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**PREPARING FOR CHANGE: AN EXAMINATION OF AN URBAN SCHOOL'S  
EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES IN CREATING A CULTURE READY FOR CHANGE**

by  
Linda Brown-Bartlett

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
May 14, 2013

Dissertation Chair: Corine Meredith, Ph.D.

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Linda Brown-Bartlett

## **Dedication**

*I dedicate this body of research to the students and staff of Sonia Middle School.*

*May our voices be heard in this time of sweeping change.*

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge, with heartfelt gratitude, the people who have encouraged me and supported me on my educational journey.

Bob, Joe, Megan, Shannon & Ann my loving family.

Dr. Meredith, Dr. Dees-Brown & Dr. Kerrigan for sifting through the coal to find the diamond.

Trish & Elise Speakers of truth and enlightenment

Denise, my writing partner, for holding me accountable every Thursday night

My students - from whom I learn daily.

## Abstract

Linda Brown-Bartlett

PREPARING FOR CHANGE: AN EXAMINATION OF AN URBAN SCHOOL'S  
EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES IN CREATING A CULTURE READY FOR CHANGE

2013/14

Corine Meredith, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the use of extra-curricular activities and professional learning communities to create a school culture ready for academic change. This unique approach to implementing change, in a historically failing urban middle school, utilizes a two pronged approach focusing on personalizing strategies specific to the school based on student and staff expressed needs.

The study takes place at Sonia Middle School located in the United States' fifth most dangerous and impoverished city, Bartlett, New Jersey. Numerous academic reform models have failed to improve teaching and learning. The researcher hypothesizes these programs failed because they were not designed to meet the specific needs of the Sonia community. The school community is rift with stakeholder disengagement and apathy. This is reflected in high rates of student and staff absenteeism, an increase in behavior referrals, violence, high student transfer rate, and lack of parent/guardian support.

The anticipated outcome of this action research study is identification of strategies that will support and advance a cultural change designed to close the achievement gap within the Sonia's eighth grade student body. The findings may be useful to school leaders looking for approaches to personalizing school change and building capacity within their staff.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xi
Chapter I: Introduction	1
History of Reform in American Education	2
School Culture	5
Context of the Study	7
Statement of Problem	9
Purpose of Study	10
Research Questions	11
Significance of Study	11
Terminology	14
Summary	15
Chapter II: Literature Review	17
Review of Literature	18
Characteristics of Failing Schools	20
School Culture and Climate	22
Stakeholder Engagement/Partnerships	24
Professional Learning Communities	29
Role of School Leaders in Creating Change	34
Call for Change	37

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Theories of Understanding	39
Summary	41
Chapter III: Methodology	43
Approach to Inquiry	45
Action Research Paradigm	46
Setting	50
Population	56
Research Design	57
Instrumentation and Data Collection	60
Action Research Cycles	66
Data Analysis	74
Aligning the Questions, Theory, and Data Collection	78
IRB Approval	80
Summary	81
Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis	83
Cycle I – Preliminary Planning Phase Analysis	84
Cycle II – The Foundation	95
Cycle III – The Beginnings	112
Cycle IV- Initial Activities	116
Cycle V – Challenges and Adjustments	136
Cycle VI – Student and Staff Directed Activities	143
Summary of Findings and Analysis	149



## Table of Contents (Continued)

Chapter V: Implications and Conclusion	158
Responding to the Research	160
Implications Related to Sonia's Teaching Practices	163
Contributing to the Body of Knowledge	165
Limitations of the Study	169
Implications Related to Research	172
Recommendations for Further Research	175
Conclusion	176
References	178
Appendix A Release Form	193
Appendix B School Triage Survey Permission	194
Appendix C School Culture Triage Survey Form	195
Appendix D Responsive Interview Guide	197
Appendix E Formal Observation Format	198
Appendix F Student Focus Group Protocol	200
Appendix G Scoring the School Culture Triage Survey	202
Appendix H - May 2011 Responses to SCTS	203

## List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1 Action Research Timeline	60
Figure 2 Action Research Cycles	73
Figure 3 SWOT Analysis June 2011	102
Figure 4 2010-2011 Student Lateness	113
Figure 5 2010-2011 Reasons for Lateness	114
Figure 6 Student Participation in Activities	126
Figure 7 Student Lateness September 2011 – May 2012	161

## List of Tables

Table	Page
Table 1 Connecting Action Research to Theorists	41
Table 2 PLC Membership	64
Table 3 Triangulation Matrix	76
Table 4 Aligning the Questions, Theory, and Data Collection Strategies	80
Table 5 Staff Response to SCTS May 2011	90
Table 6 Student Questionnaire Responses	93
Table 7 Themes in Focus Group Responses	107
Table 8 Staff Responses to 6-month SCTS November, 2011	131

## Chapter I

### Introduction

School reform and the decline of public education has been a national concern for over 30 years. Since the formation of the National Commission on Excellence in Education on August 26, 1981, educators, researchers, and politicians have been debating if and why our public education system is failing our students. T. H. Bell, former Commissioner of Education, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) to explore “the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system” (NCEE, *Nation At Risk – Letter to Public*, 1983, p. 4). The findings of the NCEE became known as the document *A Nation At Risk*, which was released to the public in 1983; this document sought to “generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways” (Nation At Risk, 1983, p. 7) what it generated was an ongoing public discourse concerning public education and created the Excellence Movement. Thirty years later, many of the problems identified by the NCEE remain unsolved.

An evaluation of educational progress on the thirtieth anniversary of *A Nation at Risk* finds that despite the urgency voiced by the NCEE to address public education, United States Public Education is still in a state of mediocrity. One in four American high school students do not graduate within the four years of attendance; although the NCEE foretold the need for increased technology, science and global education schools still struggle to provide competitive curriculums as compared with highest performers worldwide (Elliott, 2013). Furthermore, in 1983 the NCEE proposed increasing student school days from 180 to 220 annually as well as increasing teacher work time to 11

months: 10 months of instruction and 1 month of preparation. Today, districts and unions continue to discuss lengthening school days and teacher work time (Elliott, 2013). A newly released report entitled *For Each and Every Child: A Strategy for Education Equity & Excellence*, illuminates that in general the state of America's public education system has not significantly advanced in improving learning in the nation's poorest districts nor along racial lines (United States Department of Education, The Equity and Excellence Commission, 2013). Paraphrasing from Edmund Burke, if we cannot adapt and change instruction and learning for American students are we doomed to fail? ((Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790).

### **History of Reform in American Education**

The Excellence Movement in Education began in 1983 with the release of findings from the NCEE and continued through 1998. This educational movement produced a plethora of studies, reform models, and opinions focusing on what would best solve the problems in American public schools and keep the United States in the forefront of technological and industrial change. The Excellence Movement was divided into three main focus periods: intensification, restructuring, and the standards period. The intensification period, 1983-1987, focused on initiatives that tightened education regulations and raised student requirements for graduation. Restructuring followed from 1986-1995, altering the organization and delivery of instruction. It was during restructuring that the whole-school reform models sprouted up selling one size fits all programs designed to improve instruction and close the achievement gap. During Restructuring, schools became responsible for addressing the social concerns of students and families, for example poverty, pregnancy, and drug addiction, in addition to

providing education and life skills necessary to compete globally. In 1990, the United States Department of Education, declared, “Despite all the talk of reform, despite the investment of billions of extra dollars, public education in the United States is still a failure” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p.4 #1). This realization turned the focus of the United States Department of Education to the final focus of the Educational Excellence Movement, which was standards reform. Beginning in 1992, standards period initiatives attempted to unite the educational content delivered to students throughout the United States. Content standards were established unifying the knowledge to be instructed as well as performance standards that would demonstrate student learning. Notwithstanding the efforts made by educators and legislators, the 1990s ended with continued general dissatisfaction in the academic progress being made by public education.

Following the end of the Excellence Movement, President Bush met with the nation’s governors to develop a plan entitled Goals 2000. This plan listed six educational goals for the nation which were to be met by the year 2000, These goals concentrated on academic readiness prior to entering school, graduation rates, standardized testing, having United States students being first in the world in math and science, achieving 100% adult literacy, and ensuring that all schools in America would be drug free (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Local school districts were required to comply with reaching these goals and public education entered the Reform Movement era. During the Reform Movement, the non-profit organization, New American Schools Development Corporation (NAS), was founded in 1991 as a joint venture between American business leaders and educational organizations. The goal of NAS was to design and fund whole-school reform models of education designed to bring cohesive school reform throughout the nation. School

districts would adopt one of seven designs and “in some unspecified manner this adoption would result in improved student outcomes” (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002,p.2). However, none of these programs successfully addressed the educational culture of individual schools nor individualized the program to meet the needs of students and families, staff, or neighborhoods served by the local schools (Orfield, 1995). One size fits all programing became the norm by which American education was to be reformed.

The current climate in American public education is one of disillusionment with the system as status quo. Parents, local school boards, state departments of education, and the President of the United States are demanding reform. Currently, there are over 5,000 public schools across America that fall into chronically failing status (Kowal, Hassel, & Hassel, 2009). In New Jersey alone, 104,000 students attend persistently failing schools (Dopp, 2011). There are 26 failing schools in New Jersey, 23 of which are located in the city of Bartlett. President Obama, in an address to American students in fall of 2009 said, “I've talked a lot about your government's responsibility for setting high standards, and supporting teachers and principals, and turning around schools that aren't working, where students aren't getting the opportunities that they deserve” (Obama, 2009, para. 9). Yet, three years later the American public education system is still in crisis and there does not seem to be a single formula for successful change.

Multiple solutions to turn around schools have been discussed by politicians: vouchers, inter-district transfers, charter schools, privately run education systems, firing all the teachers in a failing school (Zezima, 2010) and finally closing the school doors and walking away (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2008). In states across the

country, governors are making landmark decisions concerning the future of public education (Henig & Reville, 2011). Governor Walker of Wisconsin led the charge in 2010 with a sweeping proposal, which cut his state's public education budget by 900 million dollars while increasing funding to charter schools and the existing voucher program to the tune of 23.8 million dollars (Francisco, 2011). Indiana's Governor Daniels enacted legislation that focused on "four major elements of the state's education reforms: expanding school choice, increasing school accountability, improving teacher quality, and limiting the stranglehold collective bargaining has had over local schools" (Sheffield, 2011, para. 2). In New Jersey, where this research occurs, Governor Christie is openly dissatisfied with the jobs of public educators. His educational platform, which he campaigned on, focuses on school choice, teacher evaluation, and fiscal accountability. Under Governor Christie's leadership, local class size is increasing, educational funding is being cut, districts are reorganizing, administrators and teachers are losing their jobs, and neighborhood schools are closing (Dopp, 2011; Henig & Reville, 2011). These real issues are threatening schools across the nation and in order to survive, the culture of neighborhood schools must change.

### **School Culture**

The culture of man has fascinated archeologists and sociologists throughout history. The first time the word culture was used, English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor defined it as, "That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871, p. 1). Individual schools are societies unto themselves. Located within each community, schools create customs, traditions, celebrations, and beliefs



unique to themselves, yet reflective of their neighborhoods (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Kotter, 2007). Educational leaders should be sensitive to the community dynamics within their schools when seeking to implement substantive changes (Senge, 2000).

Changing an entrenched school culture is no easy task. “Ultimately, a school’s culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have” (Barth, 2002, p. 6). A healthy school culture is evident in its beliefs and values, traditions, rituals and routines, celebrations, attitudes of stakeholders, connections to the community, and perceived reputation by staff as well as community members (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). It is a place where both students and staff want to come each day and parents feel welcome.

Sonia Middle School’s current culture does not reflect these norms. There is a lack of collegiality amongst teachers, new teachers are unaware of Sonia’s rituals and routines, there have been no celebrations in the past 18 months, academic progress has stagnated as evidenced by NJASK and Learnia testing data, there is a lack of creative instruction, and Sonia traditions have been abandoned. Sonia has developed a toxic school culture as defined by Barth (2002). A toxic school culture increases the number of at-risk students in a school, punishes students for not learning and teachers for students’ failure to learn, but most importantly, kills the desire to learn in both students and staff (Barth, 2002; DuFour & Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

This study posits that the development of a supportive Professional Learning Community, which begins by focusing on readiness for change among eighth grade

teachers and the development of deliberately planned activities for eighth grade students, will influence students' academic readiness and result in observable beginnings of changes in culture.

### **Context of the Study**

This study originated from a practitioner's perspective within Sonia Middle School. It is unique in that it is the first change initiative for this school beginning with an overall assessment of the school culture and stakeholder attitudes, then after reflecting, creates a specific plan of action based on this knowledge.

Sonia's population is not divided along racial lines, yet there is a distinct clash of neighborhood cultures that cannot be ignored. There is a history of underlying gang presence by the Bloods at Sonia, but the more significant culture clash is between students identifying themselves with their street, neighborhood, or social affiliations. Groups such as Hot Boys, Dollar Boys, and Flamers impact the culture and climate of the school. Since school leadership teams have turned over annually for the past six years, administrators are unable to curb the influence of these neighborhood factions. Student mobility has increased with parents citing "safety concerns and no confidence in school leadership as the number one and two reasons for moving their children" (Ms. Avatar, personal communication, June, 2011).

Sonia is a Category I school in need of improvement as designated by the New Jersey Department of Education. This is the lowest ranking a school can receive and means it is in dramatic need of change. Sonia ranks twenty-third out of the twenty-six failing schools in New Jersey. Perhaps the reason substantive change has eluded Sonia Middle School is the fact that district and building administration, as well as the school

board, adopts programs, initiatives, and the latest educational fads without looking inside Sonia School and analyzing its school culture (Fullan, 2001).

Sonia's culture has led to discipline problems and performance gaps which affect learning and instruction (Sonia discipline reports, 2006-2009). Issues in consistency are common among staff with respect to vision, mission, goals, objectives, and rituals and routines, thus creating an environment in which learning fails to thrive (Barth, 2002; DuFour & Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2001). Both students and staff reflect this dysfunction in the high rate of staff and student absenteeism, number of student discipline referrals, work stoppage apparent in incomplete student assignments, daily fights, breakdown in school and community communications, and failure to plan and/or participate in extra-curricular activities. Student mobility rates are three times higher than the state average, running consistently at 31% for the past three years (New Jersey School Report Card, 2010-2011). The result is Sonia has become an isolated school where teachers do not socialize together and staff lunchrooms are empty. There are no student assemblies because no one believes the students value them (Ms. Eljay, personal communication, June 2, 2011). There are no visible signs of academic work. Stagnation has occurred in program development. Parents do not come to school functions and neighbor complaints to both the school and board of education are constant. Long term planning does not occur because staff has experienced repeatedly the switch in organizational priorities and the effect of personal agendas brought by each new administration team (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002). Sonia is not currently a community where learning thrives. Rather, it is like a vacant lot full of weeds that are choking out growth (DuFour & Burnette 2002).

Despite the substantial amount of research conducted in the field of effective professional development and professional learning communities, Sonia Middle School does not have an active professional learning community. While much of the current literature (Barth, 2002; DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Putnam, Gunnings-Moton, & Sharp, 2009) agrees that a professional learning community can be “the building blocks for school culture and learning” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010, p.35), Sonia has failed to incorporate this pedagogy into its school reform efforts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

One size fits all school reform models are failing (Shipps, 2009). In their haste to turn failing schools around, policymakers, legislatures, school boards, and the public in general forget that Payne (as cited in Shipps, 2009) states, “even in the worst systems there are some things that should be built upon” (p. 6). Annually, the new administration teams in their rush to create transformational change at Sonia, eliminate positive cultural aspects of our school such as the Miss Sonia Pageant, Motown Review, and the Winter Festival, and in their place adopt initiatives developed to close the achievement gap by any means necessary. The resulting conflict between new administrators and the school community at Sonia results in a reluctant and temporary culture change (Cuban, 1990). Researchers have identified this cultural tug of war and are calling for studies to examine the effects of personalized reform programs designed to meet the needs of individual schools and their stakeholders while incorporating existing positive cultural phenomenon (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Pinkus, 2009; Tomlinson & Javius, 2012).

## **Purpose of Study**

This study focuses on altering eighth grade students' academic readiness and eighth grade faculty/staff engagement in a failing urban middle school, located in Bartlett, New Jersey. The theories and frameworks of Vygotsky (1978), Dewey (1915), Dawkins, Braddock and O'Bryan (2006) and DuFour (2004) influence this study. Vygotsky's view of community influencing learning and Zone of Proximal Development as well as Dewey's theories of experiential education and the need to connect lessons to daily life for effective learning are incorporated into the activity design for engaging students and staff. This study builds on Braddock and Dawkins' success reaching students and families through athletics at the high school level by capitalizing on student success outside the classroom in athletics, drama, and the arts. Finally the structure of the Professional Learning Community for eighth grade staff members was based on DuFour's Big Three: clarity of purpose, collaboration, and focus on results.

Grade eight students were purposefully selected for the study, with the hope that changing academic readiness will assist them in their transition to high school. The tools used to collect data in this study are: Wagner's School Culture Triage Audit, grade seven exit survey, focus groups, interviews, observations, and anecdotal records from informal dialogues. These tools will be discussed in greater detail during the methods section of the study. The measurable criteria of academic readiness will be indicated by: student and faculty/staff attendance, students' completion of class work and homework, students' behavior referrals, students' participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities, eighth grade faculty/staff involvement in a grade-level Professional Learning

Community, positive community contacts, and observable academic artifacts throughout the eighth grade.

### **Research Questions**

Through a participatory, action research project, the study answers two primary questions:

- 1) How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?
- 2) In what ways does the voluntary participation of eighth grade faculty in a Professional Learning Community influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?

### **Significance of the Study**

It is critical that the students of Sonia Middle School become educated, competent, and productive adults ready to take their place in the 21st Century. The significance of this action research study is the lens through which reform is studied and developed. There is a gap in the research of turnaround programs based on a specific school's strengths and weaknesses. While many researchers call for the involvement of staff, parents, students, and the community to change schools (Barth, 2002; Putnam et al., 2009), a study employing school reform efforts, developed from within the school, aimed at improving academic readiness and student teacher engagement is vital as Sonia and the district prepare for sweeping reform efforts determined by a state takeover.

This study individualizes change efforts by examining a specific school, then capitalizing on Sonia's strengths and working to alleviate weaknesses to create transformative change. The study has a distinctive foundation for the Bartlett School

District because it is the first change effort to solicit student and staff feedback specific to Sonia prior to initiation and throughout the reform process. It is a yearlong study designed to exam the extra-curricular activities and professional learning community as part of preparing the eighth grade community for change. The educational deficit of Sonia is not unique, but can be seen throughout urban schools in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Study findings will be specific to Sonia. It is the intention that the study will reveal methods and findings that are successful in improving student academic readiness and stakeholder engagement pertinent to Sonia Middle School. Other educational leaders may gain insight useful to creating change from within their schools.

Through my observational analysis as well as teaching experiences at Sonia I have found one of the factors specific to Sonia's disengagement is the lack of a collegial culture. The deserted hallways, empty teacher's lounge, and lack of celebrations in the school indicate the staff's disengagement in Sonia's culture (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2001). Research has shown one way to reengage staff and improve student outcomes is the development of strong professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Putnam et al., 2009). Though many variables have been identified as affecting Professional Learning Community (PLC) success and failure, conflict is one of the most significant. Even when institutional support is in place and all staff embraces a consistent school vision and mission, professional communities are often unable to negotiate the conflict essential to effective decision-making (Hord, 2004). Strong and effective professional communities depend on certain conditions, supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and the application of that learning, shared

practice, and supportive conditions for the maintenance of the learning community (DuFour & Burnette, 2002; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Hord, 2009).

Sonia has faced conflicting visions and leadership styles over the past six years. Each August, a new administration team has been appointed to Sonia. This new team brings with them a change in vision and mission, reorganization of the school leadership team, personal agendas, and leadership styles. Teachers have become steadfast in their modes of operation; a repeated theme is “I’ll be here after he’s gone” (Hatch School Culture Triage Survey, 2011). Sonia is experiencing a lack of capacity building among the staff. There are no professional learning communities in place; no longer is there a leadership team; teachers are not asked nor volunteer to sit on school committees. Ultimately, there is no capacity building occurring among the staff. This has resulted in a lack of collaboration and collegiality. This action research study proposes that if a PLC is created using DuFour’s big three as the framework (Eaker et al., 2002) to develop a culture of collegiality and efficacy among staff, then staff engagement and perception of student readiness would improve, thus leading to actual improvement in Sonia’s students’ readiness for success.

In conclusion the purpose and significance of this study is considered by the researcher to be encompassed in the following five statements: 1) This study examines the influence of extra-curricular activities and professional learning communities at Sonia Middle School in creating a school culture ready for change. 2) This study is unique to Bartlett school district as it develops reform and change efforts from within and specific to Sonia Middle School. 3) This research individualizes change efforts by examining current school culture at Sonia and capitalizing on strengths and working to alleviate



weaknesses in order to create transformative change. The study is distinctive in the solicitation and use of feedback from students and staff to develop and implement strategies as well as incorporates a unique inclusion of all staff members in a professional learning community, which reduces marginalization of non-teachers and teachers who do not teach Math and English Language Arts (CCSS). And lastly, the study advances the idea that school culture and environment must develop healthy relationships prior to implementing successful school reform or turn around efforts.

### **Terminology**

*Academic Achievement* – Student progress measured by benchmarks such as: state assessments, district assessments, classroom assessments and federal and state standards.

*Academic Readiness* – Behaviors including work habits, time management, organizational skills, and study skills as well as the ability to self-regulate and communicate effectively.

*Achievement target* – (Herr & Anderson, 2005) similar to dependent variable but changes are reflective of behavioral choices.

*Extraneous variable* – A factor that has nothing to do with the phenomena being studied but exerts its own separate effect on the dependent variable.

*Independent variables* – Actions taken to assist in reaching achievement target.

*Professional Learning Community* – (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

*Quasi-experimental* – investigation or research that implies a relationship or set of relationships between the actions and the achievement targets.

*School Culture* – The values, beliefs, norms, traditions and history of the school (Barth, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 1993; Fullan, 2001; Senge 2000).

*Extra-Curricular Activities*- any deliberately planned activity occurring outside the curriculum demands; athletics, clubs, musicals, dramas, study groups, etc.

## **Summary**

Chapter I introduced the need to implement and sustain professional learning communities of continuous inquiry and improvement, as well as the need to provide structure and conditions required to nurture the development of positive school culture. Additionally, the theory of personalizing reform efforts to the individual school in order to create a climate of academic readiness was discussed. It is suggested that the findings will advance understanding in the educational field by identifying personalized transformational change, widening the definition of professional learning communities to include all school staff members, creating opportunities to build student engagement through participation in extra-curricular activities.

The introduction of this study illustrates an urban middle school failing its students, faculty/staff, and community by ignoring a developing toxic school culture. The purpose of the study explains the focus on improving academic readiness by fostering cultural activities, professional development, and the reengagement of students and staff through deliberately planned activities. The study significance underscored the timeliness based on current educational trends of vouchers, charter schools, and district transfers.

Chapter II presents the theoretical framework and review of literature, which undergirds the study.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

This section discusses the existing literature and paradigms that shaped the research study: *Preparing for Change: An Examination of an Urban School's Extra-Curricular Activities and Professional Learning Communities in Creating a Culture Ready for Change*. Utilizing Morgan's definition of paradigm as the "beliefs and practices that influence how the researcher selected both the questions they study and the methods they used to study them" (2007, p. 49), the researcher synthesizes empirical research, established theories, personal ethical beliefs as well as leadership platform, and local knowledge to create a prototype for preparing Sonia Middle School for change.

The provocation for this study was the researcher's frustration with a lack of progress to engage students in learning despite the school's implementation of multiple reform efforts. The researcher had a growing sense of doom for students who had failed to grasp a love of learning and master basic study skills before leaving middle school for high school. Morally and ethically, the researcher felt a responsibility to try and change the status quo for Sonia students. The researcher believed Sonia students deserved the same educational opportunities as students in neighboring communities, but none of the reform efforts previously implemented had created transformative change within Sonia. The researcher began to question and observe daily occurrences at Sonia. It appeared to the researcher that the emphasis put on passing standardized tests by teachers and administrators ignored teaching to mastery and developing a love of learning. Furthermore, understanding and addressing the social development stage of the middle school student had become lost. Daily instruction had become a forced march to the test;

Sonia was failing to educate the whole child and the child was rebelling. The researcher decided to explore the body of knowledge that existed on academic readiness of middle school students as well as engaging students and staff in authentic instruction and learning.

This research study was influenced by the methodology of natural inquiry and participatory action research with the ultimate goal to impact academic readiness and engagement within Sonia's eighth grade class of 2012. This inclusive study was designed to focus on changing Sonia Middle School by giving all participants a voice in the change process (Creswell, 2007). This premise was the foundation of the project to reengage the Sonia community by promoting strategies to foster academic readiness among the students, reignite the desire to teach in staff, and increase respect and value for the school by all stakeholders. Heron and Reason (2006) assert that participatory research is:

A form of research in which all involved are both researchers and subjects: they engage together in democratic dialogue as co-researchers in designing, managing and drawing conclusions from the research, and as co-subjects they engage in the action and experience that the research is about. (p. 149)

Ultimately, this project involved all stakeholders working together towards creating positive change in the academic readiness of eighth grade students in Sonia Middle School.

## **Review of Literature**

The current climate in American public education is one of disillusionment with the system as status quo. Parents, local school boards, state departments of education, and even the President of the United States are calling for reform. Currently, there are over 5,000 public schools across America that fall into chronically failing status (Kowal et al., 2009). In New Jersey, 104,000 students attend persistently failing schools (Dopp, 2011).

Multiple solutions have been discussed: vouchers, inter-district transfers, charter schools, privately run education systems, firing all the teachers in a failing school, and finally closing the school doors and walking away. President Obama in his address to the American students in fall of 2009 said “I’ve talked a lot about your government’s responsibility for setting high standards, and supporting teachers and principals, and turning around schools that aren’t working, where students aren’t getting the opportunities that they deserve,” (Obama, 2009, p 9). Although everyone is addressing the crisis facing the American public education system, there does not seem to be one formula for successful change. Educators and legislators cannot specifically define what a persistently failing school looks like, nor have they agreed on which portions of the educational system need to be addressed in order to recapture the spirit of successful public education.

This literature review defined and examined common characteristics of chronically failing schools. First, a discussion follows of the research associated with two factors shown to impact academic achievement – culture and engagement. Second, the review explores the use of professional learning communities to implement change. Third, the review addresses the roles of leadership and change, and how they relate to improving student engagement and academic readiness. Lastly, the literature is connected to this research study designed for Sonia Middle School. Ultimately, this review provided the researcher a body of knowledge that assisted in answering the questions: How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities impact eighth grade students’ academic readiness and school engagement? And in what manner did voluntary

participation of eighth grade teachers in a Professional Learning Community influence student academic readiness, school culture, and teacher engagement?

### **Characteristics of Failing Schools**

The quality and effectiveness of the public education system in America is a topic of discussion and debate throughout the nation. One underlying factor uniting those in conversation is common school experiences; the 2011 Census indicates that 82.6% of Americans hold a high school diploma or GED credentials. Across socio-economic and educational levels, from Presidential addresses to backyard barbeques, everyone expresses their opinion on how to fix our educational system. In 1983, the National Council on Excellence in Education reported, “that declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted” (A Nation at Risk, 1983, p. 15). In 1998, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University completed a progress analysis of American education reforms since the Nation at Risk report was made public. Their findings reported,

Many Americans are indifferent to poor educational achievement. Too many Americans express indifference, apathy, and a shrug of the shoulders. Despite continuing indicators of inadequacy, and the risk that this poses to our nation’s future, much of the public shrugs (Bennett et al., 1998) .

Other researchers have reported this apathy as well (Finn, 2002; Larabee, 2005; Ravitch, 2009). Today educators, parents, and students are still asking why our schools are failing.

What is a failing school? Educators and researchers may never agree on one definition, but common characteristics do exist. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation defines a failing school based on levels of math and literacy performance (ESEA, 2001). A school that does not make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in moving the students to 100% proficiency in math and literacy by 2014 is deemed failing and in

need of improvement. Studies conducted in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois, show a 60-90% anticipated failure rate by 2014 (Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002). Many opponents of the NCLB laws contend that no schools will achieve 100% proficiency; therefore, by the year 2014 all schools in America will be failing. While the tenets of NCLB attempt to hold schools accountable for achieving these high performance standards, there is little concrete guidance for schools that are persistently failing despite implementing multiple reform efforts. The U.S. Department of Education reported in the 2008 - 2009 school year that 12,599 schools nationally were in a corrective action or restructuring phase. Schools in a restructuring phase alone totaled 6,916; this means these schools are choosing models of turnaround, transformation, or closure. In New Jersey, Sonia is one of 327 schools facing restructuring. (Consolidated State Performance Report, 2009). Nearly 11,000 Title I schools were identified for improvement in 2006-07, and after implementing whole school reform programs almost half of these schools were in more advanced stages of corrective action and restructuring at the close of the 2009 school year (Stullich, Abrams, Eisner, & Lee, 2009).

Persistently failing schools also have intangible characteristics in common. A key component in academically successful schools is the school culture, which in Sonia's case has been ignored and allowed to disintegrate. Hinde's (2004) study on "School Culture and Change: An Examination of the Effects of Culture on the Process of Change," described the impact culture has on reform, "culture surrounds and envelopes teachers forming their perspectives and influencing their decisions and actions" (Hinde, 2004, p. 1). Fullan (2005) argues that toxic cultures are evidenced by characteristics such as: teachers retreating behind closed doors, few if any celebrations, hallways are empty,



and staff arrive and leave promptly. This is not the type of school where people want to be. Pinkus (2009) describes the academic progress in a failing school as “stagnant” and reform attempts fail miserably. The teachers are oppositional and unwilling to change, perhaps because they have seen too many attempts at reform fail. “Negativity dominates conversations, interactions, and planning; the only stories recounted at the end of the day are of failure” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 29). These words describe an abysmal environment for students and staff.

### **School Culture and Climate**

Much has been written about school culture and the impact culture has on student learning and instructional practices. Studies on school culture grew from the school movements of the 1970s. Schein, a leader in defining organizational culture described it as “...a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems...valid and therefore to be taught to the new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel” (Schein, 1985, p. 12). Several researchers who studied the impact of culture on schools concluded that culture enhances improvement efforts or is a barrier to change (Barth, 2002; Deal & Kennedy, 1983 Fullan, 2005; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Wagner, 2004). Healthy cultural indicators in schools have been identified as including: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust, confidence, tangible support, appreciation, recognition, caring, celebration, humor, involvement, open communication, and honesty (Barth, 2002; DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2005; Saphier & King, 1985; Wagner, 2004; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002).

