path using the School Development Model because of sudden and significant changes in the demographics of the students being served. These changes were typically caused by school restructuring or the redesign of school boundaries resulting in more struggling students being assigned to the high school. The design, nature, and culture of the traditional public high school in the United States assumes that the type of personal, social, and academic growth nurtured through the School Development Program has been mastered by the time students reach the high school level. High schools tend to concentrate on content, often at the cost of addressing students as individuals. Implementing change at the high school level is especially challenging. High schools tend to concentrate on academics because of perceived pressure to prepare students for important tests, college admission, and the workforce. Schools employing reform realize the whole child must be addressed with consideration to the developmental needs of adolescents and optimal learning environments and experiences (Ben-Avie, 1998). These schools realized they had to take a different approach.

Michael Ben-Avie's general findings contained positive outcomes related to the implementation of the School Development Programs in these three high schools. While the article does not overtly claim to evaluate the effectiveness of the model, one cannot ignore the fact that the author is a staff member of the School Development Program. The emphasis on collaboration allowed the schools to amplify their areas of effectiveness. Child and adolescent development became the center of the educational process (Ben-Avie, 1998).

The Comer model emphasizes child and adolescent development as opposed to test scores, adequate yearly progress, value-added, student growth, or any of the quantitative measures currently used in public school. This approach is quite different from what has evolved in public education since the early years of Accountability Movement and the fruition of No Child Left Behind. Educators recognize that every positive educational outcome cannot be measured solely in a quantitative manner. The words of one of the School Development Program principals are very telling. When reflecting upon the changes brought about through the School Development Program, Principal Lloyd Wimberly expressed the benefits of the program providing a student-centered common view and a common language. High schools, he explained, are multifaceted organizations which are pulled in different directions. The work, he believed, helped the staff get on the same page and identify common interests (Ben-Avie, 1998). It is clear that the use of the School Development Program had an impact on this principal and, in his opinion, on the school. Further research reveals some inconsistency and debate in terms of the impact of the model in Prince George's Sound County, Maryland and Chicago, Illinois. Next, we consider research executed by one group in two different districts.

In 1999, a theory-based evaluation of the School Development Program in Prince George's County, Maryland, was conducted by a team of researchers from Northwestern University. The study contained more than 12,000 students, more than 1,000 parents, and 2,000 staff. The researchers were given extensive access to student records. The evaluation indicated that schools using the School Development Model were able to implement some, but not all or most, of the program's basic components better than control schools. The study revealed that the quality of program implementation varied and potentially impacted findings. Conclusions revealed possible improvements in social outcomes, but reported no improvement in student achievement. Procedures and practices associated with the School Development Model were linked to positive changes in social behavior and psychological adjustment as well as flat or decreased math test scores. Achievement gains were found in control schools with a more



explicit concentration on academics. The researchers recommended that the School Development Program decrease its emphasis on improvements in the social and developmental realm and work more directly toward improving student achievement (Cook, Murphy & Hunt., 1999).

In 2000, the same team of researchers led a second theory-based evaluation by analyzing the School Development Program in Chicago, Illinois. The evaluation examined 10 inner-city Chicago schools over four years. These schools were compared to nine randomly selected, no treatment, and control schools. Once again, the School Development Schools were found lacking in fidelity to the specific components of the program's procedures and practices. Based on surveys, students' perceptions of the schools climate improved shortly after the start of the program. During the last two years of the study, the teachers' perceptions of the school's academic climate improved compared to teachers in the control schools. During the last two years of the study, School Development schools began to show improved performance in math and reading as evidenced by 3 percentile points more growth than the control schools. Students also reported less acting out behavior, endorsed more conventional norms about misbehavior, and reported an increased ability to control their anger. Reportedly these findings of increased academic performance were not consistent with the study of the School Development Program in Maryland. After four years of implementing the School Development Program in Prince George's Sound County, the schools were still primarily working on improving social relationships and increasing knowledge of child development. Improving instructional practice was not a major program goal or local priority. No changes occurred in either social or academic outcomes. As a result of the work in Maryland and Illinois, Cook, Murphy & Hunt (2000) expressed concern that improving the climate of a school may not be sufficient to bring about the full breadth of needed changes for students.

Dr. Comer and a Yale University colleague wrote an article in response to the Theory-Based evaluation conducted on the School Development Program in Prince George's Sound County, Maryland. They cite many factors to be considered in relation to the previous study,

including their assertion that it was not evaluation of the reform program itself or its organization, but more a limited examination of the impact of one application of the School Development process (Comer & Haynes, 1999). The authors explain that the implementation occurred under difficult conditions which were acknowledged by the team conducting the study. They expressed that the program does not call for the social climate efforts to supersede the concentration on academics. They illustrated that the organization was responsive to difficulty with program implementation; creating a special curriculum, the *Social Skills Curriculum for Inner City Children* in 1977, as a result of challenges experienced in New Haven, Connecticut. Comer espouses two points of explanation especially relevant in today's educational arena. Many stakeholders continue to seek the silver bullet, which does not exist. In 1999, only a few years before No Child Left Behind was signed into law, Comer and Haynes contended that it takes three years, or more, to produce substantial educational change. The current educational landscape has produced increased expectations for school districts to produce improved student scores on standardized tests within short periods of time. Comer also confirms of the importance of the how of implementation. He proclaimed that schools which used the program to deliver a strong academic emphasis as part of an overall approach to improvement experienced academic improvements in one or two years rather than the average of three to five years typically expected. He contended the key to significant growth in student achievement was high-quality implementation (Comer & Haynes, 1999).

Over and over Americans have utilized a pattern of developing educational prescriptions or solutions to societal problems such as social or economic issues. As President Lyndon B. Johnson declared war on poverty in the 1960s and sought to build the Great Society, he declared that education was the answer to all of the nation's problems (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). President Johnson went on to declare his belief that high-quality education could actually prevent poverty. This was beyond the claims made by Horace Mann a century before as he extolled the ability of education to improve the lives of the poor.

In 1979, Dr. Ronald Edmonds, a Project Director for the Graduate School of Education, Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University and Senior Assistant for Instruction for New York City Public Schools, published research on how to successfully educate poor children living in urban settings. Edmonds described schools that were teaching poor children as dismal failures, at best. He fiercely expressed that it was known what was needed to fully educate poor children; however, educators were opting out of doing so. Edmonds contended that schools effectively teach those they think they must educate, realizing and capitalizing on the belief that schools are not expected, nor required, to teach certain children. In some schools, students failed because they were not expected to succeed; teachers were skeptical as to their own ability, as instructors, to impact the learning of their students. High expectations for all students, careful and frequent assessment of student progress, school atmosphere, and strong leadership are a few of the components critical to effectively educating poor children in urban settings. Edmonds chastised the authors of the Coleman Report, which indicated a child's home environment and family background were the primary reasons for students' academic performance or the lack thereof. While acknowledging these have an impact, Edmonds argued that the belief that family background is the sole determiner provides educators an excuse for subpar student performance. Edmonds is credited with two profound statements which remain relevant today. "How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children? Whether or not we will ever effectively teach the children of the poor is probably far more a matter of politics than of social justice, and that is as it should be" (Edmonds, 1979)

The expectations maintained for America's public schools have become more wide-reaching and increasingly difficult to meet. In the 1960s and early 1970s, high school reform became common and was frequently used as the platform for creating new forms of equality, participation, and freedom from governmental control and bureaucracy (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In the time period from the 1970s to the early 1980s, polls indicated a decrease in public confidence in the schools and Americans began to express a deeply-rooted concern about the

traditional views of educational programs and progress. Some of the blame placed on schools for not solving problems beyond their reach is an outgrowth of overpromising and repeated disillusionment (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). It is quite likely that this disillusionment and blame set the stage for one of the most scathing reports on the American public school system of all time.

*A Nation at Risk; The Imperative for Educational Reform, An Open Letter to the American People*, released in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, implored the United States citizenry to demand much more of the nation's schools and issued a critical, non-negotiable call for the American public educational system to change in order to protect the future security of the United States of America. The belief was that such a powerful wave of mediocrity had come to exist that it rose to the level of an act of war as if imposed by a foreign power (Gardner et al., 1983). Many asserted that the American public educational system was failing to prepare citizens who were able to contribute sufficiently to the continued growth and success of the United States as it would exist in the future. Business and military leaders complain that they are required to spend millions of dollars on costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading, writing, spelling, and computation. The Department of the Navy, for example, reported to the Commission that one-quarter of its recent recruits cannot read at the ninth grade level, the minimum needed to simply understand written safety instructions. Without remedial work, they cannot even begin, much less complete, the sophisticated training essential in much of the modern military

While the *A Nation at Risk* report addresses the overall American public educational system, many of the recommendations for improvement targeted high schools. "Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched. The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980. During this time, average SAT verbal scores fell over 50 points and average mathematics scores fell nearly 40 points (Gardner et al, 1983).

The commission's desire for improvement coincided with past Federal government efforts in that it advocated for educational improvement for all students as a vehicle to improve the nation as a whole. One important aspect of the movement to improve public education was the Federal Government's 1965 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the inception of the Title I Program. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was designed and implemented in order to improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students and to close the existing achievement gaps (Kuo, 2010). *A Nation at Risk* also emphasized the greater need. The report called for reform of the educational system for the good of the whole, embracing young and old, poor and wealthy, minority and majority. It was the belief of Gardner et al. that, for the first time in the history of the country, the educational skills attainment of a generation would not surpass, or even equal, those of the preceding generation (Gardner et al., 1983). Consequently, the powerful 1983 report proclaimed, America is at risk. Public school educators have spent the last forty years implementing various initiatives and programs designed to improve public education and reform educational practices.

Prior to the reform movement, which began in the early 1980s and was greatly intensified by the release of *A Nation at Risk*, the typical American public high school educational program had not been subject to many significant changes, other than the addition of computers and other technological advancements. According to John Hunt, three separate reform movements began in the early 1980s (Hunt, 2008). The first, the excellence movement, centered on increased expectations for classroom teachers and increased educational standards for students. The movement supported changes such as increased graduation requirements, a longer school day, a longer school year, and increased requirements for teacher certification. Within a two-year period of time, more than 20 states passed school reform packages (Hunt, 2008). These changes caused the role of school level administrators to shift, with more emphasis on what occurred in individual classrooms.

In 1984, only one year after the release of *A Nation at Risk*, Ted Sizer, Chair of the Education Department at Brown University, founded the Coalition of Essential Schools, with the specific goal of improving America's high schools. While Comer's is one of the oldest reform models, the Essential Schools Movement was designed specifically to improve America's high schools. Like Dr. James Comer, Ted Sizer was a seasoned and respected educator. He received his B.A. from Yale and his doctorate from Harvard. His career also included U.S. Army service, classroom teaching, serving as the Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and leading Phillips Academy Andover as its Headmaster. Sizer also established and led the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (Sizer, 1984). According to Coalition of Essential Schools website, the institute is a national policy-research and reform support organization that promotes quality education for all children, especially in urban communities. The Institute's primary lines of inquiry are school transformation, college and career readiness, and extended learning time ([www.essentialschools.org](http://www.essentialschools.org)). The development of the organization was an outgrowth of the publication of Sizer's book, *Horace's Compromise: the Dilemma of the American High School*, the first report from a Study of High Schools (Sizer, 1984).

The work of the Coalition began in 1984 with five schools and had grown to 800 schools by 1995 (O'Neil, 1995). The goal of the Coalition of the Essential Schools, from its inception, has been to transform America's high schools. According to Deborah Meier, who worked with Ted Sizer and the Coalition of Essential schools to open Central Park East Secondary School; his vision was to maintain the complexity of the subject matter/content, which is the heart of education, by keeping other things as simple as possible (Meier, 2009). Coalition founder Ted Sizer, one of five authors of a five-year study of adolescent education, believed that America's public high schools were attempting to accomplish too much, trying to meet too many varied needs. Sizer insisted that high schools could perform better by doing less, by concentrating more on students' intellectual growth (Brandt, 1988). Sizer believed that America's high schools were

structurally flawed. The way the school organized usage of time for students and staff did not align with the way students learn and how they should be taught (Brandt, 1988). Notably, Sizer observed these challenges in a wide range of schools including small, large, public, and private schools. He asserted it takes powerful collaboration between all stakeholders, teachers, students, and families to create meaningful, long-term reform (O'Neil, 1995).

At the time of the launch of the Coalition of Essential schools, Sizer asserted a critical need to assess the many attractive opportunities for students in order to discern the essentials of a high-quality secondary education, the key components to an education capable of serving students and teachers well. He pushed for the articulation of what every student, without exception, needed to master (Sizer, 1984). What follows is a description of the elements of the program at the time of its inception. The program was based on a triad of students, teachers, and subject matter or content (Sizer, 1984). Teachers were assigned to no more than eighty students and students attended school on a six-year structured schedule from grade seven through to senior year. The wide schedule was designed to allow struggling students to catch up as well as to enable well-prepared students to forge ahead with their learning. The early program utilized assessments based on mixed measures such as test scores, portfolios, and performances or exhibitions. Age-based, grade-level grouping was dismantled. Teachers were expected to team teach, collaborate, and learn from each other. In the classroom, teachers took on the role of coach or facilitator and the students became the workers. The principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools serve as a guiding philosophy as opposed to a canned model for schools to implement. The goal is to create schools where students are educated in a personalized, equitable, and academically challenging environment.

According to John Hunt, the second movement, the restructuring movement, surfaced in the later 1980s (Hunt, 2008). This reform effort caused district leadership to examine the way the district was structured in relation to individual school sites. Site-based management and the flattening of organizations were the desired structures and strategies to bring about reform (Hunt,

2008). Certain decision-making was moved from the district level to leaders and staff at the school level. Decentralization was based on the theory that increased school level autonomy would fuel organization change, which would foster improved instruction; leading to increases in academic achievement (Bryk, 1998). These shifts typically resulted in more building-level control over curriculum and programs, but not necessarily budgetary and financial decisions. In some ways, with the emphasis on educational accountability, increased autonomy at the building level was an oxymoron. One particular superintendent liked to express that he would hope to lead the district in way that would allow a good idea to be as likely to come from an elementary teacher as from the superintendent (Hunt, 2008). While this kind of sentiment was a frequently verbalized philosophy on the part of many administrators, the superintendent was the one individual whom the school board and the public ultimately held responsible for the success or failure of the district and all of its students. Stakeholder expectations for public schools have increased. Over the years, a newfound desire to hold educators accountable for the educational development of students has been developed. Critics cite the monopoly position of public schools while lamenting what they perceive as insulation from being fully accountable to taxpayers, students, and parents, especially in larger districts (Eberts, Schwartz, & Stone, 1990). By the early 1990s, the movement for increased accountability for educators was clearly in motion. School leaders were expected to disaggregate student test score data based on demographic factors such as race, gender, family income level, and special student needs. In the past, test scores were typically analyzed by looking at the school or student bodies as a whole. Disaggregation easily identified students for whom it appeared were not having their needs met by the public schools. At the same time, charter school laws were being initiated and charter schools were beginning to emerge as viable alternatives for families and worthy competition for public schools.

In 1994, under the leadership of President Bill Clinton, Congress passed the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). The act promoted standards for what students should learn, the



use of assessments of student learning, and educator accountability. The act advocated for all students, not just those living in poverty, by requiring that all students be provided with more advanced educational content. As a part of IASA, school-wide reform was developed in order to facilitate widespread, comprehensive, systemic change and improvement (Kuo, 2010). School-wide reform facilitated increased student learning through the use of wholesale, complex, school-wide change as opposed to changes implemented in isolation, such as in one particular classroom, grade level, program, or secondary school department. School-wide change was designed to impact a significant majority of the students and staff in the school. As a result of IASA, improvement was geared to all students as opposed to only certain students. Teachers participated in professional development to increase their capacity to produce student learning by equipping them with research-based instructional strategies to use in their classrooms. School-wide reform evolved quickly. Demonstration programs were developed in order to change school-level instructional and organizational practices by promoting the use of pre-approved strategies, which were touted as research-based, specific, and measurable goals with benchmarks (Kuo, 2010).

The third movement, according to Mr. Hunt, was The Standards Movement. Certain aspects of this reform effort have strong similarities to the 2001 No Child Left Behind law. The attention of the public shifted to the school level with what Hunt calls laser-like focus on the achievement of the student and away from the actions of the teacher (Hunt, 2008). Mandates such as course requirements and teacher certification were overshadowed by an emphasis on examination of the performance of individual students and designated groups of students based on demographic designations (Hunt, 2008). Such academic performance was usually defined as student scores on state-mandated standardized tests. Learning standards produced by national professional organizations and state departments of education were utilized to design and plan activities for school improvement. These plans were typically centered on initiatives, activities, and strategies which would ultimately produce increased test scores. While standards were

viewed by reformers as catalysts to improved teaching and learning, the difficulty of reform in urban districts must be considered in order to adequately determine the potential impact of standards-based reform. Efforts to implement standards and assessments are viewed as attempts to improve instruction. Having standards does not address the quality of the standards (Wong, Anagnostopoulos, Rutledge, & Edwards, 2003). The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which was signed in 1994, requires all students to leave specific grade levels in school having demonstrated competency in English, mathematics, science, foreign language, civics and government, economics, the arts, history, and geography (Hunt, 2008). In order to facilitate the needed work, over \$100 million in federal funds was made available via grants. States were required to apply for the funds and, if awarded, they would allow schools districts to apply for planning and implementation grants. These funds presented an opportunity which had not been available for several years; many school districts applied for and earned Goals 2000 Grants (Hunt, 2008).

In Chicago Public Schools, the implementation of academic content standards met with limited success. The context of the nature of improving urban high schools must be considered. Through work with standards-based reform, gains were seen. However, high rates of student and school failure continue to exist. Efforts to implement standards-based reform must be considered within the context of extreme academic challenges. Tools such as standards and assessments are more effective in urban districts as short term means to standardize curriculum as opposed to a long term means to improve instruction. The standards established a baseline or minimum level of quality for instruction one district with a high number of low performing high schools. “Standards and assessments constitute an important first step, albeit inadequate, as a self-contained strategy toward instructional improvement in larger urban systems” (Wong, Anagnostopoulos, Rutledge, & Edwards, 2003).

## Comprehensive School Reform Models

Once again, the government would seek to assist school districts in improving programs for America's children. Comprehensive School Reform models were developed in order to provide school districts with the tools they needed to improve student performance on standardized tests. The models were intended to provide systemic solutions to address every aspect of school operations including family and community involvement, curriculum, management and scheduling (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009). According to the Department of Education, in 2002, whole school improvement models were designed to use a multi-year approach to school improvement through the use of scientifically proven instructional practices and the entire school and community assuming responsibility to address the students' educational needs. The comprehensive school reform models or programs were comprised of research-based best practices and were built on the following eleven essential components of comprehensive school reform: proven methods and strategies based on scientifically based research, comprehensive design, professional development, measureable goals and benchmarks, support within the school, support for principals and teachers, parental and community involvement, external technical support and assistance, annual evaluation, coordination of resources, and strategies that improve academic achievement. The availability of grant funding for specific reform programs was based on which program was selected. Some programs were not considered research-based; and were therefore not supported by grant funding (Holdzkom, 2002). This distinction naturally impacted which programs were implemented. Working as a principal in a district seeking grant funds during this time, my recollection is that the programs were heavily promoted as research-based, which intimated that they would definitely help schools increase student success and improve test scores.

Participating districts were required to work with a service provider or a consultant deemed to be an expert in that particular model. The service provider would assist the district with the facilitation of implementation of the model. Consultants worked with both district

leadership and school level leadership to implement the models. This, once again, involved experts coming to help schools reform their programs. In some cases, teachers were not receptive to the service providers, whom they viewed as outsiders, coming in and providing direction on how to reform the school. The teachers were professional and practicing educators and consultants were non-teachers or often retired or former educators. In some situations, the consultants were not experienced in working in districts similar in composition to the district they were expected to help implement. This became a credibility issue (Payne, 2008).

The models varied in their emphasis and design. Some used very prescriptive direct instruction and were seen by teachers as limiting their instructional practices. Another model concentrated on providing organizational structure within the school to allow the teachers to have more input in school decision-making. The models were used in districts of different sizes and different compositions. As a part of the grant-funded programs, the impact of comprehensive school reform models was researched, evaluated, and measured closely. The basic findings, in terms of outcomes, reflected a limited impact. The findings indicated not all models were of similar quality in terms of potentially effective implementation and impact on student achievement as measured by student test scores. The findings included a recommendation that school and policy leaders manage school and community expectations from the outset so that reforms are given sufficient time to produce positive changes (Holdzkom, 2002).

The comprehensive school reform initiative did not produce the widespread gains hoped for by the various stakeholders supporting the efforts. Many reasons were given for the lack of powerful data. Since elementary schools were more likely to adopt the models, very little of the literature pertained to middle schools or high schools. Evaluators found that very few studies separated findings by student demographic subgroups (Kidron & Darwin, 2007). The level of fidelity of implementation was an issue in many cases. In cases where the programs were fully and properly implemented, results remained small to non-existent. In some cases, districts implemented without providing the necessary resources and support. Implementations struggled

when staff buy-in was not given proper attention in the processes prior to the decision to adopt a comprehensive school reform model. Some reform initiatives were pet projects of an individual leader such as a superintendent or a principal and when that person left, the program ended. Implementation was initiated in some districts without planning for sustainability of the program. Unfortunately, the emphasis with comprehensive school reform was on what to do to fix the school. Much emphasis was put on the treatment, the change, the reform, without enough examination prior to the reform of the how and why things were done as they were. There were typically no components which addressed human behavior or executing leadership through the change process. It was as if the reform was simply going to fix the challenges without fully acknowledging, examining, or understanding the problems or their root causes. An additional challenge, which impacted consultants and principals, was dealing effectively with resistant staff members. Veteran teachers frequently lament the various programs and initiatives they have implemented over the course of their years in education. The constant and unfulfilled cycle of school reform has devolved to the point of annoying veteran teachers and frustrated the potential innovators (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Payne, 2008). Such expressions are heard often with the consideration or announcement of any new initiative, program or practice which impacts teachers. Teachers rightfully contend, “This too shall end.”

Much of the effort of the early attempts to improve student achievement outcomes supported students at the elementary age level. While some understood and accepted the concept of starting early in order to have an impact on students by the time they reach high school, much concern still existed about educational opportunities, programs, and outcomes in high schools. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, numerous and varied school reform initiatives and programs were designed and implemented in high schools all over the country to change the format and structure of American high schools. Frequently the goal was to impact outputs such as test scores, graduation rates, and climate-related variables such building culture and student discipline (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008).

Many Americans continue to speculate that the United States of America lies behind other nations in terms of educating its future citizens and producing human capital sufficient to maintain the United States' global presence. According to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, published in 1998, graduating seniors in the United States rank near the bottom in science and math compared to students graduating secondary school in other countries. This applies to our typical students as well as our top-performing students ([http://nces.ed.gov/Press release/timssrelease.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/Press%20release/timssrelease.asp)). At the same time, reformers point to countries such as Finland as models of educational success. The current global status of the United States is considered at risk due to high school graduates lacking the skills necessary for employment in the modern economy. Many American companies communicate difficulty in maintaining high quality workforces with the graduates produced by American high schools. Fewer than three out of four students graduate within four years. More than 2,000 high schools report dropout rates which exceed 60 percent. High student dropout rates cost the United States more than \$320 billion a year. The decrease in high school graduation has occurred at a time when there is a large emphasis on getting a college degree. Three out of four jobs require a minimum of an associate degree or a bachelor's degree. Granted, adults without high school diplomas fare poorly and high school graduates have higher incomes than dropouts (Harris, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Education, a strong consensus about the need for high school reform currently exists in America (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). It is the "how" of creating this change that remains in constant debate. The report published by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and other entities in 2008 recommended five changes; elevate academic standards and high school graduation requirements to produce college and career ready graduates, supply high-quality high schools utilizing new models to prevent students from dropping out and to reconnect with disengaged youth, improve schools by changing teacher preparation and connecting teacher evaluation to student outcomes, implement processes to set goals, measure progress in order to hold high schools and colleges accountable and lastly, bridge expectation disparities between K-

12 public schools and postsecondary educational entities. Some of these recommendations are reflected in the Federal School Improvement Grant program.

School districts awarded School Improvement Grants are subject to specific rules and guidelines stipulated through the Federal program. However, sufficient autonomy is allowed to create school reform programs designed specifically for each individual school. This provides local schools with the freedom to address the challenge of how as related to needs of differing and diverse student populations across the nation. With the large amounts of funding available, many schools and districts would naturally express interest in applying for the grants. In May of 2011, the Department of Education reported that 16% of all schools nationwide were eligible for School Improvement Grants. The expectation was that these schools were more likely to be high schools serving high-poverty, high-minority student populations. High schools are 21% of the universe of public schools, 19% of the schools eligible for School Improvement Grants, and 40% of the schools awarded School Improvement Grants (Hurlburt, Le Floch,, Therriault, & Cole, 2011). In November of 2011, the Department reported that more than \$4.5 billion had been committed to the School Improvement Grant Program since 2009. Nationwide, Cohort One grant-funded schools had populations with 78% of the students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals, as compared to 45% in the universe of schools. Similarly, 76% of the populations of the Cohort One schools were African American and Hispanic students as compared to 39% in the universe of schools (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sigoverviewppt.pdf>).

The Federal Department of Education has recently begun to investigate the impact of the School Improvement Grant Program on schools in Cohort One and Cohort Two. These data are shared though advisement from the Department indicates the summaries should not be used to develop solid conclusions about the impact of the School Improvement Grant Program noting that assessment performance rates can increase and decrease over one or more years for a variety of reasons, and any changes, in either direction, cannot be fully credited to the School Improvement Grant Program (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/documentation-cohort=1-2-assessment->

results.pdf). While this study focused on the impact on the grant-mandated Lead Indicators, data provided by the Department of Education address a variety of areas. When looking at all of the high schools awarded the grant in 2010-2011, 62% of students graduated on time (for schools with submitted graduation data). Graduation rates were lowest in urban areas and highest for students in towns and rural areas. Such data do not acknowledge increases in graduation rates comparing pre- and post-grant statistics. On average, students in SIG schools (with submitted attendance rates) attended approximately 90% of school days in 2010-11. Attendance rates were lowest for high school students and those in urban schools ([http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sig\\_national\\_data\\_summary\\_sy10-11.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sig_national_data_summary_sy10-11.pdf)). State level data are shared on Cohort One schools. Looking at the Midwestern state where this study occurs, the cohort graduation rate for 2010-2011 was 74%; the state graduation rate was 84%. The percent of students scoring proficient or higher on state assessments in reading and math the year before the grant and the first year after grant implementation remained flat; for grant-funded schools and all schools in the state ([http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sig\\_state\\_data\\_summary\\_sy10-11.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sig_state_data_summary_sy10-11.pdf)). A 2014 report released by the Department of Education provides a national analysis of pre- and post-data on Cohort One and Cohort Two schools. While the report does not address district or school size and it covers the entire United States, these data are relevant to this study. Schools are making gains, on average, increasing student performance in reading and math. As compared to all schools in the nation, Cohort One schools demonstrate larger gains in reading and math; Cohort Two schools also demonstrate larger gains reading and similar increases in math to other schools. Cohort One schools continued to improve with the second year of funding. Cohort One schools produced larger gains in math than reading and Cohort Two schools produced larger gains in reading than in math. More Cohort One and Cohort Two schools showed gains in math and reading proficiency rates than declines in math and reading proficiency rates (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/assessment-results-cohort-1-2-sig-schools.pdf>). Such trends indicate



movement in the desired direction for schools that have many years of poor academic performance. Slow and steady gains take more time, but are more likely to be sustainable.

### **Organizational Theory**

Organizations are complex entities, wrought with challenges because of the nature of the human experience. When something goes wrong, failure is usually difficult to accept. Human nature causes one to see what they expect to see. When things are not as one expects, the tendency is to blame an individual. If that does not fit the scenario at hand, the next course of action is usually to blame the organization. In the following sections, we delve deeply into core aspects of organizational theory.

Change impacts all organizations, even those considered well-functioning. The accountability movement has birthed the examination of all aspects of the educational process and promoted the concept of continuous improvement. Continuous improvement means working to improve though goals may be achieved and though the organization appears to be experiencing success. Continuous improvement means room for growth exists at all times. Improvement and growth are closed tied to the creation of change. Improved outputs do not result without some form of change. Emerging literature on change for better student achievement currently encompasses several theories of organizational change. The theories, as relayed by authors Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2003), Edgar Schein (2004), and Peter Senge (2006), are provided.

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal describe four frames from which to view organizations. Each frame has its own parameter and influence in the overall organization. Organizations vary and the needs within each frame vary. There is a degree of consistency when looking at the global picture of the components of the four frames. The Structural Frame encompasses organizational aspects such as rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, and the environment. The architecture of the organization with its units and subunits has integral characteristics. The term structure gives the impression the frame is built on a tight, lockstep type of organization. This is not case. All organizations have structures, but not all structures are created the same. While

structure exists in all organizations, they differ in design, purpose, and sustainability depending on the goals, the setting and environment, and the available resources. When careful analysis leads to the identification of problems, structural deficiencies are addressed through reflection and restructuring (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The authors describe a concept of dilemmas in balance and give seven examples including excessive autonomy vs. excessive independence and goal less vs. goal bound. These relate closely to the function of public school districts as complex organizations. The delicate balances described previously certainly impact an organization in the midst of change; genuine change encompasses moving from the current level of function to another, and to what degree change is made is an important decision. That decision should be based on many organizational factors.

The Human Resource Frame emphasizes understanding the people within the organization. It promotes consideration of their strengths and challenges, their ability to reason as well as their basic needs, desires, and fears. This frame expects the organization to serve the needs of the people rather than the reverse. The relationship between organizations and people is a unique one. Both need the other in order to exist. The organization needs people to make it run as they execute the ideas and complete the work. From the organization, people earn income and other benefits such as status. Due to this complex relationship, when one suffers, so does the other. Dissatisfied, displeased, disgruntled people cannot create strong organizations and dysfunctional organizations lead to unsatisfied people. People have needs for which they look to the organization for fulfillment. Looking through this frame involves consideration of physiological needs, safety needs, and personal needs such as positive relationships with others, the need for positive self-esteem, and the need to meet personal fulfillments or goals. The authors recommend that leaders be willing to redesign the work and promote diversity (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Such recommendations are supported in the Total Quality Management work of Edward Deming (Deming, 1986) as he and others supported workforce involvement, participation, and teaming as key aspects of successful organizations.

The Political Frame causes one to attend to the overt and covert power structures within the organization. This wisely encourages the consideration of competition within the organization for valuable resources, which can, at times, be scarce. The political frame also acknowledges competing interests and entities vying for power or advantage. The aspects of this frame may not be as openly visible as some other areas, but failure to recognize the importance of political assumptions has the potential to do harm to the organization. Most of the important decisions within an organization have some degree of relationship to the division of scarce, or at least limited, resources, which connects to conflict and power. Conflicts are resolved, goals are set, and decisions are made most often through bargaining and negotiating, formally and informally, between and among the groups. Power is the main currency within an organization and power is bestowed in a variety of ways. It can be granted based on authority and title, information and expertise, alliances, history, or even personality and charisma. Power is also bestowed based on a role, such as having the control of certain valuable resources (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

The Symbolic Frame deals with areas related to meaning and faith including activities such as rituals, ceremonies, story, history, play, and culture. Within this frame, what happened or what is seen is not nearly as important as what the event or situation means. Because interpretation of what something may mean varies from person to person, typically alignment or cohesion in terms of activities and what they mean are typically loosely connected. Because of this level of variation, people or groups of people within organizations tend to create symbolism or meaning from shared events or activities. Symbolism is a very important aspect of organizational change. Objects and activities that may appear routine to some have valuable organizational meaning for some members of the organization. Symbolism can create and enhance a certain level of consistency within the organization. It can also support a level of certainty and consistency for those who interact with members of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

While Bolman and Deal use the concept of frames to dissect an organization, our next author, Edgar Schein, describes organization primarily as conduits of culture. According to Schein, one must either understand cultural forces or “become victim to them” (Schein, 2004). Culture is a powerful aspect of any organization. Culture is an abstract concept, but culture can be researched and understood in order to help guide the actions of leadership. Culture guides what happens in organizations including what is done, how it is done, and acceptable reactions to persons and situations. In order to understand an organization’s culture, Schein supports the examination of visible artifacts, stated beliefs, values, rules, behavioral norms, and basic, widely accepted underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004).

Quality of culture and effectiveness of the organization are related and aligned according to Schein. He asserts the stronger the culture, the more effective the organization. However, strong culture can also include increased resistance to change as a characteristic of the particular culture. The development of the culture of the organization cannot be left to chance and must be considered a priority. It is important to ensure the culture of the organization is being developed at the highest levels possible. Culture provides a level of stability in that it helps define the organization and helps develop a shared belief system within the organization. Culture evolves constantly. As groups solve problems and address issues, they formulate and perpetuate culture. Schein describes various aspects of culture such which will be summarized below.

Schein states that artifact, which is defined beyond mere things, are important. While some artifacts are tangible objects, some are not. The term takes account of everything one experiences when one encounters a new culture. Sometimes artifacts can be easier to view, but difficult to interpret and understand. Culture impacts various activities which transpire including shared beliefs about the establishment of goals, about what to measure and how to measure them. Some artifacts are tangible objects; artifacts can also include widely held beliefs such as only certain students can benefit from rigorous curriculum and rich instructional activities.

Schein develops an illustration of a learning culture and how it should look. The expectation is that people within the organization will be proactive in problem solving and learning. The learning process should be an area of application and motivation, as much as the actual solution. The quality of solutions to problems increases with the involvement of multiple persons. This concept perfectly aligns with the belief that the solution to a problem is more likely to be supported by others if they have been a part of the creation of the solution. Related to this is Schein's contention that the culture of the organization should be developed in such a way that one expects to be a learner through all levels. The learning must consist of the internal environment and the external environment. Important aspects of such a commitment to learning embrace reflection, analysis, feedback, and creativity.

Perceptions about human nature tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies. If a leader believes that staff tends to not have the best intentions, the leader will treat them as if they are not trustworthy and eventually the organization will evolve to one where the people within it are no longer trustworthy. With the increase in the globalization of our society, the complexity of society and problems, and the expansion of technology into virtually every aspect of organizational work, how the leader interacts with team members becomes even more critical. Cooperation, collaboration, and involvement of numerous persons in making decisions or leading an organization are critical to organizational success in current times. That trend does not appear to be short-lived as the world continues to become more complex.

In order for an organization to change, a general shared belief must exist within that organization that change can actually occur. The more difficult the challenge, the more difficult it can be to truly believe and also to convince others that the environment can be changed. Beliefs in systems and organizations are self-fulfilling prophecies. The culture of a learning environment cannot exclude an understanding of the purpose and value of inquiry and a no-nonsense approach to seeking the truth and developing solutions through processes which are participatory in nature. The solutions to issues or challenges cannot be expected to come from

one person, but from a process which emphasizes seeking information from a variety of sources through a variety of methods.

