

CLOSING THE ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP:  
A CASE STUDY OF A SUCCESSFUL KANSAS SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Closing The Economic Achievement Gap:  
A Case Study of a Successful Kansas Secondary School

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## DEDICATION

To my wife, Charleen, and my daughters, Megan, Morgan and Madison.

The safeguard of democracy is an educated citizenry.

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## ABSTRACT

In spite of efforts at the federal, state, and local levels, the achievement gap has persisted over time. Recent NCLB legislation has brought renewed attention to the achievement gap, forcing schools to address it. Despite the daunting task of mediating the impact of poverty, some schools have made substantial progress in narrowing the achievement gap with low-income students. This qualitative case study of one successful Kansas public secondary school has concluded the caring actions of teachers and administrators can serve as important sources of social capital for economically disadvantaged students, reducing the achievement gap between them and economically advantaged students and improving their likelihood of success in school.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

More than forty years after President Johnson's Great Society initiatives focused the nation's attention on addressing the inequalities of public education, economically advantaged and White students still consistently and significantly outperform economically disadvantaged and racial minority students academically in schools across the United States (Barton, 2003; Carter, 1999; Kansas State Department of Education, 2003; Weiss, 2003). This difference in performance is often referred to as the "achievement gap" and has been called "one of the most vexing problems in American education" (Rothman, 2001, p.1). Despite the general widespread agreement of the existence of the achievement gap, some schools seem to be closing the gap and meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. The purpose of the research study was to examine a school that has made considerable progress in closing the achievement gap and to offer explanations for its success.

This chapter is organized into three sections. First, the gap in achievement that exists in public schools between racial minority and White students and between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students is described. The gap is then examined from a historical background, and the nature of the gap is explained as it currently exists nationally and in Kansas, the state in which this study was conducted. The chapter concludes with a statement of the problem addressed in this study, objectives and research questions.

## *History and Background*

The achievement gap between poor and racial minority students, and economically advantaged and White students in the United States has been well documented (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Standard & Poors, 2005; U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2004a, 2004b). This section of the dissertation will trace the historical context of the achievement gap, focusing on federal legislation over the last forty years designed to close the gap. It will also summarize the nature and size of the gap as it is currently measured nationally and in Kansas, the state where this study was conducted.

Following *Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education* in 1954, national attention was focused on closing the difference in achievement between African-American students and White students. In the early 1960's, the federal government initiated legislation designed to close the achievement gap: the Economic Opportunity Act (EAO) of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (National Center for Public Policy Research). The goal of ESEA was to improve the education of low income children through Title I programs designed to provide more resources and services to schools with high concentrations of poverty (Coady et al., 2003; Ryan, 2004; Watras, 2000). The Economic Opportunity Act provided federal money directly to local public agencies, private organizations, Indian Tribes and school systems to be used for preschool programs for three and four year olds who lived in poverty (Antunez, 2005; Ryan, 2004; Watras, 2000).

In 1966, the federal government funded a study to determine the progress made in expanding educational opportunities to minority students in the years following the 1954

landmark Supreme Court case *Brown versus Topeka Board of Education*. The study, titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, drew attention to the significant differences in academic achievement between economically advantaged White students and poor and racial minority students (Coleman et al., 1966). This report, known commonly as the Coleman report, determined that family socioeconomic status (SES) was the single best predictor of a child's schooling success and that public schools were not effective enough to offset the impact of SES. In spite of the Coleman report's dire assertion that schools were not likely to overcome the effects of poverty, the achievement gap between rich and poor; and racial minority and White students narrowed during the 1970's and 1980's. However, progress leveled off and the gap has remained relatively constant since then (Haycock, 2004; Hertert & Teague, 2003; Rothman, 2001; U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Recent federal legislation has once again brought national attention to the achievement gap and prompted schools and educators to once more focus attention on the goal of equity in education established during the 1960's. Rather than simply provide more resources and funding to address the needs of students in poverty, a strategy used by the original ESEA legislation, the reauthorization of ESEA in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act has focused on closing the achievement gap by requiring schools to meet uniform levels of achievement. All students, including subgroups of ethnic minority students, economically disadvantaged students, and special education students, must meet these standards. Stringent accountability measures are imposed on schools and districts that fail to raise the achievement of all students to a level deemed "proficient" (Coady et al., 2003).

### *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*

On January 8, 2002 President George W. Bush signed into law a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, ESEA. Given the title No Child Left Behind (NCLB) this reauthorization of ESEA draws attention to the achievement gap and attempts to close it by linking the standards movement to stringent accountability measures. The act requires states to adopt high standards in reading and math and to educate all students to proficiency on those standards by 2014 (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002)

NCLB requires states to develop academic standards in reading and math and administer annual assessments to measure student progress toward those standards. Each state retains control over its standards and sets its own cut score to define proficiency, but is required to demonstrate incremental progress each year until 2014, when 100% of all students must reach proficiency. NCLB outlines severe sanctions for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward those standards, the most severe of which is total loss of local control over the school. NCLB specifically targets racial and ethnic minority students, special education students, and low-income students by requiring schools to disaggregate test results for those sub-groups and mandating each of them make AYP toward those standards (Office of the Under Secretary, 2002; Van der Klaauw, 2005). In the next section, a deeper examination of the achievement gap and the context of the institutional and social factors that underlie the gap will reveal why those extremely ambitious goals are considered unrealistic by many researchers (Aronson, 2004; Fusarelli, 2004; Williams, 2003) and educators, and even dangerous by some (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Hale, 2004).

### *National Achievement Gap*

Researchers, educators, and statisticians measure the achievement gap with two primary indicators: achievement on reading and math assessments administered through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly referred to as NAEP<sup>1</sup>, and graduation rate. An examination of both these measures indicates poor and racial minority students still do not fare as well as middle to high-income and White students despite 40 years of efforts.

African American and Latino students who complete high school have skills in both reading and mathematics equivalent to the skills of White students in 8th grade (Haycock, 2004). On NAEP's 1998 reading assessments, 2000 math assessments, and 2000 science assessments students in poverty performed significantly below their advantaged classmates with twice as many poor students scoring below basic levels of proficiency than advantaged students (Hertert & Teague, 2003). On the 2003 NAEP, White and Asian/Pacific Islander students achieved higher scores than Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students. Hispanic and American Indian students outperformed Black students. At all grades in all subjects, the level of poverty in the school was negatively associated with achievement on the assessment (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Further examination of the scores reveals the average 8th grade racial minority student performs at about the level of the average 4th grade White student (Barton, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> NAEP administers reading and math tests annually to a sample of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in all 50 states.

Recent measures indicate students of color are more likely to drop out of high school than White students. For example, in 2001, the drop-out rate for Hispanics was 27.1%, for Blacks it was 10.9% and for Whites it was 7.3% (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Similar comparisons can be made between low-income students and their higher income peers. During the 12 months prior to October 2001, high school students living in low-income families dropped out of school at nearly six times the rate of students from high-income families (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2004b). About 11 percent of students from low-income families dropped out of high school, compared with 5 percent of middle-income students and 2 percent of students from high-income families (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2004a). Similar disparities in achievement and graduation rates can be found in the state of Kansas.

#### *Kansas Achievement Gap*

The state of Kansas Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA) system of accreditation aligns with NCLB and students are tested in reading in 5th grade, 8th grade, and 11th grade. Students are also tested in math at grades 4, 7 and 10. Schools are accredited according to quality criteria and performance criteria. Quality criteria include the curriculum offered, teacher qualifications, and graduation requirements. Performance criteria include graduation rate, attendance rate, and performance on state reading and math assessments. According to the Kansas State Department of Education (2003) “A significant disparity in the performance of students eligible for school lunch programs and those not eligible continues to be seen in Kansas” (p. 2). These disparities are evident

in the achievement of poor and racial minority students on state administered assessments required under NCLB and in graduation and dropout rates.

*Reading.* While scores on reading assessments required for NCLB indicate the gap between White students and African-American and Hispanic students has narrowed there continues to be a disparity in performance As can be seen in Table 1.1 (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005a), White students significantly outscore minority students at all grade levels tested, and the gap appears to widen as students move through school.

Table 1.1

2005 Kansas State Reading Assessment Results By Ethnicity

	% Proficient or Above 5th Grade	% Proficient or Above 8th Grade	% Proficient or Above 11th Grade
African-American	60.5	58.6	36.8
Hispanic	76.0	61.5	46.6
White	81.6	81.2	68.2

As evidenced in Table 1.2 below (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005a) a similar gap in achievement occurs in reading at all grade levels for economically disadvantaged students, measured by those students who are eligible for support under the federal school lunch nutrition guidelines for free and reduced-price meals. Again, the gap appears to widen as students move through school and the rate of students proficient at the 11th grade is considerably lower than at previous grades, which may indicate a

large gap in more advanced levels of thinking and reasoning which are not tested at lower levels (Popham, 2004; Rothstein, 2005).

Table 1.2

2005 Kansas State Reading Assessment by Income

	% Proficient or Above 5th Grade	% Proficient or Above 8th Grade	% Proficient or Above 11th Grade
Ineligible for Support	84.3	84.6	69.9
Eligible for Support	67.8	64.1	48.1

Students who are eligible for lunch support are twice as likely to score basic or below in reading assessments at the 5th and 8th grade and more than half of the 11th grade students eligible for lunch support who took the assessment scored below proficient.

*Math.* Consistent with national results, the achievement gap in Kansas is not confined to performance on reading assessments. Similar discrepancies are found in 2005 state math assessment results (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005a). Less than 25% of African American students and just 25.3% of Hispanic students scored proficient or better in math at the 10th grade. Table 1.3 details achievement results on the 2005 Kansas state math assessment for minority students.

Table 1.3

2005 Kansas State Math Assessments by Ethnicity

	% Proficient or Above 4th Grade	% Proficient or Above 7th Grade	% Proficient or Above 10th Grade
African-American	68.2	40.8	22.0
Hispanic	71.6	48.7	25.3
White	89.1	74.5	57.4

As with reading, the gap in math achievement is evident in economic disparities as well as race, widens as students progress through the system and is most prevalent at the high school level. Table 1.4 summarizes achievement results on the 2005 Kansas State Math Assessment for economically disadvantaged students, again disaggregated by those students who are eligible for support under the federal school lunch nutrition guidelines. As can be seen at the 4th grade, economically disadvantaged students are twice as likely to score basic or below and at the 10th grade less than one-third of the economically disadvantaged students scored proficient or above.

Table 1.4

2005 Kansas State Math Assessments by Income

	% Proficient or Above 4th Grade	% Proficient or Above 7th Grade	% Proficient or Above 10th Grade
Ineligible for Support	90.1	78.4	59.9
Eligible for Support	76.9	53.3	32.1

*Graduation and dropout rates.* With such a disparity in achievement among poor and racial minority students, it is logical that a similar disparity is found in graduation and dropout rates. Table 1.5 summarizes graduation and dropout rates for all students by income and ethnicity. Graduation rates are calculated by adding the number of seniors to the students who dropped out of that class after entering high school and dividing the number of graduates by the total. Dropout rates are calculated by the number of students in that grade who dropped out of school divided by the total number of students in that class. Graduation rates are a four-year indicator; dropout rates are a one-year indicator. Because different formulas are used to calculate graduation and dropout rates, one is not the inverse of the other (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005a). It should also be noted that seniors who do not graduate but return to school and are awarded a diploma after their cohort class graduates do not count toward the graduation rate in these statistics.

Table 1.5

Kansas 2005 Graduation and Dropout Rate

	2005 Graduation Rate	2005 Dropout Rate
All Students	89.1	1.4
Eligible for Lunch Support	81.6	1.4
White	90.9	1.2
African-American	81.2	2.5
Hispanic	77.9	2.4
Native American	79.9	2.3

The statistics clearly demonstrate a gap in graduation rate between racial minorities and white students and between low-income students and economically advantaged students in the state of Kansas. For the first time ever; however, the drop-out rate for low-income students equaled the drop-out rate for all students in 2005 (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005a).

Because the roots of the achievement gap are grounded in social inequalities that extend beyond the schoolhouse doors in both scope and influence, forty years of federal interventions aimed at closing that gap have been relatively ineffective. The most recent attempt to address the gap through federal legislation, NCLB, is not likely to produce any more successful results than the previous attempts (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gerstl-Pepin, 2006; Kohn, 2004; Meier & Wood, 2004). This paradox of attempting to close the achievement gap through policy directed solely at schools gave rise to the research problem explored in this study and will be explained in the next section.

#### *Research Problem*

In spite of efforts at the federal, state, and local levels, the achievement gap has persisted over time. Recent NCLB legislation has brought renewed attention to the achievement gap, forcing schools to address it. Nonetheless, when confronted with the daunting task of mediating the effects of poverty on students' academic performance, some schools have made substantial progress in narrowing the achievement gap with low-income students (Borman et al., 2000; Carter, 2000; Reichardt, 2002). Closing the gap in secondary schools is an especially unusual phenomenon and one that is rarely studied. In a study of 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools, Carter (2000) discovered seven traits common across these schools, including the importance of strong leadership

in a quality principal, measurable goals, quality teachers, rigorous and regular testing to inform instruction, and parent involvement. While Carter's work included 21 schools, only three were high schools, and all three were magnet schools or schools of choice. Whether his findings can be replicated in a typical low-income public school setting remains to be demonstrated.

Other studies of effective high-poverty schools have done little to further the understanding of high-performing, high-poverty high schools. Borman et al (2000) studied four models of school improvement used to improve low-performing Title I grade schools and concluded the most effective model was a nationally recognized school reform model, Roots and Wings, which builds upon the Success For All reading program. According to Borman and her colleagues, this reform model was most likely effective due to its uniform implementation, highly prescriptive nature, and general acceptance by teachers. In a study of policies and practices in high-performing, high-needs schools and districts, Reichardt (2002) concluded these high-performing schools had high expectations for students, collaborative relationships among staff, thoughtful organization, and a focus on the individual needs of students.