DuFour and Burnette (2002) refer to the importance of tending school culture to the necessity of weeding your garden. This cultural garden is described as a delicate

balance between the internal and external factors, things that not only are seen but also lie below the surface such as the roots of the plant. If strong, the plant grows beautifully, but left unattended or over maintained, the plant will wither and die (DuFour & Burnette, 2002). Thus, schools have their own cultures of what is seen and heard, but also what is left undisturbed. Hidden beneath the surface are important and relevant subjects, which impact the school culture but are not openly talked about. Barth (1991) refers to these as “landmines.” Powerful items discussed only in parking lots and behind closed doors, these unmentionable items can create cultural disasters if left to fester. Each school has its own culture traditions and history, which affect the instructional practices. Barth tells us that this culture “...wields astonishing power in shaping whatever people think and how they act” (Barth, 2002, p. 11). Sonia has these un-discussable topics impacting the daily operations of the school; whispered in corners of the building is the revolving door of administration, staff refusal to buy into the vision of the day because “I’ve been here longer than them” (School Culture Triage Survey, #4), parental apathy, and perceived feelings of disrespect and non-value by both district and building level administrators.

More influential than the national mandates of NCLB, state standards or changes, dictates of the school board, or principal’s vision, the school culture says this is “the way we do things around here” (Barth, 2002, p. 6). The school’s hierarchy of educators and administrators, as well as student clubs, organizations, and parent acceptance sets the tone for how the school operates. Intertwined with culture is the need to understand the emotional intelligence and people skills necessary to be an agent of change. Fullan (2001) states it clearly, “...successful strategies always involve relationships, relationships, relationships” (p. 70). Goleman et al. (2002) relate people skills to musical harmony and

discuss resonance and dissonance. If this is true, Sonia is currently an un-tuned orchestra seeking a maestro to lead us in a new chorus.

In the discussion of culture, it is necessary to mention the toll NCLB and federal mandates has taken on the nature of learning itself. Barth (2002) contends that school cultures are no longer conducive to producing learners, because “the myriad of school practices that now clutter a school culture because at sometime someone believed this policy, practice or procedure was capable of getting someone’s learning curve off the chart” (p. 9). The direction Barth proposes for future research is for school leaders to have the morale outrage needed to recognize the ineffectiveness of mandated change and the courage to implement innovative programs which engage them in learning to learn. This research study attempted to break the pattern of previously implemented school reform models at Sonia by developing and implementing a personalized program based on Sonia’s specific school and community culture by looking within for keys to engaging all stakeholders in the educational process.

### **Stakeholder Engagement/Partnerships**

Ravitch (2009) states,

The public schools have a unique responsibility for children and thus an unusual responsibility to involve the parents of these children in reviewing and discussing decisions about the education of their children. This responsibility requires a greater degree of public engagement than is customary or necessary in other city agencies. (p. 26)

Engaging parents in the educational process is not a new idea or theory. Researchers have highlighted the role parents play as the first teachers to their children and how student attitudes towards school are reflective of the value the family places on education (Dewey 1915/2010; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Epstein & VanVoorhis, 2001; Ravitch,

2009; Vygotsky, 1978; Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2006). Legislation has included mandates for schools to formally establish ways for parents to have a “seat at the table” when it comes to planning the education of their children (ESEA, 2001). Despite research and legislation, data indicate only 76% of middle school parents attend parent-teacher conferences and only 38% of students have a parent who volunteered at school (Child Trends, 2012).

Bringing parents into the academic achievement equation during middle school is challenging. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) advocate the development of parental and community partnerships to help improve discipline and academic readiness. In her previous work, Dr. Epstein (1986) identified six levels through which to view parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. In her current research, Epstein and her colleagues build upon these levels of parental engagement and advocate the need for developing parental and community partnerships in order to increase academic success. Epstein acknowledges that despite the “importance of these goals most schools, districts, and states still need help in developing comprehensive programs of school, family and community partnerships” (2009, p. 1). Sheldon and Epstein (2002) sent out a call for research studies that go beyond recording educational inequities and begin to distinguish strategies that promote diverse opportunities for engagement of diverse families and students.

Student engagement is influenced by many factors. Some research suggests that student engagement is influenced by the relevancy of the work, rigor of instruction, and the relationship of the work to their own lives (Dewey, 1915/2010; Shernoff & Hoogstra,

2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, student engagement may depend on the subject, instructional format, and amount of input or choice the student has in presentations and assessments (Dewey, 1914/2004; Finn, 1993; Shernoff, Schneider, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). School psychologists are studying the lack of student engagement as it correlates to high school drop out rates. Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) hypothesize that dropouts occur due to lack of engagement based on failure to succeed as well as the student's inability to correlate school tasks with real life problems (Dewey, 1915/2010; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky 1978).

The work of Dewey (1915/2010) and Vygotsky (1978) explore how to engage students in their education and the underlying factors that contribute to their cognitive development. Dewey's research stresses that schools must not work in isolation. He espouses that student disengagement occurs because

From the standpoint of the child the biggest waste in school comes from his inability to utilize the experience he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. (Dewey, 1915/2010, p. 104)

Although these words were originally given in a 1915 lecture, they hold true today.

Educators strive to make core content standards and the classroom lessons relevant to student lives.

Vygotsky (1978) discusses the inter-relationship between student, parent, and community in his socio-cultural theory. His theory is based on observations that learning takes place in a social context and that an individual's intellectual development reflects his environment. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) illustrates the need for family and community members to promote and participate in the school activities as a model for the child. The child's first teacher, in Vygotsky's theory, is his parent and the

community in which he lives. The influence from these two factions set the stage for how a child develops cognitively. Key influences in the child's cultural environment include economic survival, perceived social order the child is born into, and both family and community attitudes towards education (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) Vygotsky recognized learning and development as both internal and external processes (Vygotsky, 1978). The basic tenets of ZPD are that the child learns first from his interdependence on family, interaction with his environment, and through peer-to-peer learning. "Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 198).

As the child becomes autonomous his self-view shapes his cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). The significant factors of socio-cultural theory, with regards to self-view align with developmental issues students in middle school are facing: group membership, perceived position in society, social interactions, relationship experiences with adults and significant people in the child's life (Stentsenko & Arieivitch, 2004; Vygotsky 1978). Vygotsky recognized that all learning starts as interactive and social prior to being internalized acknowledging student, parent, and community member roles in school engagement (Gindis, 1999; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Stentsenko & Arieivitch, 2004; Vygotsky 1978).

Many research studies have examined ways to reengage students, parents, and communities in schools, which have historically failed to close the achievement gap by focusing on best practices of instruction, curriculum, and professional development. One alternative theory that resonated with the researcher for the Sonia community were the

studies done by Dawkins, Braddock, and O'Bryan, both individually and collaboratively (Braddock, 2005; Dawkins, 1982; Dawkins, Braddock, & O'Bryan, 2006; Dawkins, Braddock, & Ceyala, 2008) which looked at changing engagement, academic readiness, and success through the use of athletics. These researchers contend that by developing a sense of personal and school pride through participation in athletics, secondary students and parents will reconnect with the school and each other (Dawkins et al., 2006). Braddock (2005) contends that although American secondary schools have a plethora of athletics, which have the potential to "create changes in student motivation, development and success" (p. 255), these activities remain under utilized as a resource in improving engagement and academic outcomes (Braddock, 2005; Brown & Evans, 2002; Dawkins et al., 2006).

One common thread all these researchers have is that engagement matters. There is a voiced need to develop new and unique strategies for engaging all stakeholders to create a culture of learning. Successful schools do not isolate themselves from the community, but are a reflection of the community, holding high expectations of all partners (Dewey, 1915/2010; Gindis, 1999; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Stentsenko & Arieivitch, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). Student, parent, and community engagement will only occur in a welcoming environment where all members feel valued (Finn, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Gladwell, 2002; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Senge, 2000). School staff must convey this sense of welcome. Therefore it is a necessary to discuss the particular characteristics and challenges of reengaging school staff in a persistently failing school.

## **Professional Learning Communities**

Connected with culture is the discussion of professional learning communities. A group of professionals with common planning time may appear to be a professional learning community, but if this time is not goal oriented and focused it is not a professional learning community. Blankstein (2004) tells us that a skilled leader “has a common understanding of what such a community looks and feels like, how one behaves in this context, what the mutual commitments are” (p. 52). Characteristics of a professional learning community, according to DuFour and Eaker (1998), include: shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation. Over the past 25 years, considerable research has been published on the topic of professional learning communities (PLCs). Across the country, school districts are forming and implementing PLCs as a strategy to increase student achievement by creating a collaborative school culture focused on learning. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) and the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) identify professional learning communities as an approach to effective professional development (Hirsch, 2001).

Current research reveals a broad range of guidelines for organizing and implementing PLCs. However, rigorous research and effectiveness studies of PLCs are limited. Although much has been written describing the processes and steps that occur during the developmental stages in a professional learning community (Astuto, 1994; DuFour, 2004; Putnam et al., 2009), there is a small but emerging body of literature that looks critically at PLC models and their impact on school culture.



This section will present an overview of the essential characteristics of Professional Learning Communities, benefits of implementation, prominent theories that drive Professional Learning Communities, leadership and the structural supports necessary for sustainable learning communities as well as their influence on school culture.

### **Change and the characteristics of a professional learning community.**

Researchers have given significant attention to defining the structure and characteristics of PLCs for school improvement. Hord (2004) cited that while the utilization and definition of a professional learning community was becoming routine as a strategy in organizational change, the concept takes on a different format when observed in school settings. Hord explains in some school settings a professional learning community was viewed as extending classroom instruction into the community. In other words, bring the community into the classroom to enhance the instruction. While in other examples, a professional learning community referred to the relationship between teachers and students. As Hord describes, the idea is embedded in the work of organizational theorists such as Michael Fullan and Peter Senge. Senge (1990) speaks about a view of the workplace as a learning organization. Senge's description of a learning organization emphasizes that active participation of the workforce is needed in creating a shared vision and culture to support collaboration. It is only then staff members are able to work together more effectively in identifying and resolving problems. Both Fullan and Senge (Fullan, 1993, 2001; Senge, 2000) believe the creation and implementation of learning communities is crucial to the future success of organizations facing the problem of change.

Transforming the ideas of a learning organization from the business world into a professional learning community in the educational realm in order to address the problem of academic achievement requires participation from all stakeholders. Hord (1997) identifies a set of common PLC characteristics based on the work of Astuto (1994). Astuto and her associates studied the relationships of educators in schools where there were ongoing conversations around issues of teaching and learning to improve instructional practice and student academic success. Hord incorporates this concept and identifies the common characteristic of PLCs as: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and the application of that learning, shared practice, and conditions which will support the sustainability of the learning community. Furthermore, additional research in the field supports Hord's essential elements of a professional learning community, but identify other significant components of PLCs. Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) include mutual trust, inclusive school wide membership, and networking partnerships. While Little (1993), Kruse, and Louis(1995), and McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) join in the discourse on school reform by incorporating reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, professional growth and mutual support, and mutual obligation as other important themes for developing PLCs focused on school improvement.

What should the focus of the professional learning communities be as related to school improvement? DuFour (2004) identifies three "Big Ideas" to guide the work of professional learning communities: a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results. Powerful professional learning is embedded in the routine practices of the school when teachers are organized into teams, provided time to meet during the

school day, and given specific guidelines for engaging in activities that focus on student achievement (DuFour 2004). According to DuFour, if PLC teams center their dialogues on these three essential concepts, schools will reap the benefits of the time invested in the development and implementation of the professional learning community.

**Benefits of implementing professional learning communities.** Instructional improvement and school reform can be linked to the successful implementation of a professional learning community (Annenberg, 2004; DuFour & Burnette, 2002; Hord, 2009; Little, 1993). Research suggests that schools benefit from having PLCs through improved teacher effectiveness and improved student achievement (Stoll et al., 2006). Multiple research teams (DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Leithwood, 1998; Senge, 2000; Smylie & Hart, 1999; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999) confirm that teachers benefit from participating in PLCs and contribute in improving student achievement. Some of the benefits are: reduction of isolation, increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school, shared responsibility for student success, greater job satisfaction and higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism (Hord, 1997). The use of professional learning communities destroys isolation in the school and creates an interconnected environment. Current research associates the success of PLCs in schools when they are a piece of the educational environment and when one or more PLCs are overlapping in their work (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001; Resnick & Hall, 1998). Members of the professional learning community become united in a common vision and mission, which has carry over into the hallways and classroom. Staff becomes formally and informally “bound together by what they do, by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in the work, and through the work they have produced" (Wenger,

1998, p. 5). The advantages to creating multiple entwined PLCs within a school shows that although united in the mission, the PLCs tackle the problem from different viewpoints. This will provide a depth of knowledge necessary for participants to become the topical authority and thus improve instruction and learning (Coburn, 2003). The end result will be a school empowered with organizational expertise ready to develop strategies, which will connect individual instructional practices to the mission and vision of the school (Wenger, 1998).

**The role of leadership in enhancing engagement and PLC.** Central High School in Tennessee and Benjamin Stoddert Middle School in Prince Georges County, Maryland are examples of secondary schools that utilize a professional learning community model and have found that shared leadership is an effective method for engaging teachers (Hurlburt, LeFloch, Therriault, & Cole, 2011). Fullan (1993) found that strong PLC schools develop leadership, additionally offering ongoing support to members. School administrators, who are invested in the PLC model, are willing to share leadership and invest their time and energies into developing the leadership talents of their staff. The principal, through modeling and support, creates a culture of respect for educators and their ideas (Zepeda & Ponticelli 1998). Moreover, teachers are encouraged to research and implement new ideas (Kruse & Louis, 1997), which support academic achievement and maintain the school's vision (Eaker et al., 2002; Hord, 1997). The rationale for this lies in the fact that significant change must involve all staff members in order to be substantial and effective. Furthermore, the diversity of staff provided a depth of knowledge through multiple lenses pertinent to Sonia stakeholders.

The researcher's educational leadership platform is based on a perpetual desire for knowledge and the desire to share and empower others through knowledge. Capitalizing on tenets of inclusion, collaboration, and transformation, the researcher utilized a developmental PLC model based on DuFour's (2004) Big 3 of professional learning communities, but opening membership to all eighth grade staff regardless of job title. This model focuses on creating a space for staff collaboration and mutual support while developing strategies to improve student academic readiness. The PLC worked on cultivating the talents and strengths of all members (Beach & Lindahl, 2007), and was also influenced by Senge's discipline of team learning. Team Learning encourages capacity building within the team by delegating leadership and supporting members on a daily basis (Senge, 2000).

### **The Role of School Leaders in Creating Change**

*“There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.” (Machiavelli, 1513)*

Leaders throughout time have been looked to as role models in the quest for knowledge. As far back as Egyptian Hieroglyphics the essential qualities of leadership have been depicted. Pharaohs were thought to be authoritative, pure of heart, and possess a just tongue. Confucius spoke of leaders possessing moral character. Plato and Aristotle have written about virtuous leaders ruling with knowledge, while Machiavelli believed loyalty and firmness entwined with the respect of the citizens made the best leaders (Bass, 1995). Studies throughout time have focused on great leaders, their skills, and the traits they possessed, trying to create a central definition of leadership.

Many researchers today study models of leadership trying to determine the effectiveness and impact leadership has on school turnaround efforts. Argyris and Schön (1974), who introduced the concept of organizational learning, point to leadership as a key factor in building a learning community. They put forth two theories that deal with human behavior and learning: theories-in-action [espoused theory] and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are presented as a leader's plan for action; what the leader believes she will do or the planned steps of action. Illustrated as given a specific situation one can achieve a desired result by performing a specific action S...C...A (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p 5). Theories-in-use are the observable leadership skills. They require a higher level of critical thinking and are based on knowledge, the situation, the organizational culture, and the people involved. This theories-in-use is the core belief and ideas, which enable a leader to effect change (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The challenge becomes trying to merge espoused theories, theories-in-use, and the change model for effective leadership. Effective leaders must be continually reflective striving for consistency in belief and practice if their tenure as leader is to have a purpose.

Fullan (2001) emphasizes the need for leaders to have a moral purpose in order for change to begin. Moral purpose must be evident in the leaders ideas, values, and character. It is "about how humans evolve over time, especially in relation to how they relate to each other" (Fullan, 2001, p. 14). If moral purpose is Fullan's number one criterion for effective change leaders, then relationship building is number two. Schools considering change cannot plan or move forward without considering the people involved. According to research on organizational leadership, effective leaders and ineffective leaders are determined by the amount they care about the people involved

(Barth, 2002; Coburn, 2003; Cuban, 1990, Fullan, 2001; Goleman et al., 2002; Kotter, 2007; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2004; Wilson, 2004). Whitaker (2003) echoes the importance of relationship building in his text, *What Great Principals Do Differently: Fifteen Things That Matter Most*. Of his 15 things, 10 of them focus on relationship building: focusing on the people not the programs, recognizing who is the variable, parental interactions, professional development, loyalty, hiring strategies, behavior interventions, staff talents, and compassion. Additionally, in-depth literature review focuses on the need for effective change leaders to be collaborative, respectful, culturally inclusive, reflective, and experimental in their approach to school turnaround strategies, which create transformational change within the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Dewey, 1916/2004; Fullan, 2001; Schlechty, 2001; Senge, 2000; Whitaker, 2003).

Kotter (2007) distinguishes between organizational management and leadership. His work contends that managing deals with the physical plant and organizational structure, while leadership deals with the development of relationships amongst all stakeholders. An effective school leader must be both a manager of the physical organization and a leader of its people (Kotter, 1990). A vital piece of Kotter's research applicable to schools is that change will not occur unless a sense of urgency is created. A sense of urgency is not panic driven, but an open dialogue with all stakeholders about the strengths and weaknesses of the organization in comprehensive examination of upcoming opportunities to capitalize on as well as what is threatening its existence (Beach & Lindahl, 2007; Harvard School of Business, 2005; Kotter, 2007; Lindahl, 2007; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). Kotter defines this sense of urgency as 75% stakeholder consensus that change is needed. Without consensus, change is likely to fail or if it occurs

it will not be sustainable (Fullan, 2007; Kotter, 2007; Wagner, 2006). The envisioned change must be part of the everyday conversation. All stakeholders must know the purpose of the change, how it aligns with school vision and mission, and leadership must be sensitive to incorporating existing rituals and routines that work into the change effort (Barth, 1991; Borman et al., 2008; Gladwell, 2002; Goleman et al., 2002; Kotter, 2007). While having a personal knowledge of staff is important to leadership, there must be a professional community of learning at the school.

Lastly, effective leaders build capacity within their staff and share knowledge (Barth, 2002; DuFour & Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2001). Leaders must access tacit knowledge, defined by Fullan as what people know but do not verbalize. Tacit knowledge is information regarding how the organization works, which is not acknowledged or discussed, but exists. Effective leaders tap into tacit knowledge in order to create transformative change.

### **Call For Change**

This action research study has chosen to look at preparing an urban middle school for change by addressing academic readiness and engagement through the utilization of professional learning communities and deliberately planned extra-curricular activities. The study design is linked to research and contributes empirical knowledge regarding personalizing school turnaround efforts for an urban middle school. This study combines theory and practical knowledge in preparing a school for change. The majority of empirical studies report strategies and interventions used to implement reform efforts. This study differs because the researcher advances the idea that the school culture and environment must develop healthy relationships prior to implementing successful school



reform or turnaround efforts. After exhaustive research, there appeared a gap in studies specifically designed to prepare a middle school for change by focusing on culture and environment through the use of professional learning communities and deliberately planned activities prior to implementing the turnaround/reform strategies.

Schlechty (2001) asks the question “How can a supportive student culture be created, especially among students from homes where academic values are not embraced or where there is out right anti-intellectualism?” (p. 89). Additionally, Shernoff et al. (2001) recommend a need for research that engages students by linking leisure and community activities to school work. Dawkins et al. (2006) discuss success that has come from engaging students, parents, and teachers through their high school athletic programs. Dawkins (1982) calls for more research in this area. In 2003, Mapp’s research amongst school counselors and administrators called for program development, which “...embrace a high level of family participation in the schools and demonstrate commitment through active involvement.” (2003, p. 51). Answering this call for research in engagement and activity led the researcher to wonder if the key to revitalizing Sonia Middle School was in planning deliberate activities, which will engage all stakeholders in bonding and celebratory ways, building self-confidence and efficacy in both students and staff thus impacting academic indicators and creating an environment ready for change.

The advantages of creating a diverse PLC within a school shows that although united in the mission, the PLC members tackle the problem from different viewpoints. This will provide a depth of knowledge necessary for participants to become the topical authority and thus improve teaching and learning (Coburn, 2003). The Education

Alliance at Brown University (2010) gives direction for future studies in professional learning communities calling for studies that include practices that develop and initiate PLCs, analyze what constitutes supportive conditions for PLCs, and include development of effective implementation strategies within the school setting. Additionally Hord (2009) states, “More studies are needed to follow the development of communities and their outcomes and performances” (p. 42).

### **Theories of Understanding**

This study was influenced by educational theories put forth by Dewey (1915/2010), Vygotsky (1978), DuFour and associates (1998, 2003, 2004), and Dawkins, Braddock, and O’Bryan (1982, 2006, 2008). The researcher wove these theories into the design and methodology to effectively influence academic readiness and engagement by all eighth grade stakeholders at Sonia Middle School. Each theory played a role in planning and implementing the action research cycles of this study. Dewey’s (1915/2010) concept of connecting community and education through curriculum complemented the sociocultural research of Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory and historical perspectives highlighted the role community and family play in how a child learns and guided the deliberately planned activities for engagement. Dawkins, Braddock, and O’Bryan (2006) as well as Brown and Evans (2002) reported success through outreach and planned activities as a means of engaging minority and at-risk students who have become marginalized in high school. The researcher is transposing this knowledge into the middle school setting to see if it will have similar results. Supporting theorists Woolfolk, Rosoff, and Hoy (1990) and Wagner (2004) were brought into the literature

discussion dealing with teacher efficacy, student self-image, and societal expectations as pertain to academic engagement and readiness to learn.

Growing research that documents improved teaching, learning, and school culture supports the creation of a Professional Learning Community at Sonia (Annenberg, 2004; Bullough, 2007; DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). DuFour identifies three “Big Ideas” to guide the work of Professional Learning Communities: a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results (DuFour, 2004). These three ideas drove the development of an eighth grade Professional Learning Community whose focus is to build staff-student-family

Table 1 assists readers in following the design of this action research study. It provides a visual connection between the action research strategies, gaps in literature, and theorists supporting the study.

Table 1

*Connecting Action Research to Theorists*

Action Research Base	AR Attribute	Gap	Theorists
Anyon, 2006 McNiff & Whitehead, 2002	Quasi-experimental	Connecting school to life	Dewey, 1915/2010
Anyon, 2006 McNiff & Whitehead, 2002 Herr & Anderson, 2005 Craig, 2009	Quasi –experimental Design while flying	Supportive school culture where academic values are not embraced	Vygotsky, 1978 Dewey, 1916/2004 Barth, 2002 Wagner, 2004 Schlechty, 2001
Lewin, 1947 Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982 Anyon, 2006 McNiff & Whitehead, 2002	Directed through personal & professional need Quasi-experimental	Change through focus on activities fostering self-esteem Personalization of change efforts	Dawkins & Braddock, 2006 Dewey, 1915/2010 Barth, 2002 Fullan, 2001 Kotter, 2007 Shipps 2009
Sagor, 2011 Anyon, 2006 Herr & Anderson, 2005 Kemmis & McTaggart, Lewin, 1947	Professional need Quasi-experimental Personal response	Studies are needed to follow the development of communities and their outcomes and performances	Hord, 2009 DuFour, 2004 Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2012

**Summary**

This chapter provided a historical overview of failing schools, culture and engagement, professional learning communities, theories of leadership, and why reform efforts fail. Implications on both national and local levels were discussed with a developing process to addressing these needs in Sonia Middle School. This review assisted in examining existing literature to assist in answering the questions:

1. How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?
2. In what ways does the voluntary participation of eighth grade faculty in a Professional Learning Community influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?

The direction for this research study was prompted by recommendations from the experts for future research in the area of activities used to promote student engagement (Brown & Evans, 2002; Dawkins et al., 2006; Epstein & Associates, 2009; O'Bryan, Braddock, & Dawkins, 2008). These recommendations include: creating a supportive school culture which links leisure activities, home-life, and school; developing programs which engage and empower families; and creating professional learning communities which will support and evaluate these outcomes. Additionally, Hord's (2009) call for more studies that follow the development of learning communities within schools that focus on academic outcomes and performances, inspired the inclusion of professional learning communities. Furthermore, following Dewey's theories of practical and experimental education coupled with researchers inviting experimental interventions regarding student motivation (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004; Barth, 2002; Dewey 1915/2010; Finn, 2002; Gindis, 1999; Hord, 2009; Wentzel, 1998), the study was designed to specifically address academic readiness and student and staff engagement at Sonia Middle School.

The next chapter describes the research design and methodology implemented in order to explore the role professional learning communities and extra-curricular activities have as valuable tools in school reform within Sonia Middle School.

## Chapter III

### Methodology

This study is designed as a participatory action research study. While it employs data collection and analysis, which is both quantitative and qualitative, the design focus is one of action research. The research methodology and design for this study is reflective of researcher practices as a Health and Physical Education teacher, as well as personal experiences.

Multiple research studies focus on the need to engage at-risk students in school in order to promote academic readiness (Dawkins, 1982; Dawkins et al., 2006; Dewey, 1915/2010; Epstein et al., 2009; Finn, 2002; Finn, 1993; Mickelson, 1990; O'Bryan et al., 2008; Osterman, 2000). The researcher's first understanding of this knowledge was not through study, but personal experience. The researcher was a "student-at-risk" early in high school after the death of her parent. If it were not for the extra-curricular activities and athletics that the researcher participated in during high school, as well as the adults who encouraged her to join, she would not have graduated. Additionally, as a coach, the researcher is conscious of the value extra-curricular activities can have on relationships, engagement, and academic readiness. Therefore having witnessed the most disengaged, disruptive students in the classroom become leaders on the court, and having wondered how this excitement and leadership can be transferred into the classroom, the researcher began the research.

This study is unique to Sonia's district and history because it focused change efforts on deliberately planned activities, which capitalized on student interests and successes. This study hypothesized that building on specific student interests,

participation, and successes in deliberately planned activities (Dawkins et al., 2006), as well as staff participation in a Professional Learning Community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), a climate that fostered academic readiness and supports the necessary changes to improve staff and student engagement would emerge. Influenced by the research of Dawkins et al. (2006), this study uses deliberately planned student driven activities in the eighth grade to create a climate of academic readiness and stakeholder engagement. Additionally, eighth grade teachers were invited to be participants in a Professional Learning Community, which evaluated Sonia's strengths and weaknesses and developed educational strategies designed to promote academic readiness and influence engagement among eighth grade students and staff (Eaker et al., 2002).

Prior to initiating fieldwork, the researcher piloted a school study to gauge the climate and staff's readiness for change. The instrument used for this portion of the study was the School Culture Triage Assessment Survey, which will be discussed in greater length in this chapter. The pilot study provided the researcher an opportunity to become familiar with the implementation and analysis of the School Culture Triage Survey. The School Culture Triage Survey, designed by Wagner and Masden-Copas (2002) consists of 17 items broken into three categories: collaboration, collegiality, and self-efficacy. The survey provided immediate feedback on staff perceptions of culture and accurate descriptions of their current engagement within the school. This instrument provided data specific to Sonia on which the study was designed.

This chapter presents the research design and methodology used to answer the following research questions:

1. How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?
2. In what ways does the voluntary participation of eighth grade faculty in a Professional Learning Community influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?

Additionally, this chapter offers the reader an intricate examination of Sonia's unique setting and challenges specific to its demographics. The researcher explains the current and historical school reform efforts implemented at Sonia that influenced the study design, as well as the instruments used for data collection and analysis in this study.

Finally, the researcher will share her personal leadership platform and the frameworks for change, which have informed this study.

### **Approach to Inquiry**

This research was approached from a stance of natural inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm fit the desire to study and create a change in school culture and academic readiness. Natural inquiry is beneficial in a setting where the change is to occur. It utilizes purposeful sampling and data collection methods may consist of interviews, observations, and informal dialogues; this collection will occur to the point of saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This data saturation "ensures replication in categories: replication verifies and ensures comprehension and completeness" (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen, & Spiers, 2002, p. 12). Moreover, natural inquiry was selected since the researcher is a member of the Sonia school community and has relationships established with the research participants.



The use of deliberately planned extra-curricular activities was selected after observing interactions between students and staff as well as listening to the history of Sonia's school reform efforts. The technique of natural inquiry allowed the researcher to capture a cultural history of Sonia from shared stories and observations of veteran teachers who had been involved in past reform efforts (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Understanding and learning Sonia's reform history was vital to creating transformational change within the school. Only by studying what had not worked could research begin to create an effective change strategy for Sonia Middle School. Furthermore, natural inquiry fit well within an action research design since it is flexible, reflective, and requires ongoing data collection and analysis (Borman et al., 2008). The self-reflection aspect of natural inquiry helped to address researcher bias and enabled a deeper understand and awareness of researcher predispositions in this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

### **Action Research Paradigm**

Action research has been defined as a knowledge-based inquiry, which is collaborative in nature and empowers practitioners to make change within their setting (Ladson-Billings 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Sagor, 2011; Senge, 2000). Action research becomes participatory action research when the researcher engages in the study through interaction with the participants. In its finest form participatory action research encourages all participants to collaborate on project design, recommend strategies, implement actions, and review the study outcomes (Craig, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Sagor, 2011; Senge, 2000). This study utilized a participatory action research paradigm by valuing participant involvement in each stage of the study. Multiple opportunities for participation were provided which were inclusive of all subjects to improve academic

readiness and encourage teacher participation. Student and staff attitudes and perceptions were solicited through surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, PLC, interviews, and observations.

Action research is recognized by recurring stages. Multiple researchers have defined these stages as being a series of inquiry, action, and reflection; or plan, act, observe, reflect (Craig, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Lewin, 1947; McLean, 1995; Sagor, 2011; Senge, 2000). Action research has sometimes been rejected as a significant form of study because of its quasi-experimental design (Anyon, 2006; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002), but it is the experimental nature of the design that made it attractive to the researcher as a new means of implementing change from within Sonia. Implementing school improvement strategies designed by someone within the school was a new concept for Sonia; past change efforts have been brought from the district, state, or national level. Based on theoretical frameworks and practitioner values, the action research paradigm allows the researcher to propose and implement strategies that are inclusive of all participants (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Additionally, in this age of educational accountability, the critical self-reflection of the practitioner documents the practices implemented in efforts to reduce student educational deficiencies (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and improve academic achievement.