When working toward change and reform, one must look toward the future, both in the short term and in the long term. While ignoring the past can be an error which has unintended consequences, the past needs to be considered within context and only to the extent needed as one prepares for the future. In struggling organizations, the inability to dismiss the past and move toward a vision for the future can be powerful. When working toward the short term, plans must contain opportunities to take mid-plan assessments and allow for reflection and redirection depending upon the short-term outcomes.

A healthy organizational culture includes an understanding that communication and the sharing of information are critical processes. A communication system which allows everyone to connect to everyone must exist, though how it is utilized should vary depending on the situation and need. This does not mean that all members of the organization are inundated with information which may or may not be relevant for them depending on their particular role or function within the organization. The system must be designed to ensure that task-relevant information is easy to share and easy to glean.

A leader of a learning environment understands the importance of diversity and appreciates the variety of resources which become available to the organization as a result. This strengthens the organization and enables it to cope with and adjust to a more varied range of challenges. In order for this benefit to be utilized, the groups of diverse members must learn to value each other and to realize the value each has to the organization. This does not entail promoting diversity and having differing groups remain to themselves as separate entities. That does not benefit the organization. The groups must work together and the structures must be put in place to facilitate mutual cultural understanding.

In order for an organization to be effective, leadership, at some level, must be able to evaluate complex systems, analyze the parts, and dissect challenges or barriers to successful

operation. In order for organizational goals to be met, those within must be able to understand the complexity of systems and issues and be willing to address challenges despite the complexities.

A learning organization understands the importance of culture and how culture impacts the world and all within it. Such an organization realizes that change comes through addressing the aspects of culture. Before the organization can move and use culture as a lever to cause change and movement, the members of the group need to be able to come together as a group or unit in order to become familiar enough with each other to accomplish the task or complete the work. Making change within a district can be challenging under the best circumstances. Within a systematic approach, people tend to look for consistent strategies and action across the district.

Peter Senge (2006) had somewhat of a constructionist view of organizations. In his theory, organizations are constantly changing, creating, growing, and expanding. Senge supported the concept of decentralized leadership in organizations. It appears this was in order to encourage the type of freedom and flexibility that cannot be facilitated under a typical, top-down authoritative leadership structure. To be effective and sustain itself, the organization must foster ways to constantly nurture and develop new ways of thinking and new ways of solving programs as a collective unit. The organization should be able to support flexibility in that adaptations are made on a constant and as-needed basis. While all of the change is happening within the organization, change is also happening to the people within it. They must be willing learners as they work together to understand the whole. Given the proper tools and guidance, they are able to produce based on the natural capacity to learn. Learning organizations and people within them are constantly re-creating themselves. This constant learning increases our ability to create. In his work, Senge focuses on five disciplines. Each will be briefly described.

For an organization to learn and transform, the people within the organization must continue to learn. A very deep level of learning is necessary to create this type of change. Senge describes it as “continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of aiming our energies,

of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively” (Senge 2006, p. 139). While competence and skill are embraced, so is spirituality. The depth of learning described is a process: a life-long pursuit. It affords the expectation for personal fallibility and the willingness to grow and learn. This would apply not just on an organizational level, but on a personal level for all within the organization.

People within organizations, such as school districts, are influenced by mental models as interactions occur with colleagues, students, families, and other stakeholders. Such influences cannot be prevented, as we are human and we are the sum of all of our life experiences. These deep-seated beliefs, assumptions, and generalizations inform how one views the world and what one does. Some of these are so ingrained that people may not even realize their individual impact and influence on the behavior and actions of others. One must develop the ability and willingness to reflect on what one does and why. Examination of the organization must begin with examination of self.

A true shared vision is a component of a learning organization, not simply a phrase, mantra, or motto memorized out of some sort of empty compliance. Shared vision causes people to excel and grow. It helps the organization and its members look toward the future. Vision should come from within the organization and should be a result of reinforcement of desired actions and behaviors. When the vision is a shared one, the organization produces enthusiasm as the people within it constantly receive validation and confirmation of the purpose of the organization.

Team learning is the phrase used to describe how members of the team are able to rise to the level of creating the desired results. In effective organizations, people act together. They learn together and they are then able to put the learning to use as the team and the organization change and evolve. This type of learning is a result of the shared vision and the personal mastery of the individual team members.



Organizational change theory is deeply rooted in human and group behavior. It impacts education greatly due to the humanistic nature of the work which occurs as a part of public education. While each of the authors mentioned previously has well-developed and detailed theories, a great deal of overlap exists. Bolman and Deal describe organizations in a very comprehensive manner; the frames cover all components of an organization. Schein's emphasis is on culture, but the theory is developed to the extent that culture seems to become the fiber which is woven to form the fabric of the organization. In terms of school reform, the aspects of culture may have been underestimated in their power and impact. The application of reform has most often concentrated on "what" to do, the "fix," and the "magic bullet," which demonstrates a somewhat singular and simplistic view of the complex process of public education. School reform, thus far, has not sufficiently addressed the organizational dynamics of change, reform, and human behavior.

### **Role of District Leadership**

A great deal has been written about effective schools; the importance of district-level leadership has not been overlooked. While effective schools do exist, district leadership is necessary in order to help assure that more schools increase their level of effectiveness. Most teachers and principals do not demonstrate the characteristics and/or capacity to consistently perform at the level required to produce the outcomes found in effective schools (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003). In order to provide the necessary type of support to schools, district-level administrative teams must cultivate a culture and climate which embrace flexibility and a service-oriented approach, as opposed to the traditional district leadership roles which emphasize and prioritize regulation, monitoring, compliance, and management over leadership. A balance must be realized such that systems, rules, and procedures are used without displacing the purpose for which they were designed (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988).

Discussion regarding school reform can sometimes exclude or fail to acknowledge the important role district leadership plays in reform; some research has indicated this is an area that

district-level leadership does not tend to prioritize. Research has shown that district-level leaders are important as they typically play a crucial role in policy implementation. Successful, consistent, and effective implementation of reform is highly dependent upon district-level leadership. District leaders control access to data, professional development, curricular and instructional guidance, qualified staff members, and the fostering of relationships with external agents and parties. Organizational capacity, which includes teachers' professional knowledge and skills, financial resources, and effective leadership at the district and building levels, is important for increasing an organization's ability to deliver high-quality educational opportunities and programs which lead to increased student achievement (Sipple & Killeen, 2004).

Central office support should include providing school staff and leaders with assistance for monitoring academic progress of students; encouraging and supplying high-quality, job-embedded professional learning opportunities; implementing a review and development cycle of curriculum; helping create a positive school climate and culture, and developing processes which continually cultivate a pipeline of high-quality staff, particularly teachers and administrators, for the district (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003). Michael Fullan, Al Bertani and Joanne Quinn (2004) provide guidance for effective leadership for change at the district level. District leaders must facilitate a culture where school principals are concerned about the success of all of the district's schools, not just their own. A collective moral purpose can drive efforts to close the disparities in student learning based on demographics. True leaders recognize, in order to create true change, their efforts must be both thorough and deep (Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004). Creating sustainable change in struggling schools usually requires more time, more moral and fiscal support from the district, support from an external reform organization, cultural changes tied to expectations and behavior, and professional learning centering on new practices and skills. These important functions necessitate district action and support (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009).

One example of what can happen with the proper type of support at the district and school level is the Achievement-Directed Leadership program. The program was developed by

the Philadelphia-based Research for Better Schools and funded by the National Institute of Education from 1977-1985. The first phase was training for district-level leadership in how to implement research-based effective instructional practices and monitor progress. Next, training was given to principals and then, teachers. The program produced evidence of student achievement gains in reading and mathematics (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003).

In the late 1980s, a group of high-performing districts was identified and studied in order to identify the characteristics which set them apart and contributed to their success. Within these 12 instructionally effective California school districts, researchers found clearly instituted instructional and curricular foci, consistent and aligned instructional activities and practices, strong superintendent leadership with an emphasis on instruction, and priority placed on constantly and consistently monitoring instruction and curriculum (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988). Possibly even more powerful findings were discovered at the district level. District leadership teams were able to move away from the regulatory role and embrace an approach of providing support to the schools. The researchers described these characteristics as follows: “rationality without bureaucracy, structured district control with school autonomy, a systems perspective with people orientation and strong leadership with active administration team through collaboration with strong leadership” (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988, p.176). Findings from a Consortium for Policy Research in Education study of 22 districts from eight states assert that the role of the district office leadership is crucial for building a school’s capacity to interpret and utilize data, increase teacher knowledge and skill, align curriculum and instruction, and target interventions on low-performing students and/or schools. This includes helping staff at the school level understand how to use their student achievement data to influence and guide classroom instruction and providing teachers the tools to achieve this important function (Massell, 2000).

Other studies support these findings. Researchers from the Education Commission of the States, studied six districts (in five states) that improved student achievement by using data. Each of the district offices functioned with a service orientation which worked to support principals

and teachers as they used student data to drive continuous improvement efforts. Data can be a powerful tool to change teachers' beliefs and attitudes on the potential academic success of certain students (Armstrong & Anthes, 2001). To be effective, data must be provided to teachers, students, and parents for the purpose of providing direction to needed improvements. Developing and implementing deliberate structures for training and assessments, providing teachers the tools to use research-based instructional practices, aligning curriculum with assessments, and decentralizing management and budgeting were strategies found to be effective in another 2001 study of six high-poverty districts in five states (Armstrong & Anthes, 2001).

A comprehensive study by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation for the Council of Great City Schools used reflective case studies to study three urban districts which had shown consistent student achievement gains for at least three years, as compared with levels in their respective states, and some level of success decreasing the achievement discrepancy between white students and minority students. The findings point to three very specific areas researchers contend must be utilized as a powerful combination in order to produce gains in student achievement:

1. A shared focus among school board, superintendent, and community leaders on student achievement as the primary goal, as well as a common vision about how to improve it;
2. The “development of instructional coherence” by providing standards, instructional frameworks, and intensive professional development to principals and teachers; and
3. The preparation of school-level personnel for data-driven decision making (Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy, 2002).

In their report, authors Martha Abele Mac Iver and Elizabeth Farley build on the 2001 work of Corcoran, Fuhrman, and Belcher to develop a list of the district level leadership characteristics they believe will support increases in student achievement. The characteristics are

similar to the dimensions provided through the work of the Council of Great Schools; however, they tend to center more on internal capabilities and responsibilities.

1. Decision-making about curriculum/instruction including selecting and implementing externally developed reform models;
2. Supporting good instructional practice through professional development for principals and teachers; and
3. Evaluating results (including the role of the research and evaluation office) and the feedback loop from evaluation to decision-making and supporting instructional practice, including scaling good practices (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003, p.10).

As the role of district-level leadership has evolved over time, it is clear that many districts struggle to design, develop, and implement the appropriate structures and practices in order to consistently support improved student achievement at the school level. Factors which have historically constrained the effectiveness of central office have been identified. District-level administrators, in one unnamed district, reportedly wrestled with how much they should prescribe reform practices to schools and how much freedom they should allow (Mac Iver & Farey, 2003). Additionally, there are reports of district leadership being tempted by funding opportunities and therefore embracing a plan that no one believed would be effective. “The emergence of evidence-based decision making was hampered by whims, fads, opportunism, and ideology” (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003, p.9). One must juxtapose all of this information, which can be hard to believe and accept, with the fact that “districts were under pressure to achieve results quickly and scale up practices before the evidence was in on their effectiveness” (Mac & Farley, 2003).

Case studies on specific large urban districts have produced clear and consistent findings in terms of the important role of district-level leadership. While the importance is clearly articulated, research fails to communicate how the role can be maximized to its full potential. District-level leadership typically struggles with this role and its ability to produce what is needed for the schools at the level and to the degree needed. Despite the extensive work of Chicago

Public Schools and the Consortium on Chicago School Reform in the 1990s, researchers reported a lack of central office understanding and recognition of its role in helping schools improve instruction and increase academic achievement. It did not appear that student achievement was the primary goal of the reform. Governance and structure were placed significantly above curriculum and instruction (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbrow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998).

In 2001, researchers from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education studied the role of district-level administration in instructional reform and increasing student achievement in the Philadelphia public school district. The findings were conceptually conflicted, as principals and other school staff expressed strong desires for more district support when selecting and implementing instructional programs to increase student achievement, while the district's reform platform promoted and espoused decentralized, school-level decision making. At the same time, some principals reported frustration with too much control from district-level leadership and too little freedom to investigate, examine, and implement their own ideas (Massell, 2001).

While some studies conducted prior to the 1990s found that district-level administrators gave little attention to curriculum and instructional issues, some studies actually portray district-level leadership as a major hindrance to the improvement of schools and their capacity to increase student achievement. The team of Aimee Howley and Craig Howley report that "the urban school reform is an inevitable negotiation with huge bureaucracies that maintain a stalwart interest in their own survival" (Howley & Howley, 2006, p. 5). The bureaucratic incompetence of large school districts is clearly articulated in a 2003 Johns Hopkins report authored by Martha Abele Mac Iver and Elizabeth Farley. They cite Ravitch and Viteritti in their description of the administration of the New York City public school system as follows:

Like a huge dinosaur, it is not particularly smart, has insatiable appetite, moves awkwardly, yet exudes great power. Like wisteria, it is impossible to control; clip it back and it grows more vigorously than before. Like a giant octopus, its many tentacles reach fearlessly into every aspect of the school system. (Mac Iver et al., 2003)

In some urban settings, the autonomy and flexibility of smallness at the school level is compromised or disabled by a myriad of district mandates in the areas of curriculum and staffing models. What happens structurally and functionally at the school level does not necessarily transfer to the district level. While the benefits of smaller schools and districts are confirmed in research, the high school reform movement frequently supports the creation of smaller schools; typically designed via school-within-a-school structures or by separating students into separate houses or academies within one large school facility. While this results in smaller groupings of students, it does not change the structure and function of the district. Aimee Howley and Craig Howley stated this very clearly. “One would not reasonably expect that administrative simulations would embed the conditions and the relationships prevalent in schools that are naturally smaller” (Howley & Howley, 2006, p.5). In 2005, researchers assessing a Washington state small school reform effort funded by the Gates Foundation expressed similar concerns:

Our primary worry is whether small school staffs, their administrators, district office leaders, families, and communities will be able to move beyond the “old world” beliefs and practices common to comprehensive high schools to a “new world” orientation of small schools, which places personalization and relationships at the heart of school for both students and teachers. (Howley & Howley, 2006, p.6)

Some researchers have established connections between higher student achievement and lower levels of bureaucracy. Other researchers have reported that central district office power has a negative impact on student achievement due to its negative influence on school climate. Some have questioned the modern-day need for the continuation of school districts. Critics have proposed downsizing or dramatically decreasing district operations (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003). Admittedly, much of this criticism is based upon large urban school districts with large central office administrative teams. While more than half of America’s children are educated in such districts, these large districts are actually very small in number. The majority of the school

districts in the United States have small numbers of central office staff (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003).

The work and functions of district-level administrators are key components of the effective operation of a school district. School districts are complex organizations. The actions of the leaders at the middle and upper management levels impact people throughout the organization, system, and community. One important function of the district-level administrative team is promoting strong school leadership in the district. Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group (Rost, 1991).

Today's administrative role initially developed from 1900 through 1930. The role has altered drastically over the years, as America and public education have changed. In America's early schools, school leadership initially was the responsibility of a head master. After a influx of students due to immigration and the passing of child labor laws, the role of the head master changed. The head master was no longer able to provide teachers with guidance and support. The head master, as a result of these changes, assumed a supervisory role which would evolve into a school administrator, with an emphasis on management. Joseph Mayer Rice, known as the father of comparative methodology, a physician who gave up medicine to become an educational reformer, conducted many studies involving public schools and emphasized the importance of teachers and administrators. In 1912, he implored them to "do the right thing," which he described as making sure students achieved a clearly defined standard. He called for "a scientific system of pedagogical management that included the measure of results based on fixed standards" (Kliebard, 2004).

Expectations for school and district leadership have continued to change over the past decades. In 1957, Dr. Philip Selznick of the University of California, Berkeley, published *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation*. This seminal work describes how organizations evolve to create a need for true leadership, rather than supervision and management. An organization, such as an agency, a business or a school, is a technical



instrument which takes on values based on decisions, commitments, goals and actions. This integration of values is one aspect of institutionalization. As an organization or institution evolves and develops, a need will arise for organizational management to develop into institutional leadership. Significant differences exist in managers and leaders. A manager functions within the organizational structure with a primary focus of efficiency. Managers prioritize systems, technical development, attainment of efficiency and routine decision-making. They tend to focus on low order need and use authority, tactics and coercion as tools. Management has given way to leadership. A leader, according to Selznick, facilitates adaptive change, critical decision-making, and goals. Leaders change organizational structures to increase organizational effectiveness by making it more aligned to the institution's purposes. Leaders utilize influence, empowerment, creativity, strategy and creativity to focus on higher order needs (Selznick, 1957). Leadership is defined as an interaction between members of a group (Rost, 1991).

School district level administration must be able to promote strong leadership at the school level. School leaders are expected to be instructional leaders, as research has shown that leadership has a potential impact on student performance. In 1982, Dr. Larry Leozotte, Wilbur Brookover, and Ron Edmonds enumerated the Correlates of Effective Schools including, "the leadership of the principal notable for substantial attention to the quality of instruction" as one of the five original essential components of effective schools (<https://www.effectiveschools.com/images/stories/RevEv.pdf>, p. 2). While the correlates have been refined over the years, and expanded to seven, many of them continue to connect directly or indirectly to school leaders. Instructional Leadership remains a requirement of an effective school; a clear and focused mission and a safe and orderly environment, two areas closely associated with the manner in which the principal leads, are included in the revised correlates (<https://www.effectiveschools.com/images/stories/RevEv.pdf>, p. 3). Because of the critical role principals play in America's

public schools, efforts must be made to promote the growth and development of strong school leaders.

The philosophical beliefs of the district level administrators lay the foundation for how the work at hand will be accomplished. Referring to McGregor's Theory of X and Y (McGregor, 1960), one may take a default position that staff members basically want to do a good job and have the capacity to do so if afforded the needed resources and training (Theory Y). On the other hand, depending on the district, community, and situation, it may appear that staff members need to be persuaded to carry out their responsibilities (Theory X). The general perception will determine the nuances of how changes and initiatives are implemented. While district-level administrators deliver leadership to others, they earn influence by adjusting to the expectations of those they lead (Heifetz, 1994). Leadership has currently evolved to mean providing a vision and influencing others to achieve it without use of coercion (Heifetz, 1994). The belief system of the administrative leadership team, along with their perceptions of the staff at the school level, will inform and influence administrative actions on basically all levels in all areas.

### **Impact of District Size**

According to research, school district size has the potential to influence the choice of organizational structure and, therefore, incentives of the various participants, operational conditions, and outcomes. School district size affects the education production process, and, therefore, students' academic achievement. In 2000, Donna Driscoll, Dennis Halcoussis, and Shirley Svorny reviewed school-level student achievement data from the year 1999, provided by the California Department of Education, to examine the impact of district size on student academic performance. Their findings indicate the impact of district size on student academic performance can vary (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003). In some settings, district-level decisions can limit local school autonomy causing the varied needs of students in larger districts to go unmet, fiscal restraints implemented at the district level may discourage innovation, and communication and coordination problems in larger district often reduce accountability. In 1994,

Walberg and Walberg reported that “achievement is significantly and inversely related to average district and school sizes and state share of expenditures and that states with larger districts and larger schools and that pay a greater share of public school costs do worse in student achievement” (Diaz, 2008). Increased district size is associated with being responsive to standards-based reform. Larger districts are more capable of responding because of their capacity to gather, consume, and utilize information, data, and support from external resources (Sipple & Killeen, 2004). Many complications can arise related to district size. Inefficiency in service provision and management can result, in part, because size facilitates a top down model of management. Additionally, increases in size can cause employees to be further removed from the oversight of critical activities at the level of service provision. Concern with the benefit of using the business concept of economy of scale to justify large district goes back more than thirty years. In 1968, Werner Hirsh noted, “The conditions that help private industry to benefit from scale economies, lower factor costs, larger and more efficient plants, and circular and vertical integration do not apply to schools” (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003, p. 195). As district size grows, he contended, “Administrative top-heaviness and unionization of public servants can produce diseconomies, causing organizations to suffer from an inability to move forward” (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003, p.195). This concept of inability to move ahead aligns closely with the dysfunction described by Charles Payne in his 2008 book, *So Much Reform, So Little Change the Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools*.

While small school design and creation continue to be major components of efforts to improve public high schools, “many states continue to pass regulations that require or strongly encourage small districts to consolidate or to close their small-town community schools and replace them with larger, consolidated schools” (Howley & Howley, 2006, p.2). Between 1940 and 1990, the number of United States school districts fell dramatically through consolidation. Consolidation reflected the widespread acceptance of the premise that small districts lack fiscal efficiency and professional leadership (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003). In 1973, the

number of local school districts decreased by more than 110,000 from 127,531 in 1932 to 16,960 (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Concerns with smaller school districts and their inability to trade on the scale economics continue. Smaller districts logistically lack the benefits of scale economics when it comes to providing professional development opportunities, coordinating same subject teachers to engage in collaborative planning and teaching, and having enough students to offer alternative educational opportunities (Sipple & Killeen, 2004).

The state of Virginia is one example of the impact of school consolidation. Between 1987 and 1994, nearly 26% of West Virginia's schools were closed. The state went from 1,002 regular schools in 1987 to 807 schools in 1994. This meant closing 258 schools, including 188 of the 725 schools located in small towns, and opening 63 new schools (Howley, 1996). The consolidations, which removed schools from rural areas and placed them in small and larger towns, were justified by the state based on net population loss and pointing to the potential of improved educational and social opportunities for students in consolidated school settings (Howley, 1996). The benefits of higher achievement for impoverished students and a weaker link between student poverty and achievement have also been demonstrated to be associated with smaller school districts (Howley & Howley, 2006). According to Aimee and Craig Howley, "the smallness of the district enabled all staff members to know all children and to intervene on their behalf, both with respect to academics and discipline. It allowed staff to take direct action in order to solve problems rather than entangling them in bureaucratic red tape" (Howley & Howley, 2006, p.9).

District size is critically important when the students being served are facing the challenges of living in poverty. Studies in the late 1980s established "a negative relationship between district size and student performance" (Diaz, 2008, p.31). Later, in 1989, Craig Howley concluded that compared to affluent communities, larger districts and schools exacerbate the existing academic performance differences in impoverished communities (Howley, 1989). With continued study, Howley concluded that larger districts and schools seem to be beneficial for

educating affluent students; while smaller districts and schools are better for educating impoverished students (Diaz, 2008; Howley, 1989). Other studies confirm that school district size has strong negative effects on student performance when dealing with students living in poverty. In 1988, Noah Friedkin and Juan Neccochea of the University of California-Santa Barbara studied the relationship between the size and performance of school districts using data from the California Assessment Program. They concluded that “as the socioeconomic status of a school district increases, the association between the size and performance of the school district goes from negative to positive and that the negative association among low socioeconomic school districts is much stronger in magnitude than the positive association among high socioeconomic school districts” (Friedkin p.237). Friedkin goes on to explain further, “It does not imply that a high socio-economic individual is more problem-free than a low socio-economic individual, only that the incidence of exceptional problems is higher in the low socio-economic population than it is in the high socio-economic populations” (Friedkin, 1988, p. 241). These findings are ironic in that many students who are facing the challenges of poverty attend school in large urban school districts. In summary, the students least equipped to handle the typical organizational characteristics of larger school districts are the very students attending schools in large districts.

Naturally, opposing viewpoints exist in terms of the value of smallness. Benefits of size should be examined and considered. For example, a centralized administration can allow more financial resources to be spent on activities and programs related to classroom instruction (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003). As the number of students in a school district increases, so does the district’s budget which, in theory, increases the level and amount of resources available to serve the students. “Increased district size (defined as student enrollment) is related to more active responses to standards-based reforms. Larger districts may have access to more resources and, in theory, may be more able to respond effectively because of the greater capacity to retrieve and utilize data, information, and assistance from external resources” (Sipple & Killeen, 2004). Larger systems generally provide decision makers with opportunities to realize

important benefits of economy by spreading cost over a larger area (Friedkin, 1988). Teachers point out it takes the same amount of time to prepare a lesson for ten students as it does for twenty-five students. In some ways, smallness can make a district vulnerable in terms of the inability to attract certain funding prospects and not having the student population to justify the operation of a large variety of programs and opportunities.

The primary focus of the study is district size; however, due to the small number of schools in the data set and the large number of schools in both cohorts, a secondary focus was to examine if school size had any impact. Smaller high schools demonstrate success in creating more personal learning environments which reduce alienation of teachers and students. They also increase school safety, improve teachers' working conditions, foster student engagement, and increase school safety (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009). While these benefits are based on smaller schools, some of them are also linked to smaller district size. In reviewing Friedkin's research, Craig Howley states the irony quite succinctly. "Large schools appear to compound the afflictions of the already afflicted, whereas they deliver modest benefits to the already blessed. Conversely, small schools mitigate the disadvantages confronted by the impoverished students." (Howley, 1996, p.26). Notably, Howley refers to schools; however, Friedkin's research drew the same parallel to district size and composition.

### **High School Reform**

Many of the structures utilized to promote efficiency remain in America's public high schools. While evidence exists to show that improvement has been made at the elementary school level and in some middle school settings, bureaucracy and lethargy continue to haunt America's public high school. Comprehensive high schools are strapped by the bureaucracy of various structures such as grouping and tracking of students, teachers as specialized content specialists, large student populations, a wide range of specialized programs and courses, and multiple levels of bureaucracy in school and district leadership.

In order to fully comprehend the factors which led to the inception of various high school reform initiatives and programs, the original design of the typical American public high school must be considered. With the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution came many changes for Americans, the creation of the industrial model of public high school education being one. By 1918, all states mandated school attendance, though to what extent varied from state to state. With the 1906 establishment of the Carnegie Foundation, the standardization of the educational process included implementation of Carnegie Units in 1920. At this same time, it was recommended by the Carnegie Foundation and accepted that college and high school programs should be based on a four-year completion cycle. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, when the modern high school system was established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, only 10% of 14-17 year-olds attended high school (Wise, 2008). This Industrial Model of using Carnegie Units to track high school course completion based on seat time, the amount of time the student sits in a classroom, regardless of what the student is doing, continues today in most public high schools.

In the late 1970s, an extensive study of high schools was sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Commission on Educational Issues of the National Association of Independent Schools. Funders included the Charles E. Culpepper Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Commonwealth Fund, the Esther A. and Joseph Klingenstein Fund, the Gates Foundation, and the Edward John Noble Foundation. The Study of High Schools, as it was named, was a “five-year inquiry into adolescent education” (Sizer, 1984). The study, which was undertaken by five individual researchers, was based upon watching and listening in fifteen schools (eleven public schools and four private schools) in San Diego, Denver, Boston, northern Ohio, and southern Alabama. Additionally, Ted Sizer visited eighty schools during 1981 and 1982. These schools were located in Australia and in fifteen states across the United States except Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and the Northwest (Sizer, 1984).

The first report from the study, a book published in 1984 and entitled *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*, centered on the experiences of Horace Smith, a fictional character, developed as a conglomeration of teachers the researchers met during their research. The second report, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace*, published in 1985, expounds on multiple key themes found in fifteen high schools during the 1981-1982 school year. The final report, *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools since 1940*, published in 1986, is a collection of essays on the history of America's high schools since 1940 (Sizer, 1984). For our purposes, we will discuss the first two reports.

Mr. Horace Smith, our fictional central character in *Horace's Compromise*, is a 53-year-old English teacher who has been a high school teacher for 28 years. He is a worn and weary high school teacher who wants to do his best and serve his students, but he is caught in a system which is not designed with such as a priority. He works long days with limited resources trying to meet the needs of increasingly diverse groups of students with varying needs. His personal professional work space is a carrel, which he considers a wonderful benefit as some teachers in his school have no dedicated space for their materials. Mr. Smith has more students than he can effectively teach. A great deal of time is spent grading papers and providing students with feedback though there is not enough time to give all of the student the in-depth, high-quality feedback that Mr. Smith is capable of providing and would prefer to offer in order to better aide the students in their learning. Mr. Smith has high standards for himself and for his students. As a teacher, Mr. Smith is trapped by traditional educational practices and old routines which may have been well intentioned at the time of inception, but they have grown sorely inadequate. As Mr. Smith reflects at one point in the book, "Just let it all continue, a conspiracy, a toleration of a chasm between the necessary and the provided and the acceptance of big rhetoric and little reality. Mr. Smith dare not express his bitterness to the visitor conducting a study of high schools, because he fears he will be portrayed as a whining hypocrite" (Sizer, 1984, p.22). In *The*



*Shopping Mall High School*, the authors describe the high school as an entity that is trying to be all things to a diverse population of students and their parents. These efforts are predicated on the rationale that everyone should attend high school, everyone should graduate from high school within four years, and everyone should perceive the experience as generally positive (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). In order to ensure the school is providing something for everyone, high schools have expanded offerings and greatly broadened the variety and type of experiences considered educationally valuable and appropriate. As a result, according to the authors, several different curricula are operating within the typical high school. These are the horizontal curriculum, which describes the different subjects; the vertical curriculum, which refers to the various levels of the same subject offered to students; and the extra curriculum, usually defined as sports and other non-academic activities such as clubs. Lastly, the services curriculum is designed to address the emotional and social issues considered educationally important (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985).

Large numbers of diverse students participating in a myriad of educational opportunities produces a neutral environment where a do-your-own-thing environment is fostered. This is a place where little or no consensus exists about most matters. One by-product of a varied curricular and extracurricular program is a varied faculty (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). Like shopping malls, America's comprehensive high schools are consumer oriented. Both try to offer something, a product, a program, a class, which is desired by its customers and both do their best to attract customers, in some cases, out of self-preservation. Malls typically have some number of specialty shops. In a high school, these are represented by the programs designed to encompass the areas or subjects perceived to be of interest to specific groups of students. Examples are the top track or accelerated courses, programs developed to meet the needs of special education students, and those developed specifically for students interested in vocational/technical or career education. Even the concept of educational innovation becomes perverted in such a setting. Efforts at innovation and creativity rarely challenge the current

preferences, programs, and practices; rather, the highest organizational priority becomes the learning itself and creating learning for all of the different populations and interests inside the Shopping Mall High School (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). Instead, innovation is utilized to simply create more of the same in an effort to keep students satisfied with a wide variety of options. This satisfaction is demonstrated by students' inclination to stay in school and their disposition to behave within certain established norms. Sadly, these norms can enable students who do not seek to learn, but are allowed to disengage, as long as they do not disrupt their teachers or fellow students (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). In my opinion, this can only be described as creative, complex dysfunction. It is simply appalling.

In a 2006 Education Policy Analysis article, Aimee and Craig Howley, both of Ohio University, enumerated the proven benefits of small schools including high achievement for impoverished children, a weaker link between student poverty and achievement, higher participation rates in school activities, and the provision of a more appropriate curriculum in smaller high schools. Today's large comprehensive high schools were established at the turn of the century, partly as a response to criticisms of small, most often rural, schools offering educational programs which were not sufficiently broad or demanding (Ancess & Allen, 2006). With the comprehensive high school striving to be all things to all students, a desire to break down the largeness of high schools has arisen. The result has frequently become smaller schools or schools within schools; more than one school or program within a physical facility.

### **Small Learning Communities**

As an outgrowth of the nation's concern with the large and failing high schools, Small Learning Communities and Small High Schools were designed using Career Academies and schools-within-a-school structures as vehicles to improve performance of high school students (Kuo, 2010). The small school movement was established to facilitate the dismantling of the factory-model high school to a more effective structure for today's students. In these settings, schools create smaller, more personalized groupings where students have fewer teachers for

longer periods of time and where teachers work more closely with smaller groups of students (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In addition to teachers working with smaller groups of students, the small school movement also promoted the practice of small groups of teachers working together or collaborating to best serve a group of students they all shared. This was a shift away from teachers' classrooms being small, isolated fiefdoms within one school. Conceptually, this is similar to how school sites, without strong and effective district leadership, can become small, isolated kingdoms within one district. The importance and power of teacher collaboration increased with the development of practices where teachers worked very closely in groups called professional learning communities, teacher-based teams, or data teams. The development of strong teacher teams is predicated on strong leadership. Administrators who use their role to facilitate a teacher community convey new professional expectations for teachers and must ensure teachers have the resources needed for collaborative work; this includes time, knowledge, training, and space. It is essential that principals build open communication and trust with all of the school's teachers (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

The most recent large-scale effort to reform America's high schools has been executed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. While Ted Sizer was a highly educated and respected educator, Bill Gates, in contrast, is not an educator, but the Chief Executive Officer and founder of a multi-million dollar corporation. The Gates Foundation was created in 2000; by 2006, the foundation had invested well over \$1.5 billion dollars in an effort to redesign the American high school (Kovacs & Christie, 2008). The Gates effort is widely recognized because of its unique funding source and corporate backers; however, it has not produced the desired increases in student test scores.

Two assumptions embedded in the reform's theory of change are as follows: "small schools lead to more supportive and personalized contexts for students and smaller schools lead to contexts for teachers that spur improved instruction" (Kahne, Spote, de, & Easton, 2008, p. 282). These two powerful concepts are referred to as "the twin pillars of high school reform"

(Kahne, Spote, de, & Easton, 2008). The small school reform concept was built upon creating smaller learning units for high school students. This was typically accomplished by using one facility to house several small schools. Another method was creating small learning communities within one school. The theory behind small schools and small learning communities included designing an educational structure which would enable students to more easily make connection with adults. Some small learning communities were structured so that a set group of students are seen by the same group of teachers for their core curriculum classes. This approach was similar to teaming within the Middle School Concept. This structure facilitated collaboration as teachers can better integrate and coordinate the curriculum, programs, and activities as they work with a common group of students. Small learning communities sometimes utilize an organizational and staffing structure which allows staff such as administrators, counselors, or teachers to remain with students for more than one school year. Staff members in these schools make a personal and professional commitment to get to know the students as individuals and to utilize practices and strategies to personalize schedules, curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Davidson, 2002). The intent was to create an opportunity for students to connect with adults and to form relationships to help the students become more successful as they dealt with school and non-school needs. In order to facilitate success, the school was redesigned to become communitarian, where students are served in small, more personalized units, where students were taught by smaller numbers of teachers for longer periods of time, and where teachers worked with smaller groups of students (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

With its student-centered approach to programming, small schools must face a difficult balance. Human behavior, including that of students, is to resist change and remain within one's comfort zone. Teachers are likely to accept student achievement at a level that does not tax students in order to maintain order, stabilize student attendance, and create a sense of understanding and belonging for the student. This creates a tension between motivating students

to achieve at much higher standards and creating a school program, environment, and culture where students feel comfortable (Kafka, 2008).