While these studies have some common denominators, such as the importance of quality teachers, high expectations for students, and strong leadership by the principal, much of the research has been conducted in elementary and middle schools and has little transferability to high school learning environments. More research needs to be conducted at the high school level on schools that have been effective in reducing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their higher income peers. In addition, because NCLB mandates the use of "research based" practices

(Fusarelli, 2004), schools are focusing on technical and structural interventions to improve student achievement. Research on schools that are effective with low-income students has a similar focus on structural and technical interventions. Structural interventions are adjustments made to the organizational structure of the delivery system in schools aimed at improving the overall quality of instruction. Examples of structural interventions include block scheduling or modified block scheduling, increased plan time or collaboration time for teachers, smaller class sizes, multi-age classes, or combination classes. Technical interventions are more prescriptive in nature and targeted toward improvement of specific elements of the curriculum and which have a more specific instructional goal. Examples of technical interventions include Six Trait Writing, Writing Across the Curriculum, Accelerated Mathematics or Accelerated Reader. While structural and technical interventions might be necessary to improve student achievement, they are not likely to be sufficient. While acknowledging that schools' make structural and technical changes to increase student achievement, this study began with the premise that caring relationships and the development of social capital are crucial to a school's success within the political context of NCLB.

#### *Objectives of the Study and Research Questions*

The purpose of this study was to examine a high school that has been successful in closing the achievement gap between low-income and middle to upper income students and to determine the reasons for their success. The objectives of this study were to:

- Describe how the school's students characterize their relationships with teachers.
- Describe how teachers characterize their relationships with students.

- Describe the relationships among various school constituents (instructional staff, administrators, students, and parents).
- Determine how the school responded to NCLB mandates.

### *Research Questions*

While evidence presented previously demonstrates the majority of public schools do not educate economically disadvantaged students as well as they educate economically advantaged students, some schools have demonstrated the capacity to close that gap while others have been unable to do so. The debate about how to best accomplish this task is continuous and ongoing. This study sought to answer the following questions in search of solutions to close the achievement gap that attempt to account for the social factors at the heart of the problem and address more than structural and technical interventions.

1. How do teachers at a high achieving, low-income high school demonstrate bonding?
2. How do teachers at a high achieving, low-income high school demonstrate bridging?
3. How do teachers at a high achieving, low-income high school demonstrate caring?
4. How does caring as social capital contribute to the school's success with low-income students within the context of NCLB?

### *Significance and Organization of the Study*

Due to recent NCLB legislation politicians, researchers, and educators are more focused on improving “failing” schools. Much of the existing research on successful high

poverty schools is limited to elementary schools with little data available on successful public secondary schools and even less available on unsuccessful schools that have transformed into successful schools (Chapman & Harris, 2004). This research study explored a rural public secondary school that was successful in making the transformation from failing to award winning and will add to the body of research that exists on effective schools.

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter included background information, a statement of the research problem, and the research questions and objectives. Subsequent chapters will consist of a review of the empirical and theoretical literature relating to the study, an explanation of the research design and methodology, and a presentation of the findings from the research. The final chapter presents conclusions derived from the findings as they relate to the theoretical framework and implications for theory and practice.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of the Literature

Because of the prominence of the achievement gap and the federal government's focus on closing the gap over the last 40 years it has garnered much attention and research. Having provided background information and an historical context for the research problem studied in this dissertation in the previous chapter, this chapter presents a review and analysis of the existing literature surrounding poverty and the achievement gap. Whereas the term achievement gap is typically used to define that occurring between Whites and racial minorities, the focus of this study is the achievement gap between students of poverty and their upper income counterparts. Therefore, the review first examines the status of poverty nationally and in Kansas. Second, the institutional factors in schools that contribute to the gap and the social factors that lie at the root of the gap are discussed. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the theoretical framework that guided this dissertation.

#### *Students in Poverty*

More than one-third of the children in the United States live in low-income families. The term *low income* describes an income level that would cover basic needs and is equal to twice the poverty level as defined by the federal government (Douglas-Hall & Koball, 2004; Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). In 2004 the federal poverty level was \$19,957 for a family of four, making \$38,314 the amount a family of four would need to meet their basic needs (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2006). According to U.S. 2000 census data, 16.6% of children under the age of 18 lived below the poverty level (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006), which by federal definition is set far below the level which

would allow for the procurement of basic needs (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006; Lott, 2001). In addition to those children who lived below the poverty level, another 37% of American children lived in low-income families and faced financial pressures similar to those families officially counted as below the federal poverty level (Douglas-Hall & Koball, 2004).

Children increase a family's chances of being poor. Children of all ages add to the family's cost of living, but most children do not earn wages to contribute to the family's income. If their children do not yet attend school childcare becomes an added expense for the working poor. Even if one parent stays at home to care for children, the loss of potential income still presents an expense to the family. The age and family status of children have an influence on their poverty rate. Younger children are more likely to live in low-income families. Children under age 5 have a poverty rate of 16.6%, while children ages 16 and 17 have a poverty rate of 14.7%. Children under age 18 living in married couple families have a poverty rate of 8.4%, while for children under age 18 living in female-headed households with no spouse present the poverty rate is 40.6%. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006).

Single heads of households can be male or female but female-headed families are associated with higher poverty rates, indicating the burden of poverty falls most heavily on women (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2006). One-parent families typically lack the financial resources that two-parent families have for children and single mothers earn dramatically less than single fathers. Married couple families in the U.S. with children under the age of 18 had a median family income of \$59,461 and just 5.5% of married couple families fell below the poverty level. In comparison, single-mother families

earned a median income of \$20,284 and 28.4% of single-mother families with children under the age of 18 fell below the poverty level (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2006). Single father families with children had a median income of \$29,907 and 17.7% fell below the federal poverty level. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006). In 2004, 17.8% of children under the age of 18, over 13 million children, lived in poverty (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2006).

### *Poverty in Kansas*

In Kansas, the poverty rate has risen from 10.4% in 2000 to 10.7% in 2004, the last year for which data were available (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2006). Poverty in Kansas impacts children more than adults; the poverty rate for children is 12%, while the poverty rate for adults ages 18-64 is just under 9% (Kansas Action For Children, 2001). Kansas currently ranks 12th among all states in the percentage of children who are poor (Children's Defense Fund, 2005).

Analysis from the 2000 census data indicates the number of children living in poverty in Kansas is increasing (Kansas Action For Children, 2001). Approximately 84,000 Kansas children live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level and 33,000 are classified as living in extreme poverty, earning less than 50% of the federal poverty level (Kansas Action For Children, 2001). Another 152,000 children live in low-income families, and 33,000 of them are classified as near the poverty level, making no more than 125% of the federal poverty level. In 71 of 105 counties in the state, more than 25% of the children live in low-income families (Kansas Action For Children, 2001), indicating the pervasive nature of poverty for children in the state, which creates challenges for the state's public school districts.

### *Factors of Poverty*

Employment and jobs are main factors that influence the poverty rate of families. Job insecurity, underemployment, and unemployment create low-income families and single-mother families. The working poor are the largest group of poor people in the United States, not people on welfare (Lott, 2001). Working poor people are generally employed in low paying, low skilled jobs with few benefits. Working mothers below the poverty level are typically employed in jobs paying less than \$8 per hour as secretaries, clerks, waitresses, cashiers, and child-care workers (Lott, 2001). When single mothers are faced with poor job prospects and difficulties in obtaining stable employment, they are less able to provide their children with the home environments and level of supports necessary for optimal child development (Trzcinski, 2002) and success in school.

### *Conditions and Consequences of Poverty*

Access to quality healthcare and nutrition are necessary for optimal child development. The health status of children has been linked to poverty and poverty is viewed as an indicator of poor health among children. Children in poverty receive fewer health services and physician contacts than other children. The neglect in the health care of children in poverty has been linked to an increase in childhood preventable diseases (Barton, 2005; Hertert & Teague, 2003). Children of poor families are more likely to have inadequate diets than children in non-poor families. Lack of proper nutrition has been linked to infectious diseases, and has been known to affect growth rate, cognitive development, and social behavior. Further, underdeveloped cognitive skills in poor children have been linked to low school achievement, school dropout rate, teen

pregnancy, and underemployment or unemployment as an adult (Barton, 2003; Gerstl-Pepin, 2006).

Not only do poor children experience a lack of health care and an inadequate diet, they also live in conditions much different from those of middle and upper income children. Often the older children in poor families are required to take on some of the responsibilities of parenting while one or both parents work multiple jobs (Trzcinski, 2002). Mothers of poor children have reported the hardest thing about being poor is having to tell their children “no” to things other children have, whether it be a pack of gum, a book order at school, or a carnival ticket (Lott & Bullock, 2001). Lott and Bullock (2001) paint this picture of the daily existence of a child who lives in abject poverty,

If you are poor, you experience crowding. Whether in an urban ghetto or a small rural cottage, you have little chance for privacy or maintaining a separate space.

You live in substandard, deteriorating housing, surrounded by peeling paint, decay, rodents, insects, crumbling walls, the odor of garbage and urine, leaking pipes, inadequate water, inadequate heat, and poor lighting. Your home is not much like the sparkling “house beautiful” seen on television. You are also wearing clothes that do not match the images of women and men on television.

You search for bargains in flea markets and thrift stores, not out of chic, but out of necessity (p. 199).

As is evident from this short narrative, the daily lives of adults and children in poverty are dramatically different from the middle class norm presented in the media.

### *Perceptions of Students in Poverty*

Not only do the daily lives of people in poverty bear little resemblance to the middle class norm, children in poverty experience the negative effects of the stereotypes associated with poverty. A majority of Americans subscribe to the Protestant work ethic that includes a belief that the opportunity to succeed is available to all and one's level of success is directly related to one's efforts and abilities. It also includes the belief that people are generally responsible for what happens to themselves and "get what they deserve." Thus, many people in the United States blame poor people for being poor and assign stereotypes to them (lazy, dumb, or on drugs) rather than recognize the barriers (low wages, discrimination) that exist in their lives (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). Stereotypes about the poor are significantly more negative than stereotypes about the middle class (Cozzarelli et al.).

Often, the media perpetuates these stereotypes. Despite the fact that the United States is becoming increasingly socially stratified (Hochschild, 2003; Lott & Bullock, 2001), television shows facilitate a perception of the middle class as the norm (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001). Low-income people are seen usually in dysfunctional roles on daytime talk shows or in reality police shows in a negative manner, which serve as a source of entertainment. News stories rarely focus on class-based power structures and tend to characterize the poor as either criminals or outsiders who deviate from middle-class norms (Bullock et al., 2001). Welfare recipients are among the most disliked and stereotyped groups in society, despite the fact that children are the largest group of welfare recipients in the nation. Media representations tend to focus not on the children,

but on their “lazy” and “immoral” mothers who are assigned blame for a host of ills plaguing society including the breakdown of the nuclear family (Bullock et al., 2001).

Because teachers are members of the society at large and subjected to the same conditions of society and media influences detailed above, low-income students and their parents must battle these same stereotypes at school. Teachers and school administrators tend to subscribe to the beliefs that low-income parents do not care about their children's schooling, are not competent to help with homework, and do not place a high value on education (Lott, 2001). These beliefs, when put into practice, create barriers for low-income students and their parents. After controlling for achievement and other factors, almost three times as many high-income as low-income students enroll in college preparatory tracks (Hochschild, 2003). Lott (2001) found that schools typically discount the views of low-income parents and treat them in negative and demeaning ways despite the evidence that such parents make substantial efforts to be involved in the education of their children. School and teacher views of students who live in poverty and their families are a few of the factors that must be considered to understand the multiple causes of the achievement gap, which will be presented in the next section.

### *Roots of The Achievement Gap*

Much of the literature on the achievement gap attempts to distribute responsibility for the gap between society and schools. This section will detail the principal causes of the achievement gap, many of which have roots that extend beyond the scope and influence of schools. The literature and research on the achievement gap has clearly identified the correlation between the gap and poverty as well as race. Because of the relationship between poverty and race, research has not yet clarified the nature of the

relationship between race, poverty, and the achievement gap and tends to consider them jointly, and the commingling of race and poverty is reflected in this review. The study, however, focused solely on the condition of poverty as it related to the achievement gap.

This review of the literature establishes that the principal causes of the achievement gap rest if not equally, then substantially, outside the control of schools. The literature will be considered in two basic strands: first, those institutional factors within the control of schools that contribute to the low achievement of poor and racial minority students; and second, those factors outside the control of schools, including the conditions of poverty students must overcome to be successful in school. An understanding of these conditions is necessary to learn why 40 years of federal legislation such as ESEA has not demonstrably closed the gap and why NCLB is likely to fare no better. It is also important to understand that while the problem is simple to define, it is not as simple to understand and the research is sometimes contradictory or inconclusive.

*Institutional Factors: How the Educational System Contributes to the Achievement Gap*

Much of the research on the achievement gap focuses on the shortcomings of schools and the system of public education. Some researchers believe schools simply do not provide enough support for poor and racial minority students in a variety of areas including curriculum, instruction, teacher expectations, and support. By themselves, none of these shortcomings is great enough to cause an achievement gap. Together, however, they can. Haycock (2001) summarizes that position:

It's not that issues like poverty and parental education don't matter. Clearly they do. But we take the students who have less to begin with and then systematically

give them less in school. In fact, we give these students less of everything that we believe makes a difference. We do this in hundreds of different ways (p. 3).