Participatory action research was chosen as the study's methodological approach based on the school's need for change and the design's unique "...process of deep inquiry into one's practices in service of moving towards an envisioned future" (Riel, 2010, para. 1). The future envisioned by the researcher was improved student readiness to learn as measured by attendance and a decrease in behavioral referrals, as well as student

engagement by capitalizing on their strengths and interests in specifically designed extra-curricular activities, which in turn influenced student readiness to learn. Furthermore, through participation in the Professional Learning Community, eighth grade teachers contributed towards improving school culture and promoting collaboration through learning, action, and reflection (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Likewise, selection of participatory action research was influenced by Sagor's (2011) three questions: Is the study's focus personal professional action? Is the researcher empowered to adjust future actions based on the results? And is it possible to improve? Answers to all three of these questions were affirmative. The researcher was trying to improve student academic readiness and staff engagement. The researcher's role as teacher as well as Sonia's chairperson for professional development and membership on the school leadership team put her in a place to adjust future actions based on the results. Lastly, contributing to the action research study was the researcher's undying passion and research-based knowledge that improvement was definitely possible in the areas of student academic readiness as well as staff engagement matched closely with the role required of researcher in action research design.

Action research allowed the researcher, who was immersed in the environment (Craig, 2009) and desiring to improve the learning community (Riel, 2010), to conduct observations, interviews, and interactions with study participants naturally (Craig, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The researcher's presence was unobtrusive and regarded as part of the everyday happenings at Sonia. Equally important in selection of action research was the fact that action research is both a proactive and reactive approach (Craig, 2009),

allowing the researcher to continually re-evaluate and adjust the initial design in response to data collected as the cycles progressed.

The inquiry stage of this study began with personal intuitive thoughts, coupled with observations, which identified a problem within Sonia. The researcher's observations, along with data documenting Sonia's continued failure to close the achievement gap, pointed to the inability of previous reform efforts to bring about transformative change as demonstrated by student scores on the NJASK. During the course of this study the researcher adopted diverse data collection strategies in order to provide accurate empirical knowledge for the study. Building on the sequential-explanatory paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), the researcher combined both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to explain the context of the study. Implementation of the School Culture Triage Survey along with the Seventh Grade Exit Questionnaire initiated the study; later cycles of action research incorporated focus groups, interviews, and observations as data collection strategies to gather and analyze data throughout the study. The mixing of data collection strategies occurs in the sequential explanatory model when analysis of the quantitative data (SCTS and questionnaire) is used to design and drive the subsequent qualitative data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). Moreover, implementing a variety of data collection tools allowed for triangulation of the data and reduced personal biases, which the researcher had brought into the study as an inside participant action researcher. Utilizing the quantitative surveys as a tool to understand perceptions and attitudes prior to the implementation and design of the action cycles increased the credibility and integrity of the findings, since the foundations of the cycles and focus of the professional learning

community could be linked to the needs of students and staff as expressed in the SCTS and questionnaire respectively. Both of these instruments will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

The researcher was a veteran teacher at Sonia Middle School attempting to address the real life problem of academic readiness and stakeholder engagement within the current eighth grade. The utilization of participatory action research gave a complete picture of Sonia Middle School, including a richer description and deeper understanding of the problem being addressed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The study began with Sonia Middle School's history of failing reform efforts and apathy of stakeholders.

### **Setting**

Sonia Middle School is an urban public school located in Bartlett, New Jersey. Bartlett, New Jersey has been named the United States' most dangerous city (Morgan Quinto Corp., 2011), and based on statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2012 Bartlett is the most impoverished city in the United States, with 42.5% of the residents living below the poverty line (Badenhausen, 2013). Bartlett is approximately nine square miles with a population of 77,344. In 2010, 40.2% of the city's population was under the age of 18. The ethnic composition of the city is 48.1% Black, 47% Latino, and 4.9% other. The median household income in Bartlett is \$27,027, which leaves 42.5% of its residents living below poverty level. Educational levels of Bartlett residents over the age of 25 are reported as 62% having achieved a high school diploma and 6.8% have a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2011).

Sonia is part of the Bartlett City School District, which is comprised of five high schools, five middle schools, 19 elementary/family schools, one early childhood center,

and one alternative high school. Sonia still occupies its original building, which was built in 1924. There are 33 classrooms, an auditorium with seating for 1,000, a gym, cafeteria, woodshop, technology lab, media-center, and two computer labs. The windows are barred or caged, the doors are locked at all times, and there is six-foot high fence surrounding the school. Inside, the bathrooms are kept locked at all times, graffiti describing rival neighborhood groups adorn the walls, lockers are tagged, and litter is strewn in stairwells and halls. These physical descriptors have been associated with toxic school cultures, which researchers have correlated with academic failure and stakeholder disengagement (Barth, 2002; Gladwell, 2002; Henig & Reville, 2011; McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Sonia is for the tenth year in a row, classified by the State of New Jersey as a school in need of improvement (New Jersey Department of Education, 2010) and in 2011 became designated by the state as a priority school. In an attempt to bring about the organizational changes necessary to close the achievement gap, Bartlett City School District has implemented numerous school reform models at Sonia Middle School. Each of these reform models has failed to bring about the desired effects.

The initial school reform model Sonia implemented from 1999-2001 was Adaptive Learning Environment Model (ALEM). ALEM is a “classroom instruction and management delivery system, which provides instruction for diverse students within a classroom” (Evans, 1998, How does it Work, para. 7). This reform model focused on delivering individual instruction by a team of teachers in one room. Sonia was assigned ALEM as the whole school reform model by the district, yet the district failed to provide

enough professional development to make the program successful. After two and a half years the district pulled ALEM for failure to improve academic achievement.

America's Choice was the next whole school reform model selected, focusing on five topical areas: standards and assessments, learning environments, community services and supports, high-performance management, and parent and public engagement. Sonia attempted to implement America's Choice from the fall of 2001 through spring of 2004. This reform model was doomed for failure from the start. Corocoran, Hoppe, Luhn, and Supovitz (2000) found that America's Choice model showed success in under-achieving schools when the following criteria were met:

Over 80 percent of a school faculty should indicate their commitment to the America's Choice design and agree to implement the program over three years. Each school must assign personnel as a design coach who coordinates the reform effort and acts as a liaison to NCEE, as a literacy coordinator who introduces the literacy program to the school staff, and as a community outreach coordinator who ensures that students get needed support services. In addition, schools must provide tutoring and other assistance to students falling behind, participate in America's Choice professional development sessions, and use the New Standards Reference Exams. Additionally schools need to contract with America's Choice for training, materials, and on-site assistance (sic). (Description section, para. 3)

Unfortunately, the Bartlett School District, and Sonia in particular, failed to commit resources and time to the America's Choice program. The district created new job positions for literacy and math coaches, but failed to invest in professional development for teaching staff to successfully utilize these coaches. Lack of continued and directed professional development, as well as lack of staff buy-in, led to America's Choice failing to improve academic success (NJ School Report Cards 2002, 2003, 2004).

The next reform initiative in 2006-2007 was a concession the principal made to keep a veteran teacher in sixth grade, and it was called Girls and Boys Academy. In reality, this model was not research based, did not have a plan, or professional

development training. The idea was motivated by one teacher's desire to be a strong role model to the boys and his insistence that the achievement gap could be closed if the boys and girls were separate. Mr. Danseur, a veteran teacher asked for and received a boys only classroom, which left a girls only classroom and a third sixth grade classroom that was co-ed. Parents could request their child be in a traditional classroom or a gender segregated class. Student attendance in the sixth grade dropped by 5.3% during this period (City-Data, 2007). Contrary to anticipated results, this reform effort increased behavioral referrals by 10% for sixth grade males and sixth grade female behavioral incidents rose by 17%, as compared to the sixth grade referral reports from the previous year (City-Data, 2007). The program was discontinued after the initial year and it is noteworthy that the teacher of the girls' academy resigned. With yet another reform effort failing to close the achievement gap, Sonia School searched for a new and improved model.

Sonia's educational reform journey continued with another district-selected reform model. Sonia teachers were told they would be working in Small Learning Communities divided by grade levels. Without further professional development, teachers were told to get together by grade level, pick a theme for the learning community, and develop goals. Three learning community themes were adopted: education through the arts, learning through service, and science and technology. Without ongoing professional development or common planning time these learning communities looked good on paper, but were never implemented. Simultaneously, the district instituted a "college prep phase," in which all eighth grade math students, regardless of their skill level, were required to take algebra and language arts instruction adopted on an



advanced placement program called Spring Board. Students were currently struggling because they lacked the basic skills necessary to be successful in this curriculum (Ms. Crystal and Mrs. Eljay, May 2011). Sonia is an example of a national phenomenon among the nation's lowest performing schools that have been impervious to reform models. Despite numerous reform efforts, academic progress has been stagnant (Pinkus, 2009).

In addition to academic progress, an important part of school culture is the process and products a school creates (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Historically, Sonia was a school that displayed collegiality and community spirit. All stakeholders were recognized and valued. Staff and students were recognized for academic and personal successes. Sonia was a highly active community; birthdays and weddings were celebrated; holiday parties were attended by 90% of the staff (Ms. Nightingale May, 2011); the teachers' room was active and full of chatter during lunches; and staff arrived early to school and left late. Student successes were celebrated with whole school assemblies, as well as in-class awards, after school clubs were popular choices, teachers opened their rooms at lunch time to facilitate student groups, children and staff felt safe and the worries of street life were left at the school door. Students and staff created and participated in community events. Sonia hosted a yearly May block party open to all community members with games, food, dancing, and crafts. This festival encompassed the entire city block. Talent shows, Motown Review, and The Miss Sonia Pageant were cornerstones of the school, as well as activities shared by parents and students.

Sadly, the decline of Sonia began in 2002 with a change in school leadership. The new principal systematically destroyed staff morale, school climate, and culture. The

principal arrived amidst turmoil. First, she had been reassigned against her wishes to Sonia Middle School, and secondly, the Sonia staff had petitioned the Bartlett Board of Education to appoint the current vice-principal as principal. The new principal's reaction to this situation was to halt all extra-curricular activities, discontinue committees such as School Leadership Team, Sunshine Club, and closed the teachers' lounge. All Sonia traditions were disallowed. Sonia no longer had an open door policy; the principal literally kept all doors locked and would not allow the community in. This principal held the reigns for five years during which time the staff became demoralized, isolated, and apathetic.

Over the past six years, Sonia has had a new administration team each fall; each year a new principal along with two vice principals have been appointed to Sonia. This constant change in leadership has resulted in perpetuating single-loop learning for students and staff. Administration and staff are in a perpetual dance to avoid conflict (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The staff has taken a *lassiez-faire* attitude and their "actions are designed to satisfy existing governing variables" (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 19). The majority of the teaching staff has gone into their rooms and shut the doors. Over the years, frustration and tension has built between staff and administration. These are things that are never discussed openly, but can be heard in the hallway corners. Teachers have divided into workers and non-workers; growing more frustrated with each other everyday. Topics of contention are: staff attendance and tardiness, class coverage, staff sick days, staff failure to go to class or assigned duties, putting students out of class, student discipline, vandalism, and criminal mischief. One thing that remains hidden and creates teacher isolation is the climate of student bullies to both children and staff. This

year alone, three teachers have been accused of abusing children and suspended from school. The issue is of such grave concern that teachers have retreated into their rooms, contemplated retiring or transfer, and have become afraid to correct student behavior for fear of reprisals. The result is that the children are running the school. Additionally, whispered in hallways and parking lots are the incidents of administration bullying and belittling their staff.

Infrequently discussed are the issues surrounding student learning. With the constant discipline disruptions, those children wanting to learn are getting left behind. Classroom management and non-instructional practices consume most staff and departmental meetings. Teachers are constantly scrutinized for accountability both academically and in regards to building student character. Parent conferences revolve around behaviors and not academics. Something must be done now to change Sonia Middle School before another generation is lost (Pinkus, 2009).

Consequently, Sonia is a persistently failing school where teachers have become fatigued with reform efforts. As a practitioner at Sonia, who has participated in these disappointing reform efforts, the researcher has endeavored to design a study reflective of Sonia's student, staff, and community needs.

### **Population**

In 1999, Sonia was at near capacity, filling almost all 1,000 available student slots. When this study began, Sonia's student population was 457 students. Students ranged in age from 10 to 16; 97% of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, 78% of students were Black, 20% were Hispanic, less than one percent was other (NJ School Report Card, 2009). Thirty-seven percent of the students received special services

and this population was growing. The Sonia guidance department reported that 15% of the students, in grades six through eight, have been retained at least once in their academic career.

The staff at Sonia consists of a principal, vice principal, one guidance counselor, a school nurse, a truant officer, 29 teachers, five para-professionals, two clerks, one secretary, psychologist, three security officers, two full-time and three part-time custodians, and four food service workers. This is a total of 55 adults providing a ratio of one adult per every five and a half students.

Staffing at Sonia reflects the cultural make-up of the student population: 80% of the staff is Black, 11% Hispanic, and 9% other. Seventy-nine percent of Sonia's teaching staff hold a BA/BS degree, and 21% have obtained their MA/MS. Five percent of Sonia teachers provide instruction in areas where they do not meet the highly qualified status as required by state and federal mandates; similarly the state average for poverty schools not meeting the highly qualified status is 0.3% (NJ Report Card, 2009).

### **Research Design**

Participatory action research was selected as the study design based on the school's need for change. That is, an insider's perception of the problem led to the belief a new approach to improved academic readiness and stakeholder engagement was needed. Additionally, participatory action research necessitated the researcher was "immersed in the environment" (Craig, 2009, p. 2), which allowed for natural connects between research and the community. The researcher was able to collaborate with colleagues, critique practice, and bring about organizational transformation as part of the daily operations (Anyon, 2006; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Riel, 2010).

The sample used for this study was the eighth grade class of 2011-2012 school year, as well as certified and non-certified staff who work with the eighth grade students. The researcher was a veteran teacher at Sonia Middle School. The utilization of multiple data collection strategies is justified by the intricacy of the study and the role of the researcher both at the school and in the study. The utilization of action research in this investigation is key to shifting the current practice paradigms as well as breaking the existing barriers to progress at Sonia Middle School. “The current paradigm of research does not work for urban schools as it fails to connect the social structures of the neighborhoods with the school” (Anyon, 2006, p. 17). This has been evidenced by the failure of the school reform models brought in by the school district.

Through multiple data collection methods, this empirical study gave district level and building level administrators, staff, students, and families a broad picture of the specific factors associated with the inability to close the achievement gap at Sonia (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Standard data sources, such as the NJASK and district benchmarks, gave a picture of the growing academic deficiency at Sonia, but lacked the completeness, which this study’s quantitative and qualitative sources revealed regarding school culture and its role in academic readiness (Bryman, 2006). The researcher chose to create a complete account of life at Sonia in order to bring about sustainable change.

**Participant selection.** Purposeful sampling was used in designing this study and selecting participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Selection of this type of sample is based on the fact the study was specific to Sonia Middle School. This study did not attempt to generalize findings or to be representative of all middle schools that wish to improve academic readiness. Sampling criteria were limited to certified and non-certified

staff currently at Sonia Middle School who taught or dealt directly with the eighth grade student population as well as open to all eighth grade Sonia students in the class of 2012. Based on general staff concerns regarding the apathy of the 2010-2011 seventh grade students, and student complaints that Sonia did not challenge them enough or provide activities at school, the researcher decided to try and re-engage students before they moved onto high school.

All 103 members of the class of 2012 were invited to participate in the study. An exit survey was administered at the end of the school year 2011 class meeting. (This survey will be discussed in greater detail in the instrumentation and data collection portion of the chapter). Additionally, an announcement along with flyers and handouts invited students to become part of a focus group and asked for staff volunteers to join a Professional Learning Community, whose mission was to impact student academic readiness and student/staff engagement. Prior to the first meeting and throughout each contact with students and staff, the researcher made it clear anonymity and professionalism would be maintained at all times. Participants could “opt out” at any time. All minor participants were required to have parent/guardian permission in order to participate (Appendix A). Reflection on data collection, organization, and analysis drove each action research cycle; the essence of action research being a community based field-intensive process (Craig, 2009). The cycles of research were anticipated, but the researcher was making adjustments and adapting to data analysis as the study progressed; action research being like “designing the plane while flying it” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 69).

During action research's cyclical design the study was emerging from the data collected. Inquiry, plan, implement, collect, reflect are the strongholds of action research (Craig, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Sagor, 2011).

**Study timeline.** The recurring cycles of action research mean that each cycle does not begin and end at a precise point (Craig, 2009; Herr & Anderson; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Sagor, 2011). The timeline in Figure 1 is an accurate if brief depiction of what was occurring in the action phases of the research cycle. Each cycle included ongoing reflection augmented by research to expand the researcher's knowledge base.

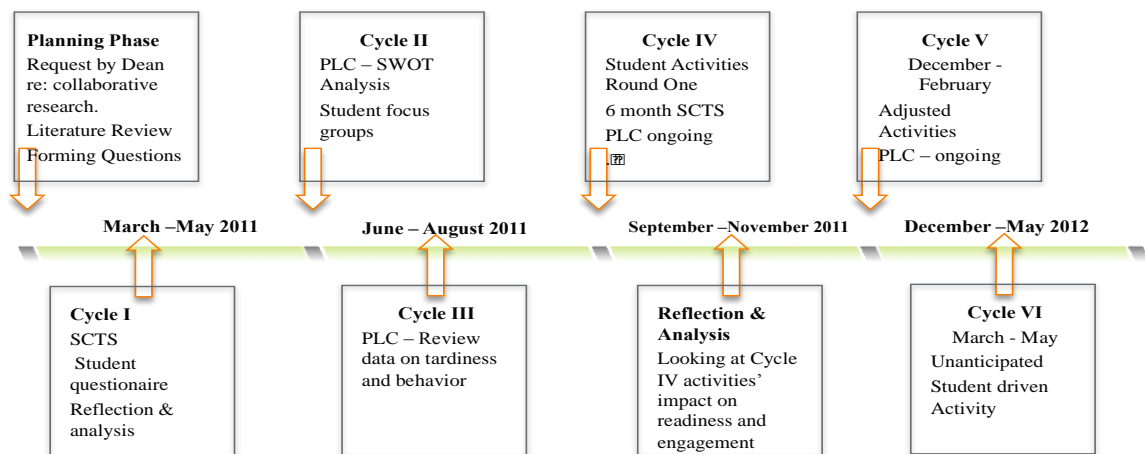


Figure 1. Action Research Timeline

### Instrumentation and Data Collection

Data collection in action research is reflective of the action research methodology tenets themselves. In a study that is evolving, so too will the data collection strategies

(Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 77). Included in this section is a discussion of the instruments used to collect data as well as the reasoning used to select each method.

**Journaling.** The researcher kept a self-reflective journal during this action research study. The purpose of the journal was to act as a tool in examining events and assumptions made in designing the project. The journal allowed documentation of dates, times, and actions which differed from the state methods. Furthermore the field notes from the journal captured informal conversations, observations, and unanticipated events (Sagor, 2011). It was through reflection on field notes the researcher was able to clarify achievement targets, evaluate intervening and extraneous variables, begin trend analysis, and explore personal biases (Craig, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

**School culture triage survey.** The initial instrument used to collect data from staff was a quantitative survey, which has been shared with the researcher by Dr. Chris Wagner from the Center for Improving School Culture (2012). This 17 item measure was designed to “assess a school’s culture based on three specific behaviors: professional collaboration, affiliate and collegial relationships and teacher efficacy” (Wagner, 2006, p. 42 ). Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, the inventory asked teachers to rate statements such as “When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.” Responses to the inventory formed the basis of the Professional Learning Community’s mission available to eighth grade teachers. The School Culture Triage Audit measures the same three professional qualities found in the framework from Eaker, DuFour & Burnette (2002) being used to develop Sonia’s professional learning community: focus on learning, culture of collaboration, and results.



The researcher selected this instrument to assess staff perceptions of Sonia's culture as well as staff attitudes toward change. The components measured, hold staff accountable for creating a change in school culture towards academic readiness. Teacher efficiency is a key discussion piece in school reform and may hold the key to empowering students and staff (Finn, 2002). The researcher believed it was necessary to measure staff attitudes and readiness for change prior to beginning my research.

Permission (Appendix B) was sought and granted to use the School Culture Triage Survey (Appendix C), which was developed by Dr. Chris Wagner. This instrument was selected because it has been proven reliable and valid through multiple uses. This inventory has been administered in over 8,000 schools and proven reliable in measuring relationships between school culture and student achievement (Wagner, 2006). The inventory was found to have internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha: .79 Professional Collaboration, .87 Affiliative Collegiality, and .88 for Efficacy and Self-determination (Melton-Shutt, 2004; Wagner, 2006).

**Student questionnaire.** Likewise, the eighth classes for the school year 2012 - 2013 were surveyed using an instrument created to elicit their perceptions and attitudes towards curriculum, instruction, school environment, and engagement. The instrument was designed to combine Likert scale responses and open-ended questions. There was no initial test of the instrument. This lack of testing resulted in instrument failure to obtain necessary data on student definition of academic readiness. Subsequently, focus groups were formed after the survey in order to obtain this information.

The data collected from this survey drove the deliberately planned extra-curricular activities as well as contributed to topical areas for the Professional Learning

Community. The questionnaire, located in Appendix D, was designed to evaluate student perceptions of challenging course work, variety of instructional strategies, time spent on homework, learning environment, involvement in extra-curricular activities, variety of activities offered, and a wish list for a great eighth grade year.

**Examining existing attendance and behavior referral data.** The professional learning community members analyzed attendance data from the 2010 - 2011 school year. The researcher, along with PLC members, was looking for trends in lateness, which the study could address. Lateness was analyzed by gender, days of the week, reasons if available, and minutes late. Likewise, Sonia behavioral records were evaluated on students who were chronically referred for disciplinary action. This data set was scrutinized for recurring offenders and violations. Information collected was used to deliberately plan student activities and focus outreach efforts.

**Professional learning community.** One Professional Learning Community was formed for the eighth grade staff. The initial Professional Learning Community consisted of nine staff members, including the researcher who was a participant. The participants represented a cross-section of the staff. Making up the PLC were three males and six females, five of whom were teachers, one nurse, one security officer, one custodian, and a guidance counselor. Two members of the group were novice teachers with less than five years teaching experience: Mr. Springstein and Ms. Crystal. The security officer, Officer Sky, had 10 years experience; Ms. Avatar, the guidance counselor, had been in the district prior, but left for seven years and returned to Sonia two years ago. The remaining members of the group, Mrs. Nightingale, Mrs. Evangeline, Mrs. Eljay, and Mr. Clean all had been at Sonia for more than 10 years. Meetings occurred in Room 112 from

7:30 a.m. – 8:25 a.m. Participation was on a volunteer basis and members could withdraw from the group at anytime.

During Cycle IV, the PLC active membership declined. One member passed away unexpectedly, and two members were transferred; one during the summer and one in September as school opened. The impact losing these members had on the PLC is discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV – Findings and Analysis.

This group, through a natural process, explored student academic readiness in relationship to tardiness and behavior referrals as well as conducted a SWOT analysis of Sonia looking at what the school does well as a learning community and what needs improvement. The data collected in interviews, observations, and focus groups helped drive the focus of the Professional Learning Community and plan the activities for student participation, and develop cycles of action research.

Table 2

*PLC Membership*

Name	Job Title	Years at Sonia
Ms. Brown-Bartlett	Teacher/researcher	12.5
Ms. Avatar	Guidance Counselor	2 [7 Bartlett District]
Mr. Springstein	Teacher	3
Ms. Crystal	Teacher	2
Mrs. Nightingale	Nurse	28
Mrs. Evangeline	Teacher	27 Sonia [32 Bartlett District]
Mrs. Eljay	Teacher	25 [Bartlett District 31]
Officer Sky	Security Officer	10
Mr. Clean	Custodian	17.5

**Focus groups.** Seven student focus groups, representing each homeroom, were formed in the spring of 2011. These groups were formed to explore academic readiness through the lens of students at Sonia Middle School. Participation was voluntary, open to all students in the class of 2012. Focus groups were valuable tools because they provided a forum for the students; an opportunity to voice their perspectives on issues of school culture and climate. Focus group interviews are a useful strategy either as a standalone data-gathering strategy or as a line of action in a triangulated project (Berg, 2007, p. 144). Participants were not paid, although lunch was provided. Focus group protocol is located in Appendix F.

**Interviews.** The interview technique selected for this research was the responsive interview model as developed by Herbert and Irene Rubin (2005). This particular form of interviewing is more conversational and creates “a window on a time and a social world that is experienced one person at a time, one incident at a time” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 14). The researcher felt it was important to hear staff members’ perspectives on Sonia’s past reform efforts and their current perceptions and attitudes if transformative change was to be achieved. The responsive interview technique allows the researcher to “build and frame the way we design research, collect data, and analyze findings” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 20), which blends well with the evolving process of action research. While the responsive interview technique is structured, it relies on one or two questions to “unlock” the doors of conversation. A sample responsive interview guide/protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Over the course of the study, 12 staff members and 79 students were individually interviewed. Follow-up interviews and member checking were conducted as methods to

ensure validity and integrity of collected data. All interviews have been transcribed. These transcripts have been coded for data analysis.

**Observations.** Observations added to the rich, in-depth story of Sonia. It gave an opportunity to compare staff espoused theories with theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1974). As an unconcealed participant observer, the researcher recorded data through note taking, photos, and voice recordings following Sonia events: bi-weekly staff meetings, teacher classrooms, student participation in activities, and hallway interactions between student-staff, and staff-staff. The purpose of observation is one form of fact checking, helping to triangulate the data collected during an interview process and vice versa (Kratwohl, 1998). The observation protocol was adapted from the Center for Improving School Culture and can be found in Appendix E.

### **Action Research Cycles**

Reflection on data collection, organization, and analysis drove each action research cycle; the essence of action research being a community based field-intensive process (Craig, 2009). Participatory action research is a cyclical design where the study is emerging from the data collected. Study, plan, implement, collect, reflect are the strongholds of action research (Craig, 2009). The cycles of research were tentatively planned out as they could be anticipated, but the researcher was making adjustments and adapting to data analysis as the study progressed; action research can be like “designing the plane while flying it” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 69).

The study begins with Sonia Middle School’s history of student failure and stakeholder apathy. The first cycle measures the perceptions and attitudes currently held by Sonia staff and students as regards school culture, engagement, and student readiness

to learn. The instruments used to gather these data were the School Culture Triage Survey and the Student Questionnaire. Samples of both instruments are located in Appendix C.

**Planning phase.** The planning for this research study began in the winter of 2011. The Dean of Education and several professors approached the researcher to be part of a collaborative research project. The premise was to attempt and bring authentic change to Sonia Middle School where several of the educational leadership students were employed. Reflection based on experience working within Sonia as well as the school's 10 year history of failing to make academic progress led the researcher to agree to the collaborative study.

The original study design involved two researchers attempting to make substantial change in student academic readiness and staff and parent engagement. This researcher would be responsible for developing the staff engagement piece of the study, her partner would develop the parental engagement piece of the project, and both researchers would collaborate on student academic readiness. However, in the middle of the literature review piece of the study, the researcher's partner had to withdraw from the study for personal and professional reasons.

The decision was made in collaboration with the dissertation chair to move forward. A literature review was conducted and IRB written for and granted. The foci of the study became how one urban school prepared for change by looking at student academic readiness to learn and staff engagement.

**Cycle I.** This first cycle collected data, which was the foundation for the professional learning community as well as for deliberately planning extra-curricular activities. Two data sets were collected, both using quantitative instruments. The School

Culture Triage Survey was administered to staff and a Student Questionnaire was given to the class of 2012. Both of these instruments were described earlier in this chapter in great detail.

The researcher explained the study to school staff at the conclusion of a weekly staff meeting in May 2011. Volunteers were asked to complete the SCTS at this meeting. Additionally, staff members were able to complete and return the SCTS during the course of the week. Similarly, the students were introduced to the research study at a seventh grade assembly the same week in May 2011. Participation was anonymous and on a voluntary on basis. The researcher provided a freeze pop for any student who returned a completed questionnaire. Students had a window of one week to return questionnaires.

This collection phase was followed by an analysis and reflection period. In action research the data from each cycle drive the next one. There is an ongoing process of analyzing data. Detailed discussion of the data and findings for Cycle I can be found in Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis, but it is important here to convey that the SCTS indicated a serious lack of collegiality and collaboration among Sonia staff. This finding influenced the development of a professional learning community in Cycle II.

Additionally, the untested student questionnaire failed to determine how students viewed academic readiness, therefore student focus groups were developed for Cycle II.

**Cycle II.** The second cycle created an opportunity for eighth grade staff members to come together as a Professional Learning Community whose mission was to complete a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of Sonia Middle School. The SWOT coupled with the staff School Culture Survey data guided the Professional Learning Community to create strategies, intended to impact staff and

student engagement. Furthermore, during Cycle II students met in seven separate focus groups to brainstorm a definition of academic readiness from their point of view while creating a wish list of ideal activities for their eighth grade year.

Additionally, during Cycle II the researcher interviewed key members of the student focus groups. The purpose of these interviews was to member check and give voice to extraneous information the students wanted known.

**Cycle III.** This third cycle occurred during July and August of 2011. This independent cycle provided a reflective period for the researcher. The primary focus was for the researcher to evaluate data collected, review the literature, and narrow the parameters for the study. Information gained from Cycles I and II, coupled with the loss of the collaborative research partner, required a period to reflect and streamline the study. During this time the PLC members met four times to analyze trends in student tardiness and behavior referrals. This research was in response to the PLC decision that indicators of student readiness, which could be measured, were lateness and behavior referrals. The group looked at the policies, rituals, and routines already in place at Sonia to address student lateness. The group brainstormed and recommended strategies and activities, which may reduce student lateness and behavioral referrals.

The researcher fully participated as a member in the PLC. In addition, during this cycle the researcher was reexamining research on social constructivism, school as community, and strategies to engage at risk youth to ensure the activities being planned were knowledge based.

**Cycle IV.** This fourth cycle incorporated activities and lessons, which reflected the data collected in Cycles II and I and reflections from Cycle III. In Cycle IV the



researcher used data collected through interviews with key players in both the staff PLC and student focus groups and collaboration with the PLC to develop action strategies, which would answer the research question: How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?

Activities to improve readiness and engagement fell into three main categories: academic, athletic, and service oriented. Each activity was designed to engage a diverse group of eighth graders. [All activities are described in greater detail in Chapter IV]. Academic activities in this cycle included: Read for the record day and Reading Buddies. Athletic activities were morning gym time, [from 7:45 a.m. – 8:20 a.m.], staff – student volleyball tournament and Models & Mentors. Service projects required students participating to help others both within and outside of Sonia: Backpack Give-away Day, Susan G. Komer fundraisers, Red ribbon week, Coat Drive, and Movie Fridays. The researcher sought teacher and administrator support and sponsorship for all activities. The Bartlett school board, prior to the start of the 2011- 2012 school year, approved all activities.

The professional learning community had returned to school ready to continue. Meetings were scheduled for Wednesday mornings from 7:45 a.m. until 8:25 a.m. The room location was switched to Ms. Eljay's room 312. The planned focus for this cycle of the PLC was to develop strategies for staff collaboration, administer the sixth month SCTS, as per the agreement with the Center for Improving School Culture, and an ongoing review of student lateness data and behavioral referrals. The PLC suffered two

major challenges during this period and almost folded; these issues are delineated in the findings section of the study.