Some small schools and small learning communities built their programs around a specialized theme for field of study; similar to what has been done in magnet schools in the past and also in some charter schools. Themes included concepts such as leadership, mathematics, and science or even a concentration on the S.T.E.M. areas (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) or S.T.E.A.M which enhances S.T.E.M. with integration of the arts. With the design of small high school and learning communities including aspects which were very structural in nature, there were also efforts to change how education was delivered to high school students. In the 2002 publication, *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature*, Kathleen Cotton reported that under the right conditions, small learning communities can be effective (Davidson, 2002). Small school reform strategies were appealing to many different constituencies because they reportedly reduced violence, increased student attendance, improved student attitudes and school climates, improved working conditions for staff, and improved student achievement. While critics supported the potential outcomes, they often expressed concerns in terms of how the reforms were being implemented and by whom they were being driven (Kafka, 2008).

While various school reform initiatives have not produced the large-scale, consistent improvements desired, incremental progress has been seen in some areas, just not to the degree or level needed. Many reasons for the lack for success are indicated. While school reform was designed with the intent to improve outcomes for underserved populations, some of the outcomes have created challenges for the precise students who were supposed to be helped. Some concepts of reform and accountability such as increasing skill levels and the amount and types of supports given to teachers and higher quality forms of assessment have been underutilized. Initiatives to address teacher quality and to deliver professional development which is high quality, targeted, and sustained are rarely implemented with fidelity. One of the primary problems is that

professional development is typically insufficient to meet the challenges the schools are working to address (Sappington, Pacha, Baker, & Gardner, 2012). Standards for teachers and strong teacher evaluation processes should be used as a part of reform efforts (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

While the work of the Gates Foundation is often criticized due to its corporate power base, it is noted, however, that many past educational initiatives, led by educators, non-educators, researchers, experts, scientists, and others have also failed to consistently produce the outcomes desired in America's public high schools. In 2005, when asked about the "academic value of small schools," Tom VanderArk, executive director of the Gates Foundation admitted that "proof" was hard to come by" (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2005, p.9). The initial entry of the Gates Foundation into the work of public education somewhat mirrors the efforts and philosophies criticized by Raymond Callahan, author of the *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. Gates and other non-educators believed their corporate mindset and knowledge of business principles would be able to lead to the long sought after change in Americas' schools. The focus was articulated as effectiveness in increasing student achievement; however, Callahan's work remains relevant. Corporations seek to operate schools and typically struggle mightily. America's public schools are inadequately funded and expected to be both efficient and effective in a time with increasing student needs stemming from changes in the country and society. According to the National Center for Education Statistics 2001 Report, for each of the ten preceding years, over half a million students left school before graduation. The average freshman graduation rate for 2001-2002 was 72.6%, but was as low as 57.0% in some states (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Reform efforts and initiatives have repeatedly failed to consistently produce the desired changes recurrently sought in America's high schools.

Much of the recent work to reform America's high schools has been centered on large urban school districts which serve a large percentage of America's students. According to a 2004 report from the U.S. Census Bureau, "historically disadvantaged minority populations are

growing rapidly and will make up half of the United States population by the year 2050” (Wise, 2008, p.12). Districts serving large percentages of students of color and large percentages of students of low socioeconomic status experience unique challenges. However, improving and transforming these districts has the greatest potential impact on the overall student population and therefore the nation. These are schools and districts in Baltimore, Maryland; Chicago, Illinois; and New York City, some of which will be discussed in this proposal.

While some improvements in the high school graduation rate are noted, the rate of the improvements is not at the level desired. “There has been a general decline in the dropout rate and an increase in the high school graduation rate over the last three decades” (Suh & Suh, 2011, p.1). It still remains that efforts to reform large urban districts have not been consistently or systemically successful at raising the level of student achievement or improving student test scores. More in depth discussion of these challenges are included in subsequent sections. In many cases, reform efforts were implemented on a small scale, where they produced initially promising results, only to struggle once scale up was attempted in an effort to create change for a larger number of schools.

Large scale implementation and reform scale up are functions which are heavily reliant upon district level support and resource availability and allocation. The research on the impact of school districts on schools and student achievement has varied over the last 30 years. With most of the districts heavily involved in high school reform being large urban districts, it brings forth the question of the effectiveness of district level administration and the size of the district. This is important because the role of the district is to facilitate, nurture, and support change at the school level. This relational dynamic between the size of the district and its effectiveness in supporting school reform is an unaddressed part of the school improvement and transformation equation. This study will focus its research in this unaddressed area.

As school reform has evolved over time, a differentiation of impact based on school level has become apparent. Increasing student academic achievement appears to be more easily

facilitated at levels serving younger students. Reform initiatives at the elementary level have brought about some improvement in test scores. Changes are slowly being made in the classroom experiences for elementary students. In a 2008 article in *Educational Leadership*, author Bob Wise laments that, regrettably, the last twenty years of school reform have ignored America's secondary schools and focused instead on elementary schools (Wise, 2008). The toughest level to make change is at the high school level, where structures are very entrenched and many traditions are simply untouchable and viewed as sacred cows.

The old factory-model high schools did not serve these students effectively. As a result, dropout rates for these students were often 50% or higher in urban schools. "High schools were never designed to meet today's moral and economic imperative of graduating all students" (Wise, 2008, p.9). Initially, smaller schools appeared to address many of the ills of the factory-model high school. Early positive outcomes for students were higher student achievement, lower dropout rates, lower rates of violence, more positive feelings about school, more participation in school activities. These positives initially seemed to be more pronounced for the students that typically were not successful in traditional high schools (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

According to a five-year evaluation by Linda Shear and others, the desired results have not been attained. Small high schools certainly possess the capacity to create a different social environment and school culture. The responsibility of public education, however, is much greater in scope. "These schools have not produced the hoped-for significant improvements in achievement results for students" (Shear et al., 2008, p.2023). At best, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's work is evidence that reform can break the mold of the traditional comprehensive large public high school (Shear et al., 2008, p.2024). "The Gates Foundation continues to look for the breakthrough education program, the instructional method, the way of organizing a school, the way of using money that will lead to dramatic improvement in outcomes for the most disadvantaged children in America" (Hill, 2006, p.51).



Overall challenges included frustration during implementation due to low teacher quality, lack of student preparation, lack of academic rigor, lack of district support, leadership turnover, and limited resources. The central office culture did not seem to align with the needs of the reforming schools and their staff. Results indicate the reform may have further stratified the student population based on academic and social characteristics (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). Limited strategic planning was used in advance of improvement efforts. The planning was overlooked due to the lack of training of educators on how to implement systemic school improvement. Districts often struggle to implement large scale change due to the constant implementation and later elimination of improvement initiatives, efforts, and activities. Districts must be able to develop and institutionalize improvement efforts in order for them to be effective. “The greater the distance and dissonance between the current culture of schools and intended school improvements, the more difficult it is to successfully accomplish major systemic changes” (Adelman & Taylor, 2007, p.57)

Implementation with fidelity was found to take 3 to 5 years to fully mature, whereas stakeholders often expect and demand faster improvements and results. While some improvements in climate and culture were noted, significant improvement in academic achievement was limited. Students were able to increase attendance rates and dropout rates due to the more personal touch of the small schools. However, impact on instructional practices continued to be a challenge as the adoption of small schools did not lead to needed changes in instructional practices or approaches (Kahne, Spote, & Easton, 2008).

District staff plays a key role in ensuring that the improvements actually reach the school level and spread across the district. Some districts use organizational facilitators to guide improvement efforts. The facilitators help the team members as the team members function as the organization’s internal catalysts and managers of change. Team members must be committed to ensuring effective system change. They must be able to comprehend the big picture as it relates to school improvement.

Resource utilization is a critical aspect of systemic change. Substantive school improvement will not be attained if sufficient resources are not dedicated to essential change processes (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). With the limited resources available to most districts, this is a difficult concept to follow as resources are scarce and most are trying to do more with less; trying to decide the least amount of resources that can be used to get the best results possible. High-performing urban high schools were found to have well-qualified teachers, personalization between teachers and students and between teachers and support staff serving the same students, a common core curriculum organized around performance-based assessments, and support for struggling students to help them meet the challenging and rigorous curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

In order to be successful, reform must change the education system as a whole. The concentration must be on redesigning teaching and learning in order to better serve all students. Top-down directives are usually not successful as they typically fail to transform teaching and learning, often because of the lack of teacher buy-in. The efforts must prioritize improvement for the whole schools instead of parts such as certain populations or certain participants or programs. Districts are greatly affected by the implementation practices and priorities at the state level. The availability of financial resources at the state and federal levels can have a large impact on reform success or failure.

Reform efforts over the years have centered on control of schools, control of decision making, composition of educational standards, changes in particular curriculum areas, and altering instructional strategies. No effort has produced long-term, sustainable change for large numbers of diverse learners in urban settings. Mathew Miller asks what is to be done when the complexity of school district problems exceed the capacity of the superintendent to address the challenges. Well-meaning people, operating from a dysfunctional foundation, cannot deviate from ingrained habits and patterns (Payne, 2008). School districts are organizations which are complex and difficult to dissect. The bureaucracy found within can, in some cases, be crippling.

Payne describes the oppressive power of bureaucracy in a chapter aptly titled, “You Can’t Kill It and You Can’t Teach It.” The power of the bureaucracy in a persistently failing school or district causes small situations or events to take on a life of their own and increased levels of importance and power. Simple things become great symbols of dysfunction. Positives become hard to recognize and acknowledge; and thus the cycle simply perpetuates itself.

“You have this cyclical kind of movement between progressive and traditional kinds of teaching and learning in schools that has gone on in American schools for almost a century (Cuban, L., Stone Lantern Films, 2009).” The repeating cycles of reform failure have produced a hardened form of educational and organizational resistance. This deep and entrenched culture of failure greatly impacts all who come in contact with the school or organization. Student behaviors and actions are affected as are those of every staff member in the school. Charles Payne thoroughly describes this dysfunction which engulfs persistently failing schools. Students and staff are demoralized and marginalized. Organizational irrationality is the norm as those within become incapable of making collective decisions. The logic and mindset of the students and adults become altered to the point that even positive actions are seen in some negative and suspicious light. People become so accustomed to negativity, punishment, and failure that they are unable to see, experience, or produce anything but more negativity. It can be extremely difficult to recruit teachers to work in challenging urban schools and just as difficult to find teachers who are actually suited and properly trained to work in these schools. Therefore, urban schools are more likely to be staffed with teachers possessing weak skills. The combination of weak teachers and struggling students creates a vicious cycle of weak skills and poor attitudes in students and adults alike. Struggling schools with populations comprised mainly of African-American children face additional challenges. As Septima Clark states, “The Black child is different from other children because he has problems that are the product of a social order not of his making or his forebears” (Payne, 2008, p. 93). Urban schools are not typically motivated, trained or equipped to provide programs with the intensive and extensive characteristics found to

impact urban learners. Other challenges to reform which have contributed to an entrenched culture of failure are poor quality implementation of programs and flawed ideologies in regard to children of color and children of poverty.

The release of *A Nation at Risk* called for overhaul and reform of America's public high schools. America's school districts continue to struggle to deliver the changes touted in the report. Many, many educational initiatives have come and gone, many programs have been created, implemented, and discontinued, and many laws have been passed in the years since the release of the report. If we are to finally create genuine change in America's public high schools, educational research must be leveraged to impact the practices which occur in districts, schools, and classroom across the United States. The following research is provided in an effort to examine what has transpired in districts which have sought to reform high schools and increase student achievement. The research is based on reform in public school districts in Baltimore, Maryland; Chicago, Illinois; and New York City, New York.

### **Baltimore, Maryland**

The Baltimore City Public School System is one of the largest public school systems in the United States of America. In 2009, it had 24,000 high school students and 82,000 students in all. Its population was largely poor, with more than 70% of students qualifying for free or reduced price meals. Baltimore City Public School System was the fourth largest school district in Maryland and the twenty-sixth largest in the United States (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). The school system was one of the first urban public school districts to implement high school reform with a priority of reducing the size of the high school setting. Many large urban districts such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City have also implemented similar reform efforts. In Baltimore, the work was undertaken with the financial and programmatic support of various entities, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, several local foundations, school reform consultants, and technical advisors (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). The authors reviewed

survey data, site visit data, and administrative records in order to examine the implementation and outcomes of the reform efforts.

The path which led Baltimore City Public School System into its small high school reform initiative is interesting. The district already had a lengthy reform history. In 1997, the district entered the City-State Partnership Agreement. The Office of the Mayor granted the newly appointed New Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners control of the schools. The nine members were business leaders, educational experts, and parents. Entering into this arrangement and agreeing to systemic reforms afforded the district access to additional funding to support the reform initiatives. A reform plan was designed for 1997-2002. Early district successes described improved student achievement, as well as improvements in the areas of professional development for teachers, system governance, facilities, and organizational and infrastructural support (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). In 2001, an evaluation indicated gains on Maryland's statewide Assessment Program (MSPAP) in each of the six subject areas and three grade levels tested. The largest gains were seen in earlier grades. The number of Baltimore third-grade students earning a satisfactory score in mathematics, writing, science, and social studies doubled as compared to four years earlier. At the same timeframe, state scores did not improve.

In 2000, Carmen Russo was hired as Chief Executive Officer of Baltimore City Public School System and his strategic plan to reform the high schools, The Blueprint for Baltimore's Neighborhood High Schools, was unveiled in 2001 (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). The plan outlined an aggressive plan to reform the city's large, comprehensive high schools by creating smaller schools within them and to open new smaller schools. The conceptual foundation of the small school reform initiative was to transform large, traditional high schools into small schools, schools within a school building, or into Small Learning Communities. In many cases, the school and district worked with program or model developers such as High Schools that Work, Talent Development, and First Things First (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). In Baltimore, the approach was twofold. The district opened new high schools called innovation high schools. Six of these

schools were opened between 2002 and 2006. The second approach was to convert large, traditional, comprehensive high schools into smaller high schools called “break-out high schools.” Twelve Small High Schools were opened between 2002 and 2006. The schools’ design was based on the concept of improving educational opportunities using small supportive structures, strong academic rigor, and effective, accountable instruction and leadership (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009).

By 2003, the earlier success had waned. A study published in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* recommended improving teacher outreach, improving staff capacity, and changing existing curricula (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). According to the journal, Baltimore City Public School System students performed worse in mathematics than the rest of the state, eighth grade students in the state were earning satisfactory ratings three times more often than Baltimore City Public School System’s students, and Baltimore City Public School System’s high school students lagged far behind average statewide performance on the Maryland Functional Test, a measure of basic skills in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Students were required to pass this test in order to graduate (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009).

The implementation of the Blueprint for Baltimore’s Neighborhood High Schools began in 2002. Within the first five years, many staffing-related challenges occurred. From 2002-2007, a great deal of leadership turnover transpired within the district with four different superintendents in five years, staff cuts in the Human Resources and Research and Accountability departments due to budget shortfalls, and the promotion of several school-level staff members to district-level administration. At the same time, the Fund for Educational Excellence, a Baltimore city non-profit organization which partnered with the district in its commitment to improve student achievement in the Baltimore City Public School System experienced the turnover of three different Chief Executive Officers and several Directors of High School Reform (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). At one point the Chief Executive Office of the Fund for Educational Excellence

was appointed to lead the school district. As a result of the numerous changes, the Fund for Educational Excellence decreased dramatically in size and capacity.

Just at the time this was transpiring, the nation began to understand and recognize the larger implications of the No Child Left Behind law which increased accountability pressures for all public schools. The reform's funders began to reassess how funds were being allocated and utilized. In 2005, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation suspended funding for new school creation and begin to support district-level planning and efforts to increase organizational and leadership capacity. Baltimore-based foundations suspended funding previously provided for break-out schools, seeking only to fund additional innovation high schools. In summary, the implementation of the Blueprint which began in 2002 was never taken to fruition due to a variety of unforeseen circumstances and organizational challenges.

While many challenges and unexpected events transpired as a part of the reform journey for Baltimore City Public School System, the researchers sought to answer specific and key questions. Did the programs of the reforming schools reflect the design principals mentioned above? How was the implementation process perceived by students and staff? Did the students in the new small school demonstrate improvements in areas such as test scores and attendance when compared to other Baltimore City Public School System high school students? Was there a connection between the student outcomes and levels of fidelity of design principle implementation (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009)?

The findings related to implementation were numerous. The initial goal of the high school reform initiative was to change the nine large comprehensive high schools into smaller break-out schools and to create six to eight new innovation high schools. The openings of the schools did not proceed as quickly as planned. Initially, implementation had unintended consequences on the composition of the student populations in the new schools and the reformed schools. As new schools opened, enrollment decreased in other schools. Consequently, some schools were closed. While students were enrolling in different schools, the resulting distribution

of students in the new schools and the schools the students had left formed less than desirable patterns. The innovation schools enrolled more academically advantaged students than in all of the other high schools except for the selective high schools. The breakout schools, which were created by breaking the large comprehensive high school into smaller schools, enrolled more over-age low income students. This is one of the implications and challenges of school choice. According to Smerdon and Cohen (2009), “the reforms may have further stratified the Baltimore City Public School System student population based on academic and social characteristics” (p. 246).

Findings also varied depending on the type of reformed school. Innovation schools were perceived as having the most highly qualified teachers. This was incorrect as the percent of certified teachers was lower in the innovation schools as compared to the comprehensive schools. Innovation schools had higher survey scores in the areas of personalized environment and safety as compared to break out and comprehensive schools. Innovation schools also outscored comprehensive schools in the areas of teacher collegiality and student-centered instruction. Break-out schools, however, scored higher than comprehensive schools in the areas of teacher collegiality, student-centered instruction, and administrative leadership (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). Smerdon and Cohen also report that break-out schools had fewer support structures for students as compared to innovation and comprehensive schools. However, more positive teaching and learning environments were found in break-out schools as compared to comprehensive schools. These findings appear to be very inconsistent and scattered with various strengths and weaknesses cited on almost every level. The one consistent finding appears to be the lack of any positive shared regarding the comprehensive school.

Often the attitude of reformers and educators alike can tend toward searching for the silver bullet. The silver bullet comes to represent the perfect program or activity which can be implemented to fix the problem. Reform becomes akin to taking a Tylenol for a headache. This approach does not work. More attention must be made to quality and fidelity of implementation.



Excellent and proven programs and practices that are poorly implemented will likely not be effective. Systemic and systematic efforts must be utilized in order to implement and sustain true change.

In Baltimore City Public School System, researchers heard deep concern from staff regarding frustration with the reform implementation process. Staff reported inadequate facilities and missing or insufficient instructional materials. The sharing of building spaces had not been thoroughly planned, which caused more security and safety concerns because of the number of unsupervised spaces. Staffing was also an area of concern. Overall, the district experienced difficulty in securing teachers in the areas of mathematics and special education. District bureaucracy was a barrier to the processing of new hires and filling vacant teaching positions. Many staff working in break-out and comprehensive schools believed the best teachers were in the selective schools, that new teachers were not invested in their schools, and that the district hired too many substitute teachers and Teach for America teachers. Teachers shared that break-out, comprehensive, and innovation schools served the most challenging students in the district because many of these students entered high school well below grade level and struggled with emotional and behavioral challenges. While expressing concern about the deficiencies of the students, the teachers also expressed that the instructional program was not high quality due to an overload of administrative responsibilities placed on teachers and a lack of definition of curricular expectations. Teachers believed that too much time had been spent on redefining culture and too little time was spent on curriculum and instruction. Staff perceived a lack of support on the part of the district leadership. Lack of thorough planning and clear communication created challenges for the principals and staff. While some staff professed to have easy access to the High School Area Office, most staff expressed concern that the district leadership had not listened to the input from the staff.

The intended outcomes were centered on student test scores and attendance. Algebra and English test scores and attendance rates were different among the high schools that were directly

involved in reform. They were higher in innovation schools than in break-out, comprehensive, and other schools. This is true even after controlling the data for the different types of students in each school. Schools with higher levels of student support produced higher scores in Algebra and English. Higher algebra scores were found in schools where teachers had reported more positive teaching and learning environments (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). Much can be said about this large undertaking on the part of Baltimore City Public School System. The district did change the way students were educated by opening innovation and break-out schools, though not as many as planned or as rapidly as planned. While not directly tied to student test scores or attendance, the staff at innovation and break-out schools described more positive social and academic environments. Students and staff both claimed more positive safety, personalization, and administrative leadership environments than their counterparts in comprehensive high schools. Innovation schools enumerated more autonomy which likely increased staff buy-in and support of plans and initiatives. The innovation schools, unlike the break-out schools, were able to start with a clean slate. However, staff working in the innovation schools did benefit from the knowledge and lessons learned from prior experiences with school reform. The innovation schools were able to design building programs without the interference of pre-existing ideas about the school and the students. Starting from scratch also exposed schools to challenges due to the need to set up systems, plans, procedures, and protocols (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009).

In conclusion, one important point shared by Smerdon and Cohen is the finding that the Baltimore City Public School System central office culture did not seem to align with the needs of the reforming schools and their staff. As educators, we realize that what happens in the classroom is actually the most important aspect of student learning. However, school district leaders cannot expect true and powerful reform if it does not start at the top. District leadership must be on board and deliver the needed planning and support to the school level. Such abdication of leadership responsibility is one reason teachers grow weary of what they call the program of the year.

In 2007, Martha Able Mac Iver, of Johns Hopkins University, which is located in Baltimore, Maryland, executed a longitudinal case study of an urban high school as it transitioned from one reform model to another over a ten-year period (Mac Iver, 2007). Neither the actual name of the school nor its location is indicated in the research. While those pieces of information are not as relevant, the experiences and situations sound similar to what is reported by Smerdon and Cohen in 2009.

In the mid-1990s, the school, which was targeted by the state because of sustained inability to meet state performance standards on state tests, implemented the Talent Development Model. The reform implementation, which created changes to the school day for students and staff, resulted in increased student attendance and an enhanced school climate. Though it was eventually discontinued, Belfast High School (a pseudonym) was one of the first to implement the Talent Development High School reform model. The principal led a school reform team through the process of breaking the school up into smaller academies. The work was supported by a Talent Development High School developer team. The school team secured physical changes to the school building and changes to the staffing and scheduling pattern of the school. Teams of teachers were grouped with specific students and the length of time in each class period was increased. In year two of the initiative, the school saw improvements in student attendance and school climate.

A decision was made at the district level to transfer the principal that had facilitated the implementation of the program and appoint an interim principal. The interim principal remained only for the remainder of that school year. Leadership instability and deeply-rooted faculty morale issues, related to tensions caused with the implementation of the model, caused the school to sever its relationship with the Talent Development High School model (Mac Iver, 2007). This initiative was dropped due to staff opposition to the program and administrator turnover.

Sadly, due to the lack of funds available to some districts, districts often support and implement programs based on which programs come with funding sources rather than seeking

programs which fit the needs of the district and its students. When Belfast High School made the switch to the High Schools That Work model, some initial investigation did occur and the school went on to receive Comprehensive School Reform grant fund for four years (Mac Iver, 2007). A faculty team visited schools with different reform models. They chose to implement High Schools That Work for a variety of reasons such as its sustainability and the support offered. This model touted higher academic expectations in the classroom and 10 clearly defined principles. Teachers considered the model a driving force for the school with benefits such as a common sense approach, provision of a focus for teacher and students, higher standards and expectations for students, helpful professional development, which included having instructional strategies modeled for them, working together in faculty study groups, and relating academic coursework to the world of careers. Teachers expressed that the program increased rigor and caused them to concentrate more on the quality of lesson planning. They were pleased to be presented with training by people with real high school experience (Mac Iver, 2007).

Implementation of the High Schools That Work model was supported by grant-funded resources which enabled the teachers to work collaboratively on curriculum development and alignment with state standards. While the High Schools That Work model was less prescriptive than the Talent Development model, school level staff, including teachers and administrators, seem pleased with the model in that it drew them together. While I realize that camaraderie, collegiality, collaboration, and morale are critically important, students, their instructional needs, and resulting academic achievement are the primary purpose of education. The small school within the larger, 2000 student high school, which was called an academy, provided the feeling of a small school and a more personal touch (Mac Iver, 2007). It is saddening to have Martha Abele Mac Iver report that administrators were not able to successfully retain effective teachers or retrain teachers who lacked skills to engage students and improve achievement levels (Mac Iver, 2007). The impact of the High Schools That Work model was positive but minimal. Attendance and graduation rates improved, but not much and not consistently. A staff member expressed

frustration such as limited direction has been provided on how to facilitate the desired changes. Some aspects of the Talent Development High School model remained despite the formal and official separation from the program. While younger students remained grouped in academies, those academics did not utilize the Talent Development High School curriculum. In place of the Talent Development High School Freshman Seminar, teachers developed an Advisory program to cover a range of areas such as academics, relationships, and emotional life. The ninth grade academies also implemented Reading/Writing Workshop, a program encouraged by the district. Academies remained in place for upper classmen (grades 10-12), and they were organized with the same names based on career pathways such as Business and Finance or Transportation and Engineering. While staff members expressed recollection of a time when students' physical locations for classes and assignments of teachers were structured in a manner which kept the academies separate and decreased crossover, such was no longer the case. The introduction of Advanced Placement classes, without enough teachers to teach separate Advanced Placement and Honors sections for each class within each academy increased student and staff misalignment between academies (Mac Iver, 2007).

While each effort produced some level of improvement, it was never enough to stave off the next round of district-led reforms sought to bring about greater improvement. Attendance rates increased from 71.6% in 1993 to 80.6% in 2004. While this reflected growth and improvement, it was not sufficient as the school still remained below the acceptable attendance rate. Poor attendance was concentrated at the freshman level which caused an indirect negative impact on the graduation rate. Researchers encountered deeply entrenched problems that the reform models have been unable to completely resolve (Mac Iver, 2007). While researchers stress the importance of addressing systemic issues at the district and state level and illuminate that some of the reform challenges require district and state attention to resolve them, others admit that little guidance has emerged on *how* to bring about desired change (Mac Iver, 2007).

Over time, the vehicles used to measure school success changed. Initially, students were required to pass early middle school level tests in reading, mathematics, and writing in order to graduate from high school. Next, the state moved to requiring students to pass high school level tests in algebra, English, biology, American government, and history, along with reading and math assessments tied to No Child Left Behind in order for them to graduate from high school (Mac Iver, 2007). Schools across the district struggled with the sixth grade level mathematics test. Belfast High School made growth in this area. In 1993, 25.1% of its students passed the test; in 2001, 73.8% of its students passed the test. While this once again reflected growth, major challenges still existed. Only 2.2% of the students passed the newly mandated end-of-ninth grade algebra test in 2002. In 2004, 43% of the students passed the same test (Mac Iver, 2007). The school was hampered by inconsistent growth. While gains were also demonstrated in the percentages of students passing in government and English I, drops were experienced in the percentage of students passing in biology.

Analysis of dropout and graduation rates was also used to determine school level success. The state-reported dropout rate decreased from 19.6 in 1996 to 1.8 in 2000. The state reported graduation rate increased from 36% in 1998 to 81% in 2003 (Mac Iver, 2007). Some of these changes resulted from students being removed from school rolls and placed in alternative programs, such as credit recovery or evening school programs, before they are counted against the school due to not graduating. While these program changes for the students may have been in their best interests, such changes are typically associated with increased accountability for educators.

Finally, Mac Iver sums up the findings in terms of what reform left behind after a decade of change. One example of structural and systemic problems, which were not addressed or overcome, is significant attendance problems at the middle school level. These continued at the high school level and were exacerbated by the failure to develop and implement an organized, district wide plan to use skilled district personnel to begin interventions with families of truant

middle school students and support them through their transition to high school (Mac Iver, 2007). While it sounds obvious and simplistic, the following must be noted: If the students do not attend school regularly, it does not matter what instructional supports are put in place or how the potential for student engagement and achievement is increased within the school setting. Mac Iver reports that reform did make a difference for many Belfast High students. More students were promoted from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, more students received rigorous and challenging instruction in honors and Advanced Placement courses, more benefited from career and technology education, such as computer-assisted drawing, and more have gone on to graduate and attend local colleges (Mac Iver, 2007). The story of this one school is but one piece of the reform journey experienced in the Baltimore City Public School System.

### **Chicago, Illinois**

In 2005, Chicago Public Schools, the third-largest district in the nation, served 439,000 students, with over 85% of the students qualified for free or reduced price meals. The district's high school student population was approximately 100,000 students; they attended one of 95 high schools. In 2005, this amounted to about one dozen small schools and charter schools. The school district reported that only 54% of the 2000-2001 freshmen graduated from high school four years later. Students in Chicago Public Schools score below the state averages on reading and math (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008). On the whole, 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the state of Illinois scored higher than 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in Chicago on the 2004 Prairie State Achievement Test. While the state of Illinois did not perform at a stellar level in 2005, with 57% of students who remained in school until the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade year meeting standards in reading, only 36% of Chicago's students who remained in school until the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade in 2005 met standards in reading (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008). While some may view these data as disappointing and disheartening, they are not unusual for a large, urban school district.

Chicago's High School Redesign Initiative was the largest and most recent effort of Chicago Public Schools to implement small high schools. The effort began in September 2001

with a \$12 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The grant was matched by \$6 million in grants from local foundations. The hope was that the smaller, more intimate school experience would lead to increased academic performance using standardized test scores as the measure, decreases in the dropout rate, and increases in the graduation rate. The first phase of the initiative was to transform up to five large high schools into 15 to 20 small schools. In 2003, the Chicago's High School Redesign Initiative was granted an additional \$8 million dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to open 12 new small high schools over five years. In 2003, the Chicago's High School Redesign Initiative helped fund and create two new small schools. In 2004, they opened two new schools. In 2005, they opened seven new small schools with one additional school slated for opening in 2007 (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008). By the fall of 2005, the initiative had opened 23 new small schools. These schools would function as schools-within-a-school by sharing a building but not administrative staff or discretionary funding.

Selection criteria for high schools to be converted included the large school having a past history of functioning as a small school, being a school with high need factors such as poverty and low academic achievement, submitting a high-quality proposal with a governance plan, and being able to demonstrate support from all stakeholders of the school community (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008). The small school model centers on the promotion of factors such as personalization, interactive and authentic instruction, and challenging curriculum while at the same time avoiding the creation of inequities and divisions in students' opportunities to participate in high-quality curriculum and overall educational opportunities.

In 2005, Joseph Kahne of Mills College in California partnered with Susan Sporte, John Easton, and researchers from the Consortium of Chicago Reform to examine the early stages of implementation of creating small schools in Chicago and the impact of such. At the time, the Annenberg Foundation had begun its \$500 million school reform effort which centered on reducing high school size. This was shortly followed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's commitment of an additional \$647 million dollars to improve America's public high schools



through the establishment of small high school environments. Additional measures to improve the educational system and increase student achievement had already been implemented including making schools accountable for student performance, issuing consequences to schools where students did not reach test-score performance goals, developing and implementing a system of selective enrollment schools in an effort to attract and maintain high performing students, improving graduation requirements, as well as providing and, in some cases, requiring educators to participate in professional development centered on curriculum development and delivery (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2005).

While the focus of Kahne's 2005 research was "formative and summative analyses for the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative and to add to the broader dialogues on the reform of low-performing urban high schools," he conceded at the time that "since the initiative was just beginning, it is far too soon for any summative judgments" (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2005, p.8). As the team undertook the research, it clearly stated several concerns in regard to the small high school movement in general. Some researchers suggested that a school being of small size was not enough. Success, according to some researchers, was based on the level of commitment the school demonstrated for principals such as personalization and interactive, authentic and challenging curriculum, while at the same time working diligently to avoid unintentional consequences such as creating inequitable divisions in students and their educational opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The magnitude and consistency of improved outcomes was unclear. A lack of understanding of the factors which led small schools to produce improved outcomes was evident. The researchers went on to state concerns related directly to the qualitative data available at the time of the study. Many studies contain no or insufficient discussion of the methodological practices which led to the identification of certain factors as the key producers of positive outcomes. Kahne and his team felt the research could have been stronger had it included comparisons of effective and ineffective small schools with controls for demographic and other relevant variables as opposed to case studies of effective small schools

(Kahne, Spote, & Easton, 2005). Many studies did not compare key elements of design components or small school structures such as schools within a school, freestanding small schools, newly created small schools, and schools created by breaking up large schools. This team of researchers sought to examine the policy efforts to implement small schools on a large scale, to learn about the implementation challenges and the impact of reform on students and teachers (Kahne, Spote, & Easton, 2005).

The team used both quantitative and qualitative data collection as they reviewed survey data from students and teachers and recorded data to compare outcomes of the small schools to outcomes of traditional high schools serving similar student populations. The qualitative data collection focused on interview and group discussions to help identify key dynamics and to study implementation experiences. As a result of these research activities, a great deal of information was gleaned. Challenges included the limits on time and resources; the volume of tasks associated with the creation of small schools; core infrastructure challenges at the district level caused delays in grant funds reaching the school level; and schools lacking needed facilities and materials such as science labs, computers, telephones, office space and projectors. While these issues were addressed, the time to do so decreased the time available for other important activities such as program development, professional development, and curriculum planning (Kahne, Spote, & Easton, 2005). Challenges arose as one of the district goals was to have teachers help lead the reform efforts; however, this concept was in conflict with district regulations, policies, and procedures regarding teacher evaluation and other management areas. Sadly, one teacher summed it up, “We were building on the fly. Things of concern just slipped through the cracks” (Kahne, Spote, & Easton, 2005, p.13).

Much of this feedback sounds negative; however, it is not. Building effective small schools is hard work and the implementation of change brings about its own set of particular challenges. The researchers also found staff that made statements such as, “I cannot say enough about the support we get from the Office of Small Schools...and the initiative” (Kahne, Spote, &

Easton, 2005, p.14). School staff expressed appreciation for professional development. Teachers expressed support for the reform as they shared positive remarks about participation in school governance and shared decision making and increased time for teachers to work together. One teacher shared a decrease in the need to utilize sick days as one example of the improved work environment experienced by staff.

Gathering feedback and perceptions of students was also beneficial. The students who attended the Chicago High School Reform Initiative rated many aspects of their school experiences higher than students from the rest of Chicago's high schools. The students believed that teachers gave them more attention and that they had positive relationships with their teachers. One student shared, "Teachers understand us and help us with everything" (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2005, p.16). Additional feedback from students included greater academic personalization, a stronger push in academics, more engagement, and higher levels of student-to-teacher trust. These results are very encouraging and afford a theoretical nexus to the belief that such positive interactions, experiences, and environments would lead to improvements in student academic performance and increased test scores.

While this team of researchers repeatedly cautions the reader regarding the fact that the study was executed very early on in the small school implementation process, tentative findings are presented. These incorporated improved student attendance, promotion of a higher number of students who are on track to graduate in four years, and a slight, but not statistically significant increase in the number of students on track to graduate as compared to other similar students. As one would expect in such a short timeframe, researchers found that "students at the Chicago High School Reform Initiative small high schools performed no differently on standardized tests than similar students at traditional high schools" (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2005, p.18).