While there is general agreement among researchers and practitioners that the gap in achievement among racial groups and between poor and non-poor students is present when students enter school and increases as children move through school (Lee & Burkham, 2002; Orr, 2003), there is less agreement about why it does. Some researchers believe schools actually magnify the gap over time by favoring the dominant social class (Aronson, 2004; Howard, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001) or by providing inferior teachers, curriculum, resources, and facilities (Barton, 2003, 2005; Haycock, 2001, 2004; Hertert & Teague, 2003; Jencks et al., 1972; Lee & Burkham, 2002). The research on institutional factors influencing student achievement can be classified as either instructional or environmental and includes the quality of schools and teachers, the rigor of the curriculum, resources, grouping, tracking and expectations of the staff. A great deal of research has reported that low-income and minority students attend inferior schools with less capable teachers in possession of fewer resources, which contributes to the achievement gap (Barton, 2005; Haycock, 2001; Hertert & Teague, 2003).

Researchers have reported that low-income and minority students are underserved in schools through inadequate curriculum and instruction. The rigor of the curriculum has a positive association with student achievement and low-income students receive less rigorous curriculum than their peers (Barton, 2003; Haycock, 2001; Hertert & Teague, 2003). Low income and racial minority students are not exposed to the curriculum standards necessary to achieve at high levels on state and national assessments, gain admission to post-secondary institutions, or advance themselves in the job market.

Teacher quality is an institutional factor that has the single most significant positive correlation with student achievement. Teacher experience and training are also positively correlated with teacher quality and therefore student achievement (Barton, 2005; Hertert & Teague, 2003; Lee & Burkham, 2002). Despite the need for better and more experienced teachers, racial minority and low-income students are more likely to be taught by out of field teachers or teachers with three or fewer years of experience (Haycock, 2004). Less rigorous curriculum taught by less qualified teachers to the most needy students contributes to the achievement gap as students move through school (Barton, 2003; Haycock, 2004; Hertert & Teague, 2003).

While there is no debate over the importance of a quality teacher in the classroom, the debate over the importance of smaller class size in reducing the achievement gap is still unsettled. Researchers generally agree that smaller class sizes are most effective for disadvantaged populations in earlier grade levels. This is disconcerting given the fact that a higher proportion of poor and racial minority students experience larger class sizes than middle class White students (Aronson, 2004; Landsman, 2004; Weiss, 2003).

Other researchers have made the case that teacher expectations are more important than class size (Barton, 2003). Part of the achievement gap between White and racial minority students and middle to upper income students and students in poverty is the result of differential expectations in school (Howard, 2002; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Lee & Burkham, 2002; Schwartz, 2001). Low-status students are placed in low track academic classes such as lower ability reading groups as early as first grade and these inequities extend to high school through a lack of equal representation in advanced placement, college prep, and honors classes (Barton, 2003; Howard, 2002; Lee &

Burkham, 2002; Weiss, 2003). In short, part of the reason poor and minority students do not achieve at high levels is because teachers, counselors, and administrators do not expect them to succeed.

Rothstein (2004a), on the other hand, argues that schools actually do a great deal to narrow the achievement gap, which grows over time as a result of out of school experiences in the summer, on weekends, and after school that are available to middle and high-income students while low status students have fewer options for cultural experiences. This sets the stage for the debate about which is more responsible for the achievement gap, institutional factors or social factors.

*Social Factors: The Effects of Social Class on Student Achievement*

While school-related factors are important elements of the size and nature of the achievement gap, they are not the sole elements. The impact of poverty and social class also contribute to the size of the achievement gap. In addition to being disadvantaged at school, students who live in poverty experience the negative effects of poverty outside of school that challenge their ability to succeed in school. These include the educational attainment of grandparents, the household size of the mother when she was a child, the quality of her high school, the mother's self-efficacy, the child's birth weight, and the child's household size (Barton, 2003; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Rothstein, 2004b). These factors will be considered in two dimensions: health and nutrition, and home learning support.

Expectant mothers living in poverty are less likely to receive quality pre-natal care prior to the last trimester of pregnancy (Hertert & Teague, 2003). Lack of prenatal care increases a child's chance of being born with low birth weight, which can lead to

problems ranging from infant mortality to learning disabilities. Infants born at low birth weight are more at risk of long-term disability, impaired development, and learning problems. Children of low birth weight are more likely to be enrolled in special classes, repeat a grade, or fail in school than children who were born at normal birth weight (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Barton, 2003; Hertert & Teague, 2003).

Children in racial minority and low-income families are not only more likely to suffer from low birth weight; they also grow up in environments that inhibit their physical and mental development. Poor children are more likely to live in older houses with lead paint or houses that are not repainted regularly and are three times more likely to have high levels of lead in their blood than economically advantaged children (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Barton, 2003). In addition to lead exposure, poor children are more apt to suffer from hunger and a lack of nutrition. Common sense dictates that children who experience hunger on a chronic basis will not develop physically or mentally and children who are hungry will have trouble concentrating in school, a fact Barton (2003) verified in his extensive review of research studies on the achievement gap. He found, “Thirteen percent of households below the poverty line experience hunger, compared to just 1 percent of households 85 percent or more over the poverty line” (p.25).

Not only will poor children who suffer from exposure to lead and a lack of nutrition become ill more often than middle-income children, they are less apt to receive adequate medical care when they do become ill, increasing the likelihood they will be absent from school more often and for longer durations. They are also less likely to receive regular well-baby or well-child checkups, which prevent illnesses and school

absenteeism. In addition, poor children have a higher incidence of vision and dental problems that go untreated and ultimately affect performance at school (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Barton, 2003; Hertert & Teague, 2003; Rothstein, 2004b).

While proper nutrition and healthcare are basic levels of support missing from the homes of poor children, other advantageous home supports are also lacking. For example, reading to young children promotes language acquisition and correlates with reading comprehension and later success in school. Poor children, however, are less likely to be read to or to live in a literature-rich environment (Barton, 2003; Hertert & Teague, 2003; Rothstein, 2004b) It stands to reason that students in homes with one parent suffer more from the effects of poverty, receive less positive parental attention, and are read to less often than economically advantaged students. In addition, low-income students watch more hours of television per day, which has a negative correlation with school achievement, and they are less likely to have a quiet place to study and do homework (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Barton, 2005; Hertert & Teague, 2003; Rothstein, 2004b). Low-income students are not exposed to some of the advantages of middle class status, including a computer in the home and out of school experiences like summer camp, trips to the library, vacations, music lessons, dance lessons, sports camps, museum visits, and other activities that develop creativity, self-discipline, and self-confidence, all of which contribute to school success (Rothstein, 2004b).

The most important home support of all, parenting, plays an essential role in the development of a child and his or her success in school. Researchers have found some striking differences in the way parents treat their children. Upper-middle-class parents are more likely to show their children how to figure out answers for themselves, are less

likely to punish their children for actions when their intentions were good, verbally encourage their children six times as much as they reprimand them, and speak to their children more than low-income parents. In contrast, low-income parents who are employed in jobs that require them to follow orders are less likely to encourage creative problem-solving, are more likely to base punishment on their children's actions, regardless of motive, reprimand their children more than they encourage them, and speak to them less often than high-income parents (Barton, 2003; Rothstein, 2004a, 2004b). In considering the multitude of advantages middle to high income students receive over low-income students, Bainbridge and Lasley (2002) summarize the situation stating "The fact is, young people who have well-educated parents, an academically stimulating home environment, and high-protein diets tend to do much better in school than youngsters without these benefits" (p. 426).

It is apparent from this review that students who live in poverty suffer from a variety of conditions created by their lack of financial capital that must be overcome to be successful in school. These include inadequate medical and dental care, substandard housing, inadequate nutrition, increased mobility, and more punitive parenting structures. Expectant mothers who live in poverty do not receive early and adequate prenatal care, give birth to children of lower birth weight, a predictor of difficulty in school. Students who are not comfortable in school due to hunger, illness, or toothache have trouble concentrating on their schoolwork. When these same students get home they have fewer supports such as a quiet place to study and parental supervision to assist them in completing their schoolwork (Rothstein, 2004b).

Given the fact that low income students must overcome both institutional factors

that work against them in schools and social factors in the conditions of their lives outside school, it would stand to reason that to be successful in closing the gap both sets of conditions would have to be addressed. Simple one-dimensional technical and structural instructional interventions alone are insufficient to close the gap given the economic reality of poverty outside the schoolhouse door. Teaching to high standards measured by a single dimension of a high stakes test under the threat of punitive sanctions will not by itself reduce the impact of poverty on students. At the same time, totally ameliorating the social conditions of poverty for low-income students will require social policy and programs well beyond the means of educators and schools. To narrow the gap between low and middle to high-income students schools must find ways to account for both the social conditions of poverty students face outside school and the institutional factors inside schools that act as barriers to disadvantaged students. Overcoming those barriers in the current era of accountability is a formidable challenge.

#### *NCLB and the Achievement Gap*

As states and schools work diligently to meet the requirements of NCLB, it is becoming more apparent that increased accountability and standards are a one dimensional technical strategy that will not provide the intended results (Fusarelli, 2004; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Critics of NCLB argue that the top-down standards and accountability measures at the forefront of the law ignore the affective needs of economically disadvantaged students that must also be addressed. Single event, high stakes tests, which narrowly measure and define success by achievement on reading and math assessments can do disadvantaged students more harm than good. Hale (2004) criticizes NCLB when she writes, “Its methods generally consist of politicians pressuring,

threatening, or punishing school districts. In this climate of hysteria over high-stakes testing, school districts are responding with hysterical solutions” (p. 34). According to Larson and Ovando (2001), “When school effectiveness is defined by student performance on test scores, White, middle, and upper-class populations predictably reap the benefits” (p. 426). Others are concerned that in attempts to raise test scores in math and reading, the curriculum has moved away not only from more advanced mathematical and literary skills, but also from social studies, literature, art, music, physical education, and other areas where test scores do not result in judgments of school quality (Rothstein, 2004a).

Practitioners and researchers worry that defining success in such a narrow focus will lead to even more failure (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Fusarelli, 2004). When teachers concentrate on narrow standards with failing students, they set aside the regular curriculum to spend class time drilling students who are behind. Even though scores may increase for these students, teachers lose instructional time for higher order thinking and higher level skills, which ultimately widens the knowledge gap between groups of students targeted for extra drill and those who are not. One unintended consequence of these attempts to improve the learning of disadvantaged students is that “The attention paid to improving the test scores of minority students may actually reduce their overall performance and knowledge over time” (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002, p. 424).

Others predict the combination of high stakes testing and singling out the achievement scores of racial minority and low-income students may backfire in a different way, by magnifying the stereotype threat and putting too much pressure on racial minority and low-income students to achieve. As one researcher stated:

The single-minded emphasis on the big test, the end-of-year evaluation used to judge the quality of students, teachers, schools, and districts—all of whom will be duly rewarded or punished for the outcome—adds pressure for students already disadvantaged by tests. Worse, it threatens an already tenuous sense of belonging by creating a belief that the school views certain students as weak links in the chain and might prefer it if they weren't around to lower the school's test score average. Such stigmatization and threats to belonging can have devastating effects on achievement (Aronson, 2004, p.18).

In addition to putting additional stress on disadvantaged students, NCLB may inadvertently result in lower standards for all students if states respond to the pressure of NCLB by lowering their standards to make it appear the gap has been closed when no significant progress has been made (Fusarelli, 2004; Rothstein, 2005). Regardless of where the standards are set, however, the validity of the tests themselves is in question. Standards-based multiple choice tests do not really measure the gap in achievement on high standards but concentrate on basic skills that are easier and less expensive to measure (Popham, 2004; Rothstein, 2005).

Because NCLB is a top-down initiative emphasizing school accountability for student test scores, and scientifically based research instructional methods it has elicited a host of top-down structural and technical responses from states and schools. Many states have adopted standards and are designing and implementing assessments to measure student progress toward those standards. Schools have responded by aligning their curriculum to the standards and teaching toward the tested standards (Coady et al., 2003; Rothstein, 2005). While these technical and structural interventions are a necessary

strategy for closing the achievement gap by themselves they may not be sufficient (Fusarelli, 2004). Research indicates that if we are to successfully close the achievement gap, we will also need to consider the social and psychological implications of these types of interventions (Aronson, 2004). How this study considered those social and psychological implications will be explained in the theoretical framework discussed in the next section.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This section will explain the theoretical framework that was used to guide the qualitative case study of a rural high school that demonstrated success with its low-income students. Because the achievement gap is attributed to factors that are institutional and social in nature, any investigation into successful schools must account for both domains of the problem. To consider both the institutional and social aspects of the achievement gap, this study focused on the importance of relationships. The theory of caring in schools and the concept of social capital were used to guide the focus on relationships. The theory of caring in schools (Noddings, 1992, 2003) and the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988) were combined and used to analyze the relationships among teachers, administrators, parents, and students to determine what role caring and social capital have played in the academic success of the school's low income students.

### *Theory of Caring*

While clear standards with articulated curriculum and highly qualified teachers are necessary components of addressing the achievement gap they must also be accompanied by an environment of respect and caring for students (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Charles A. Dana Center, 2001; Croninger & Lee, 2001). The modern concept of

caring in schools focuses most directly on relationships between teachers and students, and can be traced to Noddings' (1992; 2003) theory of caring. She posits the ideal relationship between the student and teacher takes on the characteristics of a caring relationship, one that is reciprocal between two human beings, the "one-caring" and the "cared-for." In order for the relationship between two people to be called caring, both parties must contribute to it. This relationship is so critical Noddings (1992) suggests, "caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and that contemporary schooling can be revitalized in its light" (p. 27)

According to Noddings, theorists and policy makers who advocate clear educational standards and objectives have failed to consider that students may not want to learn what has become standardized. Rather than charge teachers with teaching students what they have a natural interest in and need to learn, these theorists and policy makers insist teachers motivate students to do what the teacher wants them to do. This environment impedes the development of caring relationships between teachers and students by forcing teachers to become mechanical delivery systems. One of Noddings (1992) main premises is "People are not reducible to methods except, perhaps, in their work with objects. This form of reduction is called automation, and it simply does not apply to interpersonal activities" (p.8). Good intentions to teach all students standardized content can lead to dictatorial methods that disregard the needs of the student.