The researcher was both participant and observer during this cycle. As facilitator of the PLC, the researcher provided a breakfast on meeting days, sent reminder emails, and made sure all data sets to be examined were available. As an active participant in the professional learning community, the researcher joined in discussions and data examinations. Like the rest of the PLC, the researcher was deeply affected by the trials the group faced during this cycle.

**Cycle V.** Cycle V was planned as the last phase of the study. During this cycle the professional learning community was assessing what if any impact was made on student lateness and behavior referrals. Additionally, the group was self-reflective on what impact their participation in the PLC had on team and personal instruction as well as staff engagement. Data collection used during this cycle was examining school records and dialoguing with one another about engagement issues.

Based on reviewing data from Cycle IV, the morning gym time and Models & Mentors were continuing. A week of reading and writing activities had been planned leading up to Read Across America Day, and peer tutoring started to assist students getting ready for the NJASK. The service project for this cycle was Penny Wars.

The researcher was conducting formal and informal observations looking for signs of staff collaboration and engagement. Additionally, the researcher was recording both audible and written comments from staff members regarding engagement.

**Cycle VI.** This cycle was unplanned and unanticipated by the researcher. It came as a direct learning process from the students. As a result of participating in the Modeling

& Mentoring program, a group of five boys wanted to initiate their own league. While the researcher had planned on stopping data collection, this variable demonstrated what action research is about. The findings chapter will discuss this in greater detail and analyze the actions according to outcome and process validity. Figure 2 presents a graphical display of all six action research cycles.

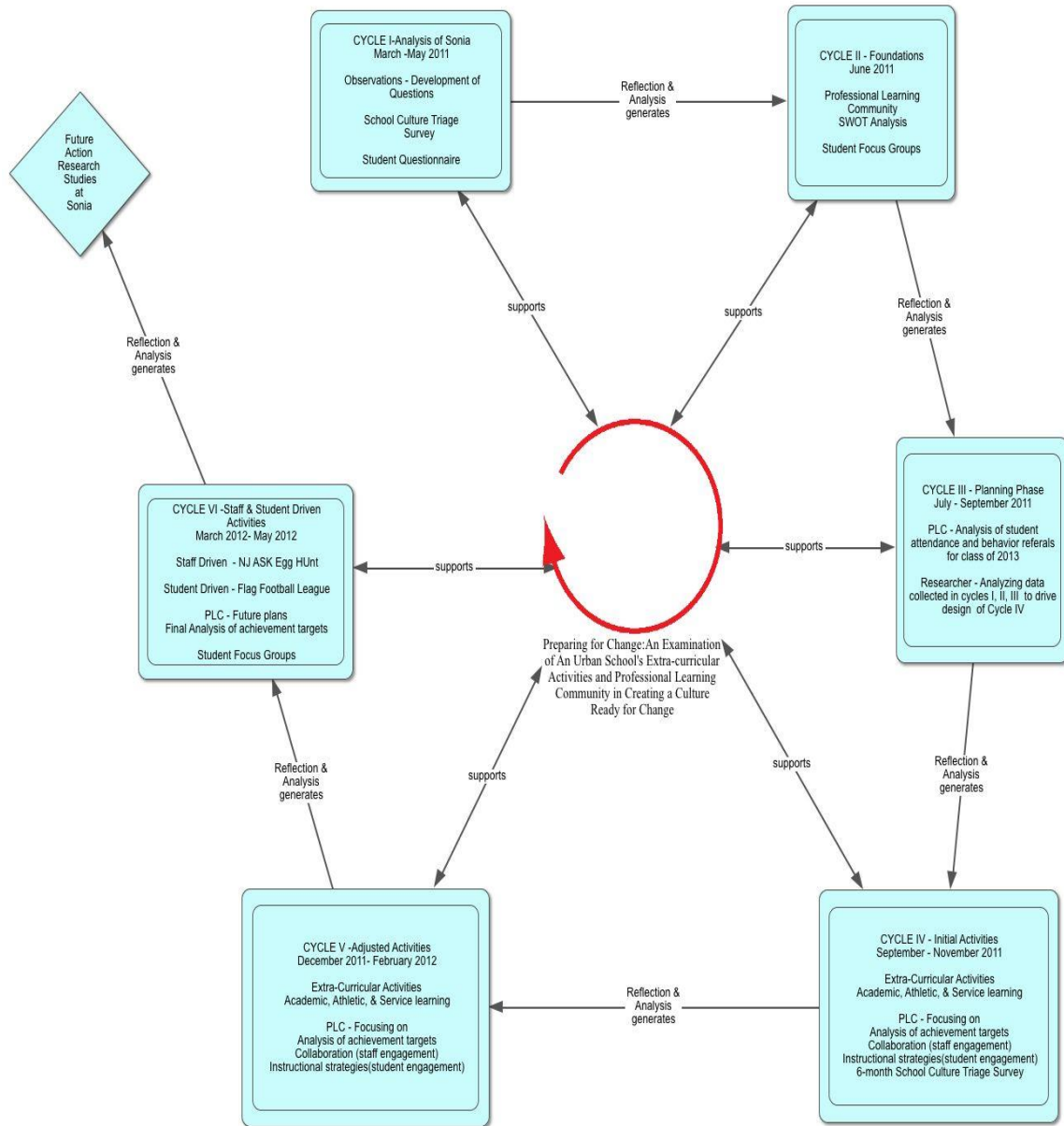


Figure 2. Action Research Cycles

## Data Analysis

During this participatory action research study, the researcher analyzed data strands individually and merged findings together in order to “decide to what extent the results advanced the program description” (Creswell & Plano, 2011). In action research the data from each previous cycle must be analyzed and reflected upon before putting new strategies in place; specifically, this means that the data analyzed will reveal if the strategies implemented have made a change in school culture and engagement (Craig, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Sagor, 2011). This ongoing analysis allows the researcher to modify the study as needed.

Data collection and analysis of School Culture Triage Survey (SCTS) and student questionnaire was completed in the spring of 2011. The School Culture Triage Survey was analyzed according to Wagner’s Tally (Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002) and using Cronbach’s alpha to produce evidence of internal consistency (Melton-Shutt, 2004). Wagner’s tally is a set of instructions and tally sheet, which assists the researcher in aligning and analyzing the data collected in the School Culture Triage Survey. The tally sheet categorizes answers according to the three behaviors evaluated: professional collaboration, affiliate and collegial relationships, as well as teacher efficacy. Once organized, the data will reveal a numerical quantity related to Cronbach’s alpha that indicates the strengths and weaknesses of Sonia’s school climate for success as measured by the School Culture Triage Survey (Wagner, 2006). The data collected through the SCTS will guide the direction of the professional learning community in conjunction with DuFour’s big three focus on learning, collaboration, and results (DuFour & Eaker, 2002).

Chunking and coding was used to analyze student questionnaires, interviews, observations, and focus group data. The researcher developed a codebook, which aligned recurring themes and statements to each research question (Creswell, 2009). Trend analysis assisted in searching for patterns in the data that reoccurred over each cycle. Since trend analysis is best used in quantitative data over a long period of examination, this method was especially useful in evaluating staff response to the School Culture Triage Survey, which was initially administered in the beginning of the study and again at the six-month mark. The utilization of trend analysis was particularly useful in measuring perceptions and attitudes over the yearlong study (Creswell, 2009). These patterns were identified in relationship to the achievement targets as well as specific actions and events (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Sagor, 2011). Outliers were explored through responsive interviews with key students and staff as well as through natural observation. The researcher anticipated early data collection patterns to include initial apathy, disengagement, and frustration; with the goal of observing a change once the study was implemented to patterns of creativity, reengagement, and self-direction as the study progressed.

The researcher kept a reflective journal detailing the steps of the project, anecdotes, quotations, verbal accounts, images, and records of meetings and events. The field notes highlighted extraneous and intervening variables and additional barriers to the study (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

**Triangulation.** Triangulation occurred through the use of multiple forms of data that when analyzed, disclosed similar outcomes. It offers a measure of validity to the study and enhances the accuracy of the data (Creswell, 2007). Using a triangulation

matrix allowed the researcher a systematic view of which data collection methods best fit each question. Triangulation of the data reinforced the validity and trustworthiness of this study (Craig, 2009). Table 3 illustrates how data were collected and triangulated for each of the research questions: How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities impact eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement? As well as what effect does voluntary participation in a Professional Learning Community, by eighth grade staff have on student academic readiness and engagement.

Table 3

*Triangulation Matrix*

Overarching Question	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3
1. How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities impact eighth grade students' academic readiness?	Focus groups	Attendance Record	Observations Interviews
2. How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities impact eighth grade students' engagement?	Open ended interviews	Researcher Field Notes	PLC Observations
3. What effect does voluntary participation in a Professional Learning Community, by eighth grade staff have on staff engagement?	SCTS	Journaling	PLC Artifacts Interviews Observations
4. What effect does voluntary participation in a Professional Learning Community, by eighth grade staff have on student academic readiness?	Interviews	Observations	PLC Artifacts

## **Validity.**

Action research is at the same time, the most valid and least valid research about classroom practice. AR (sic) is the most valid because it is done in the arena where it's results will be used, and it is the least valid when it's results are generalized beyond the classroom where it was done. (McLean, 1995, p. 48)

This study has been designed specifically for Sonia Middle School. The researcher does not intend for findings to be generalized to other locations either within or outside of the Bartlett school district.

Data collections in this action research study were analyzed for validity. The following five tests for validity were used: outcome validity, process validity, democratic validity, catalytic validity, and dialogic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005). These five areas of validity are directly linked to the pedagogy of action research which are: outcome of achievement targets, educating both participant and researcher, generation of new knowledge, results specific to setting, and use of sound and appropriate methods (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Outcome validity is used to determine if the action steps taken lead to resolving the problem. Through analysis, the researcher determined if the deliberately planned academic, athletic, and service activities impacted student readiness to learn and engagement in school. During the cycles of this study, the researcher continuously analyzed the activities through the lens of outcome validity based on data collected.

The test of process validity assessed if learning was taking place among participants and the researcher. This validity test was most often employed when scrutinizing interview and observation data. It was this validation test that led the researcher to extend the study into a Cycle VI. This will be discussed in greater detail during the findings portion of the study.



The researcher continually examined data and personal actions according to the democratic and catalytic tests of validity. According to Herr and Anderson (2005), democratic validity ensures that all participants have a voice in the study. The focus of democratic validity is that the study materials and products are relevant to the participants. To this end, the student questionnaire and focus groups connected the study to relevant student needs. In the same manner, the use of the SCTS connected PLC focus with the expressed needs of staff for opportunities to collaborate and build collegial relationships. The catalytic validity test was demonstrated in the researcher's ability to keep the study moving forward despite several extraneous variables. These variables included the death of a PLC member, a new administration team, and the merger of Sonia Middle School with Eccer Elementary School.

Dialogic validity is a test that reflects the ability of the researcher to express the study verbally to other researchers. To help ensure this measure of validity, the researcher participated in a weekly writing group with three other researchers. The group began meeting weekly from March 2011 and is still currently meeting. Meetings were held in the Rowan Camden conference room on Thursdays from 4 p.m. until 9 p.m., and then in January 2012 meetings were switched to the Campbell Library graduate seminar room on Wednesdays from 4pm until 10pm. These weekly meetings allowed the researcher opportunity to fact check with critical friends and utilize dialogic validity checks during each cycle of action research.

### **Aligning the Questions, Theory, and Data Collection**

The researcher capitalized on the tenets of inclusion and collaborative leadership to examine and incorporate the perceptions of staff and students in an effort to create a

culture change that impacted academic readiness as well as stakeholder engagement. The study began by evaluating the culture of the school and overall readiness for change as measured in the School Culture Triage Survey. The analyzed data from that cycle provided the foundation for a professional learning community designed to revitalize and cultivate the talents and strengths of all members (Beach & Lindahl, 2007) by providing a forum of support, collaboration, and collegiality. While initiated on the framework of DuFour and Eaker's (2004) Big Three for Professional Learning Communities, the project is also influenced by Senge's (2000) discipline of team learning and systems thinking. Team learning complemented the shared vision and development of talents, while systems thinking allowed members of the professional learning community to understand the interdependency and implications of goal setting and allocation of resources on academic readiness and student engagement (Senge, 2000).

Following the framework of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and cognitive gains development, as well as Dewey's (1915/2010) paradigm of connecting education with community life, students were the center of all phases of this research. Capitalizing on data collected through student questionnaire and focus groups, all extra-curricular activities were developed on student requests and expressed interests. Furthermore, the PLC incorporated a focus on student-staff relationship building based on voiced student perceptions of teacher apathy and unprofessionalism. In recognizing the uniqueness of Sonia's community of learners and an ongoing disconnect in national, state, and district level reform efforts to close the achievement gap, the researcher developed a process from within to change academic readiness at Sonia. Table 4 clarifies how activities are aligned with Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development occurring through interactions

in social contexts, Dewey's theory of school as community, and through deliberately planned activities as proposed by Dawkins et al. (2006).

Table 4

*Aligning the Questions, Theory, and Data Collection Strategies*

	SCTS	Student Questionnaire	Focus Group	PLC	Interviews	Observation
RQ1 Academic Readiness	N/A	Vygotsky Dewey Dawkins et al.	Vygotsky Dewey		X	X Dewey
RQ1 Student Engagement	N/A				Dawkins	Vygotsky Dewey Dawkins
RQ2 Academic Readiness		N/A	N/A	DuFour		
RQ2 Student Engagement	DuFour	N/A	N/A	DuFour		
RQ2 Staff Engagement	DuFour	N/A	N/A	DuFour		DuFour

**IRB Approval**

In keeping with Rowan University guidelines for IRB approval, all participant information was and will be safeguarded and remain confidential. The researcher has completed the Ethical Training and compliance certification. The researcher states that the evidence based strategies used in implementation cycles of the study provide no greater risk to the minor subjects than is part of typical classroom activities (Craig, 2009).

All subjects were given written informed consent at the onset of the study and the opportunity to withdraw from the study at anytime. In addition, this study used “processual consent” (Herr & Anderson, 2005) to keep the participants informed during each cycle of the action research process. This type of consent keeps an informative dialogue between the participant and researcher of what to expect as the study progresses. IRB approval was granted in May 2011.

### **Summary**

The chapter discussed the setting, methods, and theories used to frame this participatory action research study, whose overarching questions are: 1) How does the participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students’ academic readiness and engagement? 2) In what ways does voluntary participation of eighth grade faculty in a Professional Learning Community influence eighth grade students’ academic readiness and engagement?

A thorough description of Sonia’s setting in the community, its demographic information as it impacts learning, and its history of reform efforts were provided. Criteria for sample and participant selection were established.

A description of the methods, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis processes developed explored actions, perceptions, and attitudes of staff and student engagement was presented. Several methods of data collection were employed in this study. A timeline for data collection was provided in Figure 1. Triangulation of data was used to enhance accuracy and validation. Methods of validation were reviewed. Data sets were analyzed for validity according to Herr and Anderson’s (2005) five criteria: outcome, process, democratic, catalytic, and dialogic. Furthermore, the researcher

discussed the link between underpinning theories and alignment of the research questions.

A brief account of each action cycle was provided in this chapter. The activities and research base for the activity were noted. The researcher provided justification for the cycles and informed the reader of what was occurring. A graphic representation of the cycles was provided for the reader in Figure 2. The achievement targets for this study were student academic readiness as demonstrated through attendance, decreased behavior referrals, student preparation, and observable engagement in learning. Staff achievement targets included opportunities for regular collaboration in a grade level professional learning community and observable engagement with students.

Lastly, the researcher has demonstrated how the research questions, theory, and data collection strategies are aligned. Chapter IV will discuss the findings of this study.

## Chapter IV

### Findings and Analysis

Chapter IV discusses the analysis process used during this participatory action research study. Multiple data collection methods were used to obtain a rich description of participants' experience during the study. Utilizing multiple sources of data enabled the researcher to fully explore the use of deliberately planned extra-curricular activities and the development of a professional learning community as tools in school reform designed to improve academic readiness and stakeholder engagement. Designing a participatory action research study best suited the researcher's need to discover and interpret perceptions and attitudes, which define academic readiness and stakeholder engagement at Sonia Middle School.

Action research's cyclical nature allowed the researcher to promote and encourage Sonia Middle School toward a place ready to embrace change. Riel (2010) states that the deep inquiry found in action research enables the researcher to move towards an envisioned future; the envisioned future in this study is a school where the eighth grade students and staff are ready for significant change and academic success. The action research cycles were structured in a sequential manner to organize, collect, analyze, reflect, and act on data gathered. There were five distinct cycles that evolved over the course of the study from May 2011 to June 2012. Each cycle will be discussed at length including the methods used to analyze data and insights gained from reflection, development of action based on the data, and progression from one cycle into the next cycle.

## **Cycle I– Preliminary Planning Phase Analysis**

As a veteran teacher at Sonia Middle School, this researcher witnessed a vibrant educational community steeped in traditions and collegial relationships become a building where teachers remained behind closed doors, hallways became empty as staff arrived at 8:25 a.m. and left promptly at 3:30 p.m., and there were no assemblies or celebrations for the students. Sonia was no longer a school anyone wanted to attend. Students were transferring out at a rate three times higher than the state average; in 2010, Sonia had a 30% student transfer rate. Staff turnover was also occurring at a 10.8% rate, double that of the New Jersey reported average of 5% (NJ Report Card, 2010-2011). The revolving door at Sonia had a direct effect not only on learning and instruction, but also on stakeholder involvement. Servant leaders are encouraged to “be the change you wish to see in the world” (Gandhi), and so this researcher designed a study which would increase opportunities for engagement based on stakeholder interest and create a culture ready to learn based on Sonia’s specific strengths and weaknesses (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Kotter, 2007).

Through exploration and reading, the researcher became acquainted with the work of Dr. Christopher Wagner in the area of School Culture and Climate. One of the primary tenets of Wagner’s pedagogy is the belief that school culture is the determining factor in the achievement and well being of the entire school community (Center for Improving School Culture, 2012). Similar statements stressing the impact culture and climate have on academic success have been echoed by multiple researchers (Barth, 2002; Bolman & Deal, 1997 Fullan, 1993, 2001; Kotter, 2007). Continued research indicated that transformative change could not be made until the school community was ready for

change. In depth research on culture led this investigator to the conclusion Sonia may have become its own barrier to academic success. Perhaps the reason none of the school reform efforts Sonia has endured over the past 10 years were successful is due to a community of faculty and students who had given up.

Understanding the need to assess Sonia's climate and staff willingness to engage in academic behaviors and readiness for change, the researcher contacted Dr. Wagner at the Center for Improving School Culture to discuss the School Culture Triage Survey (SCTS). Through email correspondence and phone conversations the benefits of using the SCTS became clear. The SCTS evaluated three components of a school's culture: professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-efficacy. Integrity and validity was tested through application in 240 Kentucky schools and over 6,100 schools in the United States and Canada. Additionally, the 17-item survey represents key behaviors that correlate to staff engagement (Biggerstaff & Wagner, 2008). Utilizing the SCTS as the investigative tool assisted in eliminating researcher bias. As an insider-participant, the researcher did not want personal perceptions of the situation to affect a true analysis of Sonia's culture. This was the baseline assessment, which would be used to evaluate the change in staff engagement as the study progressed.

**Implementing Cycle I.** In May 2011, after receiving both IRB approval and Bartlett School Board consent, the researcher was ready to begin a participatory action research study. The study began with an announcement to Sonia staff at the conclusion of a staff meeting. The researcher explained the purpose of the study was to improve the academic readiness of students and impact student and staff engagement. The researcher stated that all staff, regardless of job title, were welcome to participate in the study by



completing the School Culture Triage Survey. Further explanations included the length of time required for the survey, the anonymity and confidentiality of all responses would be kept, and results of the Triage Survey would drive the portion of the study that examined Sonia's school culture focusing on staff engagement. The researcher directed the staff to use the back of the survey to provide additional information they felt the researcher should know but had failed to ask. Surveys would be available until the end of the week and results would be presented to interested parties within one week. Over the next few days the researcher was inundated with staff coming forward asking to participate; by the end of the week 58 out of 74 eligible staff members responded. This represented a 78% response rate.

Simultaneously, the 103 seventh grade students, class of 2012, were asked to participate in a brief evaluation of their middle school experience thus far. The questionnaire solicited responses both in a checklist manner and open answer response format designed to gauge student views on personal academic readiness and engagement levels. Seventh grade students were purposefully selected because they would become the eighth grade student participants of the study. Questionnaires were administered as part of a year-end grade level assembly. The researcher explained how the questionnaire would be used as part of a doctoral research study being conducted to impact student academic readiness in addition to student and staff engagement at Sonia Middle School. The students were told all responses were anonymous and would be kept confidential. Additionally, students were invited to write in any information they felt the researcher should know but had failed to ask. Students were not required to complete the questionnaire, nor were they paid for their participation; a freeze pop was provided for

each completed questionnaire. A week was the allotted time for questionnaires to be returned. In total, 69 student questionnaires were returned, but only 66 were used as part of this study, indicating a 67% response rate. [Three questionnaires were deemed irrelevant to the study and not analyzed for data due to inappropriate content.]

**Findings from SCTS.** The School Culture Triage Survey was evaluated according to the tool developed and provided by the Center for Improving School Culture. Each of the three domains: professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality, and self-efficacy were analyzed individually, and then collectively, to reflect the current culture of Sonia Middle School. The overall SCTS score can range from 17- 85 and is indicative of the school's current climate for change. The scoring strategies, tally sheets, and predetermined categories developed by Dr. Wagner and the Center for Improving School Culture (2012) were used to analyze the data. Additionally, SCTSs that contained anecdotal comments were evaluated for themes and codes. (Table 3 presents the following discussion of the SCTS findings in a visual format).

The first area of Sonia's school culture the SCTS evaluated was the capacity for professional collaboration. Professional collaboration evaluates the staff's ability to problem solve issues which are curricular, instructional, or organizational in nature (Wagner, 2006). The SCTS indicates staff felt least collaborative in the domain developing student codes of conduct. The SCTS asked for responses to five indicators of professional collaboration. Responses could range from 1, indicating collaboration never happens, to a 5, signifying that collaboration always occurs. All 58 staff responded to the first four indicators; indicator five which asked for evaluation of planning and organizational time had 54 responses and 4 non-responses. Sonia's collective staff score

was 1.93 reflecting that the staff believes less than “rarely” are they afforded the opportunity to have input into developing student behavior codes. Staff response indicated that the other domains of professional collaboration fell consistently between occurring Rarely and Sometimes. Comments symbolic of staff sentiment on the area of professional collaboration were left on the SCTS and included:

“This year there was little room for professional collaboration because the leadership was distant and lacked direction, as a boat with no rudder or a sailboat lacking sails. Better described as a sailboat with staff on the boat that knew how to hoist the sails but were not permitted to” (SCTS 1).

“None of our plans are put in place” (SCTS 2).

“Everything we usually do has stopped but no new programs replace the void” (SCTS3).

“At Sonia it is always the desire of the staff to plan, organize, implement, evaluate, and revamp as necessary. Yet staff is treated as though they had (sic) no value or contributions” (SCTS 4).

The second area of school culture the SCTS evaluated was staff affiliative collegiality. This category examined staff attitudes involving support, capacity building, and relationships. Staff responded to six measures of collegiality; four of the questions had 100% response, one measure had a 96% response rate, and the final measure had response rate of 93% (Appendix G). The total score for affiliative collegiality was 15.74 out of a possible 30, indicating a poor collegial environment at Sonia. One staff member expressed these views on their SCTS “Staff have collapsed and retreat (sic) to their areas of safety, causing additional voids and alienation” (SCTS 1).

The final area of school culture the SCTS evaluated was self-efficacy or determination, defined by Wagner as the way staff view themselves as professionals. Do staff members take responsibility to improve their professional skills or do they feel they are victims of a large uncaring bureaucracy (Wagner, 2004, p. 14)? The SCTS asked for responses to six behaviors suggestive of self-efficacy. Only one question had 100% response and this indicator asked about individual, not community, based behavior. The other indicators had a response rate of 93-98%. The overall score for self-efficacy or determination was 15.0 out of 30. This section of the SCTS elicited the following comments from staff:

“Our administrators were not supportive and served to seek and destroy rather than collaborate and create” (SCTS 4).

“Staff is openly blamed for every problem that happened both inside and outside the building” (SCTS 5).

Overall, with a total score of 42.77 on the School Culture Triage Survey, Sonia’s culture and climate for change falls two points outside the critical area for schools as judged by The Center for Improving School Culture (Wagner, 2006). The SCTS score correlation 41-59 decrees that schools falling within these limits need to make modifications and improvements immediately. The Center for Improving School Culture advocates beginning improvement with the weakest areas of the assessment. Sonia’s staff perceives the weakest area to be professional collaboration as indicated by responses and additional comments on the SCTS.

Table 5

*Staff Responses to SCTS May 2011*

Parameter	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
<b>Professional Collaboration</b>					
Discuss instructional strategies and curriculum	9	9	16	24	0
Develop school schedule	18	16	15	9	0
Decision-making about materials & resources	19	15	18	6	0
Collaboration on student behavior code	27	9	21	1	0
Common Planning time	12	9	24	6	1
<b>Affiliative Collegiality</b>					
Staff tell stories of school celebrations and values	9	6	21	20	3
Staff socialize outside of school	12	8	27	9	0
There is a “sense” of community	23	7	19	6	3
Schedule reflects frequent communication	12	18	25	3	0
School supports sharing of new ideas y staff	12	9	21	9	3
Rich tradition of rituals and celebrations	15	18	12	9	4
<b>Self-determination/Efficacy</b>					
Operates as predict and prevent vs. react and repair	21	15	19	3	0
Staff is independent and value each other	12	9	12	21	3
Seek alternatives rather than repeating what we have done	15	15	18	3	3
Staff define problem rather than place blame	15	18	15	6	0
Staff is empowered to make instructional decisions	3	24	12	12	3
People enjoy working here	9	6	21	15	6

**Analyzing data from student questionnaire.** Sixty-nine students responded to the questionnaire representing a 67% participation rate of the class of 2013. Of the included respondents 39 were female and 27 were male. All participants in the beginning of the study were current seventh grade students at Sonia Middle School. The questionnaire was designed to evaluate student perceptions of academic readiness, and of student and staff engagement at Sonia. Additionally, the questionnaire provided an opportunity for voicing barriers that students perceived to learning and engagement. The feedback was analyzed by hand and organized according to reoccurring themes.

Initial data regarding academic engagement examined student self-perception, time on task, and rigor of work. Table 6 provides a graphic representation of the student questionnaire responses to time on homework, challenge of work, and self-perception of academic achievement. The majority of students polled reported being an A-B-C student (62% of males and 48% of females). While this is the student self-perception, Sonia records for the 2010-2011 school year report only 29% of the seventh grade made the A-B-C honor roll. Data collected disclosed that the majority of male and female students spent 15 minutes or less on homework during seventh grade. An additional response found that 62% of males and 60% of females found classroom lessons to be easy.

An examination of responses regarding participation in extra-curricular activities revealed that 37% of the male population and 44% of females reported participating in extra-curricular activities at Sonia. The majority of positive respondents participated on sports teams followed by clubs and tutoring. Interestingly, when students were asked what motivated them to participate, 53% expressed self-interest in the activity, while 19% stated being asked by the adult in charge. This finding reflected the conclusions of

Dawkins et al. (2006) on the relationship of secondary student engagement and participation in school activities. When asked about the type of activities Sonia provides, 52% of respondents felt there was not a diversity of events, clubs, or happenings. One student responded, "It's not stuff we want to do."

The last criterion asked students to evaluate potential barriers to learning or participating in Sonia activities. The responses fell into four classifications: challenge of work, self-perception as academic, time on homework, and attitudes toward learning. A reoccurring theme, which was unexpected, was the students felt staff did not "see them," as one respondent wrote, or treat them with respect. Supporting comments from the students included: "Wish they would stop talking to one another and teach," "My teacher is always walking out of the room," "Needs to focus on students who need help not just ignore us," and "I am here but no one sees me."

Table 6

*Student Questionnaire Responses*

	Male	Female
<b>Challenge of work</b>		
Difficult – not able to do	10	8
Harder than Anticipated	0	7
Anticipated Level	13	14
Easier than Anticipated	4	9
<b>Minutes on Homework</b>		
0	9	9
15	12	18
30	6	7
45	0	4
60+	0	1
<b>Self-Perception of Academic Grades</b>		
A student	0	1
A-B student	Less than 1	5
B student	0	0
A-B-C student	17	19
B-C student	0	5
C and below	6	9
No response	4	0
<b>Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities</b>	10	17

**Reflection on Cycle I.** The School Culture Triage Survey evaluated Sonia's climate for change by examining three key components: professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality, and self-efficacy. While Sonia scored on the low end of all three categories, the substantially weakest area was professional collaboration (as evidenced in Table 5). Wagner and other researchers note professional collaboration as essential to a healthy school culture ready for change (Barth, 2002; DuFour & Burnette, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010; Ravitch, 2011; Senge, 2000). After careful analysis, the researcher planned Cycle II of this study as the development of an eighth grade teachers'



professional learning community in order to provide an opportunity for collaboration and impact staff engagement within the school and students of the eighth grade.

The results of the student questionnaire showed a correlation between students' social interactions, a desire to work on tasks relevant to their life, as well as a desire to participate in extra-curricular activities. Supporting the studies on engaging at-risk youth through athletics, Sonia students reported over one-half of the student population viewed themselves as active participants at Sonia (Brown & Evans, 2002; Dawkins et al., 2006; Dawkins et al., 2008; Heifets & Blank, 1998). Moreover, students also reported reconsidering an opportunity when asked to participate by the adult in charge (Brown & Evans, 2002; Dawkins et al., 2006; Dawkins et al., 2008; Osterman, 2000). This is not a new finding and is supported throughout literature and research that student actions will reflect the society around them. Therefore if a student's friends participate in extra-curricular activities, they will be inclined to join (Dewey, 1915/2010; Vygotsky 1978). This finding spoke to Sonia's student perception of school culture in the same manner that the professional collaboration and affiliative collegiality addressed staff perceptions of culture. This finding had significant implications for developing Cycle II of the action research study.

Furthermore, an unforeseen theme developed in student responses in regards to staff professionalism. When given the opportunity to provide additional information to the researcher, students left multiple comments (31 as indicated in Focus Group data Table 7), addressing the manner in which staff addressed students, lack of teacher attendance in class, and a feeling that staff did not take the time to know or "see" the individual student. These comments confirm previous research showing that student

perceptions of fair and respectful treatment by their teachers, as well as teacher attitudes towards student intelligence, affects not only behavior, but also a willingness to learn (Osterman, 2000; Wilson, 2004). Osterman (2000) postulates students who identify with a particular teacher and classes of students are more likely to display autonomy in behavior and studying. Conversely, teachers who students perceive as showing favoritism or indifference are encouraging negative behaviors and creating a school culture destined to fail (Baker, 1999). Although this study was not designed to evaluate student perceptions of teacher professionalism, the repeating theme must be addressed.