In 2008, Joseph Kahne of Mills College in California partnered once again with Susan Sporte and a different team of researchers associated with the Consortium of Chicago School Reform to re-examine small school reform in Chicago, Illinois, after four years of

implementation. The researchers interviewed various stakeholders including funders, district leaders, reform staff, teachers, and principals. Their research also contained reviews of relevant documents related to the reform. They sought to determine whether students enrolled in the newly created small high schools “demonstrated improved academic performance, as measured on standardized tests scores in reading and mathematics, and lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates when compared with similar students who attend other schools in the district” (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008, p.282).

Researchers found that students did benefit from the implementation of the reforms. Positive outcomes included increased academic and personal support for students, decreased dropout rate, an increased graduation rate for the first cohort of students, more collegial relationships among staff, and increased teacher commitment. Interestingly, teachers initially chose to be a part of the new small school based on their belief systems and the mission of the new schools. As time went on, veteran staff began to select assignment to the new school with no consideration of the school’s programmatic structure. Conversely, the graduation rate did not increase for the second cohort, and there was no indication of improved instruction or improved student achievement (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008). The reform’s impact on adult stakeholders inside the walls of the school and their experiences were interesting. Teachers at Chicago High School Redesign Initiative high schools reported “a greater degree of teacher influence, which supports the need for teacher buy-in, along with a higher sense of collective responsibility and a greater level of commitment to innovation and engagement with professional learning” (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008, p.294). However, the researchers also found that teachers and principals at Chicago High School Reform Initiative schools “did not engage more heavily in practices that facilitate instructional improvement than did staff at other Chicago Public Schools school serving similar students” (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008, p.294). Teachers at the reformed schools did not report levels of student discussion any different than teachers at the schools not part of the reform. Reports from students at the reform schools were

more positive than those from students attending school that were not a part of the reform. They reported “a stronger sense of belonging, more peer support for academic achievement, classroom personalization, student-teacher trust, and teacher support” (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008, p.294). However, juniors attending schools that were a part of the reform effort did not report having instructional experiences significantly different than peers attending the non-reform schools. Concretely creating and implementing the core aspects of small schools is difficult at best. Changes in the professional environments and experiences for staff are much easier to facilitate and much more common than meaningful changes in instructional practices (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008). In summary, change was created and improvement was seen; however, it was not consistently found in the areas desired or to the degree needed.

These mixed conclusions align with previous research on the Chicago reform efforts, including a variety of negatives and positives such as a lack of consistent impact on student achievement, decreased dropout rates, more equitable access to academically demanding coursework, continuing shortcomings related to instruction (especially in the area of mathematics), increased student attendance, the creation of personally supportive and trusting contexts for students, a more positive school climate, and the development of a common emphasis for teachers. Findings on a national level incorporated mixed and inconclusive results in terms of improved test scores of small schools in three districts with the remaining schools in those districts. Some were higher, some were lower, and some were flat (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008).

### **New York City, New York**

The New York City Department of Education is the largest public school district in the United States, with more than one million students. It is almost 50% larger than the Los Angeles Unified School District and twice the size of the Chicago Public School District. All of these districts have a past history of poor graduation rates and large high schools. As an urban district, New York City’s schools experienced the typical urban challenges of poor student achievement in

terms of low test scores on standardized tests and persistent achievement gaps based on student socioeconomic status and race (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008).

One can identify three separate movements of small school development in New York Schools over the past forty years (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008). In the 1960s, small alternative and experimental schools were created for students that were unable to experience success in traditional high school settings. The next movement occurred in the 1990s. A new type of small school was emerging as small schools were initially created with a more broadly defined concept of reform. These early small schools typically promoted second-chance and college preparatory programs. The New York City Department of Education first began the creation of small theme high schools in 1992 with the goal being a systemic strategy to improve academic achievement at the high school level (Ancess & Allen, 2006). Part of the impetus was a generous grant awarded to an intermediary organization, the New Visions for Public Schools. This organization was formerly known as the Fund for Public Education. The practice of private foundation funding being given to intermediary organizations in order to fund school reform continued with groups such as New York Networks for School Renewal, which was funded by the Annenberg Foundation from 1994-1999; the New Century School, funded by the Carnegie Corporation; the Gates Foundation; and the Open Society Institute (Ancess & Allen, 2006). It is notable that these organizations are typically private, not-for-profit intermediaries typically led by non-educators. Lastly, the current small school reform movement continues. The current reform efforts are far more expansive, as they are system wide, typically directly or indirectly impacting the entire school district. This current movement is unique in that one of the strategies is the creation of new schools. The involvement and support of private and corporate funders also sets this movement apart from prior movements (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008).

Early research was encouraging in terms of what the small high school movement could produce. Like many public school districts, New York City was able to secure large amounts of funding from a variety of sources seeking to improve large urban high schools using the Small

High Schools model. The belief was that increases in student commitment, engagement, and achievement would lead to more meaningful learning experiences. Advocates believed that such experiences would increase levels of equity and excellence within struggling schools (Ancess & Allen, 2006). The vehicle selected to produce these changes was the establishment of themes for each of the high schools. Schools selected themes such as architecture, aviation, or teaching in hopes of re-engaging alienated students. One benefit was that students were assigned to schools based on interests rather than the location of their homes. The themes were selected to create a unique identity within each school and to set the schools apart from one another (Ancess & Allen, 2006). In this 2006 study, the researchers, Jacqueline Ancess and David Allen, both from Columbia University, used the New York City Department of Education as a case study to examine the implementation of curricular themes within Small High Schools in order to improve academic quality and equity. The researchers sought to “examine the promises and perils of the small high school reform movement” (Ancess & Allen, 2006, p.1). The district strategy was to move from what were called Shopping Mall Schools to smaller high schools with specialized themes. The target size for one of these newly created schools was typically six-hundred or fewer students. While much has been written about the small high school concept, this article discusses the implementation of various curricular themes and the resulting outcomes.

The researchers examined the degree to which the small high schools implemented the themes. The researchers found a wide range in the levels of theme implementation in the small high schools. These findings caused them to establish what they referred to as the three levels of thematic integration: nominal, marginal, and integral. In some cases, the name of the school was changed and changes were initially made to the school program only to wane and falter through the passage of time. This was frequently due to the absence of systemic policies, procedures, and plans for the sustainability of important program components connected to the theme. The authors categorized this as nominal integration. In some schools, traces of theme were apparent but only on the fringes of the organization. The themes were not major drivers in terms of their

influence on programs and/or practices. Little or no integration of the theme existed within the core courses. The theme was thought of and treated as a separate entity or program within the school. These schools, characterized by marginal integration, may have had “theme rooms” or time in the day designated for the completion of theme work. The theme existed as something that was done rather than a part of the fabric of the school. In schools where fundamental integration occurred, staff at the school level took collective responsibility to support the theme and to integrate it thoroughly into the school programs. Activities and actions undertaken by students and adults within the schools were influenced by the theme. Evidence of the theme was clearly present in the daily lives of all within the school (Ancess & Allen, 2006).

Ancess and Allen describe an example of an integrated theme school: Pablo Nerudea Academy. In this school, the theme was woven throughout the school program. The school utilized small group instruction, interdisciplinary, inquiry-based projects, and learning opportunities outside the school such as fieldwork and internships. Commitment to the theme remained true even though the school was relocated from its own facility into a different building with a school within a school structure. Despite the relocation, positive outcomes were present. The school’s pass rate on the Math Regents exam, which is required in New York State for graduation from high school, was 10% higher than the other high school within the same school building. Other positive outcomes were improved performance on standardized assessments as well as a greater sense of self-advocacy on the part of students and stronger teacher collaboration. In an analysis of smaller, theme-based schools, it was clearly established that themes, when properly developed and fully implemented into a school program, can be powerful. They can be catalysts for student academic success, parent support, and staff cohesion and unity of purpose. Even schools without structured themes began to alter the names of their schools in order to portray a theme to parents and students who were asked to list the schools they were selecting (Ancess & Allen, 2006).



Efforts to implement the theme-based schools with great attention to the concept of educational equity caused a certain level of dissonance. Unfortunately, in some cases, the reforms resulted in the re-establishment of some undesirable patterns. While the themes “communicate powerful messages about race, gender, class, income, expectations, college-going, future orientations, definitions of success, and more, they are often their proxies” (Ancess & Allen, 2006, p.403). Certain themes seemed to be designed primarily for or mostly attractive to certain populations. These populations could have been inadvertently designated through socioeconomic status of the family, ethnicity of the family, educational attainment, future expectations and plans. Middle class families were accustomed to such translation of codes and navigating processes such as school choice (Ancess & Allen, 2006). The same may not have been true in homes challenged by dealing with poverty or other stresses. Students were once again grouped by family income, class, ability, political capital, and potentially race. The concept of choice, even if based on student interest, implied that all parties would participate fully in the choice selection process. What happens when families do not choose? While the small school start up application and process do not require the explanation or selection of an explicit theme, most of the school program proposals promote themes “in order to create an identity that will differentiate their school from others so that they can attract students and avoid being assigned those students who may have no interest or resist the theme” (Ancess & Allen, 2006, p.404). In order for such a choice-driven system to be foolproof, all available choices must be of the highest quality.

Early results of the small theme high school reform initiative were positive. The promotion rate of ninth grade students to tenth grade was 93% as compared to 68% in the high schools citywide. Attendance at the small schools was 91%, compared to 82% citywide. While the costs of the small schools remained consistent with the other high schools, the small schools had significantly higher graduation rates and significantly lower dropout rates (Ancess & Allen, 2006). Despite these positive outcomes, the authors made several observations and

recommendations. The locations of the small theme schools should be based on the needs in the respective neighborhoods; the small theme schools should be placed in the neediest neighborhoods as opposed to becoming an additional viable option for middle class parents. Due to school choice, the small theme high schools were open to all students and families in terms of enrollment and selection; however, having a school in one's own neighborhood makes it a more attractive option for some families. Should parents have to transport their children or have their children transported unreasonably long distances in order to obtain a quality education? The practices related to school selection and assignment must be monitored in order to address any unintended consequences which could easily generate the reproduction of tracking and segregation. Ancess and Allen warn against "unexamined equity implications of the hidden curriculum embedded in themes." They state; "You can't force middle class parents to send their children to bad schools. You can only force poor parents to do that" (Ancess & Allen, 2006, p.412).

According to Patrice Iatarola of Florida State University and researchers from New York University, "New York City's rich history of small-school reform dates back to the 1960s" (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008, p.1839). The reform efforts of the 1990s brought about even more promise and expectation as they were built on the unique opportunity to impact the school system as a whole. From 1993 to 2003, the number of high schools in New York City increased from 122 to 238. The number of schools was doubled by opening small schools and restructuring large high schools into small learning communities or schools within a school. Expected benefits of this widespread implementation of the small school initiative were improved academic engagement, improved school culture, and increased student academic performance.

In 2008, researchers examined the several possible systemic side effects of the small school reform efforts in the New York City Department of Education as described by small school reform critics. The team investigated whether small-school schools, when compared to larger schools, served an easier-to-educate student population, whether they received more

resources, where they utilized those resources differently, and where they were able to produce better outcomes. The researchers also examined changes in segregation and resource equity during the ten-year period of their research, 1993-2003 (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008). As a result of the research, many findings were shared. They should be described, at best, as mixed. New York City small schools did not appear to be selecting and targeting only the strongest students. Small schools were found to “serve disproportionately few special education students, but not necessarily with respect to Limited English Proficient, immigrant, or poor students” (Ancess & Allen, 2006; Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008, p.1864). While graduation rates increased district wide from 1998-2003, small schools had much higher percentages of upper classmen taking the SAT. However, small school students performed lower than students in the larger schools on all 1998 measures of student outcomes, including SAT scores and the Regents exam required for graduation. Fluctuations in student segregation varied depending upon student groups. Segregation worsened for poor students, recent immigrants, and Asians, while it improved for Caucasian and African American students (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008). The percent of licensed and experienced teachers and those with master’s degrees was lower in smaller schools and higher in larger schools. Small schools were not in a position which was more favorably suited than larger schools, but what Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman called “substantial segregation of students and disparities in the distribution of resources continue as major challenge for the New York City high schools (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008, p.1869).

Large schools, by design, have a larger impact on students of low socio-economic status and students of color. An unintended consequence has been the impact of this initiative on the students who do not move to the smaller school, but instead remain in the large, unchanged high schools not part of this reform initiative. For example, the larger schools in New York City became overcrowded as the number of small schools increased (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008). Concerns about insufficient space for certain activities and the potential for

increased violence increased and were exacerbated by shifts in the racial and ethnic background of the student body. The unintended results can facilitate a sorting and categorizing of students as some are more likely and more able to make the move to a new, small school depending upon home situations and the like. “As fragmentation increases, there is more opportunity for sorting by income and its close correlate, race” (Iatarola, Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2008, p.1845).

A report written by Howard Bloom and others, published in the *Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness*, embraces some potentially promising findings. New York’s small schools of choice were opened between the years of 2002-2008. They were small, non-selective public high schools serving students of various academic functioning levels, with about 100 students in each grade level from 9th-12th. The report indicates the students earned more credits than students enrolled in other schools, were less likely to fail more than one core subject, and were therefore on track to graduate in four years. The authors indicate these gains were maintained or exceeded for all students based on a review of second and third year data. Increases were seen in the proportion of students who passed the English Regents exam required for issuance of a New York State Regents diploma. No such impact was seen in performance on the Math Regents exam. While these findings appear positive, their credibility is in question due to the nature of the survey and the potential lack of rigor based on a lack of peer review.

High school reform in large districts has repeatedly failed to consistently produce the desired results. Externally, extreme criticism of America’s public schools continues unfettered. Internally, one can only imagine the frustration experienced by staff as a result of recurrent efforts to reform schools and improve student achievement and repeated failed efforts to reach stated goals. This frustration is based on several predictable factors originating from a variety of internal and external sources, including parents, politicians, businesses leaders, and tax payers. Schools with years and years of challenges are expected to produce increased test scores within a short timeframe. Such expectations go against what has been proven in educational research. Proceeding thoughtfully with reform is paramount. Full implementation of educational change

typically takes three to five years. It takes about two years to get any new project or significant improvement off the ground; two more years for it to be fully implemented and another year or two for it to become stable and sufficiently institutionalized to consistently evidence academic improvement on student outcomes (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008). District leaders are pressured by internal and external forces to ensure that effective, genuine, and meaningful reform is occurring at the schools and often, across the district. However, the district and its leadership may lack the capacity and resources, financial and human, to fully support initiatives in which they may truly believe.

District leaders, small school reform staff, principals, and teachers (even teachers who are part of supportive and trusting communities) were often distracted from pursuing sustained and systematic instructional reform efforts because of pressures associated with the implementation of new schools and the multiple demands placed on those working in them. For example, teachers and principals struggled to secure basic supports such as furniture, books, telephones and email. Discretionary money was promised, but not always distributed in a timely manner and some schools reported being understaffed all year (Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2008).

While school reform has been implemented in schools with short-term positive results, being able to consistently produce positive outcomes and improve test scores remains a challenge for districts of all sizes. Researchers have recognized the challenge of converting small-scale success to the larger scale of entire districts. Given the important role of the district in the potential creation and facilitation of long term school reform, this study will investigate the possible correlation between district size and the effectiveness of high school reform.

This discussion of school reform would be lacking without acknowledgement that some allege the crisis about America's public schools is a manufactured crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). David C. Berliner, Regents' Professor in the College of Education at Arizona State University, and Bruce J. Biddle, Editor of the *Journal of Social Psychology of Education*, authors of *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools*, which

was published in 1995, contend just that. They consider the release of *A Nation at Risk* as the beginning of the manufactured crisis. They refer to the report as the mother of all critiques of American education.

Berliner and Biddle describe what transpired after the release of the report. In 1983, despite evidence to the contrary, people in President Reagan's administration began to passionately attack the character and performance of America's public schools. The authors report these mistruths were then repeated by other leaders of the Reagan and Bush administrative teams. Next, the myths were reported as facts and supported in documents published by industrialists and business leaders. They were reported repeatedly by the media (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). People began to state the mistruths as if they were indeed fact. A few of these are as follows:

- America's schools always come up short when compared with schools in other countries, indicating that our educational procedures are deficient and that our educators are feckless.
- Investing in the schools has not bought success, indeed, money is unrelated to school performance.
- The productivity of American workers is deficient, and this reflects the inadequate training they receive in American schools.
- Because they are subject to market forces, private schools are inherently better than public schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

While Berliner and Biddle proclaim that none of these statements can be proven, they ponder why these criticisms had such an impact. They attribute the support and beliefs of these ideas to the social forces at the time, and cite contributing factors such as the problems faced by American public education and events transpiring in the society overall. The authors expressed the belief that most people are generally decent and well-intentioned; likely those who

passionately criticize public schools are not fully aware of or do not comprehend the challenges being faced in America's public schools. Upon hearing of the tainted information, some people misunderstood evidence, some were fooled or tricked, and some had self-servicing motivation to support and share the negative information. The authors firmly believe a political agenda is being leveraged by powerful people in an attempt to weaken support for public schools; their ultimate goals being to redistribute support and resources to advantage privileged students over needy students or possibly even to dismantle public schools altogether.

When I first heard about America 2000 and its provisions for diverting public funds to private schools, I classified it as just another attempt to reinforce the image of the Education President. Further probing of the evidence, however, has convinced me that America 2000 is more than a mere quest for image. Total expenditures for public elementary and secondary education have grown steadily over the past three decades. It takes no special insight to realize that, as the original forty-niners might have said, "That's gold in them thar hills!" (Jaeger, 1992, p.125)

This quote makes light of a serious series of events which occurred during the George Bush presidency. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush favored vouchers as a tool to allow public school funds to follow students to private schools. While this concept was touted as a benefit to students and families stuck in inferior public schools, one must ask who are the students, in general, that traditionally attend private schools. Might self-interest or class interest be the motivation for a program such as vouchers? The Edison Project might be another such example. The Edison Project was designed to be a network of profit-making schools. The goal was to help public school systems turn failing schools into successful ones by turning the schools over to the Edison Project. The company was founded by Chris Whittle, a business tycoon from Tennessee. His business, Channel One, provided schools with news programming and equipment in exchange for the right to subject students to two minutes of commercials each school day. Chris Whittle was an associate of the secretary of education in the Bush administration, who was

also the former governor of Tennessee. Also, the former secretary of education, a strong critic of public schools was hired to work for the Edison Project. Critics of public education, politicians, and creative, highly motivated entrepreneurs create an interesting mix.

Historian Lawrence A. Cremin declared, “International competitiveness cannot be solved by educational reform and the belief that it can is utopian and millennialist; it is at best foolish and at worst a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something about competitiveness and to lay the burden instead on the schools” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, Kindle version, location 429, no page). The authors of *The Manufactured Crisis* acknowledge that Americans are concerned about the state of public education. Efforts to reform our schools are driven by energy, optimism, and a willingness to tinker with social institutions. These efforts have mixed results. Some have a few good effects, some are unworkable, some are cost prohibitive, and some create problems for our students or staff. Finally, Berliner and Biddle elaborate on true and meaningful reform. In order to be successful, reform efforts should:

- reflect genuine, rather than fictitious, problems faced by the schools;
- be based on attainable goals that are shared by the people concerned;
- be planned with the understanding of structural forces in the society and the education system that will affect the proposed changes;
- encourage and respond to debates about alternatives among educators, students, parents, and others affected by those proposals;
- involve plans for both starting and maintaining the program; and  
are adequately funded (Berliner & Biddle, 1995)

The authors contend the logical expectation that supporting calls for public school reform with research knowledge is not the expectation among the popular reformers calling for change; meanwhile, Americans continue to fund reform after reform that cannot and do not work (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). While the authors passionately express disdain for perceived



involvement of politics in the important matters of public education; politicians of both major parties continue to promote the use of standardized test scores as the primary measure of student and public school success. Today's high stakes tests are an outgrowth of the work of Frederick Taylor. These tests heavily influence funding and public perception of school quality. As a result, schools narrow the curriculum in order to focus on content areas subject to accountability measures (Rees, 2001).

In 1996, Lawrence Stedman, Associate Professor of Education at State University of New York-Binghamton, reviewed the book written by Berliner and Biddle. Stedman asserts that the Berliner and Biddle book is based on the following four faulty assertions: (1) There never was a test score decline; (2) Today's students are out-achieving their counterparts; (3) U. S. students stack up very well in international assessment; and (4) The general education crisis is a right-wing fabrication (Stedman, 1996). Philosophically, Stedman was mindful of the apprehensions expressed by Berliner and Biddle. However, he conveyed many concerns and doubts in terms of their research and findings. Their analysis was described as "deeply flawed and misleading" (Stedman, 1996, p.1). International findings were mishandled, he asserts, adding that decreases in test score data were mischaracterized due to failure to acknowledge the continued poor academic performance of students. Berliner and Biddle, according to Stedman, care more about the story than they do about evidence. He declares that they tell only part of the story. Stedman articulates a thorough, specific, and concise point-by-point rebuttal to the issues articulated by Berliner and Biddle. Examples: "Although achievement trends, for the most part, have been stable, academic and general knowledge have been at low levels for decades" (Stedman, 1996, p.4). Another powerful counter argument:

Although racism and social inequality have taken a severe toll on many of our students' academic development, this does not explain the poor general performance of U.S. students. The math deficit, for example, is not simply a minority student problem. In 1992, only 30% of "white" U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> graders demonstrated proficiency in the NAEP math

assessment; over a quarter did not even make the basic level. Nor are our problems due to low-achievers. Even our top half has not kept pace internationally in math and science. (Stedman, 1996, p. 4.)

Gene Glass, Regents' Professor at the Arizona State University, and author of the 2008 book, *Fertilizers, Pills and Magnetic Strips*, affirms that the history of criticism of American public education, or as he refers to it, "the sport of bad mouthing public schools," (Glass, 2008, p. 5) runs deep. The language used by Glass illuminates these thought-provoking concepts. "The background whine of crisis has been a feature of public life for decades in the U.S." (Glass, 2008, p. 4). He also expresses that "The elderly have forgotten how things once were and the young never knew (Glass, 2008, p.4).

Glass insists that the challenges being experienced in America's schools are the result, loosely, of the social intersection of concepts he has labeled as fertilizers, pills, and magnetic strips. Fertilizer refers to advances in agricultural technology and science, such as the development of fertilizer, which caused population shifts in America. There was less need to tend to farms. Americans moved from the rural areas to the cities. A larger family, which was a benefit on the farm, is now a liability if one is living in the city, where space is limited. Next, we look at the concept of Pills. Advances in medicine provided more effective methods for family planning and increased life expectancies. America's public school system is impacted by this as the majority race, white Americans, bear fewer and fewer children and live longer lives while slowly becoming less invested in public education as an institution. At the same time, the population of public school students who are not white is growing. Vouchers are used, not by needy, low-income students, but by white students, in order to attend private schools. Lastly, the term Magnetic Strips refers to the introduction of the technology of the magnetic strip. The result is a credit-card economy and a credit-card culture. This includes a widespread culture of materialism and consumption. The drive for consumption and consumerism in America is such a potent force that it shapes the culture in countless ways and influences institutions such as schools

in dominant, fundamental manners (Glass, 2008). Glass believes the schools are accused of being in a crisis of achievement when they are, by all accounts, in a crisis of costs. Schools are expected to meet increasing numbers of requirements in terms of educational programming, integrating, and providing technology and new levels of service provision while cutting costs at the same time. While it will not be fully addressed here, the media play a large role in the changes described by Glass (2008). For example, in-depth examinations of student achievement data or school programs do not make good sound bites.

In 1947, an education editor of the *New York Times* reported that education was in the midst of a serious crisis. In 1959, Hyman Rickover, author of *Education and Freedom*, expressed that education was the most critical issue facing America and asserted that it would take a massive increase in academic standards in schools to guarantee America's future (Glass, 2008; Rickover, 1959). While speaking with journalist Eric Sevareid in 1965, Walter Lippman, an intellectual, journalist, and opinion-maker proclaimed that the schools were inadequate (Glass, 2008). More than 150 years ago, Horace Mann was displeased to learn that slightly fewer than half of Boston's fourteen year olds failed to answer correctly that water expands when it freezes. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the University of California at Berkeley found that approximately a third of all entering freshmen were not proficient in English. Some historians believed that the Great Depression resulted in part from failures of the U.S education system.

Tyack and Cuban share that some consider educational reform "an institutional Bermuda Triangle into which intrepid change agents sail, never to appear again; others argue that public education is too trendy, that entirely too many foolish notions circulate through the system at high velocity. Are schools too resistant to change or too faddish?" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, Kindle version, Location 44, no page). Glass reviewed many of the arguments utilized to justify the current public education system crisis rhetoric which dominates America today. He established that achievement had been somewhat stable despite a decline in the 1970s and performance by American students on international assessments was not as dire as asserted. The concept of an

educational crisis had to be created in order to justify and validate the extreme changes that certain political interests were to conspiring to impose on America's public schools (Glass, 2008). Glass points out that the inequalities in American education mirror the inequalities in American life, more generally. The rationale that efforts to address classism and racism underlie much of what contemporary education reform points to the motives of the reformers which must be considered suspect as best. "In our ordinary lives, we see and hear the evidence again and again that one group wants nothing to do with the other; not to live by them and not to send their children to the same school" (Glass, 2008, Kindle version, location 380, no page). Glass shares that he has come to believe that the debates swirling around education are not at all about achievement or test scores or preparing tomorrow's workforce. They are about gaining the political power to control money and secure special privileges. Behind the rhetoric lies material self-interest, a drive for comfort, and a need for security. These enduring motives are older than public education. They never change, just as the debates about public education seem never to change.

While Berliner and Biddle and Gene Glass stimulate intriguing debate, whether or not the crisis in America's public schools was manufactured is not the focus of this study. The intention is not to debate this topic. Large amounts of money are being spent to reform schools and improve test scores, often in the name of educational equity. School reform programs are being implemented in districts all across the United States of America. The purpose of this study is to research one such initiative, the Federal Department of Education School Improvement Grant Program.

### **Personal Experience and Knowledge**

This study was designed based upon my genuine professional desire to learn if there is a correlation between district size and how effectively school improvement initiatives are implemented. The question has arisen out of my 29-year career in public education. Eighteen of those years were spent in educational administration, including ten years as a district level

administrator. As a district administrator, positions held were Director of Human Resources, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education, and Deputy Superintendent. Regardless of the job title, one of the major areas of responsibility was always to deliver support to schools and school leaders with the ultimate goal being to facilitate change in order to increase student achievement.

The work of supporting school-level teams and assisting with school improvement and reform is a professional passion of mine. As a building principal, district-level support and resources were provided to the school where I worked. As a district administrator, it was my responsibility to facilitate the provision of support and resources. At the district level, the structure and organization of departments and procedures related to the provision of support and resources are very complex. Working at the district level helped me better understand things that were not clear when I was working at the building level.

Spending close to 30 years working in a school district with more than 9,000 students and 22 schools and now working in a district with less than 6,000 students and 8 schools has been a revealing experience. Recently relocating to a smaller school district has caused me to view things differently and created even more questions in my mind. In past visits to larger school districts in California and Texas, where district leaders often referred to our 9,000 plus student district as small, it was clear that all districts, except the smallest ones, have layers and layers of people, positions, and departments created, in theory, to address the needs of the schools and the district in order to educate students. One would typically assume that a smaller school district is potentially more efficient, and therefore more effective. Accomplishing tasks and meeting organizational needs should, in theory, be easier when there are fewer persons in the process.

In smaller districts, however, administrators are more likely to serve more than one administrative role, such as being the superintendent of schools and the high school principal. In smaller districts, school-level staff may have the opportunity to know district-level administrators, whereas in larger districts, school-level staff may rarely interact with district-level

administrators and may view the district administrative team as an untouchable figurehead. One former superintendent shared experiences in a small district as follows:

There are very few times memorandums are written. If I had something to say to a teacher, I went and talked to them, and in the same token, they came and talked to me, and they would even call and say, “Would you come and see me that day” and that day I got to see them. (Howley & Howley, 2006, p.10)

Admittedly, it is difficult to imagine working in such an environment. The experiences garnered thus far, by working in two vastly different districts, have been challenging and rewarding in both settings. The interview phase of this dissertation took me to two very different schools and districts. I found the experience of speaking with those ten educators extremely invigorating. This work, serving as a public school educator, is my passion. Considering the educational experiences and challenges of America’s young people being educated in public schools, there is much work yet to be done.

### **Summary**

The current situation was foreseen by Dan Lortie. He predicted a new external structure would arise comprised of agencies dedicated to facilitating change. Lortie predicted the current widespread obsession with reform and unsubstantiated claims of isolated spectacular schools. He forecast that improvement strategies would be designed by people whose orientations do not align with teachers and who do not understand teachers or teaching. (Lortie, 1975). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, An Open Letter to the American People*, was released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education 31 years ago; yet the American public and many politicians continue to demand more of the American education system. Efforts to restructure the American high school educational experience began decades ago and continue to this time. Numerous initiatives have been launched by a variety of sources. The call for change has been heard in the United States for centuries. Many attempts have been made, traditionally via legislation and programs providing financial resources, to fund changes in educational

practices. While Lortie (1975) recommended the creation of high-quality collegial relationships amongst teachers, mutual trust and increased responsibility for performance of peers and supported teacher-driven collaboration among teachers while expressing disdain from top-down forced teacher collaboration; the recommendations never came to fruition on a large scale. (Hargreaves, 2010; Lortie, 1975). Teachers in America's classrooms have felt like pawns in the vast number of improvements and initiatives launched in order to answer the call for reform.

Teachers' work has been manipulated by top-down reformers of all political persuasions. Reformers have been prepared to alter teacher individualism and play with presentism, but the one variable they have refused to change is their own social and political conservatism and its insistence on top-down accountability connected to narrowly tested system outcomes in relation to restricted conceptions of curriculum and learning. (Hargreaves, 2010, p.151)

Organizations are complex and facilitating organizational change within schools is difficult. Resistance and fear are often the norm (Payne, 2008). School districts are unique organizations in that they are not companies or manufacturers, which can improve the bottom line by changing the content or characteristics of the raw produce with which the work begins. The function and role of school district leadership is an important aspect of the public school educational process. Important aspects of school district include using and interpreting data, increasing teacher knowledge and skills, facilitating the alignment of curriculum and instruction, and providing targeted supports to low-performing students and schools (Masse1,2001 ).Students attending public schools and adults working in them are subject to experiences based on decisions made by school district leadership. The bureaucracy found within can, in some cases, be crippling. Payne describes the oppressive power of bureaucracy in a chapter aptly titled, "You Can't Kill It and You Can't Teach It." The power of the bureaucracy in a persistently failing school or district is characterized such that small things or events take on a level of increased power and a life of their own. Simple things become great symbols of dysfunction. Positives

become hard to recognize and acknowledge; and thus the cycle simply perpetuates itself. The sizes of America's school districts vary greatly. On the whole, the largest school districts in the country educate a majority of students who are educationally marginalized and disenfranchised due to poverty. It is the responsibility of the district level administration and the respective support structures and departments to be organized and structured in a way that will facilitate success at the building level, regardless of the size of the district. Perhaps this is not occurring because some school districts are organizationally and structurally too large to be effective.



## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This was a mixed method, exploratory study conducted in two-phases. Phase I, which was quantitative, was document analysis of the grant proposals and the annual performance reports for Cohort One and Cohort Two public schools and districts awarded School Improvement Grants. The document analysis generated trend data on the progress districts made toward meeting the grant's accountability goals. Phase II of the study, which was qualitative, was to select two schools and interview staff involved in the implementation of the School Improvement Grants. The objective of the interviews was to gather perception data from specific district staff related to the implementation of the high school reform activities, programs, and initiatives funded by the School Improvement Grant.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

##### Phase I

**Sampling strategies.** The districts and schools for the study were selected after an examination of information on the State Board of Education website. This included a review of a comprehensive list of all districts awarded School Improvement Grants and specific schools for which grant funds were allotted. The list named awardees funded in the first three funding cycles, state fiscal years 2011, 2012, and 2013. This study utilized the first two cohorts of schools, those funded beginning in fiscal years 2011 and 2012. The selection of these districts utilized a cluster sampling method; the sampling of a convenient cluster or group of schools (Vogt, 2007). The sample is obtained by using a pre-existing or natural group (Bluman, 1992). The division of the school into cohorts, based on funding, naturally establishes the clusters needed for the sampling. All of the schools in Cohort One and Cohort Two were included in

the Phase I data analysis. Cohort One has seven schools and Cohort Two has 13. Table 1, Participant Description, presents information about the schools and districts in the study. The schools and districts are divided into several different categories. These include Cohorts One and Two, district size codes, and school size codes. These categories will be utilized in subsequent sections of this dissertation for presentation of data and, in some cases, for data analysis purposes.

Table 1

Participant Description

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percent
<b>Cohort</b>		
Cohort 1	7	35
Cohort 2	13	65
<b>District Size</b>		
500 students or less than 1,000	3	15
More than 1,400 and less than 400,000	5	25
More than 400,000	12	60
<b>School Size</b>		
200 students or less	3	15
More than 200 and less than 1,000	10	50
More than 1,000 and less than 1,700	7	35

While Table 1 provides general information about study participants, Table 2 presents specific information about each school and each district. Though all of the districts and schools clearly meet the program requirements of being persistently failing schools, the districts and schools differ in several ways. The awarded school districts are of differing types, such as

suburban, urban, and rural. Most serve a high percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The lowest percentage is 53% and the highest 86%. Most of the schools and districts have been in No Child Left Behind School Improvement Status for several years. This is to be expected; the Federal School Improvement Grant program was designed specifically for what the Department of Education terms persistently failing schools. The districts' choices of which reform model option was selected were not very varied. Definitions of the models are provided in Appendix B. As described and mandated by the Department of Education, some of the models may have not been viable, depending on situations in certain districts. Differences include the numbers of students enrolled in the schools and the districts. Again, Table 2 provides information on each of the schools in the study and their respective districts.

Five of the 20 schools had been in School Improvement Status for 12 years. Eight of the 20 schools had been in School Improvement Status for nine years. Eight years in district level school improvement was the most common timeframe for the school districts in the data set. Of the four mandatory intervention model options listed by the Federal Department of Education, (Transformation, Turnaround, Restart, and Closure), 15 of the 20 schools chose the transformation model, four chose the turnaround model, and one school opted for the school restart model. Full definitions of the models are provided in Appendix B. These data are featured in Table 2.