Four major components comprise Noddings (1992) ethic of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Modeling is teaching by example, showing students how to care and be cared for in relationships with others. Dialogue is open-ended conversation, a search for understanding, empathy or appreciation. Teachers and

administrators cannot enter into dialogue with students with their minds already made up. Dialogue establishes the intimacy required in a caring relationship. Practice shapes attitudes and provides the opportunity to gain skills in caregiving and develop an attitude of caring. The last component of a caring ethic is confirmation. Confirmation is an act of affirming and encouraging the best in others. Teachers see the good within each student and foster and support that goodness so the students themselves can realize it.

Blount (1996) applied Noddings' framework to administrators by distinguishing between what she called regular administrators and caring administrators. Regular administrators rely on static policies and organizational structures to make decisions. They "disconnect individuals from their unique webs of relationships in work settings and instead impose standard sets of structures, roles, and relationships" (Blount, 1996, p. 16) Caring administrators, on the other hand, operate out of concern for the individual student and "consider the contingencies of each new situation as they strive to improve the welfare of followers" (p. 16).

The individual is the key to establishing a caring culture in a school. No institution can be thought of as caring because it cannot meet a person in an ethical way, only a person can be caring toward another person. In this regard, according to Noddings, schools themselves cannot be deemed caring, but teachers and administrators can be. In a caring school, teaching involves a giving of self and a receiving of the students. Educators do not act by fixed rule, but out of regard for the student to do what is right in each case. In this manner the teacher as the one-caring comes across in a caring way and is thought of as caring by the student, the one cared for (Noddings, 2003). A disconnect is often seen in student-teacher relationships in schools where teachers claim they care

about students, but students do not receive the care. According to Noddings (1992), caring should be the foundation of all successful education, and if the caring is not received by students, something is wrong.

### *Social Capital*

The first use of the term social capital has been traced to L.J. Hanifan, the state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia in 1916. Hanifan used the term to explain the benefits of community involvement in schools. He defined it as “those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely, good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19).

French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1985) defined the concept as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). He focused on the benefits accruing to individuals by virtue of their membership in groups. Social capital, then, consists of the social relationship with a group and the quality of benefits accruing out of that relationship.

James Coleman (1988) performed the most significant modern study connecting the concept of social capital to education. Coleman, author of the previously referenced *Coleman Report*, studied public high schools, Catholic high schools, and other religious based high schools that had low dropout rates. He theorized the success of Catholic high school students was due primarily to the interconnected social structure of the school in which a tight network of parents served as a social resource to students who were otherwise at-risk. According to Coleman, social capital is easily seen in the obligations,

expectations, and trustworthiness of social structures. That is, if person A does something for person B with the assumption that person B will return the favor in the future, then this obligation is much like a credit slip and similar in that aspect to financial capital. The value of social capital extends beyond the transactional nature of credit slips and can also be found in access to information attained through social relationships with those who have valuable information. The relationship itself is not formed for acquisition of information; the acquisition of the information is a form of social capital that is a by-product of the relationship. Coleman also posited that norms could serve as effective sources of social capital, citing norms in a community that reward high academic achievement or inhibit crime as examples. These illustrate the value of membership in the social network and the diverse nature of social capital.

Since social capital can be found in interactions, norms, and social networks the task of defining it becomes difficult. As Coleman (1988) stated,

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors... Social capital . . . comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action (p. s100).

Social capital then, is best defined not by the relationship among the actors in a social network, but by the benefits the actors receive from this relationship.

Putnam (2000) built on the foundation Coleman laid, and defines the concept of social capital in a slightly broader societal and community sense that relates to civic responsibility and virtue. Like Coleman, Putnam notes that close or collective

communities have greater social capital. However, in contrast to Bourdieu's view of social capital as a private good, Putnam proposes that social capital is mainly a public good. By calling attention to civic virtue Putnam makes the distinction that social capital is best understood in the context of community and service to community. His findings document a decline in civic engagement - including membership in service organizations and social clubs, and voting - over the last thirty years. He blames the decline on increased pressures of time and money, suburbanization, television, and generational change. Based on his findings Putnam (2000) cites two functions of social capital, bonding and bridging. Bonding is inward looking capital that reinforces identities and groups. For example, fraternal organizations are bonding in nature. Bridging is outward looking capital that connects people across social divides. Putnam believes that "social capital is second only to poverty in the breadth and depth of its effects on children's lives" (p. 297). It is especially important to children who live in poverty. "The parents' social capital . . . confers benefits on their off-spring, just as children benefit from their parents' financial and human capital. Social capital may be most crucial for families who have fewer financial and educational resources" (p. 299). He even goes so far as to state that social capital and not poverty or demographic characteristics is most important in determining SAT scores.

A student's access to social capital through family supports and networks that extend beyond the family has been linked to school attrition and academic performance (Portes, 1998). Economically disadvantaged students have less family support than middle and upper class students. In addition, poor students are less familiar with navigating the bureaucracy of the school system (Webb-Dempsey, Wilson, Corbett, &

Mordecai-Phillips, 1996) and are less connected to school personnel who can assist them when they encounter difficulty or trouble in school.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) studied the impact of social capital on racial minority students. His principle theory was that school success depended upon relationships with important and influential people across social spheres and in multiple institutional domains; and that low status children are prevented from developing these key relationships systematically and by design. He argues that schools are built on the language and norms of the dominant white middle class culture, and as a result the cognitive and language skills deemed necessary to succeed reflect a white middle class background. He criticizes schools for basing the rules of the institution on the dominant culture, which places minority students and students in poverty at a disadvantage because middle class students are socialized into the system beginning at birth. Adding to the challenge for low status students to create social capital within the school system are bureaucratic barriers such as scheduling, time, and class size that inhibit these students from forming meaningful relationships with teachers.

### *Caring as Social Capital*

When the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988) and the concept of caring (Noddings, 1992) are combined, the function and form of social capital takes on an ethical dimension. When one considers the benefits of a caring relationship with teachers and administrators in a school setting it becomes readily apparent those relationships can serve as a valuable source of social capital for economically disadvantaged students in multiple ways. Just as social capital in the parent-child relationship is a condition for creating human capital, so the presence of social capital between teacher and student is

necessary if the teacher is to convey human capital to the student (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999).

By acting as one-caring, a teacher, administrator, counselor or other individual can pass social capital to a disadvantaged student. To be a true act of caring this cannot be an artificial transaction for mutual benefit. To serve as social capital, it must provide some benefit to the student that assists him or her in an educational or social context in the school. An act of caring that does not help the student in an educational or social context is still an act of caring, but does not serve to function as social capital. Muller (1999) argues the associations among caring, expectations, and achievement appear to be the basis for the growth and maintenance of social capital between teachers and students in the classroom.

One characteristic that appears to be important in promoting academic success is having teachers who provide a nurturing environment for their students in their classrooms (Beaulieu, Israel, Hartless, & Dyk, 2001). Teachers in a caring relationship with students involve them in their learning and work with students to meet their needs rather than rely on mechanical methods of reward and punishment to control them. The more cohesive the relationship, the greater the ability of the teacher to motivate the student and to obtain the student's compliance with behavioral norms (Uekawa & Bidwell, 2004). When students do get in trouble, adults in the school enter into dialogue (Noddings, 1992) with them to gain a true understanding of the situation rather than mechanically enforce rules and regulations from a discipline flowchart.

Teachers in a caring environment help low-status students overcome the barriers of scheduling, time, and class size that inhibit them from forming meaningful

relationships rather than use them as excuses to continue the status quo. They teach low-status students how to navigate an institution that is built on values and norms different from theirs rather than blame the students for their own failure. Close connections between students and staff members is beneficial to low-income and racial minority students helping them to overcome the challenges they face navigating the bureaucracy in public schools (Beaulieu et al., 2001; Fritch, 1999; Israel & Beaulieu, 2005; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Muller, 2001; Uekawa & Bidwell, 2004). Teachers and adults who act in this way provide an important source of social capital by helping disadvantaged and low-status students to overcome the barriers of the school system referenced by Stanton-Salazar (1997) above. Maintaining relationships becomes increasingly difficult as students progress through school, making it even more important that teachers work to build the ties of trust and respect with their students (Uekawa & Bidwell, 2004).

Just as home environment is a form of social capital that can enhance children's learning, school environments can also enhance learning. Teachers, parents, and school staff members working together as a faculty in a united effort to assist low-status students form a bonding network that serves as a form a capital for those students similar to the tight social networks that existed in the Catholic schools Coleman (1988) studied. Fritch (1999) documented the importance of the community in which the school is embedded as an influence on the academic achievement of students. He found that while social capital existed in the social networks of both large and small schools, the social network in smaller schools was denser than that of large schools. Some studies claim that smaller, private schools have been shown to produce more social capital to serve as a resource for students (Parcel & Dufur, 2001a). Others have demonstrated no difference between small

or private schools on student achievement after controlling for student background characteristics (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). While the impact of school size on social capital for students is yet unclear, researchers have espoused the importance of considering capital in the community, at home, and at school all working together to boost student achievement (Parcel & Dufur, 2001b). When family or community capital declines, however it is possible for the school to compensate for those losses (Parcel & Dufur, 2001a)

Although seemingly contrary to Noddings' theory that institutions cannot be caring, support for the potential of a caring environment to level the playing field for disadvantaged students was found in testimony from students in successful high-poverty, middle schools and high schools. These students described their schools as places in which people cared about them, and went on to state this caring motivated them to do well academically (Charles A. Dana Center, 2001; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002). Students interviewed at these high schools reported feeling connected to the learning process and supported in the many decisions they faced during high school. Both students and staff used metaphors of family and community when describing their schools (Charles A. Dana Center, 2001). This type of productive relationship appears to be based on the students' perception that the relationship will yield future rewards to be gained from investing in school and therefore in the relationship (Muller et al., 1999).

A caring school environment exceeds the transactional nature Coleman documented and is dependent on transactions that are beneficial to both the student and the teacher (Fritch, 1999; Muller, 2001). Moving away from one-sided transactions forms the basis for caring as social capital. Caring about students does not mean teachers feel

sorry for the students or their life circumstances but teachers encourage students to overcome or transform those circumstances (Muller et al., 1999).

Noddings (1992) emphasizes the value of reciprocity inherent in a caring relationship. Both teachers and students appear to expect a return on their investment in the caring teacher-student relationship. Teachers who demonstrate caring expect students to work for them. Students in turn expect caring teachers to do whatever is needed to teach them. The associations among caring, expectations, and achievement appear to be the basis for the growth and maintenance of social capital in the classroom (Muller et al., 1999).

From Putnam's (2000) perspective these forms of social capital transmitted from adult to student in a school context can help compensate for a parent's lack of social capital and can assist disadvantaged students in bridging with outside contacts not otherwise accessible. Not only can they serve as an element of bonding as detailed above, but they can also serve as a bridge to connect low-status students to the assets they might not otherwise have accessed. For example, when a counselor, administrator, or teacher assists a low-income student in filling out an unfamiliar college aid form or scholarship application they are acting as an important bridge for that student. When an adult in the school makes arrangements for an economically disadvantaged student to obtain part time employment or waives a participation fee for a school activity he or she is building bridges for that student.

The majority of research on social capital in education has focused on the influence of family structure on educational attainment (Shaefer-McDaniel, 2004). This study has taken a slightly different approach, focusing on the relationships between adults

and students in schools that can also serve as a source of social capital that can mediate the lack of social capital in the family lives of disadvantaged students. Operating from a qualitative research tradition, I conducted a case study of one successful high-poverty school's response to the mandates of NCLB and its success in narrowing the achievement gap. I considered the role relationships between low-income students and school personnel played in the success of those students. I specifically considered the influence caring educators had on the achievement of low-income students.

## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative case study methods (Merriam, 1998) were used to examine a high school that has been successful in reducing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and advantaged students as measured by state reading and math assessments and graduation rate. The study took a naturalistic approach to data collection (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) using an emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The chapter begins with a description of the research site, then considers the role of the researcher, describes the data collection strategies, and explains how data were analyzed and interpreted.

#### *Research Site: Middleton High School<sup>2</sup>*

The site for this study was Middleton High School (MHS), a 7-12th grade secondary school in the small (2850 residents), rural town of Middleton, which is located in Lewis County in southeast Kansas. Middleton High School has a population of 360 students in grades 7-12, a staff of approximately 30 teachers and a total professional staff of 36. Although the school serves students in 7-12<sup>th</sup> grades, it is registered as a high school with the Kansas State Department of Education. All students are housed in a single building, and the school faculty and staff are assigned to a single school. Teachers of core subject are assigned to either 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades or grades 9-12. Teachers of students in grades 7-8 refer to themselves and the students as “junior high” staff and students. Elective teachers are assigned to teach in all 6 grades. While the school has two

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<sup>2</sup>Middleton, Middleton High School, and Lewis County are all pseudonyms.

administrators, both are designated as principals and are jointly responsible for all six grades.