Upon reflection, the researcher noted the following limitations of Cycle I. Although the questionnaire provided basic data on participation in extra-curricular activities and information relevant to time on task and barriers to learning, it failed to define what academic readiness looked like through the lens of a student. Therefore, it was determined that during Cycle II of this study, students would participate in a series of focus groups to glean knowledge on student perceptions of academic readiness and elicit ideas to plan extra-curricular activities.

Furthermore, the topic of student perceptions of the Sonia staff will need to be sensitively addressed during PLC meetings. The anecdotal comments left by students confirms the description of a toxic school culture (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Melton-Shutt, 2004; Peterson & Deal, 1998).

## **Cycle II - The Foundation**

The findings of Cycle I clearly identified professional collaboration at Sonia Middle School as the weakest link in school culture as viewed by the staff (Table 5). Themes of isolation, lack of support, disrespect of Sonia traditions, and under utilization

of staff in school-wide planning were relayed through written comments on the School Culture Triage Survey. The results of the SCTS were reported to Sonia staff at an afterschool meeting the last week of May 2011. It was at this meeting the dissertation's focus on eighth grade students was discussed, and an invitation was given for all staff members who work with the class of 2012 to join a Professional Learning Community that would focus on student academic readiness and engagement, as well as staff collaboration.

Concurrently, the class of 2012 was being recruited to join student focus groups to share their views on what students believed was necessary for them to be ready, academically, for their final year at Sonia. Prior to answering Research Question 1, impacting academic readiness and engagement, the researcher must discover how all the participants define academic readiness. The mission of the focus groups was to discuss academic readiness through the lens of the student, as well as illicit suggestions of academic centered activities that they would like to engage in during their eighth grade year.

**Staff Professional Learning Community.** Forming a Professional Learning community was paramount to the researcher in order to address findings of inadequate collaboration and collegiality within Sonia. Results from the SCTS showed that Sonia staff felt there was little opportunity to collaborate and lend their talents to creating a culture of learning. Researchers DuFour and Eaker (1998), Fullan (2001), Hord (2009), and McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) agree that professional learning communities provide staff an opportunity to collaborate and capacity build within the school. Preliminary discussions with staff about forming a PLC were met with derision. Sonia's culture, as

has earlier been outlined, had been one of starting something and then not allowing it to move forward. Staff members were reluctant to make the commitment of time and energy, only to once again be marginalized. Building on personal relationships already established, the researcher enticed PLC membership by promoting a new style of collaboration, which focused on student readiness to learn and strategies teachers can use to impact readiness, took the blame off teacher inadequacies, and sought to develop a community where all stakeholders learn: students, staff, and families (DuFour et al., 2010).

The eighth grade staff consisted of 21 people. This number represented all staff specifically appointed to the eighth grade including security, custodians, and clerks. Out of this pool, 9 staff members volunteered to be part of the professional learning community (40%). The participants represented a cross-section of the staff (Table 2). Making up the PLC were three males and six females, five of the nine were teachers, one nurse, one security officer, one custodian, and a guidance counselor. Two members of the group were novice teachers with less than five years teaching experience: Mr. Springstein and Ms. Crystal. The security officer, Officer Sky, had 10 years experience - three of these years were at Sonia; Ms. Avatar, the guidance counselor, had been in the district previously, but left for seven years and returned to Sonia two years ago. The remaining members of the group consisted of Mr. Clean, Mrs. Nightingale, Mrs. Evangeline, Mrs. Eljay, and the researcher all had worked at Sonia for more than 10 years. Meetings occurred in Room 112 from 7:30 a.m. – 8:25 a.m. Participation was on a volunteer basis and members could withdraw from the group at anytime.

Group members decided that the PLC would examine “existing conversations in new ways” (Senge, 2000, p. 239) and focus on allowing contributions by all members in a team learning style. The following parameters guided the group: inclusion of and respect for all members and their contribution to the school, movement towards the common goal of promoting academic readiness in the eighth grade, and implementing strategies for engagement. The committee members agreed to align all activities and strategies with school vision and mission (Senge, 2000). Furthermore, the roles of moderator, note taker, and timekeeper would rotate alphabetically for each meeting, enabling all members to participate fully; meetings would be chat and chew in order to capitalize on time and the researcher would send reminder emails or texts the day before the meeting indicating the agenda. Moreover, the PLC reserved the right to digress from the agenda if a relevant topic to eighth grade academic readiness and engagement presented itself at the last minute.

**PLC analysis of Sonia.** The first task of the PLC was completing a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis of Sonia Middle School (Figure 3). The purpose was to obtain an overall picture of the school and its current situation. It is only with knowledge and by “assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the schools’ current culture will you realize what aspects will support a PLC and which need to be eliminated” (Putnam et al., 2009, p. 26). The researcher sought to involve the PLC members in this evaluation to get a richer and unbiased description of what currently did or did not work; “collective judgment is bound to be more accurate than that of one or two bright individuals” (Harvard Business School, 2005, p. 9). Additionally, the PLC

contributed to the triangulation of the study. The group met four times before school during the month of June 2011. The following is the group's analysis of Sonia.

The PLC concluded that Sonia's strength lies in our teaching staff and traditions. Sonia is the neighborhood school, which has educated generations of the same family. The family arrives to school looking for their child to participate in the pageants, sports teams, and field trips that they had participated in. Sonia traditions include the Ms. Sonia Pageant, an annual event for the past 37 years. The track teams at Sonia are very competitive. In the past six years, the middle school boys' track team has competed and placed in the top 10 at the Penn Relays each time. The girls have qualified for the Penn Relays five times in the past six years.

The PLC identified three main weaknesses at Sonia: the turnover of administrators, facility issues, and school reputation. Administrators have turned over annually for six years. The mission, goals, and core objectives shift annually at Sonia with each incoming administration. There is a lack of communication and capacity building within the school. Administrators do not ask for input from staff before making changes. There is a lack of communication with the staff regarding the change. This year no communication was attempted, instead a binder of directions were handed out. Stagnation has occurred in program development. Long term planning does not occur because staff has experienced repeatedly the switch in organizational priorities and the effect of personal agendas.

Additionally, staff felt Sonia's perceived reputation throughout the district amongst staff, community members, and incoming students is a weakness. "We are the threat other schools in the district use to make students behave. Straighten up or you're

going to Sonia” (Ms. Evangeline). Sonia is classified as a persistently dangerous school. Fights break out daily both in school and on the way home. Twelve percent of the class of 2012 was not suspended during the 2010-2011 school year. Student and parent apathy are apparent in lack of student attendance, inattention to homework, poor communications, disinterest in supporting behavioral interventions, and failure of parents to come in for student conferences.

Furthermore, students at Sonia have failed to achieve on a state and/or district level in the past 10 years. Subsequently each administrative team has changed instructional practices. The amount of Responsive Interventions the staff is mandated to incorporate in daily lessons has increased significantly leaving teachers, as Mrs. Avatar stated “frustrated and bogged down in paperwork.” The most “useless” (Mr. Springstein) and “time consuming” (Ms. Crystal) intervention is the mandated NJASK Simulation, which for the past two years, students and staff must participate in every six weeks. Meanwhile students are growing frustrated with the number of mandated assessments. According to members of the PLC, little authentic learning is taking place.

Sonia’s facility is a weakness. The building is old and dirty. Repairs are done haphazardly. Ceilings have missing tiles, leaky spots, and mildew stains. Mold is visible in frosted glass hallways; dirt is encrusted on floors and walls. The school is very hot in the fall and spring yet bitterly cold in the winter.

It is not a building that encourages academics. My student’s desks break all the time yet never gets replaced. I have to fix them myself. The other week one of the desktops just fell off as a student went to sit down – we are really lucky he didn’t get hurt. (Mr. Springstein)

This summer (2012) the district painted the lockers. I have never seen anything like it. They sprayed the outside of all the lockers, but never opened the doors. Not only are the interiors dirty but there is graffiti all over the place. Funniest is

that since the locks are drilled out each locker has a blue spot inside – amazing.  
(Ms. Eljay)

An opportunity may exist in the merging of Eccer Elementary School with Sonia Middle School to create a family school. [This information was an unconfirmed rumor when the study began.] There is a loophole in the NCLB regulations if two schools merge a clean slate is awarded to the newly created school as far as making AYP because technically the school has never existed. Therefore, Sonia has the opportunity to make safe harbor because the number of students required to pass the test, by both state and federal mandates, would be lower due to the merger. Additionally, the merger might infuse Sonia with new creative staff and programmatic ideas.

Charter schools are the main threat to Sonia because many of our successful students are leaving to go to charter schools. In the same manner, the New Jersey voucher program and school choice being considered by Governor Christie, would allow students to select schools out of district. This will impact our enrollment and productivity because the PLC anticipates families who are seeking student success will choose schools outside the district, leaving in their wake students with academic and behavior challenges.

A final threat is the fact that our school district has three Board members appointed to it by the Governor. This fact has created a concern that the Bartlett community interests may not always be represented by our local school board, but will reflect the agenda of Trenton and the current governor.



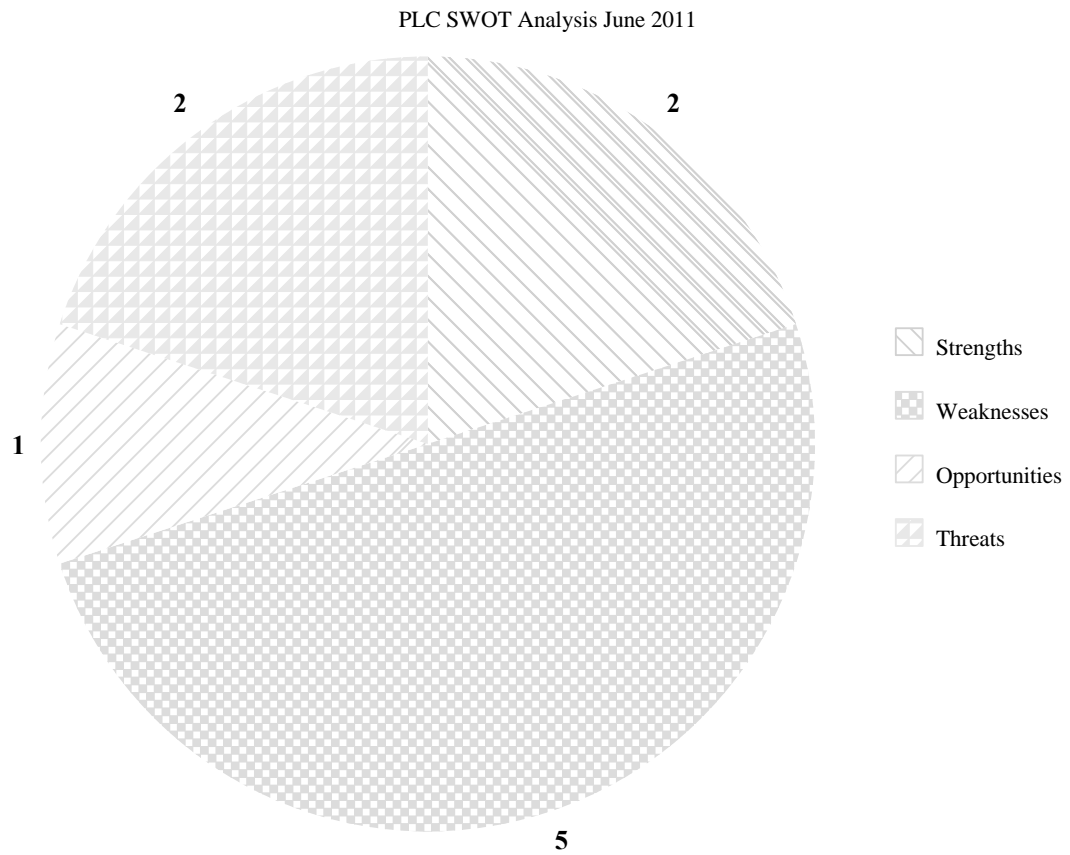


Figure 3. SWOT Analysis June 2011

**PLC defines eighth grade academic readiness.** The Professional Learning Community defined academic readiness for eighth grade students in three domains: physically, socially, and cognitively. The group’s brainstorming and ultimate definition confirms the literature and research reviewed for this study, which states one cannot treat “study not as an isolated subject but as a reference to social environment” (Dewey, 1915/2010, p. 109).

The physical domain of readiness included areas over which the staff had no direct authority, but could certainly encourage students and family to address. This included making sure the student had enough sleep prior to coming to school, eating breakfast either at home or school, as well as identifying and addressing medical issues. Additionally, the physical concept of being ready to learn included having the tools required to work in class. In order to promote student preparation for eighth grade, the PLC members created a supply list to be sent home prior to the start of school. This list was reflective of schools in our district and included: 6 one-subject notebooks, 1 marble journal, one dozen #2 pencils, 2 red pens or pencils, 2 highlighters, a ruler, large pink eraser, book bag, combination lock, homework agenda, 3 x 5 index cards, and a container in which to store index cards. Additionally, recommended for home use supplies consisted of a calculator, a pocket dictionary/thesaurus, glue sticks, colored pencils or markers, and both lined and art paper. These home items would assist students with daily homework and projects as assigned.

Social and physical aspects of academic readiness complement one another. "Self-esteem is lowest as children enter middle school...and with the onset of puberty" (Slavin, 2009, p. 82) this affects their relationships with their peers, family, teachers, and authority figures. Through brainstorming and reflective discussion the Sonia PLC identified six social characteristics necessary for student learning to take place. First students' attitudes must reflect not only a desire to learn, but also acceptance that Sonia staff has the knowledge and desire to teach. These attitudes must be fostered in school, at home and in the community (Vygotsky, 1978). Second, students should be able to express their feelings and be able to resolve or participate in resolving conflicts through

non-violent means. In addition, the student should be able to identify healthy relationships and begin moving away from harmful ones. The level of stress eighth grade students experience should be kept to a minimum. The PLC members discussed the stress factors that urban students face and the conflicts of real life and ways to minimize these effects within the school. One group member, Ms. Crystal, summed up the concerns over the stressors our students face, “If the kids could come to school with less emotional scarring we could really teach.” Lastly, the group felt each student needed to develop the self-confidence to act and think as an individual.

**Student Focus Groups.** Student focus groups occurred during June 2011. The researcher visited all seventh grade homerooms to explain the focus group and give students an opportunity to sign up. Seven focus groups were scheduled over the next two weeks. Groups were organized by homerooms so students were comfortable speaking with their peers. The focus groups occurred at lunchtime and lasted 40 minutes. Students were not paid, but pizza and juice were provided since the meeting occurred at lunchtime.

Protocols (see Appendix F) were followed for each focus group (FG). Pizza and juice were available as students entered and they were directed that it was acceptable to eat as they participated. The icebreaker activity was an open response question: “Would you rather be a pencil or a piece of paper?” This nonsensical question was designed to spark conversation and relax the students. A total of 62 students, 23 males and 39 females, participated in the seven focus groups. Diversity among student participants was noted: 8 self-contained special education students, 6 inclusion students, and 48 general education students.

The data collected in the focus groups defined academic readiness as falling into four distinct categories: environment, tools, behaviors, and attitudes. Over half of the groups, 4 out of 7, responded the environment was an important factor in academic readiness. These groups included furniture, books, charts, word-walls, computers, reference areas, and water fountains as key components. All four of these groups discussed being ready to learn if the classroom reflected a place of learning. Focus group (FG) 7-6 reported “It look (sic) like a place to gain learning” and focus group 7-1 believed it should look like a “Jungle of Knowledge.” Moreover these four groups said the classroom was a reflection of the teacher’s readiness (FG 7-3) and “willing to share their knowledge” (FG7-6).

While all seven focus groups discussed the need for students to have “the necessary tools for learning” (FG7-2), when questioned further there was little consistency as to how that was defined. FG7-1 defined necessary tools as “books, pens, and pencils”; FG7-6 believed “completed homework and appropriate clothing” were the tools needed; FG7-2 “workbooks and writing journals” and “books” were the “learning tools” as viewed by FG7-7. Additionally, the groups were divided almost equally over the issue of who should supply the tools for learning. Three groups (7-1, 7-3, and 7-8) felt parents should provide the supplies, while two groups (7-6 and 7-7) thought the school or teachers should have it for them. Focus group 7-2 acknowledged that parents should provide the supplies “like pencils, notebooks, and backpacks but teachers should have them in case they don’t get them.”

Student responses indicated behaviors that the students stated showed a consistent definition of academic readiness across the groups. Student punctuality to class and

cooperation with the teacher were voiced in all groups. Three of the seven groups included staying on task and two groups discussed “obedience” (FG7-7 and FG 7-2). When obedience was explored, FG7-7 responded with “following classroom rules” and FG7-2 agreed to define obedience as “doing what you’re told by authority – not just in classroom.”

The discussion of attitudes provided a glimpse into student expectations. All seven groups discussed both student and teacher attitudes. There was agreement that students must be open to learning as evidenced by this collection of statements describing the desired student attitudes:

- “Students come in with a light bulb over their heads” (FG7-2)
- “They are impatient to learn something new” (FG7-3)
- “Prepared for reading, math, etc.” (FG 7-7)
- “Positive attitude to learn” (FG7-6)
- “Like a dry sponge ready to absorb the knowledge educators share.” (FG7-1)
- “Enjoyable, engaging attitude – anxious to gain knowledge” (FG 7-8).

The students also discussed attitudes displayed by teachers, which improved student readiness to learn.

- “Educators are willing to share knowledge” (FG7-1)
- “Patient with slow learners” (FG7-3)
- “Provide challenging lessons” (FG7-2)
- “Challenge students” (FG7-7)
- “Help us” (FG 7-6)

A graphic representative of the data collected during focus groups can be viewed in Table 7.

Table 7.

*Themes in Focus Group Responses*

Response	Number of Focus Groups Responding	Number of Students Represented
<i>Environment</i>	////	17
<i>Tools</i>	////////	62
Parent supplied	////	37
School supplied	///	25
<i>Attitudes</i>	////////	62
Students open to learn	//////	57
Teachers willing to help	////	31
<i>Behaviors</i>		
Punctuality	////////	62
Cooperation	////////	62
Obedience	//	13
Time on Task	///	28

**Observations.** During this cycle the researcher conducted three 30-minute observations. The observations were held in areas where staff interaction could be expected to occur: teachers' lounge, first floor hallway, and a staff meeting. The

researcher was looking for signs of collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy as defined by the SCTS (Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). The weakest area of Sonia's school culture, as revealed by the School Culture Triage Survey, was collaboration and the researcher was looking for confirmation or alternate explanations of this through observations.

The initial observation occurred in the teachers' lounge/lunchroom during second period lunch the last Wednesday in May 2011. All seventh and eighth grade teachers as well as paraprofessionals had lunch scheduled for this time, which was a total of 18 staff members. The teachers' lounge contained two round tables with four chairs each, two over-stuffed armchairs, a microwave, refrigerator, and vending machine. The walls contained two announcements from the Camden Educators Association dated January 2010. There were no decorations or cloths on the tables. During the 30 minutes the researcher spent in the teachers' room, two paraprofessionals, one custodian, and a special education teacher came in. The researcher sat in one of the armchairs drinking coffee and greeted the staff as they entered. The standard greeting was "Hi. How is your day going?" The two paraprofessionals entered first and together. Ms. Holly responded "hey" as she sat down sat with Ms. Bailey who declined to respond. The two women ate lunch and discussed life events outside of school with one another. They apparently had a friendship, which went beyond the school walls. They did not speak with anyone else who entered the lunchroom. The custodian, Mr. Clean, came through next and admonished everyone to "clean up your mess when you're done here." He was just passing through. The last person to enter the room was Mr. Melody, a special education teacher. Mr. Melody nodded his head in acknowledgement of the greeting and then sat down and promptly went to sleep without speaking to anyone. From this observation the

researcher learned that the teachers' room was not a place of collegiality or collaboration. Very few staff members used the lunchroom. Little was learned from this observation on collaboration, but the small observation showed a lack of collegiality, staff were associating only within their own sphere of context. This is one sign of toxic school culture (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2001).

The second observation occurred in the first floor hallway between 2:55 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. on Wednesday afternoon. The researcher decided to move into the first floor hallway and observe as students were dismissed. Would there be more collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy when the students were not in the building? The first floor hallway was selected because the teachers walked students to the front door. As the students exited the building the majority of teachers passed a few words with their colleagues. Most of the comments exchanged were informal and not instructional. "Thank God that's over" (Ms. Richie) and "Amen" (Mr. Huge) "Can we leave yet?" Discussion by Mr. Keller and Ms. Sullivan transpired discussing the "antics" (Ms. Sullivan) of Rowley, a fifth grade student. He seemed "off" today, but neither teacher shared a strategy to assist just vented about the child's behavior. Three security officers were observed sharing a moment of humor and support. Officer Sky, Officer Aramis, and Officer Porthos had broken up a fight out front of school during dismissal. Porthos and Aramis had stopped the fight and escorted the students to the main office. Officer Sky had met them on the steps and offered to help, Aramis told him "Yeah now you're here when it's over," so Officer Sky was joking about it was not his turn today. This incident was the only one of collaboration the researcher observed or heard. Lastly, Ms. Crystal came over to the researcher declaring, "BB I'm done, I'm just done. Why



does he bother approving stuff if he knows he is gonna cancel it anyway? I am tired of spending my money for the kids and the time it takes to plan...I'm done!" Ms. Crystal had planned an activity for her seventh grade math class and it was not able to transpire because at the last minute she had to cover another section due to a district professional development day. Ms. Crystal did not have enough materials for both sections, no advance notice of the coverage, and a room of disappointed students who were anticipating her special activity. When Ms. Crystal tried to explain her situation to the administration and why she should not have a double section, her concerns were not addressed and the administrator just walked away. It is not the first time Ms. Crystal has proclaimed, "I'm done!" Within 10 minutes of dismissal the first floor hallway was cleared of staff and students. Within 20 minutes teachers began heading to the office to sign-out and leaving the building. There were little signs of collegiality, the most expressed by the security team.

The final observation in this cycle took place during a staff meeting. The meeting was called for 3:05 p.m. in the school cafeteria; it began at 3:17 p.m. Principal Brehon thanked everyone who had helped out with hallway duty and getting the hallway back in order. He discussed the rash of stink bombs, urine balloons, and vandalism of the past week. Additionally, he announced that all eighth grade promotion activities along with fun day would be cancelled. There would not be a promotional exercise but rather the students could "get their report cards and get out!" (Principal Brehon). The principal went on to ask staff for support during the last two weeks of school, he expressed his expectations for continued class lessons and admonished the staff members who had stopped working stating "lack of engaging lessons in the class is contributing to the

hallway problems we are seeing.” The observer noted during this meeting many staff members were either absent or late. There were 58 certified staff and the meeting began with 29 present. Nine walked in late, while two left while the principal was speaking. Seven staff members were on their cell phones, one talking – six texting; three small groups were speaking as the principal spoke, and one staff member kept “shushing” everyone. The overall feeling was one of little respect for the principal. While the principal was asking for support and acknowledging those who helped there was an undertone of grumbling about his leadership or lack of.

These three observations confirmed the results of the School Culture Triage Survey. There was little evidence of staff collaboration, collegiality, or efficacy at the beginning of this study. Most teachers at Sonia are anxious to leave at the end of the day, stay within their classrooms even at lunchtime, and there is no evidence of new ideas. The information gathered through these observations supported the description of toxic school cultures as defined by multiple researchers (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Lindahl, 2007; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002).

**Reflections on Cycle II.** The first activity the Professional Learning Community participated in was to analyze from a staff view point the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to Sonia Middle School. The analysis brought to the forefront Sonia Middle School’s positive and negative issues surrounding culture and climate. Additionally, the PLC established a vision of academic readiness for eighth grade students, which incorporated both physical and social indicators.

After completing the SWOT analysis together, the PLC disbanded for one week in order to reflect on what we had discovered regarding the strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities, and threats in our school. When reconvened, the driving question was based on what the group had learned: what could be done as a staff or eighth grade professional learning community to improve student academic readiness and Sonia community engagement? PLC members decided improving attendance and behaviors would lead to more time for authentic instruction and learning. The PLC decided to gather attendance and behavior data on class of 2012 and analyze for academic correlations.

The student focus groups provided rich data describing academic readiness through the lens of the student. The data collected was chunked into four areas of student expectations: environment, tools, attitudes, and behaviors. While a formal definition of academic readiness was not achieved the data clearly show students associate physical items as requirements of being academically ready. Additionally, there is an expectation that the lessons presented will be challenging and relevant work designed to engage the students “not the same stuff we always learn” (FG7-2).

### **Cycle III– The Beginnings**

Cycle III occurred during the summer of 2011. The researcher desired to have academic readiness strategies and engagement activities in place to begin on the first day of school in September 2011. The intention was for eighth grade students to return to school and observe their data in action. The researcher felt it important for the students to see the information they had shared at the end of the school year was listened to and valued. The Professional Learning Community met four times during the summer to review the attendance, behavior referrals, and academic levels of the class of 2012. Based on the data PLC members began to work on instructional strategies to improve student

academic readiness.

**PLC activities.** The group analyzed school attendance data from 2010 - 2011 for seventh grade students. Attendance data were examined for percentage of students arriving late, average minutes late, reason for lateness, and recurring lateness patterns. The group also examined school policies and deterrents with regards to lateness. Moreover, although school began at 8:30 a.m., teachers were instructed not to mark students late if they arrived prior to 8:45 a.m. Therefore, the data collected were a representation of students who arrived more than 15 minutes late. Figure 4 illustrates student lateness by gender and analyzes the average minutes late, what % of the class was late, as well as the % of latecomers who were repeat offenders. In addition the PLC wanted to understand why students arrived late to school. The pie chart (Figure 5) indicates the reason for lateness and reports the frequency the excuse was utilized. These data were then employed in developing strategies to alleviate lateness as a means of engaging students.

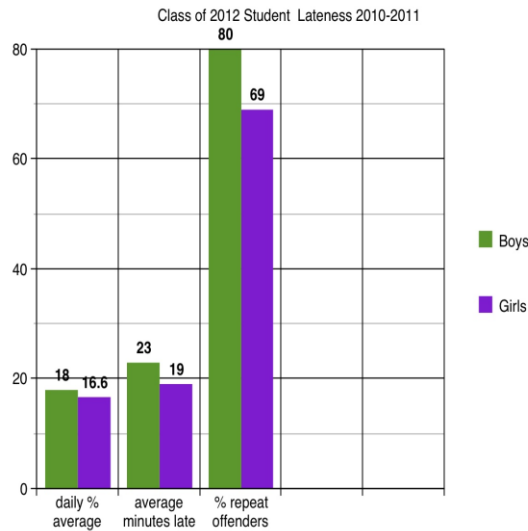


Figure 4. 2010 -2011 Student Lateness

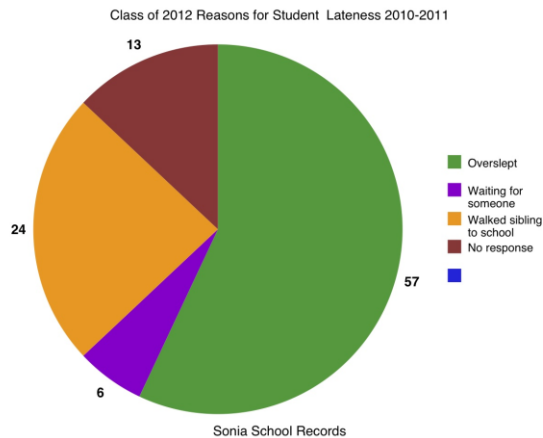


Figure 5. 2010-2011 Reasons for Lateness

The PLC group decided to focus on developing strategies to improve the students who overslept and who gave no reason for their lateness. These categories were selected since they represented the largest demographics of students and an area the PLC members felt impact could be made.

**Interviews.** A new administration team was appointed to Sonia Middle School in August of 2011. The team consisted of Principal Newman, Vice-Principal Chip, and Vice-Principal Phelps. [Vice-Principal Phelps was scheduled to retire December 1, 2011.] The researcher extended an invitation to discuss the study with the new administrators. Principal Newman and Vice-Principal Chip declined, citing a lack of time to meet. Vice-Principal Phelps met with the researcher the week before school began. This interview consisted of discussing the proposed study, what steps had already been taken, and recognition of the board approved activities. While Vice-Principal Phelps expressed

an interest in the student engagement piece of the study and offered his support, he stated, “I don’t have much pull since I am leaving in December.”

A second endeavor to meet with Principal Newman and Vice-Principal Chip occurred during the first week of school. The researcher asked for a meeting and was put off twice. On the third attempt Principal Newman asked for the researcher to send a summary of the study to him for perusal. The researcher submitted the study timeline, which can be found in Chapter III, along with a brief study summary, to the principal. The researcher followed up through email and repeated a desire to discuss the study with the new administration. There was no response. A formal interview never occurred during this study with either Principal Newman or Vice-Principal Chip.

**Reflection on Cycle III.** During Cycle III data collected in Cycles I and II through student questionnaires and focus groups were utilized to design extra-curricular activities that would promote academic readiness and student engagement. The researcher felt it important for the students to see the information they had shared at the end of the school year was listened to and valued. Therefore, the activities needed to be running the first week of school. Strategies and activities planned in Cycle III were to be implemented in Cycle IV. These deliberately planned activities were designed to impact academic readiness and engagement. The extra-curricular activities were intended to encompass three interest areas expressed by students: athletics, community service, and academics aimed at strengthening basic literacy skills. These strategies were designed to answer the researcher’s question: How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students’ academic readiness and engagement?

Members of the PLC committed to being in the professional learning community for the school year 2011- 2012. The PLC members would meet weekly to analyze student attendance, lateness, and discuss observed behaviors indicative of academic readiness such as: preparation, materials brought to class, attitude towards learning, and student-staff relationships.

Moving forward with the study, the researcher questioned the amount of administrative support she would have. The majority of the new administrative team had declined to meet and discuss the study. While Principal Newman reluctantly admitted the board had approved the study and it could continue, he did not seem to be welcoming of it. Vice-Principal Phelps, who had met with the researcher, appeared supportive, but openly admitted that he was leaving in December, therefore his influence was limited. And the third reservation concerning administrative support, which was bothering the researcher, was the fact that the second vice-principal, Vice-Principal Chip, had previously been engaged in the study until receiving a promotion that made her vice-principal and eliminated her eligibility to collaborate in the research.

#### **Cycle IV – Initial Activities**

**Activities to promote academic readiness.** The researcher began Cycle IV with deliberately planned activities that addressed the concern voiced by students and staff that children came unprepared, lacking the physical tools to learn. This was addressed in two ways. First, during Cycle III the PLC members had created a supply list for students and it was mailed home the first week in August to inform students and parents what materials would be needed. This list was reflective of schools in the Bartlett district.

Second, the researcher created a welcome back goody bag for all eighth grade students. Upon arrival to homeroom on their first day of school, each student received a spiral notebook, a bag containing two pencils, an eraser, a hand-held sharpener, a ruler, a red pencil, a highlighter, and a snack. Students were happy to receive the tools and were equipped to begin work immediately.