Table 2

## School and District Characteristics

School Name	District Size Code	Dist # Yrs in School Imp	School Size Code	School # Yrs in School Imp	% School Free/Red Lunch	Reform Strategy	Cohort
School A	1	2	1	n/a	68%	Transformation	1
School B	1	8	1	7	53%	Transformation	1
School C	2	8	2	9	75%	Turnaround	1
School D	3	8	3	9	86%	Turnaround	1
School E	3	8	2	12	86%	Turnaround	1
School F	3	8	2	12	86%	Turnaround	1
School G	3	8	2	9	86%	Restart	1
School H	1	n/a	1	n/a	69%	Transformation	2
School I	2	6	2	n/a	65%	Transformation	2
School J	2	8	3	n/a	69%	Transformation	2
School K	2	8	3	1	75%	Transformation	2
School L	2	8	3	n/a	67%	Transformation	2
School M	3	8	2	9	86%	Transformation	2
School N	3	8	3	9	86%	Transformation	2
School O	3	8	3	9	86%	Transformation	2
School P	3	8	2	9	86%	Transformation	2
School Q	3	8	3	9	86%	Transformation	2
School R	3	8	2	12	86%	Transformation	2
School S	3	8	2	12	86%	Transformation	2
School T	3	8	2	12	86%	Transformation	2

*Note.* District size code (number of students): 1 = 500–1,000 students, 2 = 1,000–399,999 students, 3 = 400,000 students or more; School size code (number of students): 1 = 1–200 students, 2 = 201–999 students, 3 = 1,000 students or more

**Data collection.** Phase I of the study included document analysis of each district's School Improvement Grant proposal and the annual performance reports for the purpose of examining how the districts performed on the Lead Indicators, the main accountability measures for the grant; and investigation of whether any connection exists between the performance on the Lead Indicators and district size or school size. These documents must be submitted to the State Board of Education annually and are publically available. Each district was required to report its performance on the Lead Indicators outlined in the grant. These indicators were developed by the United States Department of Education and applied to all districts awarded the grants. The

document analysis revealed the quantitative aspects of the district's performance on each of the Lead Indicators. The analysis of the documents was theoretically situated in a quantitative viewpoint as the consideration was squarely based on whether or not improvement occurred on mandated grant goal data points. One important aspect of the analysis was to examine whether differences existed in district performance on the Lead Indicators by district or school size.

The Phase I document analysis involved all 20 public high schools awarded School Improvement Grants in the first two funding cycles. The grant funds were allotted to enable school districts to drastically change educational programs in order to improve scores on state-mandated tests. School Improvement Grants were made available to qualifying districts beginning with fiscal year 2011. Four cohorts of districts and schools have been awarded the grants. The focus of this study was the groups of schools and districts funded in the first two funding cycles. The first cohort was funded for the three year period of July 2010–June 2013. The first cohort of districts and schools awarded funding is comprised of seven schools representing four districts. Four of the schools are in one specific large, urban district. The second cohort, which comprised 13 schools from six districts, was funded for the three year period of July 2011–June 2014. Eight of the 13 schools in the second cohort are in the same large, urban district as four of the schools from cohort one. One district has one school in each cohort. The large, urban district has a total of 12 schools between the two cohorts. Three school districts have more than one school in the School Improvement Grant Program.

In terms of district size, the grant awardees have student populations ranging from more than 400,000 to less than 500. One district has about 8,500 students, two districts have approximately 14,000 students, two have 4,000 to 5,000 students, and three districts have approximately 500 students. More specific information on the schools and districts is provided in Chapter IV. While all of the high schools in this study are located in the same Midwestern state, they are located throughout the state and in many different types of communities. The largest district in the state is one of the largest school districts in the nation. The remaining schools,

except for one, are located throughout the state in rural areas and in small, medium, and large communities.

**Analysis of quantitative data.** Phase I methods of data analysis were descriptive statistics, paired sample t-test to conduct a pre-grant/post-grant analysis of performance on the Lead Indicators, and univariate ANOVA to examine changes in the Lead Indicators across the pre-grant and post-grant performance. While the first univariate ANOVA investigated the impact of district size, a second analysis was executed based on school size. In both analyses, F ratios, p values, and effect sizes, based on partial eta squares for statistical significance indications, were utilized. In alignment with the current educational climate, which consists of historically high levels of accountability and an unprecedented emphasis on results defined by non-humanistic factors such as scores on standardized tests, these documents provided quantitative, factual data. The Lead Indicators were developed by the Federal Department of Education and apply to all districts awarded School Improvement Grants. Phase I of the study had two basic purposes. The first was to examine the district and school performance on the Lead Indicators after the implementation of School Improvement Grant programs and to examine if there were any differences in district performance on the Lead Indicators. Differences were examined for any relationship to district size. The next step was to examine if there were any differences in district performance on the Lead Indicators associated with school size. The second purpose was to utilize the findings identified in Phase I to guide the selection of two schools where interviews were held.

For the purposes of accountability, the Federal Department of Education requires all School Improvement Grant recipients to annually report updated data on Lead Indicators. The School Improvement Grant Lead Indicators are listed in Appendix C. These Lead Indicators are the dependent variables in the study. Five of the Lead Indicators (high school dropout rate, number of truants, student participation rate on the State Achievement Exam in reading/language arts and mathematics (by student subgroups), number of discipline incidents, and student

attendance rate) represent information which all school districts in the state are required to submit. Four of the nine Lead Indicators (distribution of teachers by performance level on the district's teacher evaluation system, number and percentage of students completing advanced coursework [Advanced Placement, Early-College High School, or dual enrollment classes, and International Baccalaureate], number of minutes within the school year, and teacher attendance rate) represent information submitted only by grant recipients. Definitions and sources of each Lead Indicator are located in Appendix C. Discipline data were not available. The State Board of Education indicated no district in the data set met the threshold for required reporting of these data. Format changes were made to some of the Lead Indicator data to facilitate the data analysis process. Descriptions of how the data were formatted for the purposes of the study are also in Appendix C.

## **Phase II**

**Sampling strategies.** Purposeful sampling was used to determine which districts should be part of Phase II of the study. According to Glesne (1999), the power in purposeful sampling comes from the selection of cases where the researcher can learn a great deal and tap into a certain level of richness about concepts and topics essential to the research purpose. Considering the accounts of school reform included in the literature review, the prediction could be made that larger districts would experience less success in improving performance on the grant's Lead Indicators, and that smaller districts would experience more success. Consider the reflections of a superintendent of a large district after his first few days on the job.

The internal probe was straightforward. It confirmed my worse suspicions. Like so many other school districts, the administrative imperatives in Charlotte were all bureaucratic. Central management had become slack, top-heavy, and ponderous. No one in the system was held to high standards—not students, not teachers, not administrators. To the contrary, self-protection and back scratching were the orders of the day...the

organization had begun to serve itself-the employees, rather than its customer, students and parents. (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003, p.1)

This actual description mirrors what Payne described in *So Much Reform, So Little Change*. The narrative articulates how an organization can lose its focus and become its own enemy, crippling its ability to prioritize service to clients; in this case the students and families. What this superintendent depicts is a culture which, based on the theories shared by Edgar Schein, has deteriorated. It sums up what one study participant described as many different departments in a district working to help the school sites, but instead becoming the problem due to lack of communication and coordination. Such dysfunction is described in the literature as a product of district size.

Larger districts can make it difficult for educators and others to evaluate and improve the production of education. Loss of school level autonomy is also associated with district size (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003). “In 1999, students attending schools in larger districts in California did not perform as well on standardized tests as those attending schools in smaller districts in California. District size appears to hinder educational achievement; with the biggest impact being on middle school student performance” (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorny, 2003, p.201). Part of the Phase I document analysis process was to seek to identify larger districts with positive performance toward grant accountability goals and smaller districts that were not as successful. This is described as extreme or deviant case sampling as the cases are special in that they defy what has been described in past studies of high school reform (Glesne, 1999).

**Data collection.** Two high schools, Sumner and Meridian (pseudonyms), were selected as potential interview sites based on Phase I data analysis. Sumner High School, located in the Sumner School District (a pseudonym), was selected because the dropout rate decreased while the percent of chronic truants increased, and student attendance increased slightly after implementation. Using the coding levels described earlier, Sumner High School is a large school in a medium-sized district. Sumner High School was in the second set of schools awarded the



grant, and its data reflect one year of grant implementation. Meridian High School, located in Meridian Public Schools (a pseudonym), was selected because it improved the student dropout rate, the percent of chronic truants, and the student attendance rate. Meridian is a medium-sized school in a large district. Meridian High School was in the first set of schools awarded the grant, and its data reflect two years of grant implementation.

Phase II of the study was qualitative in design, and therefore more emergent and interpretive in nature (Creswell, 2003). Interviews were the appropriate choice for the research as they allowed participants to provide in-depth and quality information which cannot be attained without some type of person-to-person interaction. By design, interviews allow the participant to share relevant historical information that may not be revealed in another vehicle, such as a survey. This qualitative approach is more collaborative and personal (Creswell, 2003).

Qualitative methods typically fall within a constructivist paradigm because the reality they portray is constantly changing and shifting; it is highly sophisticated, influenced by the social aspects of human interaction and organizational dynamics (Glesne, 1999). These concepts align with this exploratory study of high school reform as this type of qualitative research involves variables which are complex and interwoven. The interviews included probing the motivations, contexts, situations, and experiences of activities related to the School Improvement Grant implementation process (Glesne, 1999).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members from two school districts. The interview participants are high school principals, high school teachers, staff members assigned to assist with or facilitate the implementation of the grant activities, and district-level administrators. This resulted in a total of 20 interviews. For eight participants, the first interview was a face-to-face individual interview. For two participants, no face-to-face interview was held; both were via telephone. The second and last interview, a wrap-up conversation to review and confirm the data, was held over the telephone with each of the ten

participants. The interviews were audio recorded, except for one in which the participant declined to be recorded subsequent to signing the consent.

School principals were selected in order to articulate the perspective of middle management staff that is largely responsible for overseeing school level activities. School principals are on the front line, though they are part of management and not actually in the classroom teaching students. Unlike teachers, the principal's role centers on a broad view and overall knowledge of what occurs throughout the entire school. Four teachers were interviewed for the study. Some have full-time classroom responsibilities; while others work with adults in their roles such as instructional or data coaches or coordinators. Titles are not used or shared in order to protect the confidentiality of participants. The perceptions of teachers are important as they are responsible for actually working directly with students. Administrators and district leaders can share what they believe is transpiring in classrooms, but classroom teachers have firsthand knowledge of what actually occurs in the classrooms and the school. Interviewees at the central office level were administrators who work with the principals. Again, titles are not listed or shared in order to protect the confidentiality of participants. While these administrators are not located at the school site, they are involved in oversight of what is implemented at the school in terms of educational programming and grant initiatives.

Within the grant guidelines, additional staff members can be hired to facilitate needed changes. These staff members are typically compensated through grant funds with their primary role being to facilitate substantial changes in the schools and district. In the case of the two schools where Phase II interviews were completed, the structure used to secure a person to help facilitate grant implementation was unique. In one district, the role was filled by a person in an ongoing, district-funded position which existed prior to the awarding of the grant and was expected to continue once funding ended. In the other district, the role was filled with a person with a wealth of district experience and the role was slotted for elimination once the grant funds ended. In the second situation, some turnover in the position occurred because of the short-term

nature of the position. Knowing that it would be eliminated caused a person to vacate the position. In both districts, the person responsible for helping drive the reform effort was very familiar with the school, the staff, and the School Improvement Grant.

Gathering the perspectives of two types of administrators was important; principals and district level administrators potentially have vastly different viewpoints regarding school programming and implementation because of where they are situated within the overall organization. District level administrators must have a big-picture view of the entire district, the larger community and the needs of all district stakeholders. Building principals, however, usually have more of a school-level lens, with most of their interests and influence connected to the school site. See Appendix E for a list of interview participants and Appendix F for a list of the interview questions.

**Analysis of qualitative data.** Coding and generating themes were the data analysis processes utilized for data gathered from interviews. The data were analyzed using several cycles of coding and repeated identification of themes from the data. Analytic memos were written in conjunction with the coding (Strauss, 1987). After interview sessions were held and notes were transcribed, coding began. Coding is described as an ongoing and progressive process of sorting and defining and resorting and refining and examining data including transcripts, memos, notes, documents, and literature (Glesne, 1999). Similarly, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) described coding as taking whole data and creating units small enough to analyze by developing categories. Codes are labels used to assign meaning to information and data gathered during a study. Codes are connected to phrases, words, or large sections of text (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Coding facilitates the process of organizing, retrieving and interpreting data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The function of coding includes three specific operations: recognizing relevancy within the data, gathering examples of relatedness, and designing analysis in order to identify and examine commonalities, trends, differences, structures, and patterns (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). Coding is employed to connect different parts or concepts in various pieces of data. The goal of coding is

to examine the data closely in order to yield concepts within the overall data (Strauss, 1987). The ultimate objective of coding is for the researcher to find the meaning in the data in order to interpret the data and draw conclusions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). As a result of coding, various topics, ideas, thoughts, questions, and themes arise from the data.

The specific approach to the coding of the qualitative data was based on the work of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). The coding was limited to data related to the research questions. Three types of first-cycle coding were utilized. In-vivo coding was used to examine and analyze the language of the participants. Secondly, holistic coding was completed to analyze the data paragraph by paragraph. Provisional coding was executed based on the research questions being the frame for analysis. A special code was established for causation to help develop an explanation of how the impact of district size was characterized in the interview data. Finally, simultaneous coding was also used. More than one type of coding was implemented, with particular attention given to direct quotes and statements from interview participants, which connect directly to the research question of the impact of district size on School Improvement Grant implementation in high schools.

Anselm Strauss recommends the use of memo-writing by the researcher to help maintain these ideas throughout the research and data analysis process. Memo-writing was utilized in addition to coding. Memos generally contained questions of theory, preliminary summary information, possible hypotheses; they generated further coding processes as they lead to the integration of various theories and concepts (Strauss, 1987). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) specific approach to analytic memos was also utilized in the data analysis process. Tables were created to include key pieces and themes from each interview. Causation was also examined across the different roles and categories of interview participants. Tables were also created based on each research question and each individual interview question. Analyses were made to establish which, if any, themes, codes, and/or patterns were recurring and if there was an

association between the appearance of the theme, codes and patterns, and district size (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Study findings will be based upon the integration of the results of data analysis processes, the results of the coding work, and the content of memos in order to put all of the individual pieces and parts together to formulate specific findings related to this study of the impact of district size on the implementation of School Improvement Grants in high schools.

### **Researcher Positionality**

According to Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1996), all researchers are positioned by factors such as age, race, gender, class, nationality, institutional affiliation, historical-personal circumstance, and intellectual predisposition. Furthermore, she explains that positionality is shaped by personal life history and experiences (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). Because of this, I will share information about my personal background and experiences related to working with school reform as a public school educator. Some information and details are omitted in order to maintain confidentiality of interview participants.

This study holds a high level of professional interest for me. I have worked in two different school districts. My administrative roles in both districts have consisted of some degree of responsibility for improving student achievement through the implementation and evaluation of educational programs. As the principal of a school with a large percentage of low income students, it was my responsibility to implement whole school reform by implementing an innovative approach to elementary education. Once assigned to central office, a primary responsibility was to supervise principals of all types of schools, including traditional elementary, middle, and high schools; magnet schools; an alternative school; and an early childhood center. Over the course of these years, the district and community in which I was working and living was changing slowly, but drastically. The school district was impacted by the city's population decrease, which began in the early to mid-1980s. The economic and employment trends of the community also changed during this time, with many major employers relocating to other states.

By 2011, the district's enrollment had declined to 50% of what it had been in 1968. During the same timeframe, the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals increased as a result of the community's economic challenges and traditional patterns of white flight. School improvement and reform have long been on the forefront of the district's agenda due to its demographics and history of student performance. Once No Child Left Behind was placed into law in 2002, the emphasis was heightened. All of the district's 22 schools were familiar, to some degree, with reform and school improvement. I chose to relocate from this district in order to work in a different type and size of school district.

In my current role as an Assistant Superintendent in a small, suburban Ohio city, I am immersed in a different type and size of school district. The district has eight schools and a population of more than 5,000 students. Approximately 40% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. None of the schools meets the criteria for the School Improvement Grant program. This does not mean the district is not concerned about and making efforts to improve school programs and ensure that the needs of all students are addressed. Because of the abundance of resources and community support, the district is able to provide students with a wealth of unique and diverse educational opportunities, experiences, and programs. These range from offering Fencing, Crew, Chess, French, Latin and Ski Clubs to providing students with Advanced Placement courses and a fully-authorized International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. It is a core belief of the district that enrichment for all is a priority and is the basis for numerous historic and creative efforts to address discrepancies in student achievement. The district was the recipient of a small Federal Race to the Top grant. While the district makes it a point to be deliberate about its choice of initiatives and programs; over the years, it has participated in many different reform efforts, such as working with Harvard educator Ron Ferguson and implementing the International Baccalaureate Programme in all schools at all grade levels.

While I did not attend a school district with the wide array of offerings or with the broad and celebrated diversity as my current district of employment, my formative years were spent in a community with socioeconomic diversity; though its racial diversity was primarily comprised of African Americans and European Americans. As a young person raised in a supportive, nuclear family, I was taught from an early age to have a heart for the less fortunate and chose a career in education in order to serve children. As an African American woman, I am very cognizant of the fact that many of the children being educated in challenging environments such as large, urban districts are people of color. Simply put, this disturbs me. Their lives will be forever impacted if education in America's public schools is not improved. The impact of such goes beyond the children attending persistently failing schools. I passionately believe that America, as a nation, is greatly enriched when children of all races, ability levels, and socioeconomic levels are able to interact with one another and when all of America's children are able to benefit from a high-quality public education. In large, urban school districts, such as those described by Charles Payne, author of *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools*, educational programs and initiatives, as well as building-level needs may become lost in the bureaucracy. One cannot help but wonder: Could these students possibly be better served educationally in smaller districts? The question then is: Are smaller districts more capable of providing the support needed to facilitate effective school reform?

In order to record and monitor subjectivity related to these areas of positionality, I kept a journal as I executed the research for this study. These data were considered, depending upon their value and relevance, for integration in the study findings. This journal included keeping notes on how I reached out to study participants and my perceptions of how they received and perceived me. Notes included data on the researcher-participant interactions and relationships as well as my own subjective reactions to the study participants. Keeping the journal allowed me to reflect upon my experiences, but also to consider how my positionality impacts my understanding and interpretation of the data (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). The goal was to closely examine and

critically assess feelings and biases, the results of these feelings and biases as well as their impact on the research. The researcher must consider what is being learned and why, as well as what may stand in the way of learning (Glesne, 1999).

### **Possible Ethical Issues**

This study involved the perceptions of interview participants. Perceptions are significant and have the potential to be powerful. In order for the interview data to be beneficial, the participants need to be honest. Due to the personally revealing nature of interviews, it is imperative to place the data in their proper perspective. It is essential for the researcher to understand that when interview participants share recollections of past events or describe general topics, the participant may, intentionally or unintentionally be performing a role, giving a speech, or providing information that can justify, legitimize, or excuse their actions and the actions of others (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). While the identities of the participants are confidential, participants may have been hesitant to share honestly. They may have feared that their comments would be shared with others, inadvertently resulting in participants being subject to retaliation from superiors. In some cases, educators experience difficulty being honest and sharing critical feedback and constructive criticism. As reported by Glesne (1999), interviewers may inadvertently find themselves holding knowledge or information which could be considered dangerous or politically risky to hold or share. Finally, participants may have unintentionally failed to be accurate and objective for another reason: They may have given up hope and become complacent. Staff members sometimes become weary and simply give up trying to change their practices. As described by Charles Payne, school district leaders are constantly seeking ways to improve the programs provided to the students. As a result, staff at the school level is repeatedly directed to implement new programs and practices. This often happens before the previous new program has been fully and thoroughly implemented and evaluated. Staff also can suffer lowered morale as a result of the culture which develops within an organization when it experiences persistent struggles and challenges. A destructive type of dysfunction permeates the school. In



closing, every effort was made to structure the interviews in a manner which provided a degree of protection of the participants in order to facilitate the solicitation of honest responses.

As a researcher, I have a desire to show appreciation to interview participants for the time they gave for the interviews and for the value of the data they shared. Efforts were made to humanize the study experiences for the benefit of the participants. This was done by collecting the interview data through a collaborative conversation, a dialogue led, at times, by their desires to share and talk, rather than a fixed, formal interview (Lawless, 1991). This type of presentation was especially interesting to me; it validates and acknowledges the experiences of the participants and also aligns well with my emerging experiential background from working in two vastly different school districts.

School administrators are very busy; time for interactions beyond the interviews will likely be limited by the participants. Appreciation for participation in the study will be expressed through follow-up contact such as emails and my offer of continued professional contact, interaction, and networking based on the desires of the interviewees. Networking is very important for public school educators; collaborating and working with others, even long-distance, are important skills and activities for today's educational leaders. The amount of contact beyond the study and its publication will depend on the desires of the individual participants. It is important, as a researcher, to not disappear after collecting the needed data (Lawless, 1991).

### **Trustworthiness**

Based on Corrine Glesne's *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, several practices were implemented in order to establish trustworthiness within the study (Glesne, 1999). Member checking was utilized as interview transcripts were shared with research participants to make sure their ideas were represented accurately. Second, negative case analysis was utilized as efforts were made to select interviewees who work in districts that have grant performance report data in opposition to the data found in the literature review. Districts that have larger numbers of students and were successful in meeting grant goals and districts with smaller numbers of

students and were not as successful in meeting grant goals were given the highest level of consideration for inclusion in Phase II of the study, the face-to-face interviews of district staff including teachers, principals, and administrators.

Researcher bias is shared as a part of findings from the study. This honest reflection will include consideration of my work as a district level administrator in two districts of very different sizes and demographic compositions. Finally, triangulation of the data will be utilized in order to increase the trustworthiness of the data. While the study contained multiple data-collection methods and different categories of interview participants, teachers, and administrators at two different organizational levels, the triangulation included efforts to examine and connect the various pieces of data in order to decrease the threat to validity (Glesne, 1999).

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The aim of this mixed method study was to examine the impact of implementation of School Improvement Grant funded activities, programs, and initiatives on school effectiveness indicators and also to determine if the level of effectiveness differs by district size and school size. The experiences and perceptions of selected school and district staff members were examined and compared to see if they differed by district size and school size. School Improvement Grants were designed by the United States Department of Education to improve student academic performance in schools with long histories of poor performance on state-mandated standardized tests. School and district performance on the Lead Indicators articulated in the grant were analyzed and examined for differences based on district size and school size.

Phase I of the study utilized quantitative data analysis methods to examine the influence of implantation of the grant programs and initiatives and whether or not district and school size had an impact on school effectiveness. This phase included all schools in the first two groups or cohorts of schools awarded School Improvement Grants. Phase II of the study, which was qualitative, involved two schools selected from the original group of 20. For these two schools, interviews were executed to solicit the perceptions and experiences of key staff members and to determine whether these perceptions and experiences differed based on district size and school size.

## Phase I

### Process Used to Analyze Phase I Data

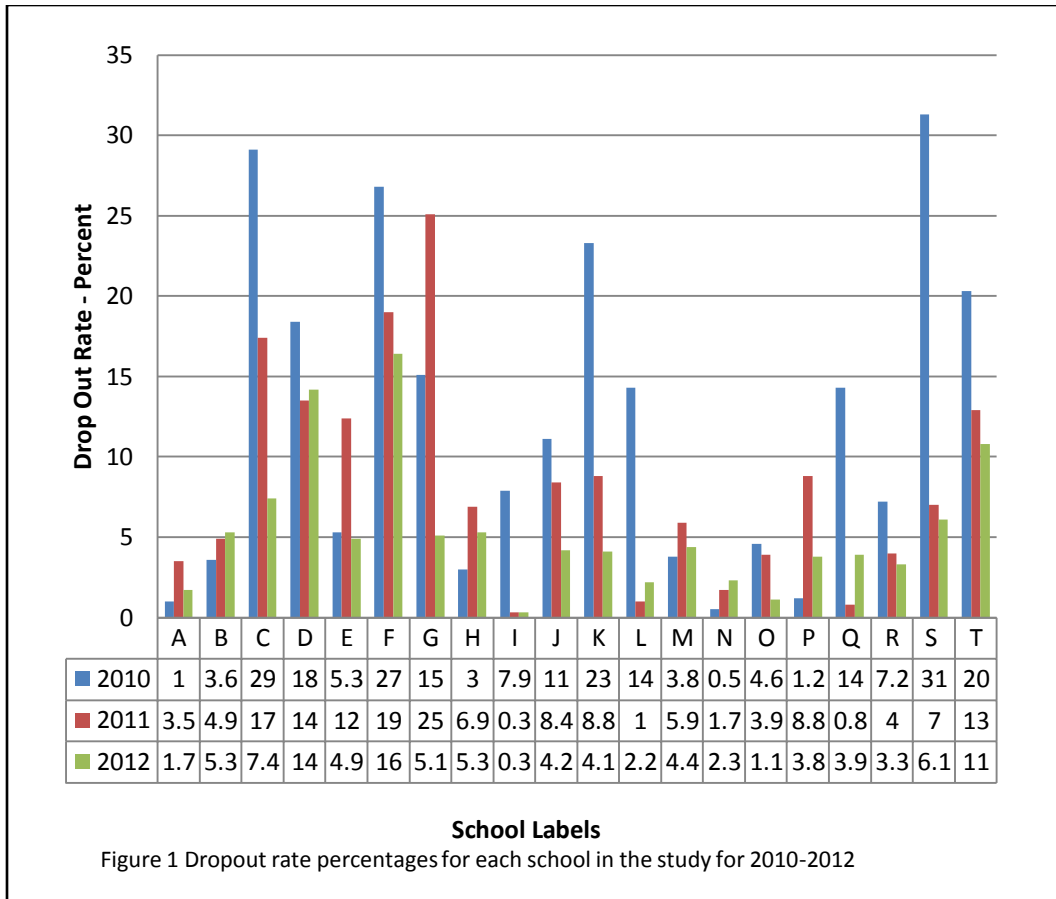
In Phase I, school performance data on the grant's mandatory Lead Indicators were collected and analyzed for all the 20 Cohort One and Cohort Two schools. The analyses were conducted using descriptive and inferential statistics. ANOVA was utilized to investigate differences in performance on the grant's Lead Indicators by district and school size.

### Presentation of Phase I Data

**Descriptive statistics.** This study examined the performance of 20 schools on eight Lead Indicators described by the Federal Department of Education as accountability measures for recipients of School Improvement Grants. A summary of the pre-grant and post-grant performance data are presented in Appendix D. Definitions and explanations of Lead Indicator data are provided in Appendix C.

Student enrollment for school districts in the data set ranges from 500 students to more than 400,000 students. Three of the 20 grant recipient districts were in level one, more than 500 and less than 1,000 students; five of the districts were in level two, more than 1,000 and less than 400,000 students; and 12 were in level three, more than 400,000 students. Student enrollment by school ranges from 200 students to more than 1,500 students. Three of the 20 grant recipient schools had 200 students or less; ten of the schools had more than 200, but less than 1,000 students; and seven of the schools had more than 1,000 and less than 1,700 students.

The goal of public high schools is to graduate students who are effectively prepared to successfully enter the world of work or post-secondary opportunities such as career training or college. While looking at the dropout rate does not address the quality of the graduates produced, it does provide insight to the number of and percentage of students not graduating from high school. Figure 1 provides data on the dropout rate for all 20 schools in the study. The data include dropout rates for 2010, 2011, and 2012, beginning before grant implementation.



### Phase I Findings

**Research question 1.** What is the effect of implementation of school improvement grant programs on the effectiveness of districts and schools?

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, minimum values, and maximum values on the Lead Indicators during the pre- and post-grant periods across the 20 schools that participated in the study. The data show inconsistencies in the changes in the Lead Indicator values from 2010 to 2012. For example, student attendance rates increased from 80% to 83%, the minutes in the school year increased from 64,791 to 65,807, the percent of teachers earning excellent or satisfactory evaluations rose from 87% to 89%, and the dropout rates across the schools decreased from 12% to 5%. On the other hand, the number of students completing advanced courses decreased from 1,903 to 1,009, the teacher attendance rate fell from 96% to 94%, and the chronic truant rate increased from 30% to 59%. The student participation rate on the state test

was unchanged at 96% before and after the grant. When the data is disaggregated by cohorts, it appears the overall effect of the implementation remained inconsistent at the cohort level as well. For Cohort One schools, improvement was seen in some areas such as dropout rates, minutes in the school year, and attendance rate. The mean for the dropout rate went from 14% to 8% with the maximum decrease ranging from 29% to 16%. The student mean attendance rate increased from 75% to 82% with the minimum improving from 53% to 70%. Slight or no increase was demonstrated on four of the other Lead Indicators. The mean chronic truant rate increased from 43% to 66% with the maximum moving from 86% to 100%. This increase could have been caused by closer monitoring due to grant programs and initiatives.

Cohort Two schools showed growth in more of the Lead Indicators than Cohort One. These include the dropout rate, which declined from 11% to 4%. In addition, the student attendance rate increased slightly from 82% to 84%, and teachers earning excellent or satisfactory on their local performance evaluation tools also increased from 80% to 91%. Percent of chronic truants, however, increased from 22% to 56%.

Table 3

## Descriptive Data on Lead Indicators

Indicator	Cohort 1					
	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	993.50 (1,164.99)	5	2,376	529.57 (588.77)	0	1,376
Chronic Truants (%)	43.29 (36.58)	1	86	66.14 (44.45)	3	100
Dropout Rate	14.14 (11.26)	1	29	7.71 (5.21)	2	16
Minutes in School Year	68,718.40 (4,871.55)	62,244	73,080	70,241.67 (5,560.07)	62,244	76,320
Student Attendance Rate	74.71 (17.34)	53	96	82.43 (9.05)	70	95
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	95.14 (4.77)	89	100	95.43 (3.50)	90	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	96.50 (1.00)	95	97	93.60 (3.20)	88	96
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	95.66 (7.711)	81	100	86.29 (16.64)	50	100

## Cohort 2

Indicator	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M	Minimum	Maximum	M	Minimum	Maximum
	(SD)			(SD)		
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	2,357.25 (716.46)	1,452	3,131	1267.46 (1,027.98)	0	3,360
Chronic Truants (%)	22.38 (14.72)	2	47	55.69 (34.97)	4	100
Dropout Rate	10.85 (9.29)	0	31	3.85 (2.70)	0	11
Minutes in School Year	61,985.71 (7,516.71)	53,328	71,750	63,590.00 (7,484.58)	53,328	75,800
Student Attendance Rate	82.15 (8.05)	68	93	84.00 (6.72)	71	96
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	96.62 (4.38)	84	100	96.85 (4.54)	85	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	96.00 (.00)	96	96	94.43 (2.63)	90	98
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	79.61 (35.17)	3.5	100	91.36 (9.59)	70	100



## Cohorts 1 &amp; 2

Indicator	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M	Minimum	Maximum	M	Minimum	Maximum
	(SD)			(SD)		
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	1,902.67 (1,071.29)	5	3,131	1,009.20 (952.51)	0	3,360
Chronic Truants (%)	29.70 (25.76)	1	86	59.35 (37.72)	3	100
Dropout Rate	12.00 (9.86)	0	31	5.20 (4.09)	0	16
Minutes in School Year	64,791 (7,174.09)	53,328	73,080	65,807.22 (7,466.63)	53,328	76,320
Student Attendance Rate	79.55 (12.21)	53	96	83.45 (7.41)	70	96
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	96.10 (4.45)	84	100	96.35 (4.17)	85	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	96.33 (.81)	95	97	94.08 (2.77)	88	98
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	87.02 (26.69)	3.5	100	89.39 (12.58)	50	100

When examined for statistical differences using a paired sample t-test, the findings indicate a significant change in three of the Lead Indicators (see table 4). These are the dropout rate ( $p=.001$ ), the percent of chronic truants ( $p=.000$ ), and student attendance rate ( $p=.024$ ). While the results suggest significant improvement in the dropout and student attendance rates, the chronic truant rates, on the other hand, did not show improvement, but rather worsened from 2010 to 2012, in spite of the implementation of the school improvement grant.

Table 4

Comparison of Lead Indicators for the Pre-grant and Post-grant years: 2010-2012

Lead Indicators	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	1.80	.10
Chronic Truants (%)	5.74	.000***
Dropout Rate	3.72	.001 ***
Minutes in School Year	1.00	.339
Student Attendance Rate	2.45	.024*
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	0.26	.79
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	1.94	.11
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	0.12	.90

\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\* $p<0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.001$

**Research question 2.** To what extent does the level of effectiveness differ by the size of the district?

While research question one examined the overall impact of the implementation of School Improvement Grant programs, research question two examined potential differences in impact based on the size of the district. Size of the district is defined based on the number of

students enrolled in the district. For the purposes of the study, districts were divided into three groups or categories. Once again, the comparison is of means of pre-grant and post grant performance on the Lead Indicators. Findings across district size are presented in Table 5.

The descriptive data show that districts with less than 1,000 students showed improvement in the means of two of the Lead Indicators: the dropout rate, which went from 4% to 3%, and the minutes in the school year, which increased by about 3,000 minutes per year. The percent of chronic truants increased from 3% to 4%.

For districts in the second size category, schools with more than 1,000 and less than 400,000 students, it is noted that pre-grant data were missing for four of the Lead Indicators. No improvement was produced on the four remaining indicators. Findings on the remaining four were either quite close to flat or indicated movement in wrong direction. The percent of chronic truants went from 13% to 36%. The dropout rate increased from 3% to 4%.

Lastly, we examine data for the district with more than 400,000 students. School Improvement Grant recipients in this district showed changes in the performance levels on three of the eight Lead Indicators: Chronic truants increased from 44% to 83%. However, the dropout rate decreased from 18% to 6% and the student attendance rate increased from 74% to 80%.