Middleton High is one of three schools in the district, which serves 825 students. Approximately 46% of the students in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch support and are classified as economically disadvantaged. The southeast region of Kansas has been experiencing economic decline for a number of years due partly to a decline in agricultural employment and minimal industry to provide more than minimum wage jobs resulting in underemployment. The City of Middleton has developed an industrial park that provides 1700 jobs for the area's residents. The main employer in the community is a recreational vehicle manufacturer that employs over 700 people. Other employers include an aerosol packaging company, a railroad car maintenance and restoration company, and Middleton Plastics, a producer of polyethylene products. While employment opportunities exist for residents of the city, they are predominantly low wage, non-union jobs.

Middleton High School was selected as the site of this study because the district is one of 22 in the State of Kansas recognized by Standard & Poor's (2005) for narrowing the achievement gap between either ethnic minority and White students or economically disadvantaged students and economically advantaged students in the 2003-2004 school year. Moreover, it is one of only four districts in the state to earn that honor two consecutive years. To earn recognition, a district must reduce the achievement gap by five percentage points while simultaneously improving the proficiency rates in both subgroups.

While the Middleton district is not considered high-poverty by urban standards it is by rural standards. Just under 46% of the district's students are classified as economically disadvantaged, higher than the state average of 38.25% which includes urban districts (Kansas State Department of Education, 2005b). Middleton's poverty rate is much greater than would be expected for a rural school and community of this size in other areas of the state, an indication of the depressed economic conditions of the region. Free and reduced lunch rates in comparable schools in the Northeast area of the state range between 20 and 25%. In addition, 47.7% of the households in town earned less than \$25,000 in 1999 and 11.3% of the population in the county was classified as below the poverty level compared to 9.9% statewide (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

As data from the Kansas State Department of Education Statistics website shown in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 demonstrates, Middleton High School has made progress addressing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and economically advantaged students while at the same time improving the achievement of all students.

Table 3.1

Kansas State Reading Assessment by Income - Middleton High

	Ineligible for Lunch Support 8th Grade	Eligible for Lunch Support 8th Grade	Ineligible for Lunch Support 11th Grade	Eligible for Lunch Support 11th Grade
% Proficient or Above 2002	49.9	16.7	54.4	27.3
% Proficient or Above 2003	82.4	65.4	66.7	60.0
% Proficient or Above 2004	85.3	79.3	62.2	50.0
% Proficient or Above 2005	87.5	70.3	66.6	42.8

Table 3.2

Kansas State Math Assessment by Income - Middleton

	Ineligible for Lunch Support 7th Grade	Eligible for Lunch Support 7th Grade	Ineligible for Lunch Support 10th Grade	Eligible for Lunch Support 10th Grade
% Proficient or Above 2002	35.9	15.6	19.1	10.6
% Proficient or Above 2003	75.6	63.3	32.6	23.1
% Proficient or Above 2004	77.3	60.7	51.7	50.0
% Proficient or Above 2005	88.4	59.4	40.7	13.6

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show considerable progress in closing the achievement gap in reading and math from 2002 to 2004. Scores for all students as well as economically advantaged students have risen consistently and significantly in both reading and math at all grade levels tested through 2004. Results from the 2005 assessments, however, show a slight decline in reading scores for economically disadvantaged students at 8th and 11th grade. The drop in reading scores provided an opportunity to determine how Middleton constituents explained and responded to the setback.

Table 3.3

Graduation Rate by Income - Middleton High

	Middleton All Students	Middleton Students Eligible for Lunch Support	Kansas All Students	Kansas Students Eligible for Lunch Support
Graduation Rate 2004- 2005	90.0	91.0	89.1	81.6
Graduation Rate 2003- 2004	83.0	87.5	87.7	78.2
Graduation Rate 2002- 2003	80.3	92.8	86.7	75.6
Graduation Rate 2001- 2002	75.0	77.0	85.7	73.8
Graduation Rate 2000-2001	86.8	82.0	85.2	73.0

Data on graduates contained in Table 3.3 reveals the graduate rate for economically disadvantaged students is higher than the graduation rate for all students for the years 2002-2005 and outpaces the graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students statewide for all years from 2001 to 2004. The graduation rate for all students at Middleton High School is lower than the state average for all students from 2002 through 2005. At the same time, the graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students is greater than for all students and for economically disadvantaged students statewide. Again, it should be noted that students who do not receive a diploma with their cohort class do not count as graduates.

### *Role of Researcher*

I am in my sixth year as a public school superintendent. Although my current district is a larger suburban district, my childhood experience and the bulk of my twenty-year career as an educator have been spent in small rural districts much like Middleton. In the early 1990's I worked as an assistant principal in a Southeast Kansas school district near Middleton and became familiar with the depressed economic conditions of the region and came to know some of the administrators of Middleton High School who have now moved on to other schools. My impressions of the school were formed by observations at athletic contests of a rough bunch of students who must have a lot of needs. I was surprised at their progress when I examined their state assessment data and also surprised to find them among the schools recognized by Standard and Poor's.

I consider myself an advocate of disadvantaged students, racial minority students, and at-risk students. I have seen them pushed out of small rural schools because they have had difficulty fitting in. Early in my career as a teacher I prided myself on my ability to relate to disenfranchised students and help them be successful. This early experience became the foundation for my belief that relationships can make a significant difference in the success of at-risk students, a bias I bring with me into this study. In later years, as a secondary principal I struggled to make the small rural high school environment more accommodating to at-risk students. As a school superintendent I see the structures of public schools that disadvantaged students must overcome to be successful from a system-wide perspective and try to provide safety nets for disenfranchised students. While I support the concepts espoused by NCLB, I have an

inherent bias against the legislation because of its' punitive nature and because it devalues all subjects other than math and reading.

All researchers bring biases to their study. Creswell (2003) contends that all research is laden with values and the qualitative researcher must be sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study. To combat my own biases as a qualitative researcher I maintained a constant level of awareness. Patton (2002) instructs against researcher bias in analyzing data when he states, "You look for data that support alternative explanations. Failure to find strong supporting evidence for alternative ways of presenting the data or contrary explanations helps increase confidence in the original, principal explanation you generated" (p. 553). I combated my biases by maintaining a constant level of awareness and by looking extensively for data that supported alternative explanations to my theory. Strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the research, which will be described later in the chapter, also assisted with working against the biases I brought into the research.

### *Qualitative Case Study*

Study of the research problem, objectives, and questions was accomplished through a qualitative case study design. A case study is usually employed to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific situation and the meaning for those involved in the study and to yield insights that can be used to influence practice (Erlandson et al., 1993; Glatthorn, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). Merriam (1998) states, "Case studies are differentiated from other types of qualitative research in that they are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system such as an individual,

program, event, group, intervention, or community” (p. 19). In my research, Middleton High and its surrounding community served as the “bounded system” of the case study.

The use of qualitative methods allows a researcher to understand a phenomenon in its natural setting (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). These methods were particularly appropriate for this study, because the research questions were focused on understanding how students and school personnel characterize their success and their relationships with each other. Consistent with the qualitative tradition, I served as the main instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998) and used multiple methods to collect data through interaction with the participants (Babbie, 2004; Erlandson et al., 1993; Patton, 2002). Qualitative techniques enabled me to learn more in depth about the topic of the study from the perspective of those most directly involved and affected (Patton, 2002). I was able to best understand how students and adults characterize their relationships by directly engaging them in the research, using open-ended techniques, and selecting participants that best helped me understand the problem and answer the research questions. I was able to probe the issue being studied in greater depth and achieve a better understanding of the subject being studied (Creswell, 2003). To accomplish the case study, I used naturalistic methods of inquiry (Erlandson et al., 1993) which included the data collection strategies described in the following section.

#### *Data Collection Strategies*

Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research, the research design remained flexible throughout the study. I used multiple strategies consistent with the qualitative tradition to collect data, including the use of individual interviews, focus group

interviews, participant observations, and a review of documents relative to the research questions and objectives.

*Purposive selection.* Consistent with the qualitative tradition, participants were purposively selected. Creswell (2003) states, “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 185). I selected those stakeholders who were most knowledgeable about the efforts made by the school to close the achievement gap and who directly participated in the relationships between and among parents, teachers, students, and administrators in the building. Selecting participants in this manner assisted in the collection of rich, descriptive data that allowed me to analyze the relationships described above in the actual context of those relationships. By selecting a representative sample of teachers and students, I was able to gather data about the relationships teachers and administrators have with advantaged and disadvantaged students as well as the relationships that existed among students who fall into those two categories. I then examined the data to determine how teachers, students, and administrators perceive their relationships with each other. Fifty-five Middleton High School stakeholders participated in the study, in either an individual interview or as part of a focus group. The flexible nature of the research design left open the possibility that more or fewer participants could have been needed and data collection was suspended when I reached a point of redundancy (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Interviews.* As stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) the interviews served as a “conversation with a purpose.” The interviews were open-ended, semi-structured conversations that allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant’s

attitudes, perceptions and beliefs on the topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2002). I began the interviews with a preliminary set of questions, but allowed for the conversation to proceed in the direction dictated by the interview participants. Doing so allowed me to uncover details the interview participants felt were important (Babbie, 2004; Erlandson et al., 1993; Patton, 2002).

The initial data collection plan called for individual interviews with the superintendent, junior high school principal, high school principal, and junior high school counselor. During the conduct of those interviews, informants indicated the perspective of additional individuals would be valuable. The first set of interviews led to the decision to conduct additional interviews with the former superintendent, the at-risk teacher, and the building trades teacher. All interview participants were asked to discuss what the school has done to improve the achievement and graduation rate of economically disadvantaged students and to share their perceptions on the relationships between and among themselves as well as teachers and students in the school. They were able to provide a school-wide perspective on the relationships between teachers, administrators and students. This allowed me to gather a broad perception of administrator- teacher-student relationships. Individual interview guides may be found in Appendix A.

*Focus Groups.* Focus groups are group interviews designed to facilitate conversation among the participants. Focus groups usually consist of 7 to 10 participants and are useful for generating discussion from a variety of viewpoints (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Patton (2002) addresses the dynamic that occurs during a focus group interaction:

Focus group interviewing was developed in recognition that many consumer decisions are made in a social context, often growing out of discussions with other

people. The twist is that, unlike a series of one-on-one interviews, in a focus group participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say. However, participants need not agree with each other or reach any kind of consensus (pp. 385-6).

The focus group setting allowed me to collect data from a variety of participants most knowledgeable about the context of the relationships among stakeholders in a social setting where participants could build on one another's responses. Focus groups were conducted with groups of students, teachers, and parents.

To balance representation of students equally among the six grade levels I conducted a total of three focus group interviews with students. One group consisted of 8 students in the junior high, grades 7-8; the other two groups consisted of a total of 12 students in the high school, grades 9-12. An attempt was made to balance the focus groups with equal representation of economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. Because some students did not return their consent forms, economically disadvantaged students outnumbered economically advantaged students 8 to 4 in the high school focus groups. This combination of students allowed me to gain an understanding of the perceptions of teacher and administrator relationships from both subgroups of students and insured representation of disadvantaged students. However, because I did not want any of my own preconceived notions to influence the focus group, I asked school officials not to reveal the socio-economic status of the students until after all interviews were completed and I was ready to start data analysis.

Students were divided by grade level to insure older students did not dominate the group. Seventh and 8th grade students were grouped together, as were students in grades 9-12. Four students in 8th grade participated, as did four 7th grade students, 3 freshmen, 4 sophomores, and 5 juniors. No seniors returned consent forms.

An attempt was made to balance the groups by gender to the extent possible. The junior high group consisted of 5 females and 3 males, while the high school student groups consisted of 8 females and 4 males, tilting the balance to favor females 13 to 7. All groups included at least two students who were native to the district as well as those who had previously attended school in another district. In total, 20 of 360 students participated in focus group interviews. Selecting students from these representative groups allowed me to explore perceptions of teacher relationships with advantaged students and disadvantaged students in all six grade levels and by gender. Focus group questions for students may be found in Appendix B.

To learn the perspective of teachers, I conducted three teacher focus group interviews. One group involved teachers of core subjects in grades 9-12. The second group involved 7th and 8th grade teachers of core subjects. The last group involved teachers of electives in all grades 7-12. Each group consisted of six or seven teachers. To the extent possible, the teacher groups were balanced by gender and by experience, and fourteen female teachers and eight male teachers participated. Balancing the focus groups by grade level and by gender to the extent possible enabled me to gather perceptions about the relationships between teachers and students from the perspective of teachers at all grade levels in the building and account for gender. Including both veteran teachers and teachers new to the school permitted me to obtain valuable perceptions of teachers

who had been in the system long enough to understand the culture as well as those who were able to recall their initial perceptions of the school. This sample also allowed me to compare the perceptions of teachers in core areas subject to state assessments with the perceptions of elective teachers in non-tested areas. It was also possible to compare the perspectives of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade core teachers with those of the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade core teachers. I was interested in determining how the teachers perceived their relationship with the students and whether teacher perceptions were consistent with those of students. Furthermore, I was interested in whether the teachers perceived themselves as caring; whether both disadvantaged and advantaged students perceived their teachers as caring, and if so, how that caring benefited the student academically and/or socially (see Appendix B-1 for teacher focus group questions).

To gain the perspective of parents, I conducted one focus group consisting of 8 parents of economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. While I had originally planned to schedule two parent focus groups, the high turnout and active participation of the parents involved in the first group provided me with an abundance of rich, descriptive data. Parents of students from all grades 7-12 were represented. All parents had students in the high school. In addition, many of the parents had students who had already graduated. A majority of the parents themselves were graduates of Middleton High School. The group was balanced by gender and income level to the extent possible, consisting of 5 women and 3 men, half of whom were low-income parents. This sampling allowed me to gain the perspective of parents from both economic groups regarding the efforts the school has made to meet the needs of their children as well as their perception of the overall quality and culture of the school and the relationships of the teachers and

staff with their students. Focus group questions for parents are included on Appendix B-2.