**Participant selection.** An open invitation to participate in all activities was given to the students in the class of 2012. Students were made aware of ongoing activities through homeroom announcements, sign-up sheets in the lunchrooms, flyers around the school, and class meetings. No student was refused the opportunity to be involved. In addition, during this cycle the PLC created a list of students who were actively recruited to participate. Ten students were initially identified based on attendance records and academic skills; six were males and four were females. Personal outreach was extended to these 10 students when opportunities to participate arose.

**Academic activities.** Academic activities were planned to improve readiness by bolstering student self-confidence in academics as well as engagement in the learning process. As discussed in the previous literature review, all activities developed were research-based and followed best practices (Dewey, 1915/2010; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Finn, 1993; Labaree, 2005; Melton-Shutt, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). The researcher not only looked outside the district for best practices, but also within Bartlett District. Sonia did not have any academic based programs for the students with the exception of an afterschool test prep class, which was held annually from November through March. This program essentially reviewed daily math and language arts work with the students and reviewed test-taking strategies.



Additionally, Sonia offered students in grades 6-8 participation in district run sport competition, which was limited to: cross-country meet, 10 week basketball season, 2 day volleyball tournament, and a 2 day softball tournament.

All the activities incorporated in this study were under the direction of the researcher. Academic, social, and athletic activities were planned based on a desire to instill confidence and develop relationships, which would enhance the school culture (Dewey, 1915/2010; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Finn, 1993; Labaree, 2005; Melton-Shutt, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002), ultimately building a climate ready for significant academic change. The researcher had to request permission from the Bartlett Board of Education, facilitate the events, train staff, as well as recruit student participants.

***Read-for-the-Record Day.*** Eighth grade student volunteers participated in Jumpstart's national campaign on October 6, 2011 by reading *Llama Llama Red Pajamas* to our first and second grade classes. The story was read and then the eighth grader led a vocabulary building game. Five students volunteered to read and they went to the four classes in teams of two and three. The activity was a success as evidenced by first and second grade teachers requesting for the students to return another day. Eighth graders reported that the "little kids kept calling them in the hallway." Connections were made to bolster confidence. One parent called the school to report, "my son loved having his big sister read to the class."

***Reading Buddies.*** Based on the peer assisted learning strategies of Drs. Doug and Lynn Fuchs (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003; PSEA, 2008), the Sonia reading buddies program was designed to impact the reading skills of all parties and support

district initiatives of Read 180 and the 100 Book Challenge. Two eighth graders were paired up with a first or second grader. The eighth grade partners would prepare the book to read with their elementary partner during LAL class. Time was allotted for the partners to review and practice the story, develop questions that would gauge comprehension, and incorporate predications. The skills that the eighth graders employed to prepare would also strengthen their own reading comprehension and prediction levels. Each partnership was made with a high and low tier reader. Reading buddies were scheduled to meet Friday mornings during 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts Literacy class time for 30 minutes under the direction of JB, the literacy teacher and a member of the PLC.

This program was researched and planned during the summer of 2011.

Administration and Board approval was received for the program to be implemented. Students were instructed and prepared the first week of school. Excitement was generated in class; the Literacy Coach was on board as was our trainer from the 100 Book Challenge. A new in-house administration team came on board in late August 2011. The new Principal Mr. Newman and his Vice-Principal Mrs. Chip did not allow this program to move forward past September. They did not feel it was a good use of student time as “our students are failing and we need to write, write, write to make AYP” (Principal Newman). This activity failed before it really began.

**Service Projects.** A series of community service activities were designed to impact academic readiness and student engagement.

**Backpack Give Away Day.** This activity took place during the second week of September. Originally planned by Principal Brehon in collaboration with community groups, this program provided new backpacks, notebooks, pens, pencils, and other school

tools for younger students. After the researcher shared data from both staff and student responses with the coordinator, the give away was widened to include the eighth grade class. Not only would students receive materials; this would be the first opportunity eighth grade students would have to be active members in the school community. The researcher had arranged for eighth graders to assist in setting up the give away and assisting younger students with selecting a backpack. There were six eighth grade homerooms and each homeroom was asked for volunteers. Altogether 11 students volunteered to assist; they carried in backpacks, escorted students from their classes, and helped with selections. The coordinator and distinguished guests thanked the volunteers and they had their picture taken for the yearbook before returning to class. Later in the day, three additional students asked if they could help out next time.

***Supporting Susan G. Komen Fundraisers.*** Ms. Crystal, who was a member of the PLC and myself initiated this event, which consisted of three events to raise money for breast cancer awareness. Ms. Crystal had been reluctant to engage in activities outside her instructional area in the past, but encouraged by the support of the PLC, she took on being advisor for the Class of 2012. The planned activities were \$1.00 jean day for staff; candy grams for female staff reminding them to get a mammogram, and 50-cent Friday for student dress down day. All proceeds were to benefit the Susan G. Komen fund. Candy grams were sent and students were excited for a uniform free day, when at the last minute Principal Newman met with Ms. Crystal and myself to cancel the dress down day. The reason given “We don’t have 100% of the eighth grade in uniform yet. They can dress down when we get 100% wearing uniforms for a week” (Principal Newman).

**Red Ribbon Week.** Red Ribbon Week was the first service project the eighth graders planned themselves. This event was designed to have students connect with an issue relevant to their community as well as connect on a national level with other middle school students. It was difficult to recruit students after their disappointment with the dress down day being cancelled. The researcher recruited student leaders asking them to try again. Ten students participated in the planning phases. A student team met with the administration for activity approval. These activities included free-style poetry contest, sponsored by the PLC, whose topic was “I have better things to do than drugs.” Students participated in spirit activities, which showed support for living a drug free life. These included: Keep a lid on drugs (hats), Kick drugs out of your life (crazy socks), Too Cool for Drugs (sunglasses), Drugs are for Suckers (lollipop give away), and a culminating dance to celebrate a drug free choice. Eighth graders were responsible to check homerooms daily for participation and hand out bracelets, stickers, and other promotional materials. Although the students had met with the principal and received permission for planned activities, Principal Newman cancelled the event as students were actively engaged in it. On the second day, Principal Newman announced on the intercom during afternoon announcements that the rest of Red Ribbon week would be cancelled, stating he did not feel “students deserved it.” This was done without speaking to the advisor or students. There were disappointed students and staff alike. The PLC tried to approach Principal Newman to discuss the decision and his response was “nothing to talk about.” One of the PLC members (Ms. Crystal) was quoted as saying “I’m done. BB I’m done!”

**Coat Drive.** Students participated in collecting, organizing, and distributing coats to students in need of one. Cat, an eighth grade student, in response to noticing a

classmate's need generated this idea. Cat noticed Queenie coming to school in a snow squall with only a sweater. When she asked Queenie where her coat was, Queenie replied it was too small and she didn't have another yet. Cat came to the PLC meeting and asked us to help. As a result 36 coats were collected, 27 distributed and 9 saved for future needs.

**Athletics.** Two athletic programs were developed. One activity incorporated more exercise time for the students prior to school and hoped to improve academic readiness by encouraging students arriving to school on time. The other program focused on engagement and building self-esteem and confidence needed for academic readiness.

**Morning Gym Time.** In a simple move to improve attendance this researcher opened the gym in the morning 40 minutes prior to school on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, beginning the third week of school. The schedule rotated monthly with planned activities on Tuesday and Thursday and free time on Wednesdays. It was an open door inclusive policy, if you wanted to play you could. The morning gym time began with 3 students showing up, but by May the average number of students participating daily was 27. The attendance was co-ed: 62% male and 38% female. The activities ranged from floor hockey to board games. Sometimes it was about exercise and playing, but also it was a social forum for the eighth graders to meet up. There was an impact on academic readiness evidenced by teacher comments: "Nelson is so awake on the days the gym is open he actually reads in class" (Ms. Eljay). Another teacher, Mr. Springstein, commented that "all my first period students should go to the gym in the morning. My room might stink but everyone is awake."

Additionally, the tardiness rate for the class of 2012 was 20% lower on mornings the gym was open. Two of the eighth grade students, DeJay and Clark, were late 3 out of 5 days in seventh grade. Clark was able to control his situation and he arrived to school early 90% of the time the gym was open. DeJay was not doing so well. He would arrive early maybe once a week to hang in the gym, but there was no carry-over to his everyday habits.

***Models & Mentors.*** This program capitalized on the eighth graders expressed desire for fun in school (Questionnaire [53%] and Focus group [100%] data). Initially open to all eighth grade students, there were criteria to be met in order to remain a Model & Mentor (M&M). This group was developed to encourage attendance and academic readiness and to show the younger students the importance of both. Models & Mentors served as lunchroom assistants, recess aides, and coaches to the elementary school students.

Students who were to assist at elementary lunch and recess had to have good academic standing in their fourth period class as they would miss it once per week. Good academic standing had been defined by the PLC to include: on time to class, materials brought to class on daily basis, homework turned in consistently, and evidence of progress being made in the academic subject. Additionally, students who were late to school during the week could not participate for that week and students whose behavior resulted in a parent conference or suspension were not allowed to participate until meeting with the PLC to discuss their infraction. A decision to allow continued participation as an M & M would be made on a case-by-case basis.

M & Ms who served as student coaches to grades 3-5 needed to meet all the above criteria in addition to promoting sportsmanship and anti-bullying strategies. A new in-house intramural program was started for students in grades 3-5 on Wednesday afternoons. Initially, the researcher recruited coaches based on their sportsmanship as well as actively reached out to four males, identified by the PLC as students at risk. Six eighth grade students responded to serve as coaches, timers, and scorekeepers. The researcher participated as referee and league director. The intramural program began in October with a 5-week soccer league. Twenty-two co-ed players were divided up into four teams, each coached by an eighth grader. Before the season was over, four additional eighth grade students asked to assist; all were males.

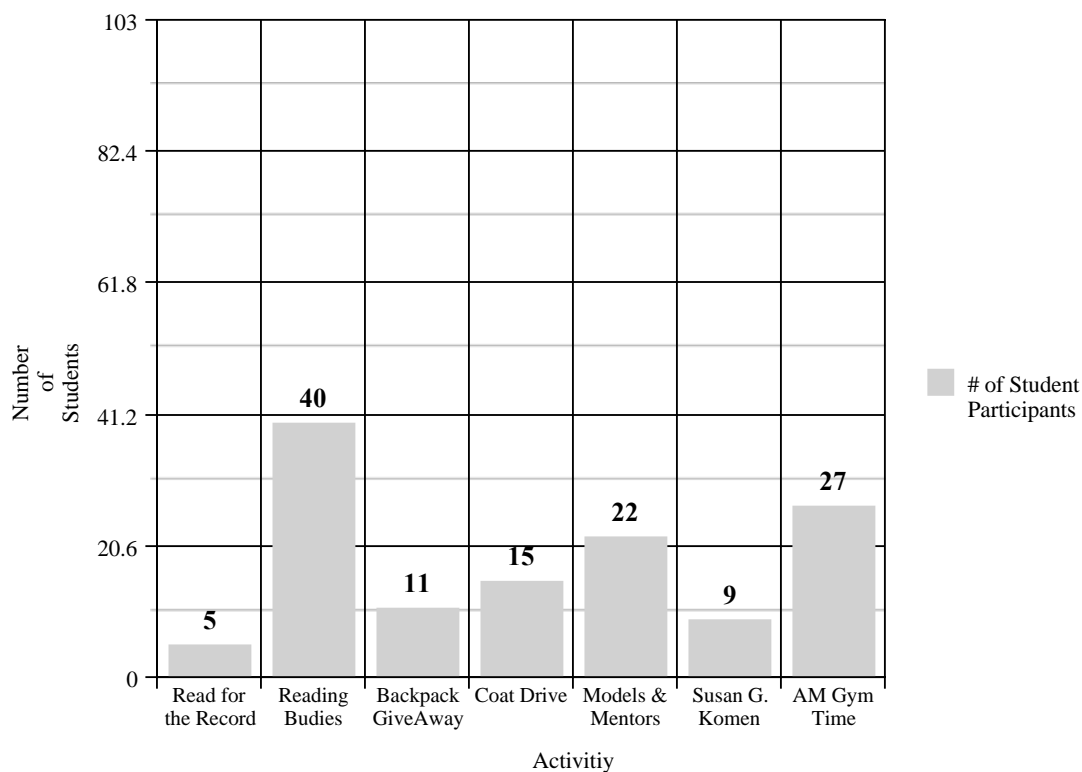
Three parents attended the games, two on a regular basis; one was an eighth grade parent who came to watch her son coach. George was one of the students the PLC had targeted for participation. His attendance was irregular due to his mother's ongoing illness. George had to help out with a little sister and accompany his mom to treatments. He missed time at school, but after he began coaching he was always there on Wednesday. George said his mom had never come to any of his activities; she wasn't in good health. The researcher had taught George the prior year and while mom was always accessible by phone, she never attended back to school night, parents' dinners, or awards days. After George started to coach she called to ask about the program. Mom said, "George doesn't stop talking about coaching the younger kids. What is he really doing?" The researcher explained the program to mom and she expressed pleasure that George had gotten involved and promised to try and make sure he did not miss school on Wednesdays. A few weeks later mom surprised George by coming to the gym one

afternoon. When George looked up from the sidelines and saw her he was so excited he started telling the kids “my mom’s here she really came.” After that George’s mom came to one of his middle school basketball games he was really proud. Two other parents who came were dads of players. They watched from the stands and once in a while shouted directions to their children. They always thanked the eighth graders for helping their sons and daughters.

A 5-week basketball program followed soccer; there were more players, 31, and a total of 13 volunteers. Additionally, the one dad asked if he could be league statistician and kept records, created a chart, and posted weekly results. This was the last planned activity for intramurals.

M & Ms who assisted with recess and lunch for the third – fifth graders grew to a total of 22 volunteers. Thirteen students assisted in playtime, while nine others assisted in the lunchroom. The M & Ms volunteered one or two days a week depending on their academic workload. A total of 19 students were successful M &Ms; three students had started as M & Ms and had to be asked, due to behavior or grades, not to continue in the program. Overall 21 students participated, representing 18% of the eighth grade class.





Data from Activity Attendance Records Sept. 2011- June 2012

Figure 6. Student Participation in Activities

**PLC fall focus.** The PLC took a break in late August with the intention of returning in September ready to work. In Cycle III, the PLC addressed the question of what we hoped to achieve, the group now continued to follow the guides outlined by Dufour and Eaker (1998, p. 28) by endeavoring to develop strategies for improving stakeholder engagement and academic readiness. The concentrated efforts would be on developing opportunities for professional collaboration, as staff had deemed this the weakest area of Sonia’s school culture. Unfortunately, the group experienced three major events that impacted the community dynamics.

In August, new administration was appointed to Sonia. This was the sixth team in six years and was comprised of an untested Principal Newman, Vice-Principal Chip, who

had three-months leadership experience and had formerly been a Sonia teacher for nine years, as well as a Vice-Principal Phelps who was scheduled to retire in December 2011. The principal, Mr. Newman, and vice-principa,l Mrs. Chip, made it clear they were out to change things now at Sonia. Principal. Newman opened the school year with a staff meeting, where he stated, “I don’t think there is anything good going on here at Sonia. That’s why I’m here. I don’t care how many years you have taught or if you’re new you are failing!” Mrs. Chip stated at the same meeting “You’ve been lazy we’re going to change that. People are going to have to work hard now!” PLC members questioned how the new administration’s attitudes would impact an already challenged school culture.

Secondly, over the summer Sonia Middle School had merged with a local elementary school and now housed students in grades 1-8. Teachers had returned to a chaotic physical environment: rooms moved, supplies missing, hallways littered with unidentified belongings, and a definite division of staff. There was no transition period or bonding activities; everyone was busy trying to find their belongings. As school began, there was a clear separation between elementary and middle school teachers. Confusion arose as to which rituals and routines were to be followed. No one stepped up to unite these factions; administration failed to address this vital part of school culture.

Lastly, on the fifth day of school, a member of our PLC passed away unexpectedly. Mrs. Evangeline was a longtime Sonia staff member for 31 years, a beloved teacher who was often requested by parents, a close friend of the researcher and other PLC members, and one of the students’ favorites. Her death and the subsequent way it was handled by school administrators affected progress made in the PLC. PLC focus was not on strategies to improve academic readiness, but strategies to support staff

and survive the way Mrs. Evangeline's death had been treated by new administrators. Mrs. Evangeline's death served to create a culture chasm within Sonia. The middle school staff was grieving and the elementary staff was apathetic to the situation; administration wanted business as usual. Mrs. Evangeline's belongings were thrown into the trash the day after she passed away. Principal Newman wanted to move on and not allow "this situation to disrupt the school." Staff members were not allowed release time to attend Mrs. Evangeline's service, so her husband scheduled services to begin at 4 p.m.

By the end of October, the PLC was meeting on a regular basis. It was agreed that the meetings would be held in Mrs. Evangeline's room to keep her spirit with the group. The PLC began analyzing data on eighth grade readiness and strategies for student/staff engagement. The PLC discovered the students were anxious to participate in new instructional formats. Jumpstart Reading was a success, open gym was bringing more students to school on time, and the group was beginning to see students eager to be involved in school activities.

The PLC membership was open to all staff members of eighth grade students. The initial group started May, 2011 with nine active participants, after the death of Mrs. Evangeline and the unexpected transfer of Ms. Avatar and Mr. Clean the PLC group consisted of six members. Weekly meetings were held to discuss student issues and develop individual approaches for at risk students. Strategies for reengaging marginalized students included one-one mentoring and utilizing colleagues for challenging students. A plan was devised to identify with which staff person each eighth grader was most at ease, then as need arose that would be the person assigned to assist the student in academic and behavioral situations. Once this program was in place, there was a 22% decrease in

student behavior referrals in the eighth grade as compared to their seventh grade year (Sonia behavior data 2011 – 2012). Specifically followed were four boys and three girls who had consistently been written up for behavior infractions in seventh grade resulting in placement in the focus room, parent conferences, and suspensions. The process of assigning a staff member to mentor these students created opportunities for student success.

In November, the PLC re-administered the School Culture Triage Survey. The SCTS was given at the six-month mark as agreed upon when permission was given from the Center for School Improvement. The same staff members were asked to retake the survey. This time only 39 staff members out of 71 responded to the SCTS. This was a diminished involvement of 23%. Table 8 provides a visual display of the responses given.

Overall this SCTS indicated a drop in staff collaboration compared to data gathered on the SCTS administered in May 2011. There were fewer respondents to the SCTS and this could be related to the morale of the building. Change had come to Sonia in the way of another new administrative team and a school merger. Instead of boosting morale these events appeared to have a negative effect. When asked to participate in the survey the researcher was told “BB what’s the use?” “I thought we did this last year and you said it would make a difference. It did – Sonia is worse.” (LAL1)

Comparison in staff perception of collaboration showed that when the study began, 41% of the polled staff believed they were frequently involved in discussions centered on curriculum and best practices. Moreover, 13% believed they were sometimes involved in these discussions. This contradicts data collected six months into the study, where 0% of the faculty felt there were frequent opportunities for collaboration on

curriculum and 13% felt sometimes there was a curriculum and strategies discussion. Additionally, the initial data revealed that 26% of the staff felt there was a lack of tradition and celebrations within Sonia; the six-month study indicated an overwhelming 79% believed there was no tradition or celebrations occurring. These indicators are the cornerstones of healthy school cultures as defined by Barth (2002), Fullan (2001, 2005), and Wagner (2004).

Possible explanations for the decline in staff perceptions of collaboration and collegiality may lie in the merger of Sonia and Eccer schools as well as the administrative change the school underwent. Principal Newman and Vice-Principal Chip came onboard to merge the two schools, but failed to share a vision or mission with the staff. No attempt was made to establish one set of rituals and routines, unite both staff in a common mission or vision, or engage everyone in providing quality education to our students. All though Sonia was now called a Family School; essentially is two separate schools operating under two distinctly different expectations in one building.

Table 8.

*Staff Responses to 6-month SCTS November, 2011*

Parameter	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
<b>Professional Collaboration</b>					
Discuss instructional strategies and curriculum	23	11	5	0	0
Develop school schedule	32	6	0	0	0
Decision-making about materials & resources	25	9	5	0	0
Collaboration on student behavior code	30	9	0	0	0
Common Planning time	9	13	11	6	0
<b>Affiliative Collegiality</b>					
Staff tell stories of school celebrations and values	26	11	2	0	0
Staff socialize outside of school	12	19	5	5	0
There is a “sense” of community	24	10	1	4	0
Schedule reflects frequent communication	24	9	1	5	0
School supports sharing of new ideas y staff	29	9	1	0	0
Rich tradition of rituals and celebrations	31	6	2	1	0
<b>Self-determination/Efficacy</b>					
Operates as predict and prevent vs. react and repair	21	14	3	1	0
Staff is independent and value each other	3	6	12	15	3
Seek alternatives rather than repeating what we have done	18	15	16	0	0
Staff define problem rather than place blame	27	10	2	0	0
Staff is empowered to make instructional decisions	31	7	1	0	0
People enjoy working here	31	7	1	0	0

**Observations.** The researcher conducted a series of observations during this cycle. These observations occurred at staff meetings. The researcher selected staff meetings for observations since in this cycle there was a new administration team introduced as well as a merger of two schools and staff. The researcher observed these meetings to perceive how the new administrators addressed Sonia’s culture issues and attempts to build collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy among the newly merged staff.

**Teacher Report Day - September 6, 2011.** This observation occurred the first day teachers reported to Sonia School. Teachers went to their classrooms only to find they had been moved without prior knowledge. The new elementary teachers were ensconced in classrooms, while the middle school teachers had to search for personal and professional belongings. Boxes, desks, cabinets, and books filled the hallways. An announcement came onto the PA system at 8:30 a.m. stating, “We are waiting for all teachers in the auditorium.” (Principal Newman made the announcement but did not introduce himself.) When teachers arrived to the auditorium, Principal Newman, Vice-Principal Chip, and Vice-Principal Phelps were sitting on the stage. There was no agenda, no welcome speech, and no introductions. All the new elementary teachers were sitting in the front row of the auditorium, notebooks open and pen in hand. Sonia middle school teachers sat behind them in small groups mostly by departments. There was clearly a Sonia – Eccer divide.

Principal Newman opened the meeting with this statement, “Ninety percent of parents I see are mothers and grandparents. Chicago does the Million Father March this is my initiative I want everybody on board with this.” The meeting continued with disjointed references to NJASK scores, efficiency of Eccer teachers vs. Sonia teachers,

and need to get this building in order. There are four statements the principal made which set the tone for the year: “Tomorrow many of you will not be here. I have not approved your placement.” “Lot of work to do here Sonia staff you have a reputation – that’s why Eccer is here to show you how to do it right.” “Sonia is notorious for being lazy.” Vice-Principal Chip spoke to staff stating that she was in charge of all 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade business. She outlined a “5 A Approach to teaching” Accountability, Alleviate interfering behaviors, Appearance classroom and teacher, Achievement, and Attitude “complaining never improves the situation. I don’t want to hear it.” The last speaker was Vice-Principal Phelps who stated, “I’m glad to be here and I am looking forward to getting to know each of you.” Principal Newman tried to close the meeting with “Be back here at 1pm sharp” but although he was ignoring 7 hands that were raised one teacher, Ms. Starr, called out to him, asking why “it appears the elementary teachers who are new to Sonia have all their belongings in the assigned classrooms while the middle school teachers are scattered throughout the building.” Principal Newman responded, “That’s how this train is gonna (sic) roll.” The first meeting ended with the administration walking out and disgruntled staff wandering off to find their belongings.

This first observation highlighted the lack of a shared vision or mission on the part of the new administrators. Although this was the first time a new school staff was meeting, there was no opportunity for collaboration; administrators did not discuss mission and vision, there were no introductions of the administrators or staff members. There was no attempt to bond the staff from both schools into one cohesive unit. This new administration was perpetrating the poor school culture already in existence.



The second staff meeting the researcher observed was at the end of the first day of school. Students were dismissed at 12:40 p.m. and teachers were anticipating their lunch break at 12:45 p.m. At 12:35 p.m. Principal Newman announced on the PA system “All teachers are required to report to the auditorium promptly at 12:40 p.m.” Again the elementary teachers were all seated up front ready to take notes while the middle school staff were in the back of the auditorium. Some staff members arrived late due to meeting parents and dismissal issues. Principal Newman called out each person as they came in “I told you to report at 12:40 I expect all staff to be prompt.” Each of the late teachers tried to explain it was the first day and parents wanted to talk, but that was not acceptable with Principal Newman. Principal Newman said he wanted a quick five minutes to review the day. The staff did not have an opportunity to participate in a discussion of the day, but it was a meeting of directives from Principal Newman and Vice-Principal Chip. Staff was instructed by Vice-Principal Chip that classrooms were not “ready for learning” and that “we have much to learn as far as discipline in the lunchroom. Each teacher will now walk their students to the lunchroom and sit with them as they eat. No one is excused from this duty.” Immediately hands went up for questions, but Principal Newman said, “There is too much to go over for questions. Hold them.” Other information given were the dates for lesson plans to be handed in and that if “classrooms were not in order by Friday teachers would not be allowed to leave.” The quick five-minute meeting lasted 30 minutes. There was no occasion for collaboration at this meeting; teachers exited the meeting disgruntled and grumbling.

The third and final formal observation was in October 2011 during a Monday staff meeting. School had been in session five weeks. An observable difference was the

Eccer staff was no longer sitting up front ready and eager. While they still sat together, the group had moved towards the middle of the auditorium away from Principal Newman. The meeting opened with Principal Newman stating, “I am a stickler for time. I said a 3:05 meeting and where is everyone? Can’t you people get it together?” [Student dismissal time is 3 p.m.]. There was no agenda for the staff. Principal Newman discussed the importance of escorting students to cafeteria and remaining with them throughout lunch, “We need to go above and beyond with disciplining the kids,” furthermore “I am not a proponent of suspension. Focus room is the intervention but I don’t want teachers putting students in the focus room...” As the principal continued speaking I noticed 11 teachers on cell phones, 3 texting, 2 sleeping, and 4 having open conversations. Additionally, Vice-Principal Chip was berating the custodian loud enough to disrupt the meeting and for everyone to hear. This final observation showed a decline in collegiality and collaboration. The culture of Sonia was growing more toxic.

**Reflection on Cycle IV.** During Cycle IV this action research study met the test of outcome validity as defined by Herr and Anderson (2005). These researchers posture that one test of validity for action research is “the extent to which action occurs and leads to the resolution of the problem that led to the study” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 55). While some activities did not transpire as planned, the implementation of the Morning Gym Time as well as the Model and Mentor program were effective in decreasing tardiness and engaging eighth grade students in school. Furthermore, the deliberately planned activities were confirming the research of Dawkins et al. (2006), Heifets and Blank (1998), and Brown and Evans (2002) by showing increased student engagement

and parental contact and involvement through participation in extra-curricular activities. Reflection on the activities included not only what worked, but what did not and why.

Conversely, the Professional Learning Community and the school in general had suffered personal and cultural setbacks. The passing of Mrs. Evangeline further divided the school. There now existed the Sonia School Staff and the Eccer School Staff. The staff had two distinct cultures trying to exist in one building with no collegial or collaborative activities planned to unite the staff. This division was confusing to the students who had come from Eccer previously. Staff members were divided in elementary and middle school pedagogies for instruction. Students and staff were caught between two distinctly different sets of expectations. Sonia did not have clear routines and rituals.

The researcher was facing roadblocks and cancellations to the plans that had been put in place before the two schools merged. The reluctance on the part of the administration to embrace the study had led to Principal Newman cancelling events at the last minute, therefore students and staffs were more hesitant to plan and participate in activities because there was no guarantee it would move forward. With these stumbling blocks in mind, the researcher reevaluated what would happen in Cycle V.

### **Cycle V – Challenges and Adjustments**

Cycle V began following the Thanksgiving recess and was originally anticipated to be the final cycle of this research. The PLC focus and student activities were designed to be reflective of the data collected and findings in Cycle IV. It is at this point in time, the study became subject to the full affects of the new administration team.

The research began in May 2011, with the approval of the Bartlett Board of Education and Sonia's 2010-2011 administration team. The initial in-house support consisted of providing resources such as time and incentive funding provided to faculty/staff, as well as displaying an authentic interest in the project itself. As previously stated, the administrative team at Sonia changed in August 2011. The researcher attempted multiple times to inform and include the new administrators, Principal Newman and Vice-Principal Chip, in the ongoing study. Neither the principal nor vice-principal showed a desire to participate in the study. Furthermore, Vice-Principal Chip, who had previously been part of the study, withdrew her support due to a conflict of interest. This shift in administrative perspective disrupted the dynamics of the study and the proposed research required re-evaluating and adjusting to this current school climate. The research design and the cyclical nature of action research allowed for readjustments and continuation of the study (Craig, 2009; Heron & Reason, 2006; Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Evaluating Cycle IV's obstacles and roadblocks, the researcher began to recognize to what degree the study might be failing and for what reasons. Kotter (2007) puts forth eight keys for leading successful change, and due to administrative changes, this study was now lacking three of those eight keys: 1) having the power to enact change, 2) a sense of urgency within the school leadership to change culture in order to improve academic achievement, and 3) 75% of administrative support for the proposed change. Kotter states if the personnel attempting to lead change lack the power necessary to enforce and implement change strategies, the change cannot occur (Kotter, 2007). Although the eighth grade PLC members demonstrated dedication and commitment to

creating a culture of change at Sonia, the group lacked the support necessary to authorize change. Principal Newman did not recognize the same sense of urgency as the Sonia faculty/staff. The researcher had district support to complete the study, but the lack of in-house support created a derision curtailing the planned activities and PLC focus. It was the researcher's own tenacity and that of the PLC membership, which moved the study forward.

Reflection on Cycle IV led the researcher to streamline the number of student activities for two reasons. First, it was getting near NJASK testing time and Principal Newman had warned he did not want students "missing instructional time for any reason." There had been an obvious lack of support by both administrators over the course of the study for extra-curricular activities, so streamlining these gave the administrators less cause to veto them at the last minute. Second, it was harder to get students and staff to plan and participate in activities because they doubted the event would actually happen. Following the Law of the Few (Gladwell, 2002), the researcher enlisted key students to encourage continued participation by the class of 2012. These student connectors (Gladwell, 2002) spread the word and activity attendance remained constant. The following activities were deliberately planned based on Cycle IV data analysis.

**Service Projects.** Data analysis in Cycle IV revealed a reoccurring theme of students' engagement and high participation levels in the service projects. As discussed in Cycle IV findings, one student recognizing the need of a classmate initiated a service project called the coat drive. Due to administrative constraints, only one project was designed for this cycle; an opportunity to enhance a family's holiday.