Table 5

## Descriptive Data on Lead Indicators by District Size

District Size 1 (&lt;1000 students)

Indicators	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M	Minimum	Maximum	M	Minimum	Maximum
	(SD)			(SD)		
Chronic Truants (%)	3.00 (2.64)	1	6	4.33 (1.52)	3	6
Dropout Rate	4.00 (3.00)	1	7	3.33 (1.52)	2	5
Minutes in School Year	67,662.0 (7,662.2)	62,244	73,080	70,887.33 (7,508.64)	62,244	75,800
Student Attendance Rate	93.00 (2.64)	91	96	93.00 (2.00)	91	95
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	100 (0)	100	100	99 (1.73)	97	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	97.00 (.00)	97	97	93.00 (2.64)	90	95
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	96.50 (4.94)	93	100	92.33 (7.50)	85	100

District Size 2 (>1000 and <400,000 students)

Indicators	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	n/a	n/a	n/a	371.00 (311.01)	0	799
Chronic Truants (%)	12.60 (6.84)	6	24	36.20 (28.47)	5	67
Dropout Rate	2.60 (2.07)	0	5	4.00 (1.22)	2	5
Minutes in School Year	n/a	n/a	n/a	66,448.00 (8,932.75)	54,810	76,320
Student Attendance Rate	86.00 (3.60)	82	91	85.80 (1.92)	84	89
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	97.00 (3.08)	92	99	96.20 (6.30)	85	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	92.25 (2.98)	88	95
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	n/a	n/a	n/a	94.50 (6.35)	89	100

District Size 3 (<400,000 students)

Indicators	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Dropout Rate	17.92 (8.30)	5	31	6.17 (5.04)	0	16
Minutes in School Year	64,216.80 (7,360.94)	53,328	71,750	64,188.73 (6,983.82)	53,328	71,750
Student Attendance Rate	73.50 (11.98)	53	93	80.08 (7.29)	70	96
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	94.75 (4.938)	84	100	95.75 (3.57)	90	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	96.00 (.81)	95	97	96.20 (1.09)	95	98
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	85.300 (28.83)	3.5	100	86.73 (15.00)	50	100

Next, a univariate ANOVA was conducted to examine if changes in the Lead Indicators from 2010 to 2012 differed by district size. The results indicate significant changes for the dropout rate, chronic truants and the total minutes in the school year (see Table 6). The findings suggest significant differences across district size for the dropout rates ( $F(2, 20)=11.96$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). The size of the effect was large (partial  $\eta^2=0.59$ ). Further comparison of the results showed that the largest district experienced a significantly larger (11.75%) drop in the dropout rate compared to the slight drop (0.667%) in the small district ( $p=0.02$ ). The medium-size

districts, on the average, saw a slight increase (1.4%) in the dropout rate. The differences in dropout rates between the large and medium-size districts was significantly different ( $p=0.001$ ).

Again, there were significant differences across the district sizes for total minutes in school ( $F(1, 10)=8.33, p=0.016$ ) with a medium size effect (partial eta =0.455). Further comparison of the results showed that the small districts experienced a significantly larger increase (769 minutes) in total minutes in school compared to the large districts, which experienced no change in minutes ( $p=0.023$ ).

Lastly, there were significant differences across the district sizes for excessive absences or chronic truancy ( $F(2, 20)=4.86, p=0.021$ ) with a medium size effect (partial eta square = 0.364). Further comparison of the results showed that the larger districts still experienced significantly higher excessive absences compared to the small districts and the medium-size districts. The lowest increase in excessive absences was in the small sized districts.

Table 6

Comparison of Lead Indicators for the Pre-grant and Post-grant years by district size: 2010-2012

Lead Indicators	F(df)	p	Partial Eta Square
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	.65	.438	.06
Chronic Truants (%)	4.86	*.021	.364
Dropout Rate	11.96	***.001	.59
Minutes in School Year	8.33	*.016	.455
Student Attendance Rate	2.47	.114	.225
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	.446	.647	.050
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	1.60	.10	.044
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	0.005	.943	.000

\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\* $p<0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.001$

**Research Question 3.** To what extent does the level of effectiveness differ by the size of the school?

Next, the study examined differences in levels of effectiveness based on the size of the school. Size of the school is defined based on the number of students enrolled. For the purposes of the study, the schools are divided into three categories based on school size. Once again, the comparison is of means of pre-grant and post-grant performance on the Lead Indicators. The results of the comparisons are presented in Table 7.

Schools in the first category, those with less than 200 students, experienced change on all eight Lead Indicators. The size and direction of the changes varied. Chronic truants went from 3% to 4%, the teacher attendance rate decreased from 97% to 93%, and teachers receiving excellent or satisfactory on their local evaluations decreased from 97% to 92%. The dropout rate decreased from 4% to 3%.

Some similarities in the data are found with the next group, schools with student populations more than 200 but less than 1,000. Chronic truants increased from 38% to 71%, the percent of teachers earning satisfactory or excellent on their evaluations decreased from 95% to 85%, the dropout rate improved from 14% to 6%, the student attendance rate increased from 75% to 81%, and the student participation rate on state tests increased from 95% to 97%.



Table 7

## Descriptive Data on Lead Indicators by School Size

Indicators	School Size 1 (<200 students)					
	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Chronic Truants (%)	3.00 (2.64)	1	6	4.33 (1.52)	3	6
Dropout Rate	4 (3.00)	1	7	3.3 (1.52)	2	5
Minutes in School Year	67,662.00 (7,662.209)	62,244	73,080	70,887.33 (7,508.641)	62,244	75,800
Student Attendance Rate	93.00 (2.64)	91	96	93.00 (2.00)	91	95
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	100.00 (.00)	100	100	99.00 (1.73)	97	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	97.00 (.00)	97	97	93.00 (2.64)	90	95
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	96.50 (4.94)	93	100	92.33 (7.50)	85	100

School Size 2 (>200 and <1000 students)

Indicators	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	1,966.20 (555.40)	1,452	2,853	893.40 (602.05)	0	1,936
Chronic Truants (%)	37.80 (28.60)	6	86	71.30 (33.52)	5	100
Dropout Rate	14.30 (10.02)	0	31	6.40 (5.48)	0	16
Minutes in School Year	62,871.33 (7,823.86)	53,328	71,750	63,585.11 (8,279.53)	53,328	76,320
Student Attendance Rate	74.50 (13.62)	53	93	81.30 (7.63)	70	96
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	94.70 (5.27)	84	100	96.70 (3.43)	90	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	95.50 (.70)	95	96	94.00 (3.80)	88	98
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	94.929 (7.27)	81	100	84.78 (15.24)	50	98

School Size 3 (>1,000 students)

Indicators	Pre-Grant Year (2010)			Post-grant Year (2012)		
	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	2,453.00 (736.57)	1,452	3,131	1,575.57 (1,222.13)	0	3,360
Chronic Truants (%)	29.57 (20.17)	6	69	65.86 (31.91)	9	97
Dropout Rate	12.14 (10.653)	1	29	4.29 (1.49)	2	7
Minutes in School Year	66,235.00 (7,174.80)	56,672	71,750	66,600.33 (5,673.77)	56,672	71,750
Student Attendance Rate	81.00 (7.50)	69	91	82.43 (5.56)	76	89
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	96.43 (3.20)	90	99	94.71 (5.43)	85	100
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	96.50 (.70)	96	97	95.00 (1.41)	93	96
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	68.45 (45.50)	3.5	100.0	94.83 (8.06)	83	100

A univariate ANOVA procedure was conducted to determine whether changes in the Lead Indicators over the 2010 to 2012 year period differed significantly by school size. Analysis of the changes in the means from 2010-2012 indicate no significant changes based on the size of the school (see table 8).

Table 8

Comparison of Lead Indicators for the Pre-grant and Post-grant years by school size: 2010-2012

Lead Indicators	F(df)	p	Partial Eta Square
Advanced Courses (# students completing)	0.74	.503	.142
Chronic Truants (%)	3.34	0.06	.282
Dropout Rate	0.99	.392	.104
Minutes in School Year	3.75	.065	.455
Student Attendance Rate	1.86	.186	.180
Student Participation Rate on State Test (%)	1.90	.179	.183
Teacher Attendance Rate (%)	1.50	.44	.075
Teacher Evaluation Ratings (% Satisfactory or Excellent)	1.59	.251	.241

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ 

The findings related to the first three research questions tell quite a story. As a result of School Improvement Grant implementation, the data indicate significant overall changes in school level performance on three of the eight Lead Indicators: the dropout rate, the percent of chronic truants, and student attendance. School size, based on the number of students enrolled in the school, had no significant impact on the changes in performance on the Lead Indicator means from 2010-2012. District size, however, did have a significant impact for the dropout rate, chronic truants, and the total minutes in the school year. There were significant differences across the district sizes for the dropout rates, and the size of the effect was large. Meridian, the largest district in the study, the only district in the Code 3 category, experienced a significantly larger decrease in the dropout rate compared to the slight drop in the small district. The medium-size district group, on the average, saw a slight increase in the dropout rate. The differences in dropout rates, between the larger and the medium-size districts, were significant. Significant

differences were also found across the district sizes for total minutes in school with a medium size effect. The small districts experienced a significantly larger increase in minutes in school compared to the large districts, which experienced no change in minutes in the school year. There were significant differences across the district sizes for excessive absences. Meridian, the bigger district, experienced significantly higher excessive absences compared to the small districts and the medium-size districts. The lowest increase in excessive absences was in the small districts.

All of the Phase I findings were re-examined to provide direction for the next phase of the study, interviews of school and district staff. The dropout rate, percent of chronic truants, and student attendance rate were the foci of this deeper examination and process of elimination. These are Lead Indicators that were found to be unique during the review of the descriptive statistics. The dropout rate and student attendance rate were re-examined as those data were readily and consistently available prior to the grant and within the grant performance reporting process. These three Lead Indicators are outcomes tied directly to student action, behaviors, and choices. Based on the Phase I data analysis, two schools were identified for Phase II: interviews of teachers, principals, grant implementation support staff, and central office staff.

## **Phase II**

### **Study Context**

Two high schools were selected as interview sites. While both schools met the “persistently failing” criteria for the School Improvement Grant, the schools, and the respective districts varied in many ways. The data below are based on school information submitted to the State Board of Education in the spring of 2013.

Sumner High School, located in the Sumner School District, is a large school in a medium-size district. Sixty-four percent of the students in the school qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The student population is 47% minority, with the largest group being African-Americans, who comprise 38% of the student body. The school has a 13% student mobility rate

and four percent of the students qualify as homeless. While 62% of the students graduated within four years, only 26% of them were college-ready upon graduation. Thirty-one percent of juniors who took the required state test met or exceeded minimum state standards. Similar challenges exist at the second high school, though to a greater degree.

Meridian High School, located in Meridian Public Schools, is a medium-size school in a large district. Ninety-seven percent of the school's students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The student population is 98% African American. The school has a 53% student mobility rate and 15 % of the students qualify as homeless. In 2013, 64% of the students graduated in four years; an improvement over the 45% four-year graduation rate the previous year. Six percent of the students were college-ready upon high school graduation. Five percent of the juniors who took the state mandated test met or exceeded the minimum state standards.

While these data tell a story, they do not necessarily paint a picture of what transpires in these two schools. Descriptions of each are provided next based on my first-hand observations and experiences during a visit to each school. The purpose for my visit was to interview specific staff members about their experiences leading the efforts to implement the School Improvement Grant programs and their perceptions of the implementation. Because of this emphasis, time was not allotted for classroom observations.

In both districts, my contacts from previous experiences in public education were utilized to connect with potential interview participants. The five interviews for Sumner High School were arranged through a few telephone calls and e-mail messages. The necessary contact information was readily available and clearly presented on the district and school websites. E-mails, phone calls, and messages were usually responded to in a timely manner. An interesting, but unexpected, situation did arise. One interviewee signed the interview and audio-recording consent form, but then refused to be audio-taped. Our session began with the participant informing me that the only reason she agreed to the interview was because the name of a specific high-level district administrator was mentioned in one of the e-mails we exchanged. Even though

this interview did not start in an ideal manner, valuable data were shared once the interview conversation progressed.

Sumner School District is located in a city with a large white-collar work force. The city has many businesses of different sizes and a shopping mall of moderate size. The city also boasts a university and a few small colleges. Sumner High School is located several miles from downtown. The neighborhood around the school is filled with one-family homes, small, older bungalows which look like they would have two bedrooms and one bathroom. Some of them are slightly run down, and a few homes are boarded up. The morning of my visit to the school, there was little activity in the neighborhood. Periodically, I would see an adult walking a young child to school. The neighborhood was quiet and peaceful, almost sleepy. The area around the school was primarily residential. Automobile traffic was minimal.

The campus had an athletic stadium named after a well-known African-American female college athlete who is not from the state where the school is located. The grounds were not unique or architecturally interesting; they were clean. The school building itself was older, large, and made of brick. It was not clear where visitors were expected to enter the facility. I approached a door which looked like an entrance and the door was locked. After I peered through the window in the door, a student opened it and allowed me to enter. At my request, the student gave me directions to the office.

Inside, the building was dimly lit; it was clean and well-maintained. Along the way, different adults greeted me politely as I walked alone to the office. No one asked the reason for my visit or where I was headed. Once in the office, I interacted with several members of the school staff. All were professional and welcoming. At the beginning of the interview process, I was met by the first interview participant who took me to the assigned office space. As we walked through the halls, several things caught my attention. Overall, the feel inside the four walls of the school was constructive and encouraging. The adults interacted appropriately and professionally with each other and students. The students moved about with purpose and

direction. No horseplay or negative behaviors were observed. Also, there was a welcoming feeling in the school, not at all repressive or stifling in nature. When one of the interview participants shared that the current principal, Ms. Jones, was transferred to this school from another district school to improve the culture, which was previously considered out of control, it became clear to me that the affirmative and nurturing school climate was purposefully and intentionally developed. According to this interviewee, the principal had indeed accomplished this goal. All of the people I encountered were going about the business of school as related to their individual roles. The adults were focused on what they are doing, but they frequently stopped and spoke with students or other adults. All of the interview participants at the school were open and basically willing to share freely.

At one point, I opted to walk through a student commons area where a large number of students had assembled during their lunch period. They were gathered in different areas of the space; some were sitting, some were standing. The students visited with each other and all were interacting appropriately. Some of the students were in mixed-race groupings. Some were not. The same was observed for mixed-gender groupings. The students I came in close contact with were courteous; they asked me if I needed help locating my destination and made room for me to walk through their area. One security staff member was in amongst these students. Unsolicited, he volunteered his assistance to help me find my destination. I observed him interacting with the students in a professional, respectful manner. It seemed as if the students knew him and his job and that they respected him without fearing him or feeling that he was their equal. One final thing that caught my eye was a same-sex couple walking down the hall holding hands. It was obvious that this was not unusual as no one was saying anything negative to them or looking at them in a disapproving fashion. Actually, no one paid them any attention.

The second interviews took me to a larger city and district, but a smaller school. This city is one of the largest metropolitan cities in the United States. The school district is also one of the largest urban school districts in the country. In the Meridian School District, making



arrangements and scheduling the five interviews was more challenging. My initial research began on the district and school websites. At the school level, it was clear who the principals were and, while their direct e-mail addresses were not public, the site contained a process whereby principals could be contacted via e-mail. Telephone numbers were also listed. Responses to phone calls and e-mails took a few days each time. Trying to reach the correct person at the district level was perplexing. It was difficult to ascertain the structure of the district in order to know whom to call. The school district utilized a large voice mail system to direct calls to the correct departments; it was complicated to navigate and difficult to reach an actual person. In some cases, a person was reached, but was unable to provide the requested information or needed assistance. When comparing the experiences at the school level and the district level, there was quite a difference. While navigating Meridian's website and large voicemail system was difficult, once connections were made with specific staff members at the school level, planning and communicating became much easier. It became clear to me rather quickly that I needed to connect with the administrative assistants for the people I was seeking to interview. This strategy was effective. I always made it a point to be humble and not at all pushy; they were always helpful and kind. Maintaining a high level of professionalism during these numerous contacts was not an issue because I was genuinely interested in the schools and hearing the perceptions of the various staff members.

Meridian High School is located in a neighborhood described in the media and by school staff and district leaders as dangerous and gang-infested. Knowing this, there was hesitation upon my late night arrival to this large, metropolitan city to pre-drive the route from the hotel to the school to find the exact location of the school. Even though I was not alone, the thought of driving through the neighborhood about midnight was a bit unnerving. We proceeded with the drive, knowing we would be pleased in the morning to already know our route. During the midnight drive, the neighborhood was quiet, like a ghost town. We saw no other vehicles and,

other than on corners where businesses such as gas stations were located, we did not see any people. I could not help but wonder what the neighborhood looked and felt like in the daytime.

Meridian High School is located in a neighborhood primarily filled with small homes. Some of them are a bit run down. Some are boarded up. During the daytime, the neighborhood was still generally quiet. The sight of young children being walked to school by one or two adults was frequent. At several corners, adults wearing yellow, labeled vests served as escorts and crossing guards for students who were walking to school.

I approached the designated entrance the same time as an adult male exited the building. He said, "Good morning." My reply was the same. I pushed the button for a buzzer and the door was immediately unlocked. Upon entering the school, a friendly security guard in a spacious lobby area greeted me. The security guard requested that I sign in on a clipboard and asked if I was there to attend a specific meeting. I explained I had a meeting with the principal. The security guard stated that person was not at work yet. I gave the guard the name of the administrative assistant, the only person I had actually spoken with from the school. The guard told me that person was not at work yet, either. In order to be prepared, I was early and none of this caused concern. She appeared to be simply making an effort at conversation. We agreed that I would go to the office and wait. She gave me directions and I headed off walking down the hall and up the steps. The walls had positive messages and banners displayed in the halls in large, colorful, contemporary graphics. The walk to the office was short and I encountered no one in transit. I entered the office and was received warmly by a lady behind the counter. After telling her why I was there, I took a seat. Many different staff members came into the office and left quickly.

Sitting a short distance from me in the office, there was a young man with dreadlocks covering his eyes. He was sitting quietly, dressed in the school uniform and carrying a backpack. After a while, an adult male came from the back of the office area and talked to him about a class schedule he was giving the young man. The staff member spoke to the young man in a calming,

matter of fact, non-judgmental, but not condescending or placating tone. The young man appeared to be a new student. There was no adult with him. He asked the staff member about classes and credits from a school he previously attended. The young man seemed knowledgeable and able to advocate appropriately for his needs in this setting. The staff member was all business, no-nonsense; he had a patient, non-confrontational manner. While he was not the only person to give me this impression, this staff member left me with the idea that it takes a special skill set to meet the needs of students in tough schools in large, urban districts.

The administrative assistant who arranged the interview came into the office and introduced herself. She then showed me to the conference room I was to use for the interviews. She was kind and courteous, offering coffee and water. The interview participants were all forthcoming and passionate about their work. Because this district had more than one school with the School Improvement Grant, two of the four school level interview participants had worked in more than one school awarded School Improvement Grants. These participants were able to share their experiences at other grant-funded schools, in addition to the experiences at Meridian High School. Two of the Meridian school level interview participants, both teachers, initially appeared hesitant to share freely. With the first one, I followed the participant's lead and body language and closed the door to the office so that no one could overhear our conversation. The tone of the conversation improved quickly. Another participant, Mr. Joyner, a teacher at Meridian High School gave this researcher the impression that he had a lot to share, but felt hesitant or afraid to talk. It was as if the participant was literally and cautiously answering only and exactly the question asked, making sure not to include any elaboration or in-depth explanation. With this one participant, the tape recorder was stopped. He immediately began to share more freely and to passionately elaborate on her perceptions and experiences. No notes were taken during this part of the interview session. A great deal of valuable information was shared in this interview.

The Meridian High School building was old and large. Like Sumner High School, it was clean and well maintained. The students and staff in this school interacted in a way which demonstrated a certain level of intimacy. There seemed to be a level of comfort, student to staff, staff to student, and staff to staff. There was little opportunity to observe students interacting with one another for more than a few minutes. I was informed that the school sits in the middle of several rival gang territories. The adults I had seen outside earlier wearing vests and escorting students were district staff hired to patrol the walk routes to the schools to help the students arrive safely. None of this is obvious to a visitor based on how the school looks and feels. The students behaved as if they feel safe, physically and emotionally, inside the school. No misbehavior or horseplay was heard or observed.

It was quite challenging to align what I witnessed inside the halls of Meridian High School with what I learned when I researched a major, in-depth newscast production about this particular school. Reporters spent several months in the school with unlimited access. The program revealed stories of students exposed to and dealing with accidental deaths, family dysfunction, drug abuse, gang culture, and gun violence; while all the time being supported, encouraged, and nurtured by compassionate staff from the school. It continues to be problematic for me to accept and comprehend this conceptual misalignment. It actually haunts me to this day. This city is one of the largest in the United States, known for its crime rate, and also for the violent deaths of many young people, including innocent victims. None of that was even close to visible the day of the interviews.

Like any school, I am sure both Sumner and Meridian High Schools have good days and not-so-good days. The two cities I visited are dissimilar and the two schools contrast in various ways. While I suspect observations in actual classroom might have shown even more differentiation between the schools, numerous commonalities were witnessed. Neither high school reminded me of the numerous movies and documentaries that have been made about the characteristics and quality of public education provided in inner-city high schools. I witnessed

only constructive student to student, student to adult, adult to student, and adult to adult interactions. The neighborhoods around the schools are in need of upgrades and improvement. However, these two high schools stand as beacons of light for their students and their families.

### **Process Used to Analyze Phase II Data**

For Phase II, ten staff members were each interviewed twice. Eighteen of the 20 interviews were recorded. One participant, Mr. Smith, the central office person at Sumner School District declined to be recorded; written notes were taken. Interviews were transcribed word for word. Coding was utilized to identify trends and themes in the data. Common themes were identified. Codes were established looking at key words and main concepts. Participant responses were coded several times using different codes. Special codes were utilized for experiences, size, schools, kids, district, causation, challenges, benefits, and implementation. Data were initially analyzed one transcript at a time and subsequently by comparing participant responses from different districts but similar roles and again examining the responses from various staff members within the same district. Analytic memos were written and included in the data analysis. Data were also analyzed based on the district in which the participants worked to investigate any differences in perceptions based on the role the person held in the district. Data were repeatedly dissected, analyzed, regrouped, and re-analyzed.

One additional data analysis process was implemented. The purpose of the additional processing was to make an entirely different type of examination of the entire body of the interview data. The entire body of interview data was analyzed to determine the most frequently used words. The first examination was based on searching the interview data for terms which seemed to present themselves as keywords or representations of main concepts. The results were reviewed as an entire body and by specific roles. The second examination was executed using software which identified the most frequently used words in a given document. The software was utilized to identify the most frequently used words for the total body of interview data, each individual interview, for each district and for each role. Comparisons were made based on the

positions held by each participant and the district in which they worked. This process was valuable as a method to scrutinize the overall categories into which I had placed the interview data as a result of coding.

After the numerous qualitative data analyses, the data were categorized into three major and consistent themes. The findings will be presented within four areas: challenges, benefits, district actions, and district size. The final presentation of the data is based on comparisons of interview data based on the roles held by the interview participants.

### **Presentation of Phase II Data**

**Challenges.** Challenges articulated by the staff members involved in implementation of the School Improvement Grant were varied. Some challenges are more closely related to the actual School Improvement Grant than others. Creating positive change in a school setting was expressed as very difficult by all participants, frequently with acknowledgement that change is difficult “regardless of the district.” Changing the mindset and expectations of adults/staff was also a challenge. One important priority was ensuring that strategies presented through professional development were utilized in the classrooms and impacting instructional practices. The nature of these experiences was described by Ms. Fulton, School Improvement Coach at Sumer High School. “In a high school, change is a huge problem for everybody because we are so imbedded in our culture and tradition.” This comment is supported by the findings of a study of 78 schools with 27 of them being elementary schools, 18 middle schools, and 33 high schools, which found that none of the high schools was able to demonstrate a systemic level of school development based on close alignment between school improvement and professional development. Within this study, 4% of the schools were able to demonstrate a systemic level of school development over four years. All of these were elementary schools (Sappington et al., 2012). Challenges directly related to the grant implementation included development and organization of all of the internal and external programs, clearly establishing roles and expectations of internal and external partners, and securing the needed level of support from the

state board of education. The state board of education not functioning effectively was mentioned by a total of three study participants responsible for this portion of the grant implementation. Two participants from Meridian School District and one from Sumner mentioned this as an area of needed improvement.

Communication was articulated as an important component of the grant implementation process. It was difficult to communicate the complex grant expectations and stipulations to all internal and external stakeholders. This included school-level staff such as teachers, counselors, and instructional coaches; district level staff such as department or division leaders; and school board members. This became evident when staff supporting the grant implementation was initially housed at the school site. In both districts, this caused confusion in terms of who was in charge of which aspects of school management, leadership, and administration. Who was the staff expected to take directives from? The principal is expected to be the instructional leader, but the grant added representatives from other entities serving as lead and supporting partners. In one district, supplementary grant implementation staff was moved out of the school site after one year; in the other, the person continues to be housed at the school.

A challenge expressed by all was addressing and mitigating the social and emotional needs of the students and working to offset the deep impact that poverty has on students. Addressing issues related to student exposure to violence was more of a priority for Meridian, the larger district; while staff at Sumner, the smaller district, did not mention student exposure to violence. Mr. Lamb, a teacher at Meridian High School shared that students have to deal with many social and emotional issues before they can learn. The services provided through the grant helped to address these needs. Additionally, Meridian High School principal, Mr. Davis, described looking out the window of the high school several years ago. A crowd of about 300 young people had gathered in the street. Many were spectators and many were fighting, using sticks, bats, and other items. Police officers were on the scene, but unable to intervene due to the

size of the group and the volatility of the situation. Eventually, the officers fired their weapons in the air to make the crowd disperse.

Addressing facilities was shared as a challenge. In one district, there is a process and an effort to create positive learning environments for the students within the school. The responsible staff member expressed this is important because of the students' personal situations and life conditions outside the school setting. While the public perception of this school has not changed with its improved physical appearance, the students do demonstrate a certain level of pride in their school. In the other district, the school is just as old as the previously described building but not as well kept, causing one staff member to consider this a part of the lack of school pride felt by the students. Notably, the nicer facility is a smaller high school located in a large district. This school is located in what is described as a dangerous neighborhood.

One particular challenge came from the principal of Meridian High School, the small school in the large district. The principal reflected on what was termed a missed opportunity to potentially gain additional resources, supports, and solutions for the school. The assessment was that principals need additional training as they are expected to wear so many different hats. The remark was not shared as a criticism, but as a genuine need. The overall tone of this participant's interview was reflective, passionate, and entrepreneurial.

As school personnel seek to reform and change through the School Improvement Grant programs and initiatives, they find reaching out to create partnerships with parents, community, and other stakeholders to be a difficult task. While both school principals expressed frustration with this, one went on to elaborate. Two examples were shared. When all of the teachers of a certain world language resigned in an untimely fashion, about 150 students were left without a qualified teacher. Only one parent contacted the principal to find out what the plan was to make sure the students received the education they deserve. The principal shared that parents holding schools accountable, in the case of this individual high school, does not occur, except when



parents become irate if students are unable to attend prom or to walk across the graduation stage. The principal's vehicle was vandalized because of such parent disagreements.

All interview participants expressed a desire for continued funding. At the time of the interviews, one school was in its last year of funding; the other in its first year of operating without the funds. Through grant funds, teachers in both districts participated in high quality professional development. However, some of the staff has been released in one district and staff may have to be released in the other due to lack of district funds to continue paying for the positions. Most of the grant-funded successful programs and initiatives are no longer in place. There is frustration that expectations have increased and resources have decreased due to the end of the grant. A major effort is being made to continue the efforts which were producing positive change and outcomes, with less staff. School level staff, such as principals and teachers, articulate disappointment; even though everyone is doing more than they did before the grant, the school can no longer muster the delivery of the previous level of supports to the students and their families. Mr. Williams, a data coach at Sumner High School and former classroom teacher reflected during the last year of the grant. "I really wish we could be where we are now at the first year of the grant. Schools need more time to plan. The grant has had a positive impact and we have just now reached a tipping point. Moving forward, we, the adults, must change; the kids won't change." His comments align with comments of other participants as they shared positives and benefits, but also expressed reflections about the need for continued support and/or funding.

**Benefits.** Participants easily and freely shared numerous benefits to being involved with the School Improvement Grant Program. Some of the initiatives benefited students through changes staff made in its practices, while other improvements impacted students directly. Organizational and cultural shifts were also noted as benefits. Being awarded the grant set the tone for all. The culture of the school changed; all are expected to be lifelong learners who are promoting and creating continuous improvement. As a result of the shift and professional learning, teachers are more prepared to address the students' needs. Building the capacity of staff

exceeded the concept of traditional professional development. Several interview participants in both districts referred to the high-quality professional learning provided to staff using grant funds. The quality of the professional development described by the participants is characterized as systemic; the school teams have connected professional development and school improvement in a systemic manner. The professional development programs and initiatives support and align with the school improvement plan, instead of each critical aspect working against the other and increasing teacher frustration and confusion (Sappington, Pacha, Baker, & Garnder, 2012). As Ms. Jones, Sumner High School Principal stated, “We have learned what to do; we cannot allow things to go backward.” Schools have benefited from increased use of data, teacher leaders, and added time for teacher collaboration. Teachers have used collaboration time to discuss specific students and their needs. Tracking various types of student data allowed the school teams to realize and recognize the improvements being made. High-functioning teams can fulfill many needs; they maintain a focus on improved practice and shared accountability; they establish ownership of reform work within the faculty; they establish coherence of school reform efforts by helping to manage external pressures; and they support cohesion by connecting whole school, grade level, or department and classroom foci and practices (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Another outcome of the teachers working together with a focus on students as individual was staff becoming much more cognizant of the personal struggles and challenges of some of the students. This has caused increased empathy and improved staff understanding of the students’ situations. Teacher leaders are now a vehicle to help drive change; there is increased accountability and renewed urgency toward the work. One participant, Mr. Williams, of Sumner High School, shared that teachers now feel the urgency felt by principals for many years. Teachers are now helping to create positive change for the benefit of the students. High school teachers are not used to having colleagues in their classrooms. Now, however, teachers and staff view each other as viable professional resources. As Mr. Williams, teacher at Sumner High School articulated, “The staff has learned new ways to do things, ways that work.”

The resources provided through the School Improvement Grant allowed schools to support students with additional academic and non-academic services and programs. One major priority in both districts was addressing social and emotional needs of the students. One school established a care team, increased counseling staff, and added an Advisory Program. They also prioritized goals such as improving curriculum and instruction, hiring extra staff such as counselors and deans of students, building the capacity of staff, and developing strong processes, structures, and protocols for use after the end of the grant. One district emphasized practices associated with a Response to Intervention Model. The other district also used Response to Intervention, but also partnered with a large number of outside entities which provided services and supports outside the school day outside the school setting. In order to increase the graduation rate, one of the schools instituted credit recover programs for students behind on credits.

The school's designation as a School Improvement Grant participant provided direction and flexibility. Mr. Williams, a teacher at Sumner High School, described a unified focus and increased consistency within the entire school. He noted alignment in how lessons plans are prepared and presented, and increased curricular and instructional alignment and integration which allow students to more easily make connections between various courses. The grant provides schools with the flexibility to be removed from certain mandates at the district level. One interview participant described this as being set aside, as a positive. This flexibility, along with autonomy, gave schools a filter by which to decide what external and additional activities and initiatives in which to participate. If it did not align with the School Improvement Grant Program and its goals, the schools declined to participate. The grant provided a direction, a frame which helped teachers and others understand why certain actions were being taken. While the message might not have been well-received, or agreed with, the rationale was, at least, consistent and clear. The components of the grant being clearly articulated by the state and mandated of all grant awardees made it somewhat easier for schools and districts to implement certain changes. Some aspects were simply not open to negotiation or discussion. This helped to drive difficult

choices forward. The School Improvement Grant was described as a powerful tool which clearly articulated “This is what we must do.”

Along with the abundant School Improvement Grant resources came plenty of work. Participants reflected upon the benefits of their efforts, the fruits of their labor, and their impact on students and related areas such as graduation rates, attendance rates, and addressing students’ social and emotional challenges. The programs they described are supported in research on what it takes to reform a high school, including alternative methods of delivery of curriculum and instruction, preventing students from dropping out, and re-engaging over-age students (Harris et al., 2008). One participant shared, “Because of the resources, test scores improved, students remained in school, students performed better, and students were admitted to colleges and earned scholarships.” In the district where school choice is an option, the reform efforts have been linked to an increase in the number of students and families opting to attend the school. The grant is viewed as a positive by all participants; it facilitated the development of tools for accountability and helped develop capacity within the staff. Being in the lower rankings of the state for some time, the school needed change. The grant represented a critical and unique opportunity for difficult, but welcome change. The resources were appreciated; they put the schools on different paths. As one participant stated, “The school is a safe haven; a huge change from a few years ago.”

**District Actions.** The two schools selected for Phase II of the study were located in two distinctly different districts. In some ways, they are different; in other ways, they are similar in their experiences of the effects of the school improvement grant programs. Benefits and challenges were experienced in both districts, even though they appear to manifest themselves in different ways. Established levels of flexibility and autonomy were afforded schools in both districts. One teacher indicated, “The district is not mandating what we are doing here. We get to make the big decisions and do things the district would not typically allow. We get to step outside the box.” One school in this district qualified for the School Improvement Grant, but

declined to apply for it. The district supported the building-level decision. In the other district, the central office interview participant expressed dissatisfaction with the thought that a school that qualified for the grant would not apply for it. This was, in his words, failing to recognize the need to address the school's poor performance record. Other comments gleaned from participants are shared. "The district has allowed things to operate in this school," a demonstration of indirect district support. This type of indirect support was also described in the other district, by the central office person who indicated that being a School Improvement Grant school prevented all of the various district departments from touching or interfering with that particular school. Other participant perceptions indicate district support and action. "The district is supportive as long as you have a solid plan and leadership is prepared to follow through." One teacher shared he had never heard the school-level School Improvement Grant leader or the principal describe having their hands tied by the district. District leaders report participating in activities to support School Improvement Grant ranging from attending portions of school-level training and keeping a pulse on implementation to helping lead a district division created solely to serve and support struggling schools in the midst of high school reform.

One district's participants shared one pattern of responses which was not presented by any participants from the other district. Staff passionately articulated concern over the district's lack of recognition and understanding of the resource inequity felt at the school level. There was the perception shared that certain schools, depending on their location, are placed on uneven footing, by the inability to garner community and business support within the neighborhood and among the parents. The resulting situation is the perception that the neediest schools do not get additional or necessary support and resources. These schools and their students suffer because of the struggle to garner widespread parental, community, and business partnerships. As one participant explained, "Resources are driven by the area in which you live. Those who already have, end up with even more than those already with less."

Due to the limited time that funds are available through the grant, both districts used a strategy of being deliberate and strategic by prioritizing the building of capacity within the staff; enough capacity that programs and initiatives would, as much as possible, continue beyond the end of grant funds. Plans were put in place to set aside a certain amount of local funds to cover some of the costs being covered by the School Improvement Grant once the grant funds ended. With unanticipated cuts to district funds, this plan will not be implemented. As the end of grants approached, sustainability plans were developed and processes and supports developed at the school level were formalized through the establishment of clearly defined roles, procedures, and protocols. Teacher leaders and department chairs are expected to work with administrators to assist with the continuation of the work.

While numerous examples of district support for schools awarded the School Improvement Grant were enumerated, concern with the function and decision-making in Meridian was noted. The district had implemented efforts at reform in the past. One of the schools in Phase II of the study underwent its third major reform and overhaul as part of the School Improvement Grant Program. While change and reform can occur, this brings into question the ability to sustain. Another participant shared about a School Improvement Grant school not selected for inclusion in Phase II of this study. This school, like the one I visited, was in a repeat performance of reform under the School Improvement Grant Program. In the participant's opinion, the prior reform had been terribly mishandled by the district.