*Document Review.* The collection and review of documents is a commonly used strategy in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). To gain a more accurate understanding of the setting and context of the study, I reviewed the following documents: class schedule, strategic plan, sample student improvement plans, correspondence regarding the assignment of the at-risk teacher, drafts of school achievement charts, a summary of assessment scores by grade level, activity calendar, at-risk plan, student handbook, and faculty handbook. In addition to providing contextually relevant information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the data from the documents was used to verify and advance hypotheses as they emerged in data analysis (Merriam, 1998). Specifically, I was interested in programs designed to assist students who were not successful. This information assisted me in understanding the level of support provided for economically disadvantaged students, and institutional attitudes toward them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). These documents informed the data gathered in teacher and administrator interviews and focus groups.

*Observations.* In order for me to fully understand the nature of the relationships between and among students, teachers, and administrators, I observed and recorded descriptions of events, behaviors, and artifacts of the setting (Patten, 2002). According to Erlandson (1993), "Observation allows the researcher to discover the here-and-now inner-workings of the environment via the use of the five human senses" (p. 94). Observations were used to gain a better understanding of the context and culture of the setting, as well as to triangulate emerging findings (Merriam, 1998).

I observed the classes of eight teachers in core area classes for at least 30 minutes per observation. I also observed passing periods between classes, and periods of time immediately before and after school. These observations were held on five separate days scheduled during November and December. This allowed direct observation of the interaction between students and teachers in both a formal classroom setting and an informal school setting. I was able to observe the nature of interactions between teachers and administrators and both subgroups of students. These observations were used to assist me in confirming and disconfirming the data about the nature of relationships gathered during the interviews and focus groups. These observations also informed the data collected in the more formal setting of the focus groups and individual interviews. Observations were recorded in the form of field notes.

#### *Data Analysis and Interpretation*

Data analysis is the process of arranging and organizing the data collected, while data interpretation involves making sense of the data and deriving meaning from it while considering the theory used to frame the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Data analysis and interpretation in qualitative research is an ongoing process that begins during data collection and ends when the final report is submitted (Creswell, 2003; Erlandson et al., 1993). I used an inductive process to analyze interview and observation data, and unitized it in to segments of meaning, each of which could stand on its' own as a meaningful piece of data. All unitized data were then grouped by commonalities.

Using the constant-comparative method (Merriam, 1998) I continually compared one unitized segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data were then grouped together and assigned a label that served as a category or theme. Each

theme or category was then assigned a code to assist with the organization and analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal of the analysis was to identify patterns in the data. The patterns in the data were then analyzed through the theoretical framework detailed earlier. Once patterns were developed and verified, individual units of data were then examined against the theoretical framework to verify their placement in each category.

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts from the interviews and focus groups, along with the field notes from observations and document review were unitized and analyzed as described above. Unitized data were entered into a FileMaker database to facilitate analysis. Data were searched for common patterns and themes, with the research questions and theoretical framework used to guide analysis and interpretation of the data. Documents collected were analyzed in the same manner as the transcripts from interviews and focus groups and were used to confirm or disconfirm themes in the data (Merriam, 1998).

### *Trustworthiness*

In order to obtain high quality data, it is essential the participants view the researcher as trustworthy throughout the process of data collection and analysis. In order to increase trustworthiness and credibility, to increase the accuracy of findings, and to work against my biases, I used the trustworthiness strategies of data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), member checking, and establishing an audit trail (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of data was accomplished through the collection of data from multiple sources and utilizing multiple strategies (Patten, 2002).

Member checks were conducted throughout the study. Participants were provided with a transcript of the interview to verify its' accuracy and were afforded the opportunity to identify and clarify any discrepancies. This allowed participants to test the accuracy of the data collected and the conclusions reached. As a final measure of establishing trustworthiness and credibility and insuring the accuracy of findings, I continually reflected on the data while composing findings and drawing conclusions to insure a direct connection, or audit trail (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), existed between the data and the findings and conclusions. I also utilized the services of a peer debriefer (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to validate the findings and conclusions throughout data analysis.

#### *Protection of Human Subjects*

To insure the protection of human subjects, the Institutional Review Board of Wichita State University approved the proposed study before I began. All participants were required to sign a consent form prior to data collection sessions. The consent form explained the purpose of the research study, asked for voluntary participation, assured that all data will remain confidential, and offered participants the option to withdraw from the study at a later date. All participants under the age of 18 were required to provide their personal assent in addition to written consent from a parent or guardian in order to participate. Adult consent forms, parent consent forms, and student assent forms are located in Appendix C). To further protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms have been used for the town, the school, and individual participants in reporting the findings, which are contained in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings: Middleton and Middleton High School

Middleton High School (MHS) is located in a small town of about 2,850 residents in Southeast Kansas. As described earlier, the town has developed a number of small industries that employ approximately 1700 people, which is unique for a town of its size. In the early 1970's, the town's major employer, an oil company, closed its refinery and left town. At that time, the city formed an economic committee that actively sought out smaller industries and manufacturers to replace the jobs that left with the refinery. According to the principal, "That's the only way they could survive... They got tax breaks. They got buildings. They got land. But, they could only pay low wages because they were small industry." In the opinion of one parent I spoke with, this attitude of responding to challenges by finding solutions was part of the culture of the town, "You never hear the words Middleton and dying or failure, it is always growth and potential, very positive words. You don't always hear that in a lot of communities our size anymore." Many stakeholders felt this attitude of growth and potential carried over to the school.

A positive attitude was visibly transmitted from the community to the school through a private foundation. A former graduate of Middleton established the foundation to provide scholarships to MHS graduates who went to college. Any graduate can receive up to \$4,000 in scholarships to be used to attend any college or community college. The foundation also paid half the expenses for any student who qualified to compete in a national level competition. Students who qualified for and participated in national forensics tournaments, national Future Farmers of America (FFA) or Family Career and

Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) contests often benefited from these stipends. In addition, other sources in the community contributed additional funds for scholarships or expenses. The tight connection between the school and the community was also visible when students participated in community clean up day. Two days each year the students in the high school work together to clean up Main Street. Parents saw this activity as a visible artifact of the symbiotic connection between school and community.

### *Middleton High School*

The high school itself houses 365 students in grades 7 through 12. The single story brick and mortar building was built in 1987, and its construction connected an existing gymnasium with existing industrial arts and agriculture education shops. The building runs east-west with the front of the building facing north to the main parking lot. Across the street to the north are the high school football stadium, the city outdoor swimming pool, and city tennis courts. The wing housing students in grades 7 and 8 sits on the east side of the building and was opened in 1991 at the same time as a weight room constructed on the west side near the gymnasium.

Upon entering the front door of Middleton High School, I found an interior with painted concrete block walls and tile floors that were clean and well maintained. The building construction was functional and pleasant, but not elaborate or excessive. The main entrance is in the middle of a nearly block long single level building and opens adjacent to the main high school office. Students in grades 7-8 had a separate entrance and a separate office with their own administrator on the east side of the building. A third entrance on the west side of the building provided direct access to a small lobby, the

gymnasiums, locker rooms, and weight room. The cafeteria sat just up a sloped hallway from this entrance.

The building was well lit. Ceiling tiles were white and in good condition indicating recent replacement. Standard tile floors were clean and emitted a sheen that indicated the wax applied routinely during the summer had either held up exceptionally well or had been recently reapplied. Wood doors showing little wear opened to restrooms that were clean, with no graffiti or unpleasant odor. Fixtures were operational and in good condition.

On the west wing of the building, vending machines selling snacks and drinks dotted the wall in the lobby of the commons area adjacent to the cafeteria. The cafeteria was clean, orderly and of adequate size for the student population. Students spoke freely at round tables in groups of six or eight during lunch without creating an uncomfortable level of noise. A jukebox sat along one wall. It was rarely used because the music had not been kept current. In addition to the cafeteria and gymnasiums, also in this wing were the vocational classrooms, including the FACS (Family and Consumer Science) classes, vocational agriculture, horticulture, and drafting.

The concrete block walls were painted a neutral color and interrupted by lockers in the official school color, royal blue, and decorated with flyers encouraging athletic teams. A trip eastward down a long hall took me to the high school office and past classrooms and the main entrance to the library. Tack boards fashioned in the shape of the school mascot, a lightening bolt, adorned the walls in the junior high wing. Larger square shaped bulletin boards advertised coming events: a school play, a dodge-ball tournament for the sophomore class, and a Friday night movie night. Mr. Watson, the

high school principal in his 9th year, informed me the school often showed movies on the large screen television in the commons to entertain students on the weekends.

Further to the east, the junior high wing of the building intersected like the letter *T* with the main hall of the main building. A large commons area separated a cluster of five eighth grade classrooms on one end from an equal number of seventh grade classrooms, an office and conference room on the other end. Restrooms flanked either side of the commons area, with sinks and mirrors on the exterior for easier supervision. In the middle of the commons was half a dozen round tables surrounded by molded plastic chairs. One wall of the commons was lined with windows offering a view of the courtyard and adjacent street. The other wall was lined with cabinetry, where a big screen projection television was centered.

Students nodded and greeted me pleasantly, making eye contact and asking if I needed directions to the office, or to the cafeteria for coffee. During passing periods the students made their way to their lockers to gather books and talk to friends. Visits to the school occurred during the late fall and early winter, and students were modestly dressed in jeans and long sleeved t-shirts. Many wore hooded sweatshirts, a few with the school name and logo on the front. Some students congregated around teachers who were standing in front of their classroom doors for supervisory purposes. They engaged students in conversation. As I stood in the hallway during a passing period, Mr. Marshall, the junior high principal and a staff member at Middleton High School for 28 years, related stories about students as they walked by. He taught most of their parents and knew them as well. After a few weeks of observation some students greeted me in the

hallway with remarks like “Hey, you’re that one guy who gave us donuts,” or “I know you. You talked to us. Can we get some more donuts?”

Staff and students interacted pleasantly and cordially before school and during passing periods. Staff members often initiated contact with students asking them about activities or homework, or encouraging them to “be on time” for class. During class students appeared comfortable with, but respectful of staff members. In one classroom, students sat on pillows on the carpeted floor listening to the teacher read aloud and lead the discussion. In others, students sat in desks arranged in rows, a more traditional classroom format. Teachers routinely stood or sat on the front of desks at the front of the room to lead discussion. Some circulated among the students while students worked in labs or on assignments. Students actively participated in discussion engaging teachers with questions and opinions. By listening to and observing teachers, administrators, and students I got the feeling that they genuinely liked each other. According to Mr. Watson, faculty members interact socially outside the school day through recreational activities like bowling and golf or hayrack rides for their families. At the end of every summer the staff gathers at the house of the principal, Mr. Watson, for a back-to-school cookout.

Students were well behaved. They participated in class. They were polite and orderly during passing periods. When they did misbehave teachers usually issued a stern verbal reprimand such as “Gentlemen, we don’t need any of that.” Or “I am not your mother. Put your stuff away.” Students in the halls at the end of the passing period were likely to receive a “Get some place! On time!” from Junior High Principal Mr. Marshall, who was in charge of attendance for all students in grades 7-12. One reprimand was usually enough to correct the behavior. I was able to hear one rather loud lecture

delivered by Mr. Marshall to an 8th grade student who had been sent to the office. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, students viewed Marshall's gruff demeanor as caring rather than punitive.

I was routinely invited to lunch in the cafeteria, especially on the days when chicken and noodles were served. Nearly every adult and a even a number of students asked me if I was eating lunch in the cafeteria, "Coming to lunch? Chicken and noodles today!" I obligingly accepted the invitation and was treated to complimentary homemade chicken and noodles, dining in the cafeteria with the superintendent, the high school principal, the junior high principal and two teachers. All three administrators eat in the cafeteria on a daily basis. The culinary highlight of the case study came in the form of an invitation to Thanksgiving dinner prepared by the student organization Family Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) who each year prepare Thanksgiving dinner for themselves and the school staff. As a guest, I was allowed to fill my plate first and feasted on a dinner of turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, sweet potatoes covered with brown sugar, and pecan pie. All the food was prepared by the students, who eyed my plate enviously as I made my way to the dining area, the bleachers in the gymnasium.

I found adults in the building to be very accommodating. The principals and secretaries arranged the teacher and student focus groups, distributed and collected consent forms, and called students out of class for interviews. One group of teachers showed up at 7:30 AM for a focus group after having stayed as late as 9:30 PM the evening before for parent-teacher conferences. After a teacher focus group the teachers remarked how much fun it was and one even stated, "We need to do this more often."

The junior high secretary, Melissa, routinely asked if I needed anything and gathered documents at my request. She graduated from the rival high school down the road, but liked working at Middleton “mainly because of the teachers, they really care, and the kids are very well behaved.”

Parents support the school, the teachers, and the administrators. On the night the parent focus group was conducted 6 inches of snow fell and continued to fall throughout the evening. Despite the heavy snow and deplorable driving conditions, 8 of 10 parents showed up for the interview because “that’s what we do for our school.” Most of them were employed in blue-collar jobs within the city of Middleton and were graduates of Middleton High School. Those who were not native to the community expressed equal attachment to the school.

Teachers attempted to make the subject matter interesting to students through hands-on projects and by connecting the content to the student’s lives. One junior high school teacher stopped me in the hall before school one day to tell me that while the students in her class were doing a worksheet when I observed them, it is not typical practice at Middleton. She went on to explain that she typically introduces a concept and has students do an activity to reinforce the concept. On another occasion I witnessed an English teacher connect *Romeo and Juliet* to the student’s working class lives by explaining that if Romeo had to get up and work in the morning he wouldn’t have been able to stay out all night and sleep all day.