**Penny Wars.** This activity was a contest that pitted homeroom against homeroom to see who could collect the most pennies. Funds raised were used to assist a Sonia family at the holiday time. Eight students came forward initially to plan and work as collectors and statisticians, but as the war commenced, five additional students volunteered afterschool to assist in running the service project. Student assistants were responsible for collecting pennies, distributing incentives (such as candy canes, stickers, etc.), counting money, and recording and posting results. All six eighth grade homerooms participated in this activity. As the war raged on excitement could be heard in the hallways; students were checking the class meters to see what place their class was in, and teachers were trying to help their homerooms collect the most. This project raised a total of \$341.64. Gift cards were purchased to Target and Wal-Mart and given to families in need as identified by the school nurse. Observable student behaviors included engagement, empathy, and caring. PLC members capitalized on student motivation by incorporating Penny War data to instruct money management, bargain hunting, and graphing into eighth grade Math and Language Arts Literacy lessons.

**Athletics.** Models and Mentors continued. The soccer program was ongoing in this phase. This afterschool soccer league was scheduled to stop in January. Prior to the last game, four of the M & Ms who had coached in the program asked the researcher to organize a flag football league after soccer. The researcher responded it would be taken under consideration, but it probably would not move forward. The researcher had intended to conclude the study in February. The boys were not content to take no for an answer. Students continued to ask and then offered to write up league rules and

participation guidelines. They presented their proposal in mid-January; impressed with their enthusiasm, the researcher extended the study to a sixth cycle.

Furthermore, the M & Ms who assisted at lunchtime were asked to stop coming in January by Vice-Principal Chip. Although teachers of students in grades 1-4 had voiced approval for the M & M program at lunchtime, administrators felt they could not justify the eighth graders missing class. Administrators were presented with student grades and schedules showing that each M & M attended with teacher permission and were in good academic standing. Furthermore, individual eighth grade teachers reported the opportunity to participate as an M & M once a week motivated students to engage in class and maintain grades (Mr. Springstein, Ms. Eljay, and Ms. Crystal). Nonetheless, the lunchtime M & M program was forced to disband.

**Academics.** *Read-Across-America* preparations were made for eighth grade students to celebrate Read-Across-America Day. A book swap was held to promote grade-level reading in the middle school rather than focusing on Dr. Seuss. Additional activities included a Read-a-thon of favorite Seuss books at the elementary lunch periods by eighth grade students, along with a Seuss trivia competition. Naturally, prizes were books! Participation results: 54 books were swapped; three teams of five students each competed in the Seuss trivia, and six students read at lunchtime.

Additionally, National Junior Honor Society students were recruited to read their favorite Dr. Seuss books in the first, second, third, and fourth grade classrooms. In a proactive effort to move this event forward, the researcher invited Principal Newman and Vice-Principal Chip to read to the school. Principal Newman agreed to read, but did not follow through, while Vice-Principal Chip declined the opportunity.

**PLC focus.** Cycle V challenged the PLC to remain focused. Continual evaluation of attendance and behavioral referrals showed a limited correlation to the deliberately planned activities. Student referrals were rising slightly by 2%, but when further evaluated, the increased referrals were not for students participating in the extra-curricular activities.

The PLC assessed the 6-month SCTS administered the previous November. Initial evaluation indicated no progress had occurred regarding staff perceptions of collaboration, collegiality, or self-efficacy. Nineteen fewer staff members responded to the survey. Completed surveys indicated the faculty/staff felt Sonia's culture had declined in all three areas. Discussion among the PLC membership elicited the following comments on overall school culture. "The only collaboration or collegiality I feel is with you ladies" (Mr. Springstein); "BB, I'm done. It only gets worse" (Ms. Crystal); "Hey, I know where to go if I need support and it is not the main office. The kids know, too" (Officer Sky). While both Officer Sky and Mr. Springstein voiced a small improvement within the PLC in collaboration and collegiality, Ms. Crystal voiced the lack of power the PLC had to enact even small change. There was no correlation between the in-group support PLC members felt and the overall school culture. The PLC struggled to remain active, apathy spread due to the inability to transfer small group improvements throughout the school and produce change (Kotter, 2007).

Through evaluation of student data, the PLC came to identify a core group of eighth graders consistently late to school, yet eager to participate in all extra-curricular activities. Upon further investigation, the PLC discovered three students were homeless; two lived in shelters and had to wait for the bus, while one student couch surfed each



evening, never knowing how long it would take him to get to school. Furthermore, one student who was absent or consistently 90 minutes late was taking his mom to dialysis. One final student identified was found to be responsible for getting her four younger sisters ready and escorted to two different schools each morning. Due to their chronic lateness and the parameters set for participation, these five students had never been eligible to participate in the extra-curricular activities. This new knowledge led to a “make-up time” for students who, for good cause, arrived late to school. Students who desired to participate in activities but were not able to arrive on time to school were allowed to make-up time with a PLC member during lunch. This consisted of bringing lunch to the designated member and students would eat and work on material they had missed. Each member of the PLC participated in this make-up tutoring time. When this new opportunity for eligibility became possible, four of the five students took advantage of it; one student HT thought it was a punishment and continued to eat lunch in the cafeteria.

An independent variable developed during Cycle V that forced the study into a sixth unanticipated cycle. Ms. Crystal, famous for saying, “I’m done,” presented to the PLC an idea for a NJASK Easter Egg Hunt for the students. She felt the students were engaged in the Read Across America Day and wanted to replicate the activity utilizing her Math curriculum.

**Reflections on Cycle V.** Research and data collected during Cycle V reflects frustration with staff administrators and a decline in school culture as indicated by the 6-month SCTS. There was a curtailing of student activities due to administrative constraints

placed on the research study. Despite this, there were small signs of change and leadership growing among staff and students indicating small successes.

Gladwell (2002) indicates a measure of success is based on contagious behavior. If you can instill the desired behaviors in others and they replicate them than you can consider your change successful. Using this measure, the study revealed minor localized culture changes demonstrated by both students and staff: student flag football league and Ms. Crystal's NJASK Easter Egg Hunt idea. No longer were the activities being driven by the researcher, but by the participants.

Additionally, while the study may have lacked three of Kotter's eight keys to leadership for change, it did embody five: 1) a sense of urgency, 2) a clear vision, 3) ability to communicate the vision, 4) plan for short term success, ability to consolidate, and 5) produce change and institutionalize change (Kotter, 2007). The sense of urgency for a culture change at Sonia still existed within the staff, evidenced by responses on the 6-month SCTS, support of student extra-curricular activities, and PLC endurance despite multiple obstacles. There was a shared vision among eighth grade PLC members as to what the group goal was and members were able to articulate it to others. While the researcher and PLC members did not have authority to implement whole school change, they were able to institutionalize change within the eighth grade.

### **Cycle VI - Student and Staff Directed Activities**

The researcher did not originally envision this cycle, but it is a most important cycle. This cycle speaks to the small successes encountered throughout the study and development of leadership and capacity building within the PLC and the eighth grade student body.

Originally, the study was planned to conclude at the end of Cycle V. The study design included continuing the recess assistants for the remainder of the school year, as well as morning gym time, but ending additional study activities. Two reasons exist for this original decision. First, action research is typically a three-cycle study (Heron & Reason, 2006; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and this study had grown to five cycles. The researcher needed to close and analyze the study. Second, Sonia's administration team was adamant extra-curricular activities detracted rather than enhanced learning. The NJASK Test was only a month away and the administration was cutting all extra-curricular activities before, during, and after school.

Two events required a Cycle VI to occur. One of the PLC members, an eighth grade teacher who had previously isolated herself in her room and openly expressed frustration at Sonia, came forward and wanted support in planning an NJASK Easter Egg Hunt. Furthermore, as the M & M coaching was winding down in January, the eighth grade participants came forward asking to create a flag football league along the guise used in the study for soccer and basketball. Fullan (2001) indicates one measure of institutionalized change is when leadership has been cultivated and evidenced by group members being able to carry on and "outgrow the leader" (Fullan, 2001, p. 134). Therefore, Cycle VI was generated and data were collected through informal observations, non-scripted conversations, and journal entries.

Ms. Crystal's proposed egg hunt was a subject review for the NJASK. The idea was for eighth grade math, science, and literacy teachers make 75-100 eggs for the students. Inside the eggs were questions that derived from math, science, and literacy class similar to NJASK test questions. PLC members hid the eggs outside Sonia during

lunch. After lunch students were divided into teams of five and sent out to gather as many eggs as they could in five minutes. The teams then returned to designated areas in order to solve their questions before the other teams. The prize was a pizza luncheon on the day before spring break. It was observable that both students and staff enjoyed the activity. Evidence of this was the fact two eighth grade teachers, who had declined being members of the PLC, voluntarily joined forces to help make the egg hunt a success. This indicated the PLC was becoming effective as a group of teachers leading by example (Barth, 2002). Moreover, during the final interviews conducted with eighth grade students, the egg hunt was mentioned by 19 out of 24 students as a highlight of the year.

The success of the flag football league was documented by the continued attendance rate of the M & Ms and the lack of any behavioral referrals during this time for the students involved. Each Wednesday, between 4 and 11 parents/guardians attended and watched the games. One parent advocated to the district health and physical education supervisor that the middle schools start a competitive flag football league. The M & Ms recruited additional eighth graders to help monitor the lines and flags. An informal cheer squad performed each week, which was made up of four eighth grade girls. Overall, the student-led league was a success for engagement, but more importantly, students developed their capacity for leadership, as well as increased levels of positive self-esteem and Sonia community support. Through informal observations and review of PLC notes, the researcher identified growing support by Sonia staff for the young men who created the flag football league. Each game day there were at least two staff members present watching the games as opposed to just the researcher as staff during the soccer and basketball leagues. Additionally, Officer Sky and Mr. Springstein

helped the boys set up the play-off bracket. Furthermore, Officer Sky showed students how to manage league statistics. The indicators of self-efficacy and community support are necessary components of authentic educational learning according to Vygotsky's (1978) theories of Zone of Proximal Development and Activity Theory. The planning and implementation of the flag football league took the students out of their comfort zone, reversing the norm where the adult was in charge of the program. The students needed to reach beyond their individual capabilities and pool knowledge with their peers in order to create a successful activity. The students perceived the learning as a social activity and did not recognize it as work. Their learning was guided by staff support demonstrated by Officer Sky, Mr. Springstein, and the researcher facilitating instruction as needed. Mental constructs were developed through relationships with peers and staff.

Lastly, in Cycle VI, Officer Sky quietly gathered three young men he knew from the neighborhood who were on the cusp of making some serious wrong decisions and began mentoring them. At first, it was not recognized as mentoring. Officer Sky convinced these three boys to hang with him at a lunch table, to talk and joke about the neighborhood. Occasionally, he would buy them snacks. As the weeks developed, he started to casually discuss the events happening on the streets such as: which of their peers had been arrested, sharing how hard it was for him growing up because he "walked their walk." Officer Sky had a calm, no-nonsense manner to which the boys were able to relate. Throughout the spring, Officer Sky became the staff person who could reach these boys and get them back on track when they needed it.

Cycle VI concluded with a PLC luncheon hosted by the researcher. The purpose of the luncheon was to discuss what we learned and to evaluate the degree to which the

PLC influenced student academic readiness and engagement. The PLC membership felt that the eighth grade PLC focused on DuFour's (2004) big three: 1) having a focus, 2) analyzing data, and 3) looking for results. No one in the group felt that there was carry-over into Sonia's general culture.

The discussion specifically addressed research question two: In what ways does the voluntary participation of eighth grade faculty in a Professional Learning Community influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement? Members of the PLC offered several insights. "I realize I need to look deeper into why a student is not engaged not just think he/she doesn't care" (Ms. Crystal). "Keeping extra pencils, paper, and materials ready and in a place where students did not have to ask for them, I think got more students to engage in work" (Mr. Springstein). Mrs. Eljay stated:

Without support from this group I would not have made it this year. Ms. Evangeline died, we taught together for 30 years, this new administration team doesn't like anyone, and they changed me from 6<sup>th</sup> grade LAL with a supportive role in 8<sup>th</sup> grade to primary 8<sup>th</sup> grade LAL teacher. More than looking at data and student outcomes, this group gave me a safe place of support and I knew people cared.

"Eighth graders had more smiles this year and less of them were in my office"

(Mrs. Nightingale). There was a general consensus that since faculty/staff attitudes had changed within the PLC members, there was more authentic learning and student engagement occurring.

The exit focus group for eighth grade students came after NJASK. The same protocols were in place from the previous spring. Water ice was provided during each focus group. Again, data were reviewed, organized into categories, and coded according to themes. Coding data revealed student perceptions on academic readiness and engagement had changed since the initial survey. Themes of frustration occurred, but

reflecting academic struggles more than relationships. Four groups felt teachers were “assuming we know something we don’t” while three groups wanted “classes I fit in.” When this statement was further explored in these groups, it revealed a desire for leveled classes. Students were expressing one reason they did not engage academically is “ I don’t know what they are asking me” (FG 3) and “I don’t like to be wrong” (FG 5). Furthermore, students reflected on their attitudes of learning as changing in eighth grade. One example of a comment reflective of this change is: “I had to pass this year I wanted to go to High school” (FG 1). Five of the seven groups voiced the idea that Sonia was more fun this year, while six of the six groups commented on disappointment and frustration with administration cancelling activities. When asked to discuss if participating in extra-curricular activities made a difference in the classroom, the answers were mixed. A repeated theme in all focus groups was it depended on the classroom teacher. Students still voiced concerns about staff professionalism and attitude towards them as a student body.

**Reflection on Cycle VI.** Cycle VI served as the concluding cycle in the insider participatory action research study. The events leading to Cycle VI displayed a growth of staff leadership, pointing to study success. Barth (2002) states teachers are “leaders in one of three ways: by following, leading alone or leading by example” (p. 99). While all three of these styles are acceptable, moving through the stages of leading by following to leading by example is a sign of organizational growth. Moreover, this study proved that given the opportunity, teachers will help “unlock” the leader in each other (Barth, 2002).

The development of student leaders through the modeling and mentoring program confirms research earlier reported. If given the opportunity to participate in a meaningful

way at school, students will develop leadership qualities that can be transferred to the classroom as well as the real world. Researchers document that if leadership is cultivated in students, they will benefit by being able to ask for help when needed, persevere rather than give up quickly. set specific goals and accept accountability, solve problems, and develop team building skills (National Middle School Association, 2003).

Data collection from Cycle VI indicated participants in the PLC cohort felt their experience positively affected student academic readiness and engagement. PLC members reflected on growth resulting from both their engagement with students in a different way and a better understanding of the barriers students faced in engaging in the classroom. This experience was not transferable to other staff members in Sonia, which was anticipated because action research is designed to impact a small specific group. That is the nature of action research (Heron & Reason, 2006; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The PLC's continued monitoring of academic indicators showed overall eighth grade behavior referrals decreased by 10%, and attendance improved overall by 23%, based on a comparison of the 2010-2011 records and 2011-2012 records. It would be remiss not to note this change may have occurred outside the study due to the merger of Eccer Elementary School with Sonia Middle School. This merger may have affected the tardiness of students who had been chronically late in seventh grade due to walking a younger sibling to school.

### **Summary of Findings and Analysis**

This study began with the premise that personalization of school turnaround strategies, based on specific student and staff needs, will create a school culture ready for academic change. Purposeful participant selection focused on the eighth grade staff and



students prior to their promotion into high school. The research was designed as an insider participatory action research study located at Sonia Middle School in Bartlett, New Jersey, one of the most violent and impoverished cities in the United States (Morgan-Quinto Corporation, 2011).

Implementation of the study in May 2011 began with Cycle I, which measured the current school culture through use of the School Culture Triage Survey and seventh grade Student Exit Questionnaire. Seventy-eight percent of faculty/staff and 65% of seventh grade students participated in Cycle I. In the infancy phase, the study generated faculty/staff and administrative engagement by creating a forum for discourse, evidenced by anecdotal comments on the SCTS such as “Will you actually use our input?” (SCTS #7) to “Thank you for asking me what I thought” (SCTS #31). Faculty and staff inquired how to become involved and expressed disappointment when the study was limited to eighth grade students and staff. The initial SCTS analysis, May 2011, indicated staff collaboration was the weakest area of school culture with the lowest mean score of 12.03. Additionally, the SCTS indicated a deficit in the areas of collegiality (15.74) and efficacy (15.0) for an overall culture score of 42.74. Based on scoring strategies provided by Wagner and Masden-Copas, total scores of 41-50 are described as “modifications and improvements are necessary; begin with the weakest area of culture indicated” (Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2004, p. 53).

Students were not only engaging in completing the questionnaire, but they were recruiting friends to participate as well. The results of the student questionnaire showed a association between students’ social interactions, a desire for school work to more closely reflect life, and a request for more and varied extra-curricular activities. These findings

were reflective of the guiding theorists in the study Dewey, Dawkins, and Vygotsky. Through careful analysis, the researcher recognized the student questionnaire failed to create a cohesive definition of academic readiness through the student lens. Therefore, Cycle II incorporated voluntary student focus groups in order to address this issue. The instruments used in Cycle I measured the prevailing attitudes and perceptions held by staff and students in regards to academic readiness and engagement. This baseline assessment was necessary prior to developing cycles of action, which would address preparing a culture for change.

Cycle II continued collecting data on the current culture at Sonia by implementing a SWOT analysis conducted by the PLC and holding student focus groups to define academic readiness. Additionally, a series of three strategically located observations occurred to aid in validating the data collected from the SCTS. These observations were looking for differences in espoused theories of collaboration and collegiality vs. what was really happening among staff members. Observations confirmed that little collegiality was occurring. Staff, as indicated on the SCTS, was isolating themselves or socializing with friends, not colleagues.

The SWOT analysis led to the conclusions that the teaching and support staffs were Sonia's strengths as well as some of the traditions families and community supported, such as Ms. Sonia Pageant and Motown Review. The weakest link was the annual administration turnover, creating confusion in vision, mission, and routines. Furthermore, weaknesses at Sonia were indicated as the disrepair of the facility as well as district mandates and curriculum benchmarks changing constantly. The major threat to

Sonia was viewed as the state takeover rumors as well as the increasing number of neighborhood charter schools.

Seven student focus groups were formed involving 62 students: 23 male and 39 female. The focus groups represented all homerooms as well as general education students (48), inclusion students (6), and special education students (8). Collected data were chunked into four reoccurring themes, which defined academic readiness: student expectations, tools, attitudes, and behaviors. Extraneous variables affecting learning were brought to the forefront; these require further study to assess impact on academic readiness and student engagement and were identified as teacher professionalism and relevancy of lessons.

Cycle III was a planning and reflective phase. Careful review of the data analysis of Cycles I and II occurred. Content analysis reoccurred for all observations, focus groups, PLC notes, anecdotal information, informal conversations, and researcher journals were coded looking for themes. A codebook was developed which aligned recurring themes and statements to each question (Creswell, 2009). Trend analysis identified themes and patterns indicative of the perceptions and attitudes of staff and students regarding academic readiness and engagement on which change strategies were developed to be implemented in Cycle IV.

**Cycle III trend analysis of research question one.** How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities impact eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement? Four factors affecting student academic readiness were chunked as: relevance of work, instructional strategies, environment, and necessary tools. Data indicated that the biggest influence on student engagement was how much fun was

perceived in an activity followed by peer response. Furthermore, data analysis revealed barriers to engagement as personal frustration, staff professionalism, and influence of peers, anger, and lack of preparation. Overall 37% of males and 44% of females surveyed indicated they participated at Sonia; of these students 9% of the males and 16% of the females reported actively engaging in academic pursuits.

**Cycle III trend analysis of research question two.** What effect does voluntary participation in a Professional Learning Community, by eighth grade teachers, have on student academic readiness and engagement? Limited trend analysis aligning with this question was available. The PLC was formed in late May 2011. Attendance at each meeting thus far had been 100%. Members engaged in a SWOT analysis of Sonia, which led to identifying school strengths as staff and a history of traditional celebrations. Sonia weaknesses lie in the facility itself, district reputation, and annual administrative team changes. A local threat was recognized as the increasing number of Bartlett City charter schools as well as rumors of a school merger.

Cycle IV consisted of initial extra-curricular activities designed to bring about changes in academic readiness and engagement. Three distinct categories of activities were designed based on current research and Sonia student responses to survey and questionnaire. Service learning, athletics, and academic activities were utilized. Activities began the first week of school and were scheduled to continue on a bi-weekly basis through Thanksgiving recess. Academic outcomes used to measure success were student attendance, tardiness, and behavior referrals among eighth grade students. Early indicators showed a decrease of tardiness and absenteeism and a higher level of student engagement. The positive results noted in tardiness and absenteeism may not be related

solely to the steps taken by this study. As indicated in initial analysis during Cycle III of student attendance and lateness, many students walked younger siblings to school prior to arriving at Sonia. Now with the merger of Eccer Elementary and Sonia Middle School many students did not have to walk their brothers and sisters anywhere else. There was not an effective way to measure this phenomenon during the study.

It was during this cycle the PLC experienced the personal loss of one of its members, affecting the moral of building staff. Additionally, a newly appointed administration team was impacting the study by cancelling planned activities at the last moment and demonstrating a lack of support for the study. It was through the commitment of the researcher and the use of personal connections that the study moved forward. A 6-month re-administration of the SCTS confirmed school culture had plunged. Three months after the new administration team arrived, staff viewed collaboration as having plunged 4.39 points; collegiality 8.65 points, and self-efficacy 3.94 points. Sonia school culture was experiencing a negative change in culture (Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2004). A limitation of the findings is that the researcher failed to design a strategy that would identify PLC members' responses on the SCTS; had this occurred it would be another method of validating observable improvements within the eighth grade PLC.

Data collected from Cycle V through PLC notes, researcher journaling, and informal observations showed small signs of success strictly within the eighth grade. Measuring success by Gladwell's (2002) contagious behavior as well as Kotter's (2007) eight keys to change leadership, there became within the eighth grade students and staffs a cultural shift. Staff pedagogy became one of small personal successes. PLC members

began to identify and address specific student challenges to success. This visible empathy and personalization of academic readiness led to students engaging consistently with teachers. An observable carry-over built through engagement in extra-curricular activities for students and staff supporting one another in a PLC became evident in everyday lessons.

Cycle VI was an unanticipated but telling occurrence. It consisted of two final activities, which were led by a student and a teacher independently. Additionally, in a quiet unobtrusive manner, a second PLC member lead the study in a powerful direction by demonstrating all staff, regardless of job title, has the ability to lead and impact student success in school. The activities in Cycle VI demonstrated the capacity building and team leadership that occurred throughout the study. Among the eighth grade PLC members, significant culture shift had taken place regarding how staff can positively impact academic readiness and student engagement at Sonia Middle School.

Subsequently students demonstrated if given the opportunity and guidance they will become leaders. Supporting the research base of Dawkins (1982), Sonia students who participated in extra-curricular activities developed positive self-esteem, which began transferring if not to the classroom to supportive adults. The students' accomplishments outside the classroom assisted in connecting parents to the school. Further study is needed to see what impacts this parental connection can develop into.

**Conclusion.** Chapter IV delineated the activities of each action research cycle. The data collected were presented in the sequential manner they were gathered. The researcher reported findings in both narrative and graphic formats through the use of

tables and charts and descriptive analysis. Quotes from interviews and observations were utilized to give rich details to Sonia's story.

Interviews and observations of students and staff were conducted throughout the study. Observations of students, staff, and administrators enriched the picture of poor collaboration and collegiality throughout the school. This action research study focused on impacting the eighth grade staff and students. The purposeful selection of grade eight was to ready them for academic engagement in high school.

Cycles I and II examined the existing culture at Sonia, laying the baseline for the study. One notable piece of evidence pointing to Sonia's growing toxic culture was when the Eccer staff physically moved themselves away from the administration during staff meetings. A cohort of elementary teachers, who in the beginning of the school year aligned themselves closely with the administration, evidenced by their demeanor and seating at staff meetings, no longer sat near the administrators. The interviews along with focus groups gave rich detail of teacher and student perspectives on what academic readiness looked like and what was necessary to create a culture of academic readiness and engagement at Sonia.

Cycles IV, V, and VI detailed the activities and events, challenges and successes that occurred during the study. Key to the success of the study was the development of leadership from within the classroom. Research from Barth (1991), Fullan (2001), and Kotter (2007) on leadership was expanded to include all staff, not just teachers. One significant member of the PLC, who is not a teacher, became a quiet effectual leader. Furthermore, student leadership was developed through the M & M program, which led to the creation of a flag football league planned and implemented by the students.

Chapter V will discuss the implications of these findings and the direction this researcher recommends for further study.



## Chapter V

### Implications and Conclusion

This chapter presents a summary discussion of the implications and recommendations from the examination of one urban school's efforts in preparing for change. The researcher began with the premise that by examining Sonia Middle School's readiness to change through the lenses of extra-curricular activities and a professional learning community, a culture of academic readiness and engagement could be created. Findings from the study may advance understanding in the educational field of the need to prepare the school culture for change *prior* to implementing turnaround strategies. Additionally, this research contributes new information regarding personalized school reform efforts and diversification of professional learning communities.

The study developed a professional learning community and deliberately planned activities designed to influence students' academic readiness and school engagement within Sonia's eighth grade class of 2012. The study addressed two research questions:

1. How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?
2. In what ways does the voluntary participation of eighth grade faculty in a Professional Learning Community influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?

The researcher developed an engagement model, unique to Bartlett School District, which individualized change efforts by examining the current culture of Sonia Middle School and capitalized on self-identified strengths while working to alleviate weaknesses in order to create transformative change. Through the use of in-house

feedback and a design reflective of the challenges facing Sonia Middle School, this study advances the idea that specific school culture and environment must be addressed before academic progress can be made. Specifically, reform efforts tailored to individual schools are similar to individualized learning plans and are necessary to address educational deficits. Embracing Fullan's (2001) statement "Leadership, then is not mobilizing people to solve problems we already know how to solve, but to help them confront problems that have never yet been successfully addressed" (p. 3), the researcher planned a study designed to impact Sonia's school culture and engagement in the eighth grade.

This study incorporated multiple deliberately planned activities to promote student engagement. These activities were derived from student requests during focus group sessions as well as brought to the researcher from participants while the study was ongoing. Building on previous research utilizing athletics to promote student engagement among marginalized high school students (Brown & Evans, 2002; Dawkins, 1982; Dawkins et al., 2006; Dawkins et al., 2008; O'Bryan et al., 2008), this study produced moderate success rates implementing activities focused on academics, athletics, and community service.

Additionally, a professional learning community was established for eighth grade staff that focused on creating collaborative opportunities, as well as providing a supportive collegial environment. The unique quality of the Sonia PLC was that it included staff from all job areas, not just teachers. The diversity of the PLC more closely reflected staff that the students interacted with on a daily basis as well as represented the jobs more closely associated with their families. The contributions each PLC member made gave a kaleidoscope of ideas through which to view and address student

engagement and academic readiness. The influence of the PLC on student academic readiness and engagement was analyzed through data collected using the School Culture Triage Survey, PLC notes, interviews, and observations.

### **Responding to the Research**

**Research question one.** Research question one asked, “How does participation in deliberately planned extra-curricular activities influence eighth grade students’ academic readiness and engagement?” Offering a variety of deliberately planned activities increased eighth grade student participation from a self-reported 3% during the 2010-2011 school year to a range of 3-20% during the 2011-2012 year as documented by activity attendance records. This increased participation may be linked to the diverse offerings, personal direction from staff members, and student input into the activities offered. Interesting to note were the two activities that generated the most interest were community service programs where students had the opportunity to help others (the Model & Mentor program and Reading Buddies). Additionally, the study found that the Morning Gym Time program was the most widely participated athletic program at school, with 23% of the class attending on a regular basis. This participation rate was greater than the district organized competitive sports programs.

Eighth grade behavioral referrals were reduced by 22% and tardiness reduced by 20% on mornings the gym was open prior to school. Tardiness among eighth graders was reduced by 22%. These data are displayed in Figure 7. However, these data must be interpreted with caution. These findings may not be a result of the singular offering of an early morning activity, but rather a combination of the activity, as well as the fact that Sonia became a Family School, housing grades K-8. For example, students who were late

to school in seventh grade due to walking a younger sibling to school can now just bring the sibling with them to Sonia. The researcher failed to extrapolate these data from the onset. It is interesting to note that a review of PLC notes and informal dialogues indicated the PLC membership felt students who engaged in the planned activities were more receptive to instruction and open to learning. In general, it appeared the relationship developed between the students and their PLC mentor did have some degree of influence on students' academic readiness and engagement in the classroom

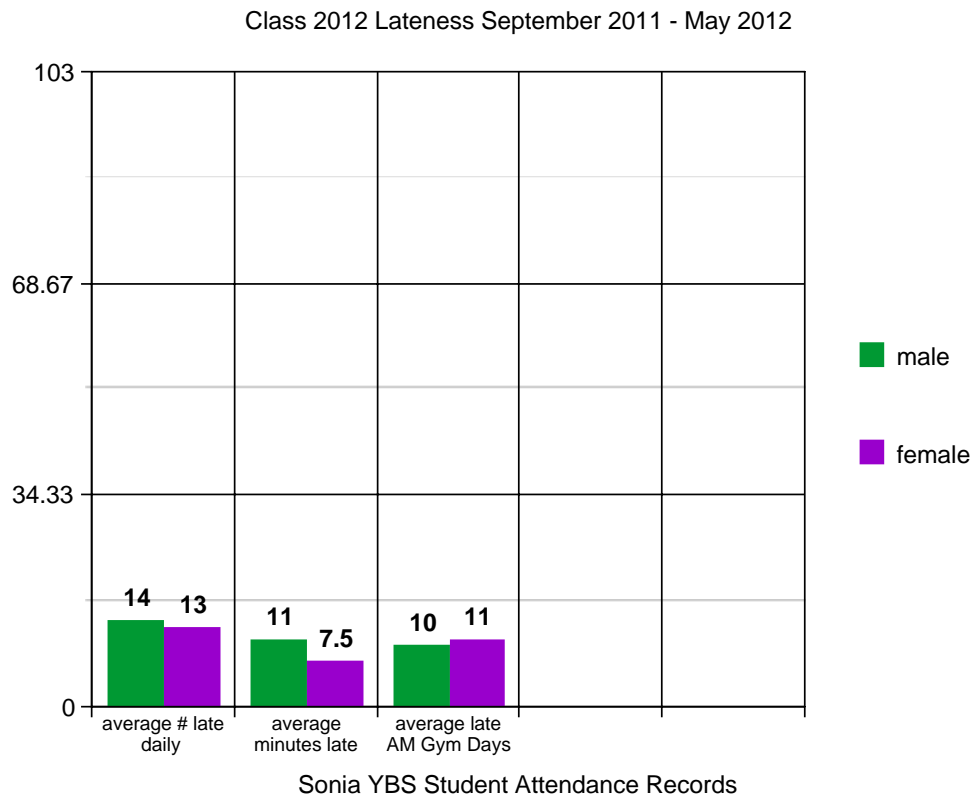


Figure 7. Student Lateness September 2011 – May 2012.