Sumner School District, the smaller district in the study, was in the midst of transition at the time of the interviews. One participant described the district as chaotic due to a shift in leadership and instability in state funding. The participant also cited constant fluctuations being driven by the state and difficulty in creating and maintaining true change. While it is unclear if the description of the district as chaotic was meant for the short-term or as the norm, it may not be a coincidence that the process to apply for the School Improvement Grant Program was passionately described by this same participant as horribly muddled. The district applied for the

grant twice; it was successful the second time. The participant reported that during the first application process, the district was not supportive at all, which, according to the participant, was not unusual. The report was that a key committee member did not complete the assigned portion of the grant and that the Superintendent took a laissez-faire attitude toward leadership in general and about the grant in particular. The district did not win the grant the first time, but was awarded the next time with a grant written by the same committee that wrote the first grant. This experience with district leadership left this interview participant feeling “discouraged and disgusted.” “I did it for the students; I would never want to be a part of central office.”

The leadership structures of all districts are not the same. One of the schools visited for interviews was a medium-size school in a large district. In this district, all groups of employees are unionized; the teachers’ union is large, with powerful lobbying mechanisms. This large district has a school board and is mayor-controlled. Many different nuances come with this structure. This district had the same leader for more than five years; a lack of turnover in leadership tends to provide a certain level of stability. This was supported in the interview data. According to the central office participant from this district, even though the district is large, it can be greatly impacted by changes in leadership. For a mayoral control district, these changes come whenever the mayor changes, whenever the school board changes, and/or whenever the Chief Educational Officer changes. After a period of more than five years under one leader, the district was led by six different people in six years. When asked, the participant shared that the departure of one person—one influential, effective, talented person—can cause the district and schools to be hard hit. “These staff changes make it hard to sustain the grant and the changes...a real challenge.”

Meridian School District, the larger of the two districts utilized for Phase II, created a division, two smaller sub-districts within the one district, specifically to serve schools with a history of academic struggle and undergoing school reform. This division was described as a project management vehicle to keep the supports in the schools well-coordinated. The division

was proactive rather than reactive, and schools were supported using data, metrics, and plans. Separate protocols, processes, and protections were developed for these schools. Once they were stabilized, the schools returned to the main district structure. One of the reasons for newly-designed structure was to protect the struggling schools. Typically, various district departments would come into the schools, and, according to a participant, “That was part of the problem.” The efforts were intended to help the schools, to support them, but they were not organized and coordinated; the “system was broken.” These are the words of an interview participant.

It was from within this department that the School Improvement Grants were written for this district. A two-step, internal process was utilized. With a large number of School Improvement Grant qualified schools in the district, leadership had to find a way to prioritize the schools and decide which could apply and when. The school district has an internal leveled rating system for the schools. Schools performing at a certain level were invited to develop a proposal which allowed them to advocate for their school to be in the district’s School Improvement Grant application. Once a school made it past this step, the leadership of the department which oversaw the struggling schools secured input from the school staff about its specific needs. The needs were analyzed; programs and initiatives to meet those needs were placed in the grant, per funding guidelines. The structures described above, including a division created specifically to support needier schools and an internal process to help funnel anticipated grant funds to schools prepared to implement and likely to be successful in creating much-needed change, are more likely to be found in larger districts due to the availability of resources. Districts of a certain size would not likely have enough resources to create an entire division to support struggling schools. Additionally, a district of smaller size may not have several schools working within the School Improvement Grant Program.

**District Size.** The size of the district in which a school is located impacts the school in many ways, including the availability of resources and support. It is the role of district leadership to provide support to school sites and also to distribute resources in an appropriate, efficient, and



equitable manner. Such important processes are influenced and impacted by the size of the school district. While the interview protocol did not contain any direct questions about size of the district or the impact the size of the district has on the school, interview participants interjected the concept of the size of their respective districts in the conversation. When asked to describe their district, eight of the 10 interview participants responded with a description which included an element of district size. Responses from the Sumner School District participants were as follows: (1) urban, not stable and chaotic; (2) large; (3) large, but not so large, not huge; forward-thinking, ahead of the curve, a pretty good district; (4) large; and (5) large and urban. The first set of Sumner school district interviews was completed before the first set of interviews at Meridian School District. Knowing that Meridian was a much larger district than Sumner, the researcher questioned how those participants would describe their districts. Responses from the Meridian School District participants were as follows: (1) a huge, giant conglomerate of schools that need one clear vision and direction that would better benefit the haves, the have nots, and the ones who need it; (2) huge, with a lot of inconsistencies; (3) large, metropolitan; (4) large, urban district, we're just, we're just huge; and (5) uneven, resources are uneven, differences between more privileged school and less privileged schools.

It is clear that "large" is the adjective interview participants most frequently used to describe these two districts. It appears that participants working in Meridian, the larger of the two districts, were more inclined to verbalize descriptions which articulated characteristics and challenges. Within this district, two conflicting perceptions were noted. One participant, who works in a supporting position and has worked in several different School Improvement Grant schools indicated, "In this district, they listen to the schools. From the school level all the way to the senior leadership. It is only a few layers down to the head." A teacher in the same school indicated, "Usually, things are top down in this district."

With a large number of low-performing schools, Meridian, the larger district, was able to secure School Improvement Grants for several schools. Ms. Dale, the central office interview

participant from Meridian School District described the School Improvement Grant program as a “huge benefit to the district and to students.” This participant introduced an interesting aspect of school size. The term this participant used was “scale.” The concept was that the scale of a school district, which, based on our conversation, related to the number of schools in the district and the respective amount of resources available, makes a difference in what happens in the district. A concrete example of the benefit of scale, or size, and several schools being funded within one district, centered on the provision of high-quality professional development. In a large district, resources are significant enough that high-caliber experts can be brought to the district for extended periods of time to work directly with staff. In a smaller district, resources are typically less; staff may end up doing a book study, watching videos or webinars, or going to a workshop not presented by the actual expert. With several schools funded, the district is able to do its own research as to the impact of the reforms. The participant contends that schools which created reform through building capacity in staff (transformation) were able to produce and maintain deeper change, including improvement in academic performance, than schools where the reform strategy was based on removing a majority of the staff and bringing in a new team to lead and operate the school. The participant also shared a trend for decreased staff turnover in transformation schools as compared to other reformed schools and schools which have not been reformed.

One unique aspect of data collection was the interview with the central office person in Meridian, the larger district, Ms. Dale. This participant spoke, more than any other, about district size. Due to the size of the Meridian School District and the number of challenging schools within the district, a rating system was developed and utilized to categorize the schools based on needs. This allows the district to attempt to provide varying levels of support, such as the special division described earlier. As a central office staff member, the participant possessed a unique view of the organization. The tasks and activities in which the participant is involved impacts the

schools without staff at the school level understanding or realizing what is transpiring. Several observations of this participant will be shared next.

Control is less of an issue in a larger district. The board can see the district as a huge, massive structure and typically does not have ties to all parts of the whole. This can make it easier to bring in a lead partner to assist with change. Being large and urban can mean fewer community issues in some parts of the district. This anonymity can lead to a lack of connection, a lack of familiarity which makes it somewhat easier to make and implement drastic decisions. In larger districts, there are enough schools to consider large scale release or reassignment of staff as a viable reform option. In larger districts, the structure of the central office is typically comprised of parallel groups of staff executing the same tasks, but not effectively communicating with one another. One does not know what the other is doing. Communication is a challenge due to different units and departments. In smaller districts, people tend to communicate more as one person does several different things; whereas in a larger district, you have several people all doing the same thing without talking to each other. The structure and function of central office in a larger district has been described from the viewpoint of a central office administrator. Next, consider the data analysis of staff in the same role but in differing districts.

**Data based on participant's role.** In an effort to more deeply analyze and interpret the interview data gathered in Phase II, the transcripts were coded and reviewed based on the roles held with comparisons then made between the districts. Responses which were the same in both locations were coded one way; responses which were opposites of each other were coded another way; and comments lacking significance or previously covered were eliminated.

**Teachers.** In general, all four teachers felt the grant had helped the students. All four were supportive of the grant, the programs implemented, and the school leadership. Both teachers working in each district expressed similar beliefs and experiences. Opinions of their respective district, however, varied. Teachers in Sumner School District verbalized challenges and obstacles without criticizing the district. "Change is hard; bumps in the road should be

expected.” In Meridian, the larger district, the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the district based on their perceptions of provisions of resources. All four teachers expressed that the grant funds enabled them to meet the needs of their students and the hope that funding can be restored.

**Grant support staff.** These two study participants had many differences. One is a professional educator; the other is not. One is in position with compensation provided via the School Improvement Grant; one is in a district-funded position. One is the person driving all of the grant activities within the school setting; the other is a support person for the grant who deals with everything except instructional matters. Both have numerous experiences related to the School Improvement Grant Program outside of the current schools and roles. The participant working in Sumner, the smaller district, has a negative perception of central office, but appears to be pleased that they are basically left alone at the school level to do whatever is needed for the students. The participant does acknowledge support from the district for the implementation of the School Improvement Grant. The participant working in Meridian, the larger district, has a positive perception of the persons in positions above the school level. This might be based on past experience at the next level up in the organization. According to the participant, the level of politics was an issue; causing the participant to return to the school level where the expectation of the job is to make sure the students and staff have everything they need to be successful, including a nice facility which creates a positive learning environment.

**Principals.** The roles these two principals fulfill in their respective schools vary based upon the organization, priorities, and structure of their districts and the configuration of the plan put in place as a part of the School Improvement Grant. Neither principal was in the role when decisions were made and actions were taken to secure a School Improvement Grant. The principal in Sumner, the smaller district, is not the driver of grant activities at the school level. This role is addressed by a study participant who is housed at the school and responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the grant activities. The position is funded by the grant, which means it will cease to exist at the end of the school year. The study participant is the second

person to hold the role; the previous one resigned to move on to another position due to the short-term nature of grant funding. Early on, issues arose with the added personnel, including consultants from the lead partner and supporting partner entities, being in the building and staff not knowing from whom they were to take direction. The principal of this school verbalized that he is the instructional leader of the school. The principal in Meridian, the larger district, did not have specific staff on site for the purpose of assisting with educational aspects of grant implementation. The one participant housed at the school site held a district-created position designed to remove non-educational matters, such as facilities and budgets, from the principal's busy schedule. The principal in Meridian, the larger district, was knowledgeable about programs and implementation of the grant. The need to improve curriculum and instruction and culture and climate were stressed, whereas the other principal talked primarily about the improved climate of the school. The two principals expressed many of the same perceptions. Change comes slowly; the grant was the driver of reform, a boost for the school, a shot in the arm; the perceptions of the schools have not changed in the eyes of some, even though the schools have genuinely improved; and principals have been given autonomy.

The degree to which the principal expressed a perception of being supported by the district varied. The principal in Sumner, the smaller district, said the district was supportive. The principal in Meridian, the larger district, describes a shortfall and reflects that it could have been addressed had the principal reached out to the district. This principal feels it is the principal's role to go to central office on behalf of the school. The principal did express dissatisfaction with perceived differences in treatment and available resources for schools depending upon the neighborhood in which the school was located. These sentiments were also shared by the teacher study participants in this school. Both principals stressed the importance of the grant activities addressing the needs of the students. The principal in Meridian, the larger district, was more specific and more deliberate about the severe social and emotional needs of the student body. This may be a product, not of a larger district, but of a district with a higher percentage of

students qualified as living at or below the poverty level as defined by the Federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program. The principal in Meridian, the larger district, operated from a mindset of a problem-solver on a mission to find a way, against many odds, to help the school and its students.

*Central office.* A variety of contrasts presented themselves when examining these two study participants. Mr. Smith, the participant from Sumner, the smaller district, was new to the position and indicated that work related to the School Improvement Grant program was less than five percent of the work load. Ms. Dale, the participant from Meridian, the larger district, was assigned to a particular area of the district. Ms. Dale, though not originally from this Midwestern state, had held several central office positions within Meridian. Ms. Dale was one of the only interview participants with experience outside of the district where the interviews took place. Mr. Smith, the participant from Sumner, the smaller district, was fairly removed since the driving of the work related to the School Improvement Grant resided at the school level. The participant from Meridian, the larger district, was heavily involved in working only with School Improvement Grant recipients. This was due, in part, to the large number of grantees and struggling schools in Meridian, the larger district. Both central office leaders highlighted the benefits of the resources provided through the grant with each pointing out the high quality of professional development the schools were able to receive. Both expressed that the end of funding was or would be a loss, even though they felt that the work of the grant had developed capacity within the schools. Both were positive about the work and impact of the School Improvement Grants.

## **Phase II Findings**

**Research question 4.** What are district and high school staff perceptions of effectiveness of reform initiatives?

While the results of the districts' performance on the Lead Indicators provided us with a quantitative understanding of data, the Phase II interviews provided an interpretation of school

reform from the viewpoint of the people actually completing the work. Interview participants included teachers, a data coach, principals, and central office staff members. Every participant expressed support of the programming and impact of the School Improvement Grant. Each voiced regret that the funds will soon end or have ended, and that the students are no longer able to be served at the same level as when the grant was in place. Several participants mentioned trying to continue the work of the grant without the resources. While the perception was that capacity had been built in staff, the harsh reality of the lack of partnerships, certain people, and job positions could not be ignored. The participants expressed strongly that the programs were the correct activities and initiatives for their specific students. The participants articulated appreciation that they were able to participate in the development of the actual programming, creating tight alignment with the needs of their individual students. One of the most consistent responses of the participants was that the School Improvement Grant had a positive impact on the students and the schools. Another response all participants voiced was the desire that funding continues or is reinstated.

**Research question 5.** What are the experiences of district and high school staff related to attempts to direct school reform efforts articulated in School Improvement Grants?

Experiences of the district and high school staff members varied depending on their individual personal and professional histories, as well as their experiences in the current district. Participants described the grant implementation as a great deal of work, but also expressed that the work was worth it because of the impact on the students. Experiences involving others outside of the school seemed to be described in a more disconnected fashion than experiences relating to occurrences or events at the school sites. Examples include negative experiences with central office staff and leadership in the Sumner School District, and not being prepared to maximize the potentially positive impact of a major media event at Meridian High School. Various concerns were expressed, such as the complexity of grant paperwork, securing effective support from the state board of education, and philosophical misalignment with entities

contracted to facilitate and assist with implementation of reform programs. While working to implement the grant brought about challenges, many of the challenges were not directly related to the grant itself. A consistent perception, clearly and passionately articulated by all participants, was that true change is very difficult to generate and maintain in any district setting. Participants mentioned this challenge as a major factor, but also expressed it as a given. Based on the findings of this study, these comments may have more significance than previously thought.

**Research Question 6.** How does district size influence the experiences and perceptions of district staff and high school staff?

The size of the district in which the school was located influenced how the School Improvement Grant was implemented. Organizational dynamics and management structure and design are heavily influenced by district size. District size certainly influences how work is undertaken, but not necessarily the perceptions of the staff as it pertains to School Improvement Grant implementation. The perceptions of working with School Improvement Grants in Sumner and Meridian School districts were also influenced by the fact that only one of the interview participants has worked in a school district other than Sumner or Meridian.

In smaller districts, resources are typically proportionately less. With scarce resources often comes the need to spread them further than what can actually be effective. In smaller districts, the imaginary organizational space between the school level and the district leadership is less and the connection seems more functional. Larger districts typically have more organizational layers, but also more resources at their disposal. There is a certain type of anonymity found in large districts and it can be maximized as a catalyst for change. Certain school improvement actions, such as moving an entire staff from one school and placing all of the staff at different job sites, are easier to accomplish with an increased number of schools. In Meridian, the large district, it was stated that all of the various departments create additional challenges for schools because functions are disjointed. This particular district addressed this by isolating struggling schools into their own sub-set of the district, complete with protection from



the myriad of departments. While large districts can have enough concentrated need to propel leadership to create comprehensive and specialized supports for those schools, it is unfortunate to hear that the basic structure of a large district is one of the impediments to school level success in large districts.

The interviews with the 10 participants produced a great deal of information based on their experiences and beliefs. Staff members in both schools seemed passionate about their efforts to meet the holistic needs of their students. The principals of both schools demonstrated strong, but different, types of leadership. Ms. Jones, principal of Sumner High School, was more laid back and was not the driver of the grant at the school level; there was a grant-funded staff member at the school, Ms. Fulton, who was primarily responsible for grant implementation and program monitoring. Mr. Davis, principal of Meridian High School, was more overtly passionate. He was the driver of the grant in the school even though the district provided a staff member to address all non-instructional matters related to the grant. All ten of the participants shared a wealth of valuable information. It is clear that both benefits and detractions exist whether working in a very large district or a smaller district. The interview participants were able to articulate the stories, challenges, and experiences beyond what the numbers show.

The participants are impacted by the organizational structures in which they work. The environment in which they work influences what they do as educators. For example, Meridian High School is located in a large, urban school district. Larger school districts typically have student populations with greater needs due to poverty and challenges such as not speaking English as their first language. Serving large percentages of such students requires certain approaches and cannot be compared to serving smaller numbers of students facing these types of challenges. The Meridian High School principal was perceived by this researcher as a passionate, fearless advocate for the school and the students. The school leader viewed it as a leadership priority and responsibility to address all of the needs of the school by being able to function effectively in a variety of roles. This feeling is the by-product of being in a large system where

the support system is neither aligned, effective, nor efficient. In Sumner, the smaller district, the school seemed somewhat like an island, though staff expressed feeling the support of the district staff. In Sumner School District, the central office person has many varied responsibilities and work related to the School Improvement Grant is less than five percent of the participant's work load. Because of the few number of School Improvement Grant schools in this district; it would never be feasible to create a separate division for struggling schools. In Meridian, the central office person is responsible for a large group of similar schools and, in the past, was very heavily involved in School Improvement Grant implementation.

### **Summary**

This study examined the performance of 20 high schools awarded Department of Education School Improvement Grants in fiscal years 2011 and 2012. The purpose of the study was to investigate the schools' performance on the grant's accountability measures, the Lead Indicators. The first phase of the mixed method, two-phase exploratory study was to examine the Lead Indicator data for changes from 2010-2012 in order to establish the level of effectiveness of the grant programming. The second phase of the study was qualitative; interviews of ten educators working in two schools awarded and implementing School Improvement Grant reform activities. The purpose of the interviews was to allow us to learn about the experiences of the staff members as they lead implementation efforts for the School Improvement Grant and to gather their perceptions of the effectiveness of the grant's programs and the implementation process.

The implementation of School Improvement Grant programming from 2010-2012 in the 20 high schools in the data set had an overall impact on three of the eight Lead Indicators examined. One Lead Indicator, student discipline, was not included due to a lack of data from the State Board of Education. Research question one investigated the effect of implementation of School Improvement Grant programs on the effectiveness of districts and schools. Based on the data analysis in this phase of the study, the impact has been inconsistent and minimal. Change

was produced on three of eight Lead Indicators. One of the changes was a negative impact. Due to the grant, significant changes were seen in the dropout rate, the percent of chronic truants, and student attendance. The percent of chronic truants was a continual challenge with changes negatively impacting the percent of students classified as chronic truants. Part of the issue may be that implementation of the School Improvement Grant caused increased monitoring and greater scrutiny of student attendance in these schools. Research question three examined any differences in effectiveness related to the size of the school. School size, based on the number of students enrolled in the school, had no significant impact on the changes in performance on the Lead Indicator means from 2010-2012. District size, however did have a significant impact for the dropout rate, chronic truants, and the total minutes in the school year. Research question two investigated any difference in effectiveness related to district size. The analysis indicated the level of effectiveness on several of the Lead Indicators differed significantly based on district size. There were significant differences across the district sizes for the dropout rates, and the size of the effect was large. Meridian, the largest district in the study, and the only district in the Code 3 category, experienced a significantly larger decrease in the dropout rate compared to the slight drop in the small districts. The medium-size districts, on the average, saw a slight increase in the dropout rate. The differences in dropout rates, between the larger and the medium-size districts, were significant. Significant differences were also found across the district sizes for total minutes in school with a medium size effect. The small districts experienced a significantly larger increase in minutes in the school year compared to the large districts which experienced no change in minutes in the school year. There were significant differences across the district sizes for excessive absences. Meridian, the bigger district, experienced significantly higher excessive absences compared to the small districts and the medium-size districts. The lowest increase in excessive absences was in the small sized districts.

While Phase I of the study focused on quantitative data, Phase II concentrated on qualitative data. Ten educators, five from each Meridian and Sumner School Districts, were

interviewed to gain their perceptions of the effectiveness of the reform programs and initiatives provided through the School Improvement Grant resources, and their perceptions and experiences as they worked to implement programming related to the School Improvement Grant Program.

Nine of the ten interview participants shared freely. All described the grant program as a lot of work that made a huge difference for the students at the school. All expressed the hope that the funding would somehow be reinstated in future years. All participants shared a variety of challenges and benefits they experienced through the School Improvement Grant implementation. As they shared, they provided insight in terms of district actions related to the School Improvement Grant and potential linkages between the grant's implementation and effectiveness and school and district size.

Despite the repeated failures to successfully implement and maintain school improvement or school reform in large, urban school districts as cited in the Chapter II literature review, district size is not an impediment to school improvement. Schools and districts of all sizes in the study were challenged to create systemic and systematic improvement for the children in the School Improvement Grant schools in this study. Notably, of the schools in this study, schools in Meridian School District, a large, urban school district was able to more effectively improve dropout rates as compared to medium-size school districts and small school districts.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the mixed method, two-phase exploratory study was to investigate the impact of implementation school reform funded by a Federal Department of Education School Improvement Grant on school effectiveness. Additionally, school and district performance on the Lead Indicators articulated in the grant were analyzed and examined for differences based on district size. District size was based on the number of students enrolled in the district. Due to the small number of schools and districts in the study, performance on the Lead Indicators was also analyzed and examined for differences based on school size. District and school level staff experiences and perceptions related to School Improvement Grant implementation were also gathered in order to investigate whether or not there were any difference in these experiences and perceptions related to district size or school size.

In Phase I of the study, document analysis using quantitative data analysis methods was used to examine the influence of implementation of the grant-funded reform initiatives and programs and whether or not district and school size had an impact on school effectiveness. Performance on the accountability measures mandated in the grant, the Lead Indicators, was analyzed using descriptive statistics and univariate ANOVA. This quantitative research included 20 high schools, all awardees in the first two groups of schools given the grants. Phase II of the study, which was qualitative, involved two high school schools selected from the original group of 20. For these two schools, interviews were executed to solicit the perceptions and experiences of key staff members. The interview data were analyzed using several types of coding.

Findings have been established through data analysis executed to answer the six research questions. The first three questions are addressed in Phase I of the study; the last three in Phase II. The implementation of programs and initiatives funded through the School Improvement Grant program had a statistical impact on the data as well as personal and educational impacts on the students and a professional impact on the staff interviewed as part of the study. First, a summary of Phase I data and findings is provided followed by the same for Phase II.

A quantitative review of the data on the Lead Indicator performance from 2010-2012 indicates improvements in dropout rates, student attendance rates, minutes in the school year, and teacher performance on local evaluation tools. These improvements, however, were not indicated consistently and systematically within all of the schools.

The most significant finding is the impact that district size was found to have on decreases on the dropout rate and increases in the percent of chronic truants. Meridian School District, the largest district in the study and one of the largest districts in the United States, experienced a significantly larger drop in the dropout rate as compared to a minimal drop in the group including the smallest districts. The group of medium-size districts experienced a slight increase in the dropout rate. When comparing the decrease in Meridian's dropout rate to the dropout rate in the group of medium-size districts, the difference between the two was significantly different. There were significant differences across the district sizes for total minutes in school with a medium size effect. The results showed the small district experienced a significantly larger increase in minutes in the school year; compared to the large district, which experienced no change minutes in the school year.

Changes in the percent of students classified as chronic truants due to excessive absences were noted in almost every data analysis. The changes reflect increases in the percent of students experiencing excessive absences. The findings reflect significant differences across the district sizes for excessive absences, with a medium size effect. Meridian, the largest district, still experienced significantly higher percentages of chronic truants compared to the group of small

districts and the group of medium-size districts. The lowest increase in percent of chronic truants was in the group of small districts.

Next, Phase II data and analysis are included. Phase II of the study centered on the stories behind the numbers. All participants shared their experiences and perceptions related to their responsibilities to implement programs and initiatives funded by the School Improvement Grant program. The interviews with ten staff members, including teachers, principals, staff supporting grant implementation, and central office staff, produced some consistent themes. Most of their experiences and perceptions fit into the categories of challenges, benefits, and district actions. Regardless of the participant, a consistently repeated verbalization was that the school had benefited greatly from being awarded the School Improvement Grant. Participants expressed that students had been helped and staff had changed the way they work with students. Many described capacity being built within the staff. Challenges were expressed as well; ranging from a superintendent who appeared indifferent and unsupportive in Sumner School District to the Meridian High School principal expressing frustration about restrictions placed on how grant funds can be utilized. All ten interview participants expressed the desire that funding be reinstated somehow or extended for a longer period of time to allow the changes to firmly take hold within the schools.

District size appeared to have an influence on how staff at the school level viewed themselves and their schools within the overall district. Staff working in the Sumner School District seemed to view the district leadership as not very far removed from the school level. In Meridian, the staff seemed to work with more of an entrepreneurial spirit, working almost on its own, to save the students. These perceptions were difficult to analyze and discern as nine of the ten interview participants had not worked in any district other than Meridian School District, creating a lack of a basis for comparison of Meridian School District to other districts. In terms of the impact of district size, the work of the educators is affected by the size of the school district in which the school resides. This includes the amount and quality of resources available to how

they are or *are not* distributed. Staff in Meridian High School expressed concern that the neediest schools are harmed simply by being located in communities with fewer resources. As Meridian High School teacher, Mr. Lamb, said, “The district, the system, ends up penalizing certain populations of the city. The poorer parts of the city, those are the students that need the most supports; and the most supports are going to the people that really don’t need them. They already have.” Based on information and research provided in the literature review in Chapter II, this district, a large, urban school district, would be expected to regularly experience historically resistant and deeply engrained challenges, causing great difficulty in facilitating meaningful change and improvement.

### **Discussion**

This discussion will include information in terms of how the findings of this study align with past research and how they differ. Connections will be made to the previously discussed concepts of organizational theory, the role of school district leadership, and the impact district size has on high school reform.

This study focused on 20 schools and the results of one or two years of School Improvement Grant implementation. While the examination is not a long-term view of the impact of the grant, it does provide some positive outcomes. Previous research and the information shared in the Chapter II literature review indicate the schools would be ineffective in creating significant and long-term change (Brooks, 2006). Early findings from research commissioned by the Federal Department of Education indicate general gains and pockets of improvement. Findings also included some schools not improving, but halting long-established declines in student performance by creating a plateau in performance (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/assessment-results-cohort-1-2-sig-schools.pdf>). The data indicate the schools in the Meridian School District, the largest district in the study, was able to significantly decrease its dropout rate. This finding aligns with those of William Corrin in his report for Manpower



Demonstration Research Corporation: small schools had a positive impact on high school graduation rates for disadvantaged students of color (Corrin, 2013).

While programs and initiatives were implemented, change created, and numerous successes acknowledged, serious concerns were expressed about maintaining and sustaining the improvements. It was not surprising that one of the most common responses from interview participants was the need for funding to continue somehow. Educational research indicates sustainable change takes at least three to five years. According to Joseph Kahne, Sporte, and Easton (2008), full implementation of educational change typically takes three to five years. It takes about two years to get any new project or significant improvement off the ground, two more years for it to be fully implemented, and another year or two for it to become stable and sufficiently institutionalized to consistently evidence academic improvement on student outcomes. It is unfortunate and ironic that School Improvement Grants funds are provided for three years.

The call for an extension of grant implementation timeframes may not be purely a financial consideration. Consideration of time, in terms of how long it takes an organization to create significant change that can be maintained and sustained is grounded in theory. It is my belief that the inconsistent school performance on the grant-mandated Lead Indicators is due to the need to allow more time for changes to become sufficiently ingrained into the organizational culture of the school. One significant barrier to effective organization change and education reform is failure to comprehend to the degree which the change process is subject to powerful cultural influences from within the organization itself (Dooley, 1995).

William Corrin (2013) asserts that those seeking reform and creating education policy should refrain from constantly shifting from one reform to the next. Educators need to stay the course until programs have been in place enough time for their effectiveness to be examined fairly based on adequate time and implementation fidelity. He specifically asserts that turning around struggling high schools is complex; time must be allowed for changes to stick, as he calls

it. Corrin reiterates what has been previously stated. Reforms in place for five or more years have greater outcomes than reforms with shorter implementation timeframes (Corrin, 2013). Reforms are often implemented without the fidelity or the long-term support necessary to produce success and facilitate sustainability (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009).

In 2005, Susan Awbrey emphasized that reform requires the integration of cultural and structural change. She described a deeper level that is critical to effective systemic organization change. This level is comprised of affective elements connected to the psychological and social characteristics of the organization. Awbrey contended the institutional culture resided within areas such as power and influence patterns, personal views and interpretations of the organization, interpersonal relationships, norms, trust, risk-taking, values, emotions, and needs. It is at this level at which institutional culture operates (Awbrey, 2005). Based on this research, for change to be sustainable, it must reach these deep areas of the organization and the institutional culture. The deeper the learning reaches, the more profound and lasting is the change it elicits (Boyce, 2003). The culture cannot be exchanged as it systematizes and organizes itself (Lindahl, 2010). Organizations must be ready and able to learn, unlearn and relearn (Lindahl, p. 238). The aspects of in-depth organizational learning are described by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön. They describe three distinct levels of learning. Single loop learning, which reaches only the formal, operational level, is short-lived. Single loop learning is evident when a problem is approached based on strategies which have produced success in the past. Double loop learning is deeper and requires the examination of values and beliefs via interactive dialogue. It occurs when there is no pre-existing solution or strategy to address a given problem. New conceptualization is required. Double loop learning has the potential of changing the organization's culture. Triple loop, or Deutero Learning, is transformative; it changes the structure of the organization and the way it is intellectualized by those within it. The organization has established effective ways to address first and second order changes. Members have integrated that learning into their organizational behaviors and cultures (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Deutero approaches to school

improvement are rare because they focus on long-term perspectives; whereas, most school improvement initiatives have a backdrop urgency driven by unrealistic timelines to plan and implement lasting change (Lindahl, 2010). Deutero learning requires schools to “continuously building history, knowledge, perspectives, and culture; a process that takes years, if not decades” (p.244). In contrast, school reform initiatives typically run their course within three to five years, in part due to limited financial resources. Such funding-induced time limits prohibit members of the school and district organizations from reaching the depth of triple loop learning. This limitation is manifested as our study reveals schools producing inconsistent results despite hard work by supportive and dedicated school and district staff.

Notably, one of the two Phase II schools, which had been greatly improved through the efforts connected to the School Improvement Grant, counted its most recent transformation as the third total overhaul of the school. Limited funds and resources create a need for short timeframes, such as three years, for program in an effort to be fiscally responsible. However, funding three separate total overhauls of the same high school is not financially efficient. According to Mr. Davis, the principal, who participated only in the most recent reform, each time resources were removed, the school slowly returned to dysfunction and disarray. This decline aligns with what was described by Martha Able Mac Iver, associate research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University and author of a 2007 *Urban Education and Society* article titled “What Reform Left Behind: A Decade of Change at One Urban High School.” The research exposed repeated patterns of reforms being started, implemented, and abandoned, only to be followed by a different reform being started, implemented, and abandoned. Neither staff nor students took the efforts seriously. They were viewed and treated as perfunctory measures.

It was heartbreaking to hear Meridian High School principal, Mr. Davis, a dedicated, reflective, committed, enthusiastic educator, express with sadness that a return to the old ways would result in his departure from the school after ushering in the powerful changes created

through the School Improvement Grant. Reformers need to take stronger approaches. Research indicates that initial gains in student achievement, even if they are significant, typically reach a plateau. Once a plateau is reached, policymakers erroneously conclude that schools are not improving and often begin to dismantle the initiative or program. What this predictable cycle actually calls for is additional time and more intensive strategies (Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004).

This cycle of resources creating change, resources withdrawn, and school decline supports what has been described in past research. The cycle is closely tied to what research tells us transpires when change after change and initiative after initiative is forced upon teachers and other staff. Everyone involved with the school, students, staff, and parents; they all give up. Organizational Theory supports this type of emotional shutdown mechanism. The culture of the organization devolves into one with a lack of hope. Without some type of corrective action or support, things worsen. The level of organizational dysfunction described by Charles Payne (2008), author of *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools* is inevitable in these situations. No such dysfunction was found in the schools in this study. The data indicate the reforms produced some encouraging outcomes. The reforms were perceived by staff as constructive and as having had a positive impact on students, school, and staff. This finding was true regardless of district size and school size.

The importance and role of district leadership was verified through the study. The districts in the study were of vastly different sizes and functioned in different manners; many of the basic functions of the district departments, however, were similar. How the functions were executed varied based on the size of the districts. Meridian School District had so many departments interacting with Meridian High School and other high-needs schools that Ms. Dale, the central office interview participant, described these departments and their lack of coordination as an actual problem for the school sites. In Sumner School district, the organizational space between the school and the central office appeared to be perceived as smaller than in Meridian.

In Sumner, however, one interview participant expressed extreme disdain at the lack of support provided by central office and the superintendent during the grant writing process.

Past research describes district size as a hindrance on many levels. Large districts are reportedly poor learning environments for students challenged by living in poverty and speaking English as a second language. Past research indicates large districts are better for students with stable home situations and that larger districts exacerbate the problems experienced by struggling learners (Diaz, 2008; Friedkin, 1988). On the other hand, larger districts have access to greater levels of resources. School districts are funded through a variety of sources; more students enrolled generate more revenue from the state. Large districts may benefit from what the Meridian School District central office administrator, Ms. Dale, described as scale. Meridian School District created an entire department to support persistently failing schools, protecting them from interference from the myriad of district departments. In this study, district size impacted how the work of grant implementation was undertaken. District size, according to the data in the study, did not prevent effective school reform on some of the indicators such as the dropout rate, student attendance, and teacher evaluation ratings. However for other indicators such as the number of students taking advanced courses, the percent of chronic truants, minutes in the school year, student participation on the state-mandated test, and teacher attendance, there appeared to be a regression of performance or no change in performance.