#### *Middleton’s Schedule, Curriculum, Co-curricular, and Extra-curricular Activities*

Classes at Middleton High School officially begin at 8:00 AM and end at 3:25 PM. The daily schedule consists of eight 45-minute class periods and one 28-minute

advisory period, which is held every day between first and second periods. During advisory, students are assigned to a teacher, but they may seek assistance from any teacher in the building or work on their homework. Passing period for students in grades 7-8 is staggered so they are not in the halls at the same time as the 9-12 grade students. Lunch for the junior high students occurs between 4th and 5th periods at 11:49 and is 26 minutes in length. High school students eat lunch from 12:33 to 12:59 between 5th and 6th periods.

Middleton offers the core courses one would expect for a Kansas high school of its size. Math courses range from general math to calculus. Science offerings are limited to physical science, biology, physics and chemistry. Language arts courses include the standard English I, II, III, and IV as well as Advanced Placement English and journalism. Social science course offerings include government, world history, US history, and psychology. Electives are available for students in the following areas: instrumental music, vocal music, art, physical education, greenhouse, agriculture education, family and consumer science, industrial arts, computer applications, building trades, VPL (a computer based credit recovery class), business classes, Spanish, and French.

The school has a reputation as a “high-tech” school primarily because it was an adopter of technology and internet use in the early 1990’s. MHS employs two full-time business and computer teachers who primarily teach keyboarding and computer applications with one section of accounting and business law. Students are allowed to check out a laptop computer if they do not have a computer at home to do homework. The school itself serves as the internet provider for the community.

Students can participate in a variety of extra-curricular activities including clubs, athletics, and non-athletic activities. An examination of the student handbook yielded the following list of athletic activities: football, boys and girls tennis, volleyball, boys and girls basketball, baseball, softball, track, boys and girls golf, boys and girls cross country, and wrestling. Non-athletic activities include: band, choir, spirit squad, forensics, student council, yearbook, newspaper, and scholar's bowl. In addition, students may join the following organizations: National Honor Society, drama, Future Farmers of America (FFA), student council, Spanish club, spirit club, FCCLA, math relays, drill team, and class officer.

#### *Programs and Interventions Support Students*

Middleton High School has a variety of programs and interventions to support students. These include programs directed at students who would be considered at-risk of dropping out of school, and include the Student Improvement Team (SIT) where teachers meet to discuss individual students about whom they are concerned. The SIT process is described in the at-risk plan developed by the district in the early 1990's. According to the plan, the mission of the SIT is to "coordinate home, community, and educational resources to help students develop to their full potential." The plan also lists other options that have been created to provide support for students. These include college courses, tutorial services, Upward Bound, talent search, volunteer community service program, apprenticeship program, individual learning plans, and virtual prescriptive learning (VPL). Three of these programs, VPL, Building Trades, and Zeros Aren't Permitted (ZAP) are widely used by the school to assist students who are not being successful without intervention, therefore will be described in some detail in the following sections.

*Zeros Aren't Permitted (ZAP) Program.* When the MHS staff examined data on high school dropouts they determined the critical factor was that students did not hand in assignments. According to the principal, "The one common factor I found in all those dropouts was the fact that they didn't do their work." Further investigation determined in most cases students had the ability to perform the work, but for a variety of reasons either did not complete homework or turn it in. In response, the school developed the Zeros Aren't Permitted (ZAP) program to assist those students who were not turning in their work. The principal had learned about ZAP from a colleague in another school that had seen positive results with the program and thought it would produce similar results at Middleton. After presenting the program to the teachers, who endorsed it, the school implemented ZAP. When a student receives three zeros in any one class, the teacher submits the student's name to the office. Each week the principal develops a list of students who are then required to stay after school for 30 minutes each day Monday through Thursday to complete their assignments. Once the student completes his or her assignments, he or she is no longer required to stay after school. The program is staffed by teacher volunteers who stay after school to work with students in their subject area. According to one staff member, some students transition in and out of ZAP, while a few students "never come out."

*Virtual Prescriptive Learning (VPL).* While the goal of ZAP was to prevent students from failing classes, MHS implemented a program called Virtual Prescriptive Learning (VPL) in the fall of 2003 to assist students who do fail a class and help them to remain on track to graduate. The technology coordinator discovered the program through a local education service center. Believing it would help students who were not

successful in a traditional classroom he presented it to the administration. After consulting with the teachers about how the program might be utilized, administrators and teachers decided to implement it. VPL is a computer based online instructional program. Students who fail a required course can be taken out of an elective at the semester and enroll online in the class they have failed any hour during the day. The net effect of the VPL class is to enable students to recapture the lost credit without having to wait until the next year to re-take the class. As one administrator summed it up,

We figured out we were losing kids when they were freshmen and sophomores. They were dropping out when they were juniors and seniors, but we were losing them as freshmen and sophomores because they would flunk classes and get behind on credits and they wouldn't graduate with their classes.

Now if a student fails a required class first semester he can be pulled from an elective and enrolled in the VPL version of that class. This allows the student to make up the credit in the required class he lost immediately and remain on track to graduate with his class. As the counselor explained,

If I had a kid fail first semester English... I would get that kid into VPL English and I'd enroll him also in his regular English class. We keep him in both so he doesn't get behind. The moment they start getting behind, that's when they start disengaging.

An added benefit to the program is that students can progress at their own rate. Because the classes are technology based, they offer the student an alternative pedagogical approach to the regular classroom. As one teacher put it, "Which makes it more

individualized. They get to progress at their own rate. Faster at what they understand better, slower at what they need more time on.”

*Building Trades Program.* In the decade prior to NCLB, the former superintendent in collaboration with the director of the special education cooperative that serves Middleton High School developed the building trades vocational program. They believed it would benefit both special education and regular education students who were not successful in the traditional classroom and needed vocational skills to improve their job prospects after high school. The program primarily enrolls non-college bound students who operate as a construction crew under the guidance of the instructor and an assistant who serve in the roles of general contractor. The students are generally juniors and seniors who enroll half a day in their required courses and the other half of the day in building trades. The students in the program have built houses and garages from the ground up, remodeled the local movie theatre, erected fences, and poured concrete, among other construction projects. According to the instructor, the goal of the program is to “teach them work skills and familiarize them with as many types of construction as I can.”

In addition to providing students with a hands-on, high interest applied course of study, students are motivated to attend regularly because they are paid for their work in the class. Because the class generates revenue the students are each paid up to \$300 per semester to work, but the amount of pay is pro-rated according to the students’ grade and attendance. For example, if a student’s grade is an 80%, he or she receives 80% of the \$300. Every day a student is suspended from school he is fined 10%. Every day a student is absent from class results in a 2% fine. At the end of the semester the teacher “settles

up” with each student. When the program first began, he was able to pay them in cash, which worked “really well” because he would lay down all \$300 and take back the money they lost for poor attendance or suspension. Now, he is prevented by policy from using cash and instead uses gift cards that can be redeemed at national retail stores or outdoor specialty stores.

The curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and support programs at Middleton High described above are the visible elements of the school that participants spoke about most frequently and reflect the importance of relationships between teachers and students. The next section contains an analysis of parents, students, teachers and administrators perceptions of Middleton High School.

#### *Parents Hold Middleton High School in High Regard*

Parents of Middleton High School students were very attached to their school system and felt it was a good school. Many of them were products of the Middleton school system and graduates of Middleton High School. Those who had not gone to school at Middleton talked about choosing to live there because of the quality of the schools. It should be noted ten parents had been invited to attend the focus group interview, and seven had responded they would attend. Despite the fact that on the night of the focus group interview over six inches of snow fell making roads difficult to travel, eight parents still showed up. When asked why they braved the weather they responded that is what they do for school activities.

Parents talked about the high standards at the school that applied to all students. According to one parent, “The standards here seem to be higher than other schools I have observed.” A second parent stated plainly, “The kids are challenged here. They don’t just

show up and that's it." One mother commented that when she asked her kids about school they never replied, "boring." Another mother reacted to her claim stating, "You're right. That is something I've never heard and I said that a lot in my school."

Parents also felt the school used technology to engage students in learning and to communicate with parents. They praised the use of the student data management system, Powergrade, which allowed both students and parents to monitor grades and attendance online via the internet at any time. They discussed how the district adopted a forward thinking attitude about technology early on and how this attitude allowed them to more effectively use technology today. As one father stated,

It is not just having computers for the sake of having computers. They have been able to refine what they have been doing and ... really tune into what the student needs and what they need to work on.

Another parent described how her daughter traveled to other schools as part of a school organization. According to her, "our school system has more technology than any other school [and] she has been in quite a few." Not only did Middleton have more technology, it assisted students in using technology, as the parent continued by asserting, "Our students are more computer literate than students at other schools. The level is higher here."

School sponsored trips also provided students with opportunities to see the world outside of Middleton. Student groups regularly traveled to Germany in the summer. They also attended national competitions in forensics and national FFA and FCCLA conferences in Kansas as well as other states. The importance of these opportunities was not lost on the parents. One father expressed his appreciation for these opportunities,

“With FCCLA my daughter’s been to Chicago, to San Diego, to Dallas, to St. Louis. She knows people all over the country. She still communicates with them. She emails them. That program has been so good for her.” These trips were funded partly through the private community foundation that provided financial support for trips and college scholarships for students.

Parents talked about how the students were engaged in school through quality co-curricular and extra-curricular programs. One parent summarized the relationship between the curricular and co-curricular programs when he stated,

In all respects, the school system is hitting on all cylinders. They have great sports programs as well. I know that is outside the academia, but it adds to a fun environment for the kids. The kids enjoy it, and the adults enjoy it too. Adults are very into the kids’ programs and that just adds more to it. You have a full house when you have an event. It adds to the atmosphere as well.

Many parents chimed in that the community’s support was not limited to athletic, but also included instrumental and vocal music programs as well as plays and other fine arts programs. They testified to broad based parent and community support for any type of school activity.

Perhaps one reason support for school activities was so high was the personable atmosphere where “everyone gets along with everyone else,” which parents attributed to the school’s size. As one parent stated, “It is a small enough town that we kind of take care of everybody.” Another added, “We are small enough everyone is friends with everyone else.”

While the parents mentioned these as reasons they felt Middleton High School was a quality school they gave the bulk of the credit to the teachers and administrators. Parents enthused about how teachers cared about students and were willing to work with them and do whatever it took to help students succeed. As one parent stated, “They kind of take everybody under their wings.” Another parent related a story about how a teacher had gone out of his way to help her daughter, who was having trouble in class,

She had missed a lot of school. She had been ill. Her teacher caught her up and he stayed late and came in early and made sure she kept her grade up. I don’t know that too many teachers would do that, but I can say here they do that.

Another parent talked about moving back to Middleton specifically because of the schools. “When [my children] went to [another school] teachers were writing stuff on the board and that is what the kids were supposed to do. They didn’t explain it. Didn’t do anything. That’s why my kids came back here.” All parents in the focus group shared a story about how a teacher had gone out of his or her way to help one of their children. They felt the quality of the teachers separated Middleton from other schools.

The parents’ perceptions of the teachers as caring and as willing to help students likely contributed to the high level of trust parents felt for teachers. All parents, even parents of at-risk students spoke about how willing the teachers were to discuss the problem and come to a compromise. According to one parent,

The teachers, you can go and talk to them. They are very friendly. They are willing to work with your children. I have never had any problem in all the years with either of my children. I can’t say enough for the school system.

One parent, who confessed her son was “not a model student,” expressed her gratitude for the teachers’ willingness to listen,

I am just happy if I have a problem I can come up here and say, “this is my problem,” and we can sit down and work it out and do the best we can to compromise if we all don’t agree. And I think that helps out.

Teachers’ willingness to listen to parents combined with their willingness to do whatever it takes to help their children built a high degree of trust between teachers and parents. As one parent summarized, “The people who work here, we count on them, we trust them. We trust their judgment.”

Parents’ positive perceptions were not limited to teachers, but included administrators as well. Parents spoke about how much they admired and trusted all three administrators: superintendent Darryl Pastor, principal Tom Watson, and junior high principal Craig Marshall. They used the words “respect,” “fair,” and “strong” to refer to the administrators.

Parents described the principal, Mr. Watson, as “approachable” and “open-minded.” One low-income parent stated, “He is fair to all the kids. It doesn’t matter who you are or what the problem is he will take the time to listen to you and work it out fairly.” This statement was echoed by another parent who added, “He seems very open minded. He doesn’t seem to deal with an issue with a pre-conceived notion.” Another parent stated that even though he was open minded, Mr. Watson was not weak minded, “With Tom everybody knows what you have. You’re not going to get any baloney.”

Parents expressed respect for all administrators. They talked about how Mr. Watson and Mr. Marshall treated all students fairly and did not “play favorites.” Most

parents nodded in agreement to one parent's assessment that, "I think they look at every parent, you know there are good kids and bad kids, and they treat everyone fairly." They also appreciated how much the administrators worked to stay knowledgeable about current trends in education. According to one parent, "I appreciate the fact they are looking outside and not just the 'this is the way we have always done it mentality.' I think that makes a big difference."

Similar statements of admiration were made about the superintendent of schools, Mr. Pastor. Parents were impressed that he had made personal connections and built relationships with the teachers and students. As one parent stated,

Mr. Pastor can walk through the hallways and know your child and call him by name. He was able to do that shortly after he came. He attends the functions whether it be academic or sports. He is involved with the kids at all levels.

Another added, "Mr. Pastor is very approachable. He truly has the kids' best interests at heart. He's just a very sincere man." One parent summed it up for the whole group when he expressed his belief in all three administrators, "It is kind of amazing really that they can be as strong as they are, yet they're so well respected by the students and the parents too."