**Research question two.** Research question two asked, “In what ways does the voluntary participation of eighth grade faculty in a Professional Learning Community

influence eighth grade students' academic readiness and engagement?" Data collected from the study suggest consistent discussion of student academic readiness issues in a supportive collegial environment revitalized staff and encouraged engagement. Although the focus of the PLC at Sonia differs from traditional PLC data group studies, by focusing on supporting staff through change, and implementing strategies to impact student readiness to learn, the findings confirm previous studies that participation in a PLC builds capacity within teachers to problem solve and collaborate (DuFour, 2003, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Gladwell, 2002; Hord, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002).

The diversity of the Professional Learning Community, structured to include all staff regardless of job description, differed from the traditional teacher-oriented, data-driven professional learning community model (DuFour, 2003, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). Including all staff fulfilled the study's "need for members to have multi-abilities and multiple strengths," leant strength to understanding the constraints that impacted engagement, and provided an examination of academic readiness from multiple lenses (Putnam et al., 2009, p. 27). Moreover, diverse staff participation allowed for mentoring from a position of multiple life experiences. These various intelligences allowed the PLC to analyze and plan from many perspectives. Furthermore, the variety of staff members allowed the PLC an overall view of student actions and behaviors in forums beyond the traditional classroom, enhancing the picture of school culture.

Interviews and observations of students and faculty/staff were conducted throughout the study. These interviews and observations provided supplemental evidence

of student academic readiness, as well as engagement and collaboration in faculty/staff interactions. Data from the SCTS indicated a lack of faculty/staff collaboration. However, faculty/staff interviews and observations demonstrated specific areas where they were willing and eager to collaborate. The PLC became a vehicle for learning, collaboration, and engagement for the eighth grade faculty/staff members. Two staff members previously rejected leadership roles; Ms. Crystal and Officer Sky provide evidence of this. Yet, throughout the study, Ms. Crystal began to create relevant learning experiences for her students (Dewey, 1915/2010; Vygotsky, 1978), as well as take a leadership role on the eighth grade floor coming out of her classroom and into the halls. Additionally, Officer Sky volunteered to mentor a student. Both PLC members stated the collegial support they felt from the group revitalized each to re-engage. Three disconfirming items in the data revealed: 1) collaboration did not involve whole school planning, 2) collaboration did not involve participation by administrators, and 3) the change efforts did not have a generalized effect within Sonia. Observations of staff meetings and hallway interactions demonstrated a continued lack of capacity building within the school. Further research may focus on improving collegiality and collaboration on a large scale within Sonia. It is not suggested that membership in the PLC resolved the issues which caused Sonia teachers to disengage, rather, findings indicate that PLC members “got knocked down but they got up again” (Chumbawamba, 1997).

### **Implications Related to Sonia’s Teaching Practices**

There are practice-based implications the study offers for changing academic readiness and engagement in Sonia Middle School. This study found that on days the eighth grade students had the opportunity to arrive to school early and begin their day by

socializing, absenteeism dropped, behavior referrals decreased, and students' academic performance was enhanced. The membership of the PLC discussed this finding and correlated it to the way most teachers arrive for work. "I get here early so I can have my coffee and talk to colleagues" (Ms. Eljay). Mr. Springstein stated,

It makes sense. The days I run in right with the kids I am distracted and feel like I am running to catch up all day long. As opposed to the days I come in, chat with a few people and come into my room and set up slowly.

A simple implementation of this finding is to schedule the gym and a game room to be open daily before school begins. Although Sonia currently serves breakfast to students, the cafeteria is only open for 20 minutes before class and students are not allowed to enter if not eating breakfast, thereby limiting the number of participating students.

Furthermore, a significant finding revealed the eighth graders enjoyed working with the younger students as Models & Mentors. Teachers of younger students were appreciative of their assistance in the cafeteria opening milk cartons, walking students to the bathroom, playing games as they waited to be called to the lunch line, or just talking with the children. In addition to the 22 students who participated in Models & Mentors, there were always students striving to meet the criteria to participate. This program could be further developed to assist in the classroom with learning stations or special projects. Learning stations give the students an opportunity for hands-on learning experiences, which incorporate the standards taught in classroom lessons. Learning stations can be used to reinforce concepts, spark interest in learning, diversify educational constructs for each child, as well as motivate and engage learners (Jarrett, 2010). At Sonia, learning stations provide an opportunity for the classroom teacher to work with small numbers of children to reinforce concepts and teach to mastery. The management of station learning

can become problematic when the students are young and the numbers large. Utilizing Models & Mentors at station time would be an effective tool in managing student movement, materials, and reinforcing basic concepts. A current example is the book “All About (fill in the blank)” that eighth graders have been working on with the first grade. Eighth grade students were partnered with first graders to create a book about the first grader for his family at the end of the school year. Eighth graders have helped the students write a personal history of first grade. Utilizing e-book software, the students collaborated and created a personalized published book for all 26 students. This is not a project the classroom teacher could have managed on her own without sacrificing instructional time.

This research suggests a need for staff professional development on experiential learning and the value it has to daily academic work on a district level, as well as individual teaching practices. There is such a focus on high stakes testing that experiential learning as well as academic disciplines outside of math or language arts are taking a back seat at Sonia – if not eliminated all together. Gone are the “teachable moments” that connect real life to the classroom, rather it is a forced march to the test. This dilemma is not exclusive to Sonia, but exists on a local and national level. Dewey began the question of what are knowledge and the nature of learning in his works and this question has gotten lost in the era of high stakes testing.

### **Contributing to the Body of Knowledge**

The seminal contribution of this study may be the expressed frustrations of teachers who feel sidelined in school reform issues. Voiced by Sonia teachers are how NCLB, mandated testing, and focus on math and language arts has diminished student



appreciation and knowledge of other subject areas. There is a strong sense that high stakes testing has ostracized teachers of other disciplines and thereby focusing student attention and concern on math and language arts only. An exhaustive search of literature has failed to turn up longitudinal studies regarding what impact NCLB, high stakes testing, and national or local mandates have had on student achievement and engagement in non-math and language arts classes. Currently, the Bartlett school District mandates 90 minutes daily for math and language arts. Beginning in fall of 2014, students in grades 1-6 will be mandated to receive 200 minutes of language arts daily.

This study has inadvertently revealed perceptions and attitudes Sonia teachers have in this regard. Teachers voiced frustration at being left out of reform discussions, as well as being professionally disrespected by students and other staff members. To what extent these feelings of marginalization have impacted school culture and climate for learning is unclear. Some of the comments obtained from Sonia staff during interviews and informal conversations indicate their frustration.

I am not included at all in discussions of making AYP or changing the school. My subject area (social studies) gets no respect. I don't teach to the test but I can see the students are very frustrated by unit testing; once behind they get lost.  
(Mr. Springstein)

I never know when I am teaching. Classes get cancelled all the time so students can take Benchmark and SMI tests. The Data leader keeps sending out emails about DARs and reports due but I have no idea what they mean. The administration wants me to teach using data but the only teachers with data access are the math and language arts teachers. I have given up – sometimes I don't see a class of students for 4 weeks. I think the principal thinks we are all self-contained elementary teachers. (Mr. Gold)

I don't feel my immediate supervisors maximize the potential of the Arts to reform education. I do feel my district supervisor, RB, advocated strongly for the arts' inclusion and importance in reform and education in general. Teaching to the test marginalizes any subject not specifically tested. It teaches students how to  
(Mr. Jones)

I am tired of my students telling me my class doesn't matter. It doesn't help when math teachers or language arts but mostly math keep students during my class time to "finish up work". I am tired of explaining to staff and students that state law also requires my discipline, in fact it is the only state mandated by time requirement in middle school (Mr. Vick)

Currently there is not a comprehensive body of literature to support my premise that disregarding disciplines contributes to the lack of collaboration and collegiality within a school and ultimately creating a poor academic culture. I do not believe these feelings of diminished value are unique to Sonia staff. On a national level we continue to discuss how United States students compare to other high performing countries in math and reading scores (Beach & Lindahl, 2007; Borman et al., 2008; Elliott, 2013), occasionally including science in the discussion. What of history, the arts, and humanities? Currently the Bartlett District mandates 90 minutes of math daily and beginning in Fall 2013, 200 minutes of language arts daily for students in grades 1-6; this leaves little time for any other disciplines. Yet as research shows, it is the other disciplines such as the arts, technology, physical education, and the humanities where students can more readily connect lessons of the classroom to real life experiences and actively engage in learning: "ironically the elimination of social studies and science reduces the likelihood students will have the chance to use reading and math skills in real contexts" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 15). This emerging theory deserves to be further explored in a local and national conversation.

This research study has added to the body of literature by introducing responsive school turnaround efforts from within the school. This study was the first school reform effort for the Sonia School that started from within the school, rather than buying a reform model from an outside provider. This action research study responded to the gaps

in literature, which called for “experimental interventions focusing on student motivation and academic readiness” (Wentzel, 1998, p. 207). Researchers have called for expanding empirical knowledge of personalized school reform efforts (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Pinkus, 2009; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2012) and this study has, by examining extra-curricular activities and professional learning communities in creating a culture ready for change, answered that call.

Unique to this study was the change reform effort coming from within the school and incorporating specific empirical knowledge from students and staff. “Successful school improvement can only occur when schools apply those strategies that best fit their own context and particular developmental needs” (Harris, 2002, p. 4). Findings included reports regarding successful activities and programs were designed based on staff and student needs. Furthermore, both students and staff became empowered through the process to design additional academic and mentoring activities, reflecting an unanticipated, but valuable, growth in leadership skills reflective of their commitment in contributing to the cultural change within Sonia. Senge (2000) sites the reciprocal process of leadership, where the follower takes the lead and “enables participants to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose” (p. 404).

This study contributed to the body of empirical research, which empowers teachers to lead from within the confines of their classroom. It has opened the lines of communication at Sonia among teachers who individually have been isolated in classrooms thinking alone. The eighth grade PLC members inadvertently have become role models for the staff. Through example and participation they have become who other teachers turn to for information and inspiration. Ms. Crystal’s serious cry of “I’m done!”

prior to shutting down has now become a rallying cry that means we need to brainstorm past the latest obstacle.

Additionally, the inclusion of previously marginalized staff members into the PLC resulted in developing leadership throughout the school. The study's findings support previous research that links participation in a Professional Learning Community to creating a culture of collaboration and academic inquiry. In this study, the PLC was created as a response to staff-voiced desire to collaborate at Sonia in order to establish a culture ready for change. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade PLC provided an opportunity for both the individual staff member and 8<sup>th</sup> grade team to establish a learning environment where both students and staff are engaged in daily (Fullan, 2001; Hord, 2004; Senge, 1990). The diverse membership of the PLC allowed staff members to contribute to identifying and solving extraneous variables affecting the everyday culture at Sonia through multiple lenses. PLC members became school leaders who identified and promoted strategies to solve problems within Sonia, in spite of administrative and district obstacles. The personal initiative shown by Ms. Crystal, Officer Sky, and the student M & Ms during Cycle VI reinforces DuFour's (2010) statement, "The success of the PLC concept depends not on the merit of the concept itself but on the most important element in the improvement of any school – the commitment and persistence of the people with in it" (DuFour, 2004, p. 3). Further research is recommended to delineate the contributions and development of non-teaching staff leadership through participation in a PLC.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study serves as a model for participatory action research design, which capitalizes on a school community's strengths to create an inclusive plan for change.

Designed in response to an existing problem within the researcher's school, the study is not designed to be generalizable to all urban schools (Craig, 2009). Focus variables for change at Sonia School were academic readiness and engagement among eighth grade students and staff. Research suggests these constructs must be addressed before substantial change can be made on the existing achievement deficit at Sonia (Barth, 2002; Fullan 2001, 2007; Kotter, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Several limitations to this research need to be acknowledged and considered when evaluating the study. One limitation may be the broad scope of the study for a novice researcher. Originally designed as a collaborative study shared by two colleagues, it became the work of a sole researcher due to shifting professional roles. A deeper examination of school culture could have occurred if the researcher had created a way to code the SCTS by job title, yet maintained faculty/staff anonymity. Overcoming this second limitation may have led to increased knowledge, resulting in further implications for action.

A third limitation identifies one issue, which was not explored in this study, but previous research reports suggest has a major impact on student academic readiness and engagement, is the role of parents and guardians. This study, which utilized Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Dewey's experiential learning theory, is incomplete without addressing the parental view of academic readiness and engagement. Originally, the second member of the research team was responsible for examining the engagement and interactions of parents/guardians whose children attend Sonia. When the research partnership dissolved due to other professional responsibilities, minimal parental input

was an unfortunate result. Further studies at Sonia need to address how to involve parents in the reengagement of students.

A significant weakness of the study was the lack of administrative support for any research efforts or activities within the building. Lack of cohesive beliefs in the change process and observable disregard for the incorporated activities resulted in an unvoiced expectation of failure. Administrators did not feel the sense of urgency, created within the Sonia faculty, staff, and student body prior to their arrival (Kotter, 1995). Building administrators felt the deliberately planned activities were “fun time” and held little to no value. Although both the researcher and the PLC attempted to highlight how building self-esteem and confidence outside the classroom was documented by prior research (Dewey, 1915/2010; Shernoff, & Hoogstra, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and had a clear relationship to academic productivity, Sonia administrators clung to “it’s not gonna (sic) be on the test” (Vice-Principal Chip).

In addition, both the principal and vice-principal were untested in their positions. Not only were they new to Sonia, they were new to their position. Fullan (2007) states that administrators who feel the need to prove themselves indirectly allow ego to block change. Sonia’s six-year history of changing administrators led the current team to only support district and state initiatives. Taking his lead from other district principals, Principal Newman often cancelled activities at the last minute with explanations such as, “I don’t know any other school in the district that is doing this.” The administration’s lack of urgency coupled with their need to prove themselves led to a dilemma of effectiveness for this study.

Argyris and Schön (1974) describe a dilemma of effectiveness when the implementation of change becomes less and less achievable. This study faced an administration change, which did not support the study design or findings. It became harder and harder to implement board approved activities. Study undertakings were sporadically cancelled rendering disengagement by staff and students.

Furthermore, a noteworthy extraneous variable to the study was the merger of Eccer Elementary School with Sonia Middle School. This merger may have inadvertently impacted student tardiness and attendance rates, as well as participation in extra-curricular activities for eighth graders who were responsible for getting their younger siblings to school. These younger siblings now attended the same school as their middle-grade siblings, rather than across town. Further research would be necessary to interpret data and determine the impact this school merger had on student engagement.

### **Implications Related to Research**

The results of this study are relevant to practitioners in K-12 urban schools attempting responsive school turnaround efforts. First, this study can serve as a resource for schools of comparable size and demographics to analyze their school's current culture through a new lens, which prioritizes staff and student perceptions and needs in preparing for change. This study, though small in scope, showed that by addressing school culture and readiness for change prior to implementing restructuring mandates lead to higher levels of academic readiness and engagement, and over time may narrow the educational deficit by producing authentic learning opportunities. As far back as Dewey (1915) there has been a call to connect learning to real life. Through experiential education, extra-curricular activities, and relationship building, student engagement has increased,

especially in early adolescence (Baker, 1999; Battin et al., 2000; Braddock, 2005; Brown & Evans, 2002; Finn, 1993; Henig & Reville, 2011; Kowal et al., 2009; NMSA, 2003; Pinkus, 2009). One Sonia teacher indicated on the SCTS 1,

Anytime I can connect math or LAL to what we are doing I do. It shows the student that everything you do needs math and reading. We took a class trip to Wildwood where the Coast Guard talked about the angles necessary to beat a riptide. The more you show kids the more they will understand it works for everything – math and reading are truly life skills. (SCTS 7)

The study has utilized the Professional Learning Community concept in order to develop collaboration and collegiality specific to the eighth grade staff. The model created for this research differs from traditional teacher oriented Professional Learning Communities (Barth, 1991; DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Putnam et al., 2009) by including all staff members regardless of job description. Previously discussed in responding to the research this noteworthy difference had two major implications. First, staff members who are often the most visible to parents and students were given a voice and equal role in creating an environment ready for change. Previously at Sonia, PLC groups were made up of administrators, math and language arts teachers, and occasionally an additional subject area teacher. Never were security officers, custodians, or clerks invited to participate. Yet it is the security team, custodians, and clerks, which students interact with everyday in multiple ways. Additionally, our students at Sonia come from homes where more adult workers hold entry-level jobs rather than professional careers. Including all staff in the PLC showed the students that regardless of position, all staff members were valued and important in creating a collaborative educational community.



The PLC facilitated collaboration in order to develop instructional strategies and extra-curricular activities deliberately designed to address specific student needs within Sonia. Thus, individualizing strategies, which will promote engagement and academic readiness among a specific set of students and impact academic achievement, can give students a lifetime learning edge. Finn (1998) hypothesizes that “engagement behaviors are not just important in early years or during high school years but continue to be important in post school accomplishments as well” (p. 82).

Second, the utilization of the School Culture Triage Survey confirmed studies done by the Center for Improving School Culture (2012) by uncovering the underlying attitudes and beliefs of the culture and climate. Employing the SCTS in school turnaround design allows focus on a school’s specific needs, thereby individualizing the reform effort. The SCTS draws attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the school by examining collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy (Melton-Shutt, 2004; Wagner, 2006; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). This knowledge may provide insight to administrators and policy makers contemplating “resuscitating a particular institution that is in deep trouble and may need to evolve into a different form” (Senge, 2000, p. 556).

Lastly, this study may provide practitioners with a more thorough understanding of how to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities affecting their school in the current era of educational reform. Deal and Peterson (1993) state that school culture is the epicenter of change. In order to implement effective change, a leader must know the current culture of the school. A SWOT analysis can be used to offer helpful perspectives at any stage of a change initiative, but particularly in the planning phase. SWOT analysis is useful in exploring possibilities for change specific to your setting,

identifying existing cultural threats, and offering the opportunity for collaboration for all stakeholders. Furthermore, a SWOT analysis can be used as a communication tool to introduce change and turnaround initiatives reflective of stakeholder perceptions and attitudes specific to the setting.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The inquiry begun in this study is continuing to unfold as is natural with action research. Alternative avenues for potential study at Sonia, which would extend the research along the lines already conducted in this dissertation include: challenges in leading from within the classroom; individualizing student learning plans for all students; school-wide or grade level student mentoring; and building the parental support base.

As evidenced by the SCTS conducted in spring, 2011, as well as fall, 2011, the school culture suffers from lack of collegiality and collaboration. Sonia administrators and teachers must find ways to bond the staff through collaboration, especially in light of the two school staffs merging. Additionally, a study of best practices in school mergers with a focus on staff bonding as well as consensus on the rituals and routines that are followed would be beneficial; no longer is it acceptable to only follow the old Eccer or Sonia procedures.

Further studies are needed to incorporate the parental and guardian viewpoints of academic readiness and their expectations of student and staff engagement within Sonia. How and to what extent do parents expect teachers to engage their student in learning? What can be done to promote Sonia and the value of the education each child receives here in the community at large? How does Sonia incorporate parental and community talents into our learning community?

Furthermore, serious investigation at Sonia, in Bartlett district, and across the nation needs to focus on the marginalization of non-tested disciplines and teachers. The concerns and attitudes voiced by Sonia teachers are the tip of an iceberg. We do not yet know the full impact of high stakes testing on our children or education in general. Thirty years after *A Nation at Risk*, not much has changed (Elliott, 2014). In fact, at Sonia, elective courses and experiential learning is all but gone. Teachers and students nationally are dealing with the same issue. “Teachers are explicitly told not to take their students to art and music” (Taylor, Sheppard, Kinner, & Rosenthal, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

Sonia is currently experiencing rapid change. Since the study began, Sonia has changed from a Middle School to a Family School. It is a Regional Achievement Center School, which means that the New Jersey Department of Education is mandating methods of instruction and assessment. Enrollment is dropping and the population of Sonia is changing from an inclusive environment to one predominately attended by students with behavioral and academic challenges.

The challenge of bringing reform from within lies in having the correct leadership. This study began under an administration seeking change and acknowledging that the keys to Sonia’s success were within the school. The researcher was empowered not only to seek input, but also to act upon the data collected. Staff and students rallied to participate in the study and contribute their thoughts and opinions. Insightful discussions ensued among colleagues that had long been silent. In mid-stream the administration changed, the vision was not the same and underlying issues challenged the advancement of the study. Despite the lack of urgency for reform or respect for the teachers in the

classroom demonstrated by the administration, teacher leaders continued to step forward. I believe the study's lasting value is the beginning of honest dialogue among teachers of what is necessary to create a climate ready for academic success at Sonia.

The model put forth in this study could be expanded upon in order to support Sonia students and staff. Developing multiple inclusive supportive and collaborative professional learning communities that focus on strategies to foster academic readiness among all students and creating a culture of learning at Sonia is necessary, as is giving a voice and a value to all employees who come into contact with our students. Such an approach could lay the groundwork for Sonia's efforts in changing the school's reputation in the community and preparing a climate ready for the changes that will come with the state takeover in the 2013 school year.

The culture of failure is ingrained at Sonia and must be addressed immediately, but in scaffolded steps built for success. Lindahl (2007) supports tackling aspects of the dysfunctional culture: "diagnose the culture carefully and focus on modifying only very specific key values or assumptions not the entire culture" (p. 11).

This researcher has described and discussed specific action steps school leaders can take to analyze a school's readiness for change. By focusing on empowering staff through collaboration in a supportive Professional Learning Community, as well as deliberately planning activities designed to engage students and influence academic readiness, the study produced personal participant successes specific to the parameters of Sonia Middle School.

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## Appendix A

### Release Form

Student Participation in Research Study  
Parental/Guardian Release Form

#### **Preparing for Change: An Examination of an Urban School's Extra-Curricular Activities and Professional Learning Communities in Creating a Culture Ready for Change**

**Researcher:** Linda Brown-Bartlett

**Student Name** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

<b>Address</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Telephone:</b>
----------------	-------------	-------------------

I understand that participation in this research study by my child is strictly voluntary and they can withdraw at anytime.

I understand that any data or responses that my child may contribute throughout the duration of the research study are confidential and are to be protected.

I also understand that my child's identity will be protected and he/she will not be identified in the research report. Data with names or other identifiers (such as student numbers) will be disposed of when their use is complete

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### School Triage Survey Permission

**CENTER FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL CULTURE**  
**CREATING BETTER PLACES TO LEARN**  
**Box 51632**  
**Bowling Green, KY 42104**

#### **REGARDING PERMISSION TO USE THE SCHOOL CULTURE *TRIAGE* SURVEY FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES**

Your request for permission to use the School Culture *Triage* Survey in your research is hereby granted with the following stipulations:

- The School Culture *Triage* Survey is to be used solely for your research study and shall not be sold or used with any compensated consultive activities;
- The copyright shall appear on all copies of the School Culture *Triage* Survey instrument;
- Your research study and one copy of reports, articles, and other printed materials that make use of the School Culture *Triage* Survey data shall be promptly sent to the Center for Improving School Culture;
- This agreement is not transferable to other researchers without the express consent of the Center for Improving School Culture.

Please sign and return this document to CISC, Box 51632, Bowling Green, KY 42104

Best regards,

Christopher R. Wagner, Ph.D.  
President and Founder, Center for Improving School Culture

**I, Linda Brown-Bartlett understand the above conditions of use and agree to abide by these terms and conditions.**

**Signed:** Linda Brown-Bartlett

**Date 2/10/11**

## Appendix C

### School Culture Triage Survey Form

**CISC Center for Improving School Culture**  
***CREATING BETTER PLACES TO LEARN***

#### Professional Collaboration

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals.

1 2 3 4 5

**TOTAL: \_\_\_\_\_**

#### Affiliative Collegiality

1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values

1 2 3 4 5

2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others' company.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Our school reflects a true "sense" of community.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff?

1 2 3 4 5

5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.

1      2      3      4      5

6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.

1      2      3      4      5

**TOTAL= \_\_\_\_\_**

#### Self-Determination/Efficacy

1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.

1      2      3      4      5

2. School members are interdependent and value each other.

1      2      3      4      5

3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.

1      2      3      4      5

4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.

1      2      3      4      5

5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.

1      2      3      4      5

6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here.

1      2      3      4      5

**TOTAL= \_\_\_\_\_**

## Appendix D

### Responsive Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. My name is Linda Brown-Bartlett and I am a doctoral student at Rowan University. My research study is entitled: Examining Extra-Curricular Activities and Professional Learning Communities as Valuable Tools in School Reform. My goal is to gather data from colleagues, students, families and community members and utilize these findings to develop professional learning communities and extra-curricular activities to improve student academic readiness and improve stakeholder engagement in the Class of 2012.

*How do you define academic readiness?*

*What are some indicators that can address academic readiness in a middle school student?*

*In your opinion what barriers or challenges do our students face to be:  
Academically ready  
Engage in class*

*What do you perceive the responsibilities of the \_\_\_\_\_ is in ensuring students are ready for school?*

*Student  
Parent  
Teacher  
School Level Administration  
District Administration*

*Do you have any additional thoughts or comments you would like me to consider as I pursue my study?*



## Appendix E

### Formal Observation Format

- 1. Collegiality.** The way adults treat each other, i.e., respect and harmony vs. disrespect and discord.
- 2. Efficacy.** Feeling of ownership or capacity to influence decisions; i.e., do people tend to live with or solve problems?
- 3. High expectations of self and others.** Excellence is acknowledged; improvement is celebrated, supported, and shared.
- 4. Experimentation and entrepreneurship.** New ideas abound and are respected no matter where they come from. Invention occurs.
- 5. Trust and confidence.** Participants believe in the leaders and each other based on the match between creeds and deeds.
- 6. Tangible support.** Improvement efforts are inclusive, abundant resources are made available to all.
- 7. Appreciation and recognition of improvement.** People feel special and act special.
- 8. Humor.** Caring is expressed through "kidding" or joking in tasteful ways.
- 9. Shared decision-making by all participants.** Those affected by a decision are involved in making and implementing the decision.
- 10. Shared vision.** Staff known and support school vision, which is demonstrated in daily activities.
- 11. Traditions.** The school has identifiable celebrations and rituals that are important to the school community and supported by building administration.
- 12. Open and honest communication.** Information flows throughout the organization

in formal and informal channels. Everyone receives information on a timely and inclusive manner. Multiple forms of communication are used effectively.

\*Adapted from the CISC Observation Protocol

## Appendix F

### Student Focus Group Protocol

Date \_\_\_\_\_ # Participants \_\_\_\_\_

Facilitator \_\_\_\_\_ Stratified Group \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

Room will be set up in a circle formation prior to group arrival. Light refreshments will be available for all participants. Facilitator will greet participants and engage in conversation until everyone has arrived.

#### **Opening:** Greeting and Introduction (5 minutes)

Purpose: Welcome participants and express appreciation. Explain-participant's role in research – Facilitator's role in focus group; purpose of today's focus group

Confidentiality: highlight definition of confidentiality

Recording: Discuss the presence of an audio equipment.

*Our focus groups are being recorded in order to retain the information and comments you share. The tapes will be transcribed and listened to or read only in strict anonymity. Your comments will be transcribed only as information with no identifying markers. This information will be used only by those involved in this research project in order to study and improve our school culture and student academic outcomes.*

#### **Icebreaker (5 minutes)**

This is a FUN activity to introduce one another in the group. Purpose is to relax group and develop relationships. (If group meets multiple times icebreaker will change to reflect focus of the day).

### **Establishing a Safe Environment (2 minutes)**

Participants should feel free to speak openly and freely –revealing their own experiences or point of view additionally participants can speak on things they have observed first-hand.

The data is the experience or observation of participants.

All answers are valuable there is no right or wrong answer!

### **Work Session (25 minutes)**

*Topics will be developed from analyzing the School Culture Triage Audit. (phase one of the study)*

### **Wrap-up (5minutes)**

Purpose: express appreciation and gratitude for sharing

Emphasize the value of sharing their voice in the study.

Ideas will count towards change

THANK YOU

### **Analyze & Collaborate (own time)**

Researcher will transcribe sessions and analyze for reoccurring themes.

Focus group designed to take no more than 42 minutes. One class period

## Appendix G

### Scoring the School Culture Triage Survey

The lowest triage score is 17 and the highest score is 85. After using the triage questions in several program evaluations, our data suggest the following:

17–40 Critical and immediate attention necessary. Conduct a full-scale assessment of your school’s culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing the culture.

41–59 Modifications and improvements are necessary. Begin with a more intense assessment of your school’s culture to determine which area is in most need of improvement.

60–75 Monitor and maintain making positive adjustments. 76–85 Amazing! We have never had a score higher than 75!

*Before engaging in an elaborate and extensive analysis of the school culture, this quick assessment of current status can assist in determining the wise allocation of time and resources.*

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## Appendix H

### May 2011 Staff Response to SCTS

#### CISC Center for Improving School Culture *CREATING BETTER PLACES TO LEARN*

School Culture Triage Survey Tally For

*\*Italicized numerals indicate responses per each question*

#### Professional Collaboration

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.

1	2	3	4	5	
9	9	16	24	0	= $171 \div 58 = 2.9$

2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.

1	2	3	4	5	
18	16	15	9	0	= $131 \div 58 = 2.25$

3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.

1	2	3	4	5	
19	15	18	6	0	= $127 \div 58 = 2.18$

4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.

1	2	3	4	5	
27	9	21	1	0	= $112 \div 58 = 1.93$

5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals.

1	2	3	4	5	
12	9	24	6	3	= $150 \div 54 = 2.77$

**TOTAL: 12.03**

## Affiliative Collegiality

1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 9 & 6 & 21 & 20 & 3 \end{array} = \underline{179 \div 58 = 3.08}$$

2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others' company.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 12 & 8 & 27 & 9 & 0 \end{array} = \underline{177 \div 56 = 3.1}$$

3. Our school reflects a true "sense" of community.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 23 & 7 & 19 & 6 & 3 \end{array} = \underline{133 \div 58 = 2.29}$$

4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff?

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 12 & 18 & 25 & 3 & 0 \end{array} = \underline{135 \div 58 = 2.32}$$

5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 12 & 9 & 21 & 9 & 3 \end{array} = \underline{144 \div 54 = 2.66}$$

6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 15 & 18 & 12 & 9 & 4 \end{array} = \underline{133 \div 58 = 2.29}$$

**TOTAL= 15.74**

### Self-Determination/Efficacy

1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 21 & 15 & 19 & 3 & 0 \end{array} = \underline{120 \div 58 = 2.06}$$

2. School members are interdependent and value each other.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 12 & 9 & 12 & 21 & 3 \end{array} = \underline{168 \div 57 = 2.9}$$

3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 15 & 15 & 18 & 3 & 3 \end{array} = \underline{111 \div 54 = 2.05}$$

4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 15 & 18 & 15 & 6 & 0 \end{array} = \underline{120 \div 54 = 2.22}$$

5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 3 & 24 & 12 & 12 & 3 \end{array} = \underline{150 \div 54 = 2.77}$$

6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here.

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\ 9 & 6 & 21 & 15 & 6 \end{array} = \underline{174 \div 57 = 3.0}$$

**TOTAL= 15.0**

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