While interview participants shared their experiences and perceptions of School Improvement Grant implementation and the work of creating change in a school, the impact of school size was not paramount to the School Improvement Grant. District size was more of a factor in terms of its impact on the general work of the participants. The qualitative interviews reveal educators who consistently perceived that schools were drastically improved by the implementation of School Improvement Grant initiatives. Principal Davis, of Meridian High School laughed during our subsequent (or follow-up?) discussion of my visit to the school. He had not been present the day of my visit. As the positive nature of my experience was shared, he

stated I would have had a very different response several years ago. “You would have asked, ‘Is this a real school?’” He described a chaotic school, including daily fights and a large number of over-age students. Ms. Fulton, of Sumner High School, stated, “I can truly say this work has really made a difference in the way our teachers teach and the way our kids learn.” Sumner High School Principal, Ms. Jones, reported, “There is no way we could have provided the professional development and support which lead to learning new instructional strategies if we had not had some kind of boost, so it (the grant) is a shot in the arm.” Ms. Wilson, a grant implementation support staff member at Meridian High School, clearly articulated his opinion. “The School Improvement Grant is more work, because it creates more activities and programs, but the work is worth it; the resources made a difference for the kids.” Staff members in both districts led their schools to improvements on some of the School Improvement Grant Lead Indicators. Staff in both districts struggle to maintain improvements with reduced funding. Improvement and success can be fostered in districts and schools of vastly differing sizes. Based on these experiences and perceptions of the participants, the researcher believes schools located in large districts can, through the provision of significant resources, be improved, transformed, turned around, and reformed. Improving high schools requires a systemic, coordinated, holistic plan of action which simultaneously focuses on a variety of outcomes, involves a combination of different approaches, and rejects piecemeal programs or actions (Fleischman & Heppen, 2009).

### **Recommendations**

This study examined the impact of the implementation of programs and initiatives funded by School Improvement Grants in 20 high schools in one Midwestern state. Grants have been awarded in all fifty states and funding continues. Additional groups of schools have been the recipients of School Improvement Grant funds. Recommendations for future research include the need to examine effectiveness of School Improvement Grant programs beyond the one state in the study.

The findings in the study lead to a need for increased study of the possibilities within school reform. Deep consideration must be given to address the lack of ability to sustain positives outcomes due to the end of provision of financial resources via the School Improvement Grant program. Two participants expressed strong beliefs that money is not the answer to all issues; however, they shared that through the significant financial resources and expert technical support provided through the School Improvement Grant, their schools were reformed and students were helped.

Since district size and school size are not impediments, within themselves, to school reform, more study is needed to examine how to produce large-scale school improvement and increased academic achievement for students in these districts. Populations of the largest school districts in the United States are large in number and more likely to include students faced with the significant challenges such as poverty and English as a second language.

As the lead agency for education in the United States of America, the Federal Department of Education needs to examine the nationwide impact of the School Improvement Grant program thus far. While this study centered on schools in the first two cohorts, additional groups of schools have been awarded the grant since the beginning of this research. The Department of Education needs to glean the lessons learned and provide guidance and support, even if only technical, to schools whose funding has ended. According to the participants, there was no process for awardees all in the same state to collaborate and share practices, challenges, benefits, and outcomes of the grants. Learning through this School Improvement Grant program would strengthen its impact and increase effectiveness and efficiency. This would involve active, engaging support, moving beyond posting resources and documents on the Internet as currently provided on the Federal Department of Education website.

Additional research needs to occur to examine how to provide the resources for longer periods with an emphasis on finding a way to sustain the improvements without continued and endless provision of the large sums of money awarded via the School Improvement Grant

program. Conversely, perhaps what is actually needed in order to produce the changes that have been sought for hundreds of years in America's public high schools is increased funding to public schools, and not in the form of the periodic awarding of different types of grants and the endless cycle of reform program implementation. One cannot help but consider the countless number of American children who been ill-served over the years while this quandary about successful high school reform churned on and on.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of the United States of America public school system can be debated on many levels. In the past, public schools were seen at the pathway to utopia. Education was viewed as what would "save" America. Most stakeholders believe it is the responsibility of the public school system to produce graduates who are ready for the world of work, careers, and further education. Regardless of one's philosophy, it is clear that public school graduates represent the vast majority of the citizenry of our nation. Society functions best with diverse and productive citizens who are capable of contributing in a positive, significant manner.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that for the 2003-2004 school year, 23% of all public school students were educated in the 100 largest public school districts. These 100 districts represent less than one percent of school districts in the United States. These same 100 districts employed 22% of the public school teachers and produced 20% of students completing high school. Based on the past research, the student population in large, urban districts is statistically pre-dispositioned to experience academic, social, and emotional challenges due to issues such as living in poverty and not speaking English. For hundreds of years, the American public school system has struggled to consistently produce positive outcomes for many students, but particularly for students attending schools in large, urban school districts. The United States needs its educators to prioritize the educational attainment of these students. These students need us to prioritize their educational attainment. Today's students are tomorrow's global citizens of the world.



Recently, students attending school in persistently failing schools have been portrayed in the media as facing a hopeless future. The Department of Education School Improvement Grant program was created to address student achievement challenges in persistently failing schools. Schools awarded grants are held accountable via nine Lead Indicators. The ability to improve school and district performance on all School Improvement Grant Lead Indicators was a challenge for the 20 schools in the study. Out of the eight Lead Indicators where data were available, the results indicate significant changes for the dropout rate, chronic truants (which actually increased) and the total minutes in the school year.

The analysis indicated the level of effectiveness on several of the Lead Indicators differed significantly based on district size. Significant differences occurred across the district sizes for the dropout rates. The biggest district experienced a significantly larger drop in the dropout rate compared to the slight drop in the small districts. The medium-size districts, on the average, saw a slight increase in the dropout rate. The difference in dropout rates between the larger and medium-size districts was significant. There were significant differences across the district sizes for total minutes in school. The results showed that the small district experienced a significantly larger increase in minutes in the school year compared to the large districts which experienced no change in minutes. The bigger districts experienced significantly higher excessive absences compared to the small and medium-size districts. The lowest increase in excessive absences was in the small sized districts. Smaller districts have lower percentages of chronic truants and larger districts have higher percentages of chronic truants.

Based on the findings in this study, district size is not a hindrance to school improvement. The largest district in the study was able to produce significant decreases in the dropout rate. While past research reported that students are disadvantaged by attending schools in large districts, the research in relation to the specific implementation of School Improvement Grants did not fully support this assessment. Both the quantitative and qualitative research support this

conclusion. These findings are significant because they potentially remove size of district as a hindrance to student success.

Based on the interviews of the district staff, the experiences and perceptions described did not differ based on district size or school size. District size was more of a factor in terms of its impact on the general work of the participants. Staff members in both districts led their schools to improvements on some of the School Improvement Grant Lead Indicators. The qualitative interviews reveal educators who consistently perceived that schools were drastically improved by the implementation of School Improvement Grant initiatives. Based on this study, improvement and success can be fostered in districts and schools of vastly differing sizes. Despite a history of challenge with effective school reform in large, urban school districts, public schools located in large districts can, through the consistent provision of significant resources, be improved, transformed, turned around, and reformed.

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## APPENDIX A

### DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT

#### GUIDANCE LETTER TO STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

December 3, 2009

Dear Chief State School Officers:

I am pleased to inform you that, today, the Department posted on [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov) the final requirements and the State application package for School Improvement Grants (SIG) authorized under section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). These final requirements govern the process that a State educational agency (SEA) must use to award SIG funds to local educational agencies (LEAs) that demonstrate the greatest need for the funds and the strongest commitment to use the funds to raise substantially the achievement of students attending Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, and restructuring, as well as certain secondary schools that are eligible for, but do not receive, Title I funds. Specifically, the final requirements will direct section 1003(g) SIG funds in significant amounts to each State's persistently lowest-achieving schools in order to turn around those schools.

Along with the final requirements, the Department is releasing five percent of each State's allocation of fiscal year (FY) 2009 SIG funds. As you know, more than \$3.5 billion in FY 2009 SIG funds is available: \$545.6 million that was appropriated in the Department of Education Appropriations Act, 2009; and \$3 billion that was appropriated in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). An SEA is authorized to reserve, under section 1003(g)(8) of the ESEA, not more than five percent of its total SIG allocation for SIG-related administration, evaluation, and technical assistance expenses. We are awarding these State-level SIG funds now, prior to the approval of your State's application for SIG funds so that you may immediately begin support of State and local efforts to implement the final requirements by the beginning of the 2010–11 school year. Your State is receiving two grant awards: one for SIG funds from the regular 2009 appropriation (CFDA # 84.377A) and one for SIG funds from the ARRA (CFDA # 84.388A).

Although we are awarding each State the maximum amount of State-level SIG funds (in lieu of an SEA's reservation), your State is not required to reserve the full amount. If you choose to retain less than five percent for State-level activities, you should add the excess

funds to the SIG funds you will soon receive for allocation to eligible LEAs. As your grant awards indicate, you may use your State-level SIG funds for allowable pre-award costs that you have incurred since the beginning of the respective Federal funding periods: February 17, 2009 for SIG ARRA funds and July 1, 2009 for regular SIG funds. The State-level SIG funds are available for use throughout the period of availability of SIG funds, which may be extended through September 30, 2013, if your State applies for and receives a waiver of the period of availability. The grant awards reflect the maximum amount of FY 2009 SIG funds an SEA may reserve for the entire period of availability.

Your State may use these funds to prepare its SIG application (which will include a request for any applicable waivers and a description of its LEA application process) and to provide technical assistance to eligible LEAs. For example, your State may wish to provide guidance and tools that LEAs can use to carry out needs assessments, screen partner organizations, and review school staff, or may support networks of district leaders charged with planning and leading turnaround efforts.

You may also wish to launch or expand efforts to recruit or develop principals and other staff to serve in your State's persistently lowest-achieving schools and to identify, screen, and attract Education Management Organizations and Charter Management Organizations willing to work with LEAs to implement the "restart" model in those schools. In addition, your State may allocate some of the funds to LEAs with Tier I and Tier II schools to support planning for implementation of selected school intervention models if and when they receive a grant under the SIG program. An LEA might, for example, use the funds to review student achievement data; evaluate current policies and practices that support or impede reform; assess the strengths and weaknesses of school leaders, teachers, and staff; recruit and train effective principals capable of implementing one of the school intervention models; or identify and screen outside partners.

The early release of State-level FY 2009 SIG funds is the second of two steps the Department has taken to support State efforts to administer FY 2009 Title I funds, including Title I ARRA funds. On October 27, 2009, the Department published in the *Federal Register* a notice of final adjustments that permits each SEA to reserve an additional percentage of Title I, Part A funds (0.3 or 0.5 percent of its Title I, Part A ARRA allocation, depending on whether the SEA requests waivers of certain requirements) to help defray the costs associated with data collection and reporting requirements under the ARRA. This increase in State administrative funds may be used to support data collection activities associated with ARRA funds, including those required by the ARRA SIG program.

It has been almost ten months since the enactment of the historic ARRA, which has made available to States and LEAs unprecedented funding to support and improve our Nation's schools. I recognize that during this time you and your staff have been working hard to get these funds to LEAs and schools and to provide guidance to help LEAs think in new

ways about using the funds to stabilize local school budgets and support significant improvements in teaching and learning that will result in better academic outcomes for students. I appreciate all of the hard work you have been doing to date and look forward to continuing to work together to ensure that section 1003(g) SIG funds are used to their maximum potential to turn around our Nation's persistently lowest-achieving schools.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_ /s/

\_\_\_\_\_ Arne Duncan

Retrieved from [www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/091202.html](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/091202.html)

## APPENDIX B

### DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION INTERVENTION MODELS

#### TURNAROUND MODEL

A turnaround model is one in which an LEA must do the following:

- (1) Replace the principal and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to implement fully a comprehensive approach in order to substantially improve student achievement outcomes and increase high school graduation rates;
- (2) Using locally adopted competencies to measure the effectiveness of staff who can work within the turnaround environment to meet the needs of students,
  - (A) Screen all existing staff and rehire no more than 50 percent; and
  - (B) Select new staff;
- (3) Implement such strategies as financial incentives, increased opportunities for promotion and career growth, and more flexible work conditions that are designed to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of the students in the turnaround school;
- (4) Provide staff ongoing, high-quality job-embedded professional development that is aligned with the school's comprehensive instructional program and designed with school staff to ensure that they are equipped to facilitate effective teaching and learning and have the capacity to successfully implement school reform strategies;
- (5) Adopt a new governance structure, which may include, but is not limited to, requiring the school to report to a new "turnaround office" in the LEA or SEA, hire a "turnaround leader" who reports directly to the Superintendent or Chief Academic Officer, or enter into a multi-year contract with the LEA or SEA to obtain added flexibility in exchange for greater accountability;
- (6) Use data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next as well as aligned with State academic standards;
- (7) Promote the continuous use of student data (such as from formative, interim, and summative assessments) to inform and differentiate instruction in order to meet the academic needs of individual students;
- (8) Establish schedules and implement strategies that provide increased learning time; and

- (9) Provide appropriate social-emotional and community-oriented services and supports for students.

In addition to the required elements, an LEA implementing a turnaround model may also implement other strategies, such as a new school model or any of the required and permissible activities under the transformation intervention model described in the final requirements. It could also, for example, replace a comprehensive high school with one that focuses on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The key is that these actions would be taken within the framework of the turnaround model and would be in addition to, not instead of, the actions that are required as part of a turnaround model.

#### RESTART MODEL

A restart model is one in which an LEA converts a school or closes and reopens a school under a charter school operator, a charter management organization (CMO), or an education management organization (EMO) that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend the school.

A restart school must enroll, within the grades it serves, all former students who wish to attend the school. The purpose of this requirement is to ensure that restarting the school benefits the population of students who would be served by the school in the absence of “restarting” the school. Accordingly, the obligation to enroll any former student who wishes to attend the school includes the obligation to enroll a student who did not actually previously attend the school — for example, because the student was previously enrolled in grade 3 but the school serves only grades 4 through 6 — but who would now be able to enroll in the school were it not implementing the restart model. If the restart school no longer serves a particular grade or grades that previously had been served by the school, the restart school is not obligated to enroll a student in the grade or grades that are no longer served.

#### SCHOOL CLOSURE

School closure occurs when an LEA closes a school and enrolls the students who attended that school in other schools in the LEA that are higher achieving. These other schools should be within reasonable proximity to the closed school and may include, but are not limited to, charter schools or new schools for which achievement data are not yet available.

#### TRANSFORMATION MODEL

**With respect to elements of the transformation model that are the same as elements of the turnaround model, do the definitions and other guidance that apply to those elements as they relate to the turnaround model also apply to those elements as they relate to the transformation model?**

Yes. Thus, for example, the strategies that are used to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of students in a turnaround model may be the same strategies that are used to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of students in a transformation model. For questions about any terms or strategies that appear in both the transformation model and the turnaround model, refer to the turnaround model section of this guidance.

**Which activities related to developing and increasing teacher and school leader effectiveness are required for an LEA implementing a transformation model?**

An LEA implementing a transformation model must:



- (1) Replace the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformation model;
- (2) Use rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals that —
  - (a) Take into account data on student growth as a significant factor as well as other factors, such as multiple observation-based assessments of performance and ongoing collections of professional practice reflective of student achievement and increased high school graduation rates; and
  - (b) Are designed and developed with teacher and principal involvement;
- (3) Identify and reward school leaders, teachers, and other staff who, in implementing this model, have increased student achievement and high school graduation rates and identify and remove those who, after ample opportunities have been provided for them to improve their professional practice, have not done so;
- (4) Provide staff ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development that is aligned with the school’s comprehensive instructional program and designed with school staff to ensure they are equipped to facilitate effective teaching and learning and have the capacity to successfully implement school reform strategies; and
- (5) Implement such strategies as financial incentives, increased opportunities for promotion and career growth, and more flexible work conditions that are designed to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of the students in a transformation model.

**Must the principal and teachers involved in the development and design of the evaluation system be the principal and teachers in the school in which the transformation model is being implemented?**

No. The requirement for teacher and principal evaluation systems that “are designed and developed with teacher and principal involvement” refers more generally to involvement by teachers and principals within the LEA using such systems, and may or may not include teachers and principals in a school implementing the transformation model.

**Under the final requirements, an LEA implementing the transformation model must remove staff “who, after ample opportunities have been provided for them to improve their professional practice, have not done so.” Does an LEA have discretion to determine the appropriate number of such opportunities that must be provided and what are some examples of such “opportunities” to improve?**

In general, LEAs have flexibility to determine both the type and number of opportunities for staff to improve their professional practice before they are removed from a school implementing the transformation model. Examples of such opportunities include professional development in such areas as differentiated instruction and using data to improve instruction, mentoring or partnering with a master teacher, or increased time for collaboration designed to improve instruction.

**In addition to the required activities, what other activities related to developing and increasing teacher and school leader effectiveness may an LEA undertake as part of its implementation of a transformation model?**

In addition to the required activities for a transformation model, an LEA may also implement other strategies to develop teachers' and school leaders' effectiveness, such as:

- (1) Providing additional compensation to attract and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of students in a transformation school;
- (2) Instituting a system for measuring changes in instructional practices resulting from professional development; or
- (3) Ensuring that the school is not required to accept a teacher without the mutual consent of the teacher and principal, regardless of the teacher's seniority.

LEAs also have flexibility to develop and implement their own strategies, as part of their efforts to successfully implement the transformation model, to increase the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. Any such strategies must be in addition to those that are required as part of this model.

**How does the optional activity of “providing additional compensation to attract and retain” certain staff differ from the requirement to implement strategies designed to recruit, place, and retain certain staff?**

There are a wide range of compensation-based incentives that an LEA might use as part of a transformation model. Such incentives are just one example of strategies that might be adopted to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills needed to implement the transformation model. The more specific emphasis on additional compensation in the permissible strategies was intended to encourage LEAs to think more broadly about how additional compensation can contribute to teacher effectiveness.

**Which activities related to comprehensive instructional reform strategies are required as part of the implementation of a transformation model?**

An LEA implementing a transformation model must:

- (1) Use data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next as well as aligned with State academic standards; and
- (2) Promote the continuous use of student data (such as from formative, interim, and summative assessments) in order to inform and differentiate instruction to meet the academic needs of individual students.

**In addition to the required activities, what other activities related to comprehensive instructional reform strategies may an LEA undertake as part of its implementation of a transformation model?**

In addition to the required activities for a transformation model, an LEA may also implement other comprehensive instructional reform strategies, such as:

- (1) Conducting periodic reviews to ensure that the curriculum is being implemented with fidelity, is having the intended impact on student achievement, and is modified if ineffective;

- (2) Implementing a schoolwide “response-to-intervention” model;
- (3) Providing additional supports and professional development to teachers and principals in order to implement effective strategies to support students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and to ensure that limited English proficient students acquire language skills to master academic content;
- (4) Using and integrating technology-based supports and interventions as part of the instructional program; and
- (5) In secondary schools—
  - (a) Increasing rigor by offering opportunities for students to enroll in advanced coursework, early-college high schools, dual enrollment programs, or thematic learning academies that prepare students for college and careers, including by providing appropriate supports designed to ensure that low-achieving students can take advantage of these programs and coursework;
  - (b) Improving student transition from middle to high school through summer transition programs or freshman academies;
  - (c) Increasing graduation rates through, for example, credit recovery programs, re-engagement strategies, smaller learning communities, competency-based instruction and performance-based assessments, and acceleration of basic reading and mathematics skills; or
  - (d) Establishing early-warning systems to identify students who may be at risk of failing to achieve to high standards or to graduate.

**What activities related to increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools are required for implementation of a transformation model?**

An LEA implementing a transformation model must:

- (1) Establish schedules and strategies that provide increased learning time; and
- (2) Provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement.

**What is meant by the phrase “family and community engagement” and what are some examples of ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement?**

In general, family and community engagement means strategies to increase the involvement and contributions, in both school-based and home-based settings, of parents and community partners that are designed to support classroom instruction and increase student achievement. Examples of mechanisms that can encourage family and community engagement include the establishment of organized parent groups, holding public meetings involving parents and community members to review school performance and help develop school improvement plans, using surveys to gauge parent and community satisfaction and support for local public schools, implementing complaint procedures for families, coordinating with local social and health service providers to help meet family needs, and parent education classes (including GED, adult literacy, and ESL programs).

**In addition to the required activities, what other activities related to increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools may an LEA undertake as part of its implementation of a transformation model?**

In addition to the required activities for a transformation model, an LEA may also implement other strategies to extend learning time and create community-oriented schools, such as:

- (1) Partnering with parents and parent organizations, faith- and community-based organizations, health clinics, other State or local agencies, and others to create safe school environments that meet students' social, emotional, and health needs;
- (2) Extending or restructuring the school day so as to add time for such strategies as advisory periods that build relationships between students, faculty, and other school staff;
- (3) Implementing approaches to improve school climate and discipline, such as implementing a system of positive behavioral supports or taking steps to eliminate bullying and student harassment; or
- (4) Expanding the school program to offer full-day kindergarten or pre-kindergarten.

**How does the optional activity of extending or restructuring the school day to add time for strategies that build relationships between students, faculty, and other school staff differ from the requirement to provide increased learning time?**

Extra time or opportunities for teachers and other school staff to create and build relationships with students can provide the encouragement and incentive that many students need to work hard and stay in school. Such opportunities may be created through a wide variety of extra-curricular activities as well as structural changes, such as dividing large incoming classes into smaller theme-based teams with individual advisers. However, such activities do not directly lead to increased learning time, which is more closely focused on increasing the number of instructional minutes in the school day or days in the school year.

**What activities related to providing operational flexibility and sustained support are required for implementation of a transformation model?**

An LEA implementing a transformation model must:

- (1) Give the school sufficient operational flexibility (such as staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student achievement outcomes and increase high school graduation rates; and
- (2) Ensure that the school receives ongoing, intensive technical assistance and related support from the LEA, the SEA, or a designated external lead partner organization (such as a school turnaround organization or an EMO).

**Must an LEA implementing the transformation model in a school give the school operational flexibility in the specific areas of staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting?**

No. The areas of operational flexibility mentioned in this requirement are merely examples of the types of operational flexibility an LEA might give to a school implementing the transformation model. An LEA is not obligated to give a school implementing the transformation model operational flexibility in these particular areas, so long as it provides the school sufficient operational flexibility to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student achievement outcomes and increase high school graduation rates.

**In addition to the required activities, what other activities related to providing operational flexibility and sustained support may an LEA undertake as part of its implementation of a transformation model?**

In addition to the required activities for a transformation model, an LEA may also implement other strategies to provide operational flexibility and sustained support, such as:

- (1) Allowing the school to be run under a new governance arrangement, such as a turnaround division within the LEA or SEA; or
- (2) Implementing a per-pupil school-based budget formula that is weighted based on student needs.

## APPENDIX C

### DEFINITIONS OF LEAD INDICATORS

Lead Indicator	Definition/Information	Data Preparation
Discipline incidents	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>The incident involves a student who is in grades Kindergarten through 12th grade, or the equivalent if ungraded, and who is under the control of the school or LEA when the incident occurs.</p> <p>* The incident results in the student being disciplined by removal from the student's regular educational setting for at least an entire school day.</p> <p>* The incident is a result of drugs, alcohol, weapons possession or violence.</p> <p>Under the criteria above, student incidents at school or district-sponsored events not on school property that results in the removal of a student for an entire school day should be included.</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education for grant recipients and non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>The State Board of Education has no data for this indicator. Reportedly, no school met the required number of incidents for reporting. A school must have more than ten incidents for reporting purposes.</p>
Distribution of teachers by performance level on the LEA's teacher evaluation system	<p>The State Board of Education provides no definition as this is self-explanatory.</p> <p>However, it is noted that law requires that district developed teacher evaluation instruments and processes result in teacher performance summative ratings of Excellent, Satisfactory, or Unsatisfactory.</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education for grant recipients, but not for non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>For data analysis purposes, an index for each rating was created. The percent of teachers earning excellent was multiplied by five, the percent earning satisfactory was multiplied by three and the percent earning unsatisfactory was multiplied by one. Lastly, all of the numbers were added together.</p>
Dropout Rate	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>The Dropout rate is the number of dropouts, divided by the fall enrollment (not including post-graduates), and multiplied by 100. Dropouts include students in grades 9-12 whose names have been removed from the district-housed roster for any reason other than death, extended illness, graduation/completion of a program of studies, transfer to another public/private school or expulsion.</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education for grant recipients and non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>They are published in the annual State of School Report Cards.</p>

Lead Indicator	Definition/Information	Data Preparation
<p>Number and percentage of students completing advanced coursework (Advanced Placement, Early-college high schools or dual enrollment classes, and International Baccalaureate)</p>	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>The number of students who completed advanced coursework (such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate classes, or advanced mathematics).</p> <p>Percentage completing advanced coursework with numerator = # of students who completed advanced coursework and denominator = # of students in membership on October 1 in high school grades.</p> <p>The number of high school students who completed at least one class in a postsecondary institution. Percentage completing dual enrollment coursework with numerator = # of students who completed dual coursework and denominator = # of students in membership on October 1 in high school grades.</p> <p>The number of students who completed advance coursework AND complete at least one class in a postsecondary institution.</p> <p>Percentage completing advanced coursework and dual enrollment coursework with numerator = # of students who completed advanced coursework and dual coursework and denominator = # of students in membership on October 1 in high school grades.</p> <p><u>Definitions</u></p> <p>Advanced coursework ... student receives credit in accordance with state and local requirements.</p> <p>Advanced Mathematics: trigonometry, analytic geometry, math analysis, probability and statistics, pre-calculus, calculus.</p> <p>Advanced Placement (AP): sponsored by the College Board and high school students earn college credit and advanced college placement.</p> <p>International Baccalaureate: Sponsored by the International Baccalaureate Organization. IB Diploma Programme includes prescribed coursework and is normally taught over two years.</p> <p>Dual Enrollment ... Coursework that counts for high school and college credit.</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education for grant recipients, but not for non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>The course offerings vary greatly among the grant recipients.</p>

Lead Indicator	Definition/Information	Data Preparation
<p>Number of minutes within the school year</p>	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>The number of minutes that all students were required to be at school and any additional learning time (e.g., before or after school, weekend school, summer school) for which all students had the opportunity to participate.</p> <p><u>Example:</u></p> <p>The regular school year for the school included 176 full school days and four half school days that all students were required to attend.</p> <p>The school is in an LEA where a full day is at least 300 minutes and a half day is at least 150 minutes.</p> <p>The school also provided 80 days of additional learning time for which all students had the opportunity to participate.</p> <p>The additional learning time lasted 90 minutes per day.</p> <p>The total minutes would be 60,600, calculated as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 176 days multiplied by 300 minutes = 52,800 minutes;</li> <li>- 4 days multiplied by 150 minutes = 600 minutes;</li> <li>- 80 days multiplied by 90 minutes = 7,200 minutes;</li> </ul> <p>Total = 60,600 minutes (52,800 + 600 + 7,200)</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education from grant recipients, but not for non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>Some districts submitted the number of days in the school year instead of the number of minutes. In these cases, the provided number of days was multiplied by the mandatory minimum number of minutes in a school day.</p> <p>The resulting number provided the minimum number of minutes in the school year for that school. The number would be less than the actual number of minutes within the school year in any case where the school day is longer or if additional learning time was provided outside the school day.</p>
<p>Student attendance rate</p>	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>The number of school days during the regular school year (plus summer, if applicable, if part of implementing the restart, transformation or turnaround model) students attended school divided by the maximum number of days students could have attended during the regular school year.</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education from grant recipients and non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>The data are published in the annual State of School Report Cards.</p>



Lead Indicator	Definition/Information	Data Preparation
Student participation rate on PSAE in reading/ language arts and mathematics by student subgroups	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>Percentage of students not tested in state testing program for reading and mathematics, enrollment as reported during the testing windows for grade 11.</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education for grant recipients and non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>The percent of students not tested in each subgroup is published in the annual State of School Report Cards. These figures were used to determine the percent of students tested in each subgroup.</p> <p>Subgroups which were consistently underrepresented were removed from the data set. These subgroups were students identified as Pacific Islanders and Migrants.</p> <p>If the school did not have any students in that subgroup, no figure was used (though the percent not tested is technically zero).</p>
Teacher attendance rate	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>The number of FTE days teachers worked divided by the maximum number of FTE-teacher working days.</p> <p>A teacher is absent if he or she is not in attendance on a day in the regular school year when the teacher would otherwise be expected to be teaching students in an assigned class. This includes both days taken for sick leave and days taken for personal leave. Personal leave includes voluntary absences for reasons other than sick leave. Do not include administratively approved leave for professional development, field trips or other off-campus activities with students.</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education from grant recipients, but not for non-grant recipient schools.</p>
Truants	<p>The State Board of Education defines this Lead Indicator as follows:</p> <p>Percentage of students who are absent from school without valid cause for 18 or more days of the last 180 school days</p>	<p>These data are collected by the State Board of Education from grant recipients and non-grant recipient schools.</p> <p>The data are published in the annual State of School Report Cards.</p>

APPENDIX D

SUMMARY OF PRE-GRANT AND POST-GRANT PERFORMANCE DATA

School Label	Cohort	District Size	School Size	Number in Advanced Courses		Percent Dropouts		Minutes in Year		Percent Truants	
				Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
A	1	511	103	5	28	1	1.7	73,080	74,618	1	3.2
B	1	593	167	53	41	3.6	5.3	62,244	62,244	5.5	6.2
C	1	403,770	1,190	2,376	1,376	29.1	7.4	71,750	71,750	69	94.2
D	1	403,770	771	1,540	1,240	18.4	14.2	71,750	71,750	53.9	100
E	1	14,266	818		302	5.3	4.9		76,320	9.9	60.3
F	1	403,770	998		720	26.8	16.4	64,768	64,768	85.9	100
G	1	403,770	746		0	15.1	5.1			76.7	100
H	2	8,624	1,081		799	3	5.3		65,762	23.9	40
I	2	403,770	988	1,993	1,936	7.9	0.3	71,750	71,750	32.9	70.4
J	2	403,770	1,686	3,131	3,360	11.1	4.2	71,750	71,750	29.2	67
K	2	403,770	1,278	2,853	2,450	23.3	4.1	64,768	64,768	33.8	96.6
L	2	403,770	1,461	1,452	2,492	14.3	2.2	56,672	56,672	32.1	87.1
M	2	14,561	1,228		552	3.8	4.4		68,900	12.6	8.6
N	2	3,988	876		202	0.5	2.3		54,810	10.2	5.3
O	2	403,770	882		1,400	4.6	1.1		63,908	6	28.3
P	2	14,266	1,462		0	1.2	3.8			5.6	67.2
Q	2	403,770	616	1,993	946	14.3	3.9	58,960	58,960	14.1	61.1
R	2	542	149	3,131	152	7.2	3.3		75,800	2.1	3.9
S	2	403,770	561	2,853	922	31.3	6.1	53,328	53,328	41.1	100
T	2	403,770	692	1,452	1,266	20.3	10.8	56,672	56,672	46.6	89

School Label	Cohort	District Size	School Size	Percent Student Attendance		Percent Teacher Attendance		Percent Teacher Evaluation		Percent Test Participation	
				Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
A	1	511	103	95.8	94.9	97	94	93	100	100	97.1
B	1	593	167	91.4	92.8	97	95	100	92.3	100	100
C	1	403,770	1,190	69	77.9	97.02	95.8	100	86.1	89.6	90.1
D	1	403,770	771	72.7	78.9	95.12	95.04	81	91.4	92.5	94.2
E	1	14,266	818	87	84.8		88		89.3	98.9	98.7
F	1	403,770	998	52.9	77.4			100	96.4	95.8	94.6
G	1	403,770	746	54.1	70.3			100	50	89	92.9
H	2	8,624	1,081	83	86.1		93		100	99.4	97.6
I	2	403,770	988	77.8	84	95.63	96.37	92.3	98.1	98.6	99.6
J	2	403,770	1,686	82.9	87.2	96.47	96.22	3.5	100	95.5	98.2
K	2	403,770	1,278	73.5	75.9			70.3	83.3	96.1	93.6
L	2	403,770	1,461	79.7	76.3			100	100	99.3	98.3
M	2	14,561	1,228	87.2	89.3		95.13		100	95.9	99.5
N	2	3,988	876	81.5	84.4		93		88.9	92.3	99.4
O	2	403,770	882	93.1	96		98			97.5	98.9
P	2	14,266	1,462	90.8	84.8					99	84.7
Q	2	403,770	616	87	85.8			91.2	70.4	98.4	98.6
R	2	542	149	92.1	90.8		89.81		84.6	100	100
S	2	403,770	561	70	71.2			100	88.9	83.6	90.4
T	2	403,770	692	67.5	81.2			100	91.2	100	99.4

APPENDIX E  
DATA ACCOUNTING LOGS

Phase I Data Accounting Log

<b>DOCUMENT REVIEW &amp; ANALYSIS</b>			
Document	Time	Estimated total hours	Estimated pages of notes generated, reviewed, & analyzed
Grant Applications	1.5 hours per school	30	5
State School Profiles	1 hour per school	20	5
Annual Progress Reports	2 hours per school	40	30
State Board of Education data	2 hours per school	40	30
	Totals	130	70

Phase II Data Accounting Log

<b>PHASE II - INTERVIEWS</b>			
Participant	Total Hours Estimated	Pages of notes generated, reviewed, & analyzed	Pseudonym
<b>Site One:</b>			
<b>Sumner High School</b>			
School Improvement Coach	1.5	15	Ms. Fulton
Data Coach	1	10	Mr. Williams
Teacher	1	10	Ms. Brown
Principal	1.5	15	Ms. Jones
Central Office	0.5	5	Mr. Smith
Contact/Setup Time	0.75	1	
<b>Site Two:</b>			
<b>Meridian High School</b>			
Support Personnel/School Improvement	1.5	15	Ms. Wilson
Teacher	1	10	Mr. Lamb
Teacher	1	10	Mr. Joyner
Central Office	1	10	Ms. Dale
Principal	1	10	Mr. Davis
Contact/Setup Time	5	1	
National Radio Program	2	1	
<b>Observations</b>			
Site One	1	15	
Site Two	1.5	15	
Totals	21.25	143	

Phase I and II Summary Data Accounting Log

TOTALS		
	Estimated hours	Estimated pages of notes generated, reviewed, & analyzed
Phase I – Document Review and Analysis	130	70
Phase II - Interviews	21.25	143
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>151.25</b>	<b>213</b>

## APPENDIX F

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me your name and your current position.
2. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - a. Current position/responsibilities, for how long, and how did they end up in that position?
3. How would you describe your district?
4. How is your work connected to the School Improvement Grant?
  - a. Workload percentage related to the School Improvement Grant?
5. I would like to learn more about the school improvement grant in your district.
  - a. How was the decision made to seek the School Improvement Grant?
  - b. Who was involved in the decision making?
  - c. Is this the typical process for decision making in your district? If not, how are decisions typically made about school reform?
6. In your district, what is the way to get things done or to make change occur?
  - a. Would you say change is difficult in your district in comparison to other districts? Why or why not?
7. How was the School Improvement Grant implemented?
8. What were some of the things the district did to provide support for the implementation of the high school reform initiatives within the School Improvement Grant?
9. What have been the challenges of implementation?
10. Please describe your opinion of the quality and effectiveness of the implementation process.

11. What lessons have you learned as a result of the district being involved in the School Improvement Grant?
12. Do you think the School Improvement Grant has been a help or a hindrance for the district? Why
13. What would you change related to the School Improvement Grant process?
14. Is there anything else related to the School Improvement Grant high school reform that you would like to share?