While the parents were very positive about the school, the teachers and the administrators, they expressed dissatisfaction in one area. Most parents believed the school should provide more vocational courses to the students. They felt programs like work study and building trades allowed students who were not going to college to gain valuable workplace skills. Most parents believed the school should offer more vocational classes because "not everyone is going to college." One parent related a story about a

graduate who dropped out of college whom she felt should have been encouraged to choose a different path,

I am thinking of a young man who graduated last year. He just dropped out of college. I think he was in the special education program here. I feel like the school failed that child. He couldn't do the math and maybe he needed more guidance with the choice of college. I feel really bad he had to drop out. That's not a good thing. I don't know what the school can do so it doesn't happen to another child. I really feel bad for the kid.

The theme that not every student is going to go to college was prevalent in the perceptions of other stakeholders and will be seen in the analysis of student perceptions which will be considered next.

#### *Students Believe Middleton is a Safe, Caring School*

Student perceptions about Middleton High School, its teachers and administrators were very similar to those of the parents. Like their parents, students believed most teachers had high expectations for them. As one student professed, "Every teacher, even if it is a class you don't have to take, thinks their class is the top priority." Others talked about how they were expected to get their work done and were not allowed to coast. One group of junior high students engaged in the following verbal exchange, "We have too much homework." Another stated, "Especially in math." To which a third added, "We have homework every night," followed by a fourth student who further explained, "It's like 40 or 50 problems." While yet a sixth student complained, "Takes about an hour," and a seventh brought the discussion to a close with, "Science is worse though." These junior high students saw homework as a chore they did not care to do, while high school

students saw it as beneficial and an example of the high expectations teachers held for them. The difference in perceptions between high school and junior high students was articulated by high school students in this way, “That hallway [between the junior high and high school] is a major difference.” A second student explained, “Exactly. I think it’s a maturity thing. You have to grow up. With age you appreciate the help and what they [junior high students] think is harping is help.” Another further elaborated, “Junior high students have to grow up and realize what the teachers are there for. Why they are pushing them so hard. They want them to succeed. It’s not like they are doing it because they are mean.”

Students also talked about quality co-curricular and extra-curricular programs that were not valued more highly than academics. According to one student, “We put a lot of effort into sports and stuff. Football mostly. But everything else is pretty high on the scale too.” Another added, “We have a lot of organizations you can get into like FFA and all that too. It’s cool.” Most students felt the athletic teams, activities and other organizations helped to make school more fun and interesting. As one student proclaimed, “It is important to be out there on the field or the court, and the same with FFA and FCCLA.”

In addition, students mentioned the small size of the school and personable environment. According to one student, “Everybody supports you in whatever you decide to do pretty much.” Another added, “What I like about our school is it is so small. It is just cool that everybody knows everybody. So you always have someone to talk to or hang out with.” According to one student “Our class, we are so close.... Because everyone of us has grown up together basically.”

The personal small atmosphere helped students to feel safe at school. As one student professed, “Yeah. You know everybody’s tendencies so you don’t have to be scared of them cause you know pretty much how they are.” A second student added, “Everybody has each other’s back kind of.” In addition, the students felt the teachers were better able to monitor them because of their school’s smaller size, as one upperclassman theorized, “Since we are such a small school teachers can keep an eye on each student better.”

While students felt the small size did make the school safer and more personal, they also felt it had its drawbacks. One in particular was lack of privacy and everyone knowing everyone else’s business. As one student put it, “It is so small that if somebody says something it goes all over the school.” To which another added, “Yeah, everybody knows before you do.” Most students agreed with this. The junior high students referred to this phenomenon as “A lot of drama.”

And, similar to the parents’ views, students spoke about the teachers’ willingness to do whatever it takes to help them be successful. One student summarized the teachers’ willingness to make time for students, “They are always there to help you if you go in. They always are very patient with you and sit down and talk with you and explain everything to where you understand.” Another student talked about how teachers will hold evening study sessions before tests “to make sure you are prepared.” Others talked about how teachers went out of their way to help students. One cited a specific example of a teacher who brought her work to her after she had been absent, “I was sick for three days and he came to my house and gave me my assignments because he cared. I know that’s a lot and we don’t expect every teacher to do that but you could tell he cared.”

Most often, students spoke of the teachers' willingness to come in before school or stay after school to help them. Many related stories of teachers who had come in early or stayed late to help them with schoolwork. Most also spoke about how it was normal for teachers to be available after school to help them.

Because the teachers spent extra time and did whatever it took to help students, the students felt the teachers really cared about them. One economically disadvantaged student explained, "I feel that lots of teachers in our school actually care about us. They are like parents almost. They actually care about us like we are their kids." Another student shared how one of her teachers cared enough to make an extra effort to get assignments, "It's like the one teacher that tells you to turn it in and if you don't, you are in there right after school or before class. They really care about you." Another student followed with,

Like yesterday I had missing assignments in two different classes. One teacher was like, "You're going to see me after school and you're going to get that done."

She wanted me to come in and get it done, like she really cares.

Finally, one low-income student summarized the feelings of the group when she stated, "Most of my teachers want kids to get the work done. You will be in their room before school and after school if it is not done. I don't really have any teachers that just don't really care."

Not only did students believe the teachers really cared about them, they also felt the administrators cared as well. They talked specifically about how the administrators supported them by attending activities, by listening to the students and considering their point of view, and by just "being there" for the students.

Students provided ample evidence of this type of caring behavior by high school principal Mr. Watson. One said simply, “I especially like Mr. Watson cause he is a fun guy to be around and he makes you laugh when you go into his office.” Others were less elaborate but just as effective in their praise of Mr. Watson with comments like, “He is there for us.” and “He lets you tell your own side of the story. And he takes it into consideration. He doesn’t just toss it out the window.” One student stated, “If something goes wrong he’s there and he changes it.” To which another added, “He wants to make it right for everybody.” When a student wears an inappropriate shirt that violates the dress code Mr. Watson makes them wear a t-shirt with the words “I Love Mr. Watson” across the front. One male student expressed admiration for Mr. Watson when he said “I think I am going to wear a bad shirt just so I can get one.” Students did not like Mr. Watson because he gave them a free pass. In fact, they admitted that when students start to get a little out of line, Mr. Watson will address the entire school on the intercom to make sure everyone understands his expectations. Students were reassured that Watson would maintain order and provide the structure necessary to keep them safe and help them learn.

Students expressed similar feelings about junior high principal Mr. Marshall. As one student said, “Our administrators care a lot. If you miss school and you get an unexcused absence Mr. Marshall is looking for you, hunting you down by the end of the day.” Another added, “He wants to know why you weren’t there.” A third student related a story about how Mr. Marshall tracked down the student council president when she was two minutes late for school. When asked about Mr. Marshall’s gruff manner with students, they consistently replied with comments like, “It’s just a show. That old man is so soft. Seriously. I used to be scared of him in junior high, but now I joke around with

him.” Yet another stated, “He is always checking on you to make sure you are ok, and if you are not here at school then why weren’t you here. They are all really nice people.”

Perhaps the most important testimonial on behalf of Mr. Watson and Mr. Marshall came from one low-income student who stated, “They really care about you. If you are having problems with people calling you names and stuff they will take care of that person. You can just go to them for everything.” Middleton students trusted their administrators enough to openly talk to them about their issues and concerns.

Students spoke about how Mr. Watson paints his beard with the school colors for football games and talked about how much it mattered to them that all administrators attended school activities. One student related the following, “The sophomore class just put on a little dodge ball tournament to raise money for prom and they were all there. It wasn’t even a big deal and they were all still there.” The students interpreted their presence as an act of caring.

#### *Teachers Support Students, Connect with Parents, Administrators*

Teachers spoke positively about students, parents, and administrators at Middleton High School, reinforcing much of what the students and parents said about them. Teachers felt most parents were supportive of them and the students. In addition, teachers saw themselves not only as caring and willing to do whatever it took to help students be successful, but also as caring about each other. One teacher elaborated, “I think we actually care about the students and our colleagues. I think it was mentioned before that we’re pretty supportive and tight-knit with each other.” When referring to how the teaching staff views disadvantaged students, one staff member stated, “We make a very concerted effort to make sure those kids are learning, to make sure they know that

somebody cares about them in school and is trying to get them to a better place in their life.” Teachers felt it was their duty to care about the students and to act in a way that students knew they cared. As one teacher put it,

It is not just what we expect from them, they expect us to be as good of teachers as we possibly can. They also expect us to like our job a lot. We get that a lot:

“Do you like being here?” I’ll have the kids say, “You must really like your job.”

Teachers saw the mostly White, working class student body as “sheltered” because most of them had very little experience with racial and ethnic diversity. The only exposure to this type of diversity came from students’ contact with foreign exchange students each year. In addition to lacking experience with diversity, many students lacked exposure to experiences outside of Middleton. As one teacher declared, “Some of the students haven’t traveled out of Kansas. At the most they’ve been to Oklahoma. There aren’t masses of them that are necessarily well traveled.” Another teacher reinforced this point of view and agreed, “Some of them haven’t even been out of Middleton.” She went on to tell a story about one student she took on a trip to Wichita who, while on the trip, ate for the first time at a restaurant where waiters took his order and brought his meal to him. School trips were often the only time some students traveled outside of Middleton.

Even though most students were not well traveled, the teachers were aware of the expectations students had for them and felt an obligation to live up to those expectations. Teachers talked about coming in early and staying late to work with students. According to one teacher, “We have students we assign to 7:30 in the morning. We assign them to after school with us. Sometimes we are all fighting over the same student.” It was routine for teachers to volunteer to work with students in the ZAP program who were behind in

their class even though that was not the intent of the program. One staff member talked about the willingness of the teachers to put in extra time to help students,

I mean, you can walk around this building after school and our foreign language teacher will have 6 or 7 kids in the room. Just about every math teacher will have additional kids in the room, and their contract day's over. Our kids' day ends at 3:25 and our teachers' contract day ends at 3:30, but you won't see any of them walk out the door at 3:30.

Staff members singled out teachers Bill Gray and Tim Fessler for their especially instrumental roles in supporting disadvantaged and at-risk students. Mr. Gray runs the VPL program for at-risk students detailed earlier and Mr. Fessler teaches the previously described building trades class.

Through the use of the VPL class Mr. Gray sees his role as working with all kinds of students from "jail bound to home bound" in order to keep them from falling behind on credits. "To have a gifted student walk in my door is an honor" he stated with a chuckle. According to a number of staff members Mr. Gray is the key to the success of the VPL program, and one teacher's comment represents the views of many:

Without VPL, I don't know what we would do. And once again, I give a great deal of credit to Bill Gray. It takes someone like Bill Gray who could work with a variety of personalities of a child. Keeping a child motivated and wanting to do it, instead of getting in their face and turning them off.

One staff member verified that statement by saying of Mr. Gray, "He's got that gift of making the connection with the child. So they go down there, but they may not want to be there. Bill doesn't let them get away with a thing!" Mr. Gray often enlists the

assistance of the regular classroom teachers, and believes MHS teachers are always willing to do what it takes to help his students to be successful, “Whenever I ask teachers to help with the students in my room I can’t think of any negatives, and I’m always asking them to give us some help, or a special lesson plan for a special situation.”

Staff members made similar statements regarding Mr. Fessler’s ability to connect with students in the building trades program. While the hands on nature of the program is important and the incentives motivate students to perform, the key to its success, according to one administrator, is the relationship Mr. Fessler develops with his students,

That program alone has saved a lot of kids. And it’s all based on a relationship with those two guys [Mr. Fessler and his assistant, Mr. Williams] that run the program – I’m convinced of it. If they left us and we put two other people in there, we would be in trouble. Same program, same stuff – it’s the relationship that makes the difference.

Other teachers and parents corroborated the belief that Mr. Fessler’s work with students through the building trades program helps students to stay in school. One staff member shared why she thinks Mr. Fessler is able to accomplish this, “Tim can help them feel successful. Because, you know, they’ll build a house, and that’s pretty darn successful. They work hard at it. They create something, and it develops pride.” While the sense of accomplishment was important, Mr. Fessler used other extrinsic rewards to motivate his students.

Each semester Mr. Fessler pays his students and takes them on a trip to spend the money they earned in the program. Often they go to Cabela’s, a store that sells equipment for pursuit of hunting, fishing, and camping and other outdoor activities. Every spring

they go on a fishing trip and part of the ritual is to grill steaks. To go on the trip, students must have a passing grade in all of their classes. A few weeks in advance of the trip, Mr. Fessler emails staff members urging them to use the trip as “leverage to get all the back assignments and anything they are missing because this trip is important to them.” He went on to explain why this is such an important opportunity for students. “These kids don’t get to go on a lot of trips” in their other classes, and as the teachers previously noted, many of them have had little chance to travel much farther than the county line. They are not the class officers or leaders of other clubs who get to travel to Wichita or St. Louis or Kansas City. When the topic of these reward trips came up, Mr. Gray related a story about one of the trips he assisted with that captures the spirit of the program and the nature of the teachers in charge of it,

I was thinking of a few years ago when I made one of the fishing trips. It was to Elk City, no big deal. There were all sorts of challenges about who was going to catch the most and the biggest fish and so forth. I think Mr. Watson - and by the way that is another example, he took time to go with the kids - he usually ends up with the biggest fish. Anyway the camaraderie was a lot of fun. But I remember Tim [Fessler] and Mr. Williams cooked steaks and this one poor little scrawny kid ate three of them. These are big steaks and he ate three. Afterwards I said, “Man how can you eat three steaks?” He said, “Well I save up. I never had a steak until last year [on this trip].” At home he gets peanut butter and hamburger at best, but here was an opportunity to build some social skills, really a big deal. I mean it.

Often, Mr. Fessler uses the trips to teach students what he refers to as social skills. For the fishing trips he helps them get a fishing license to make sure they are legal. When

they go to Cabela's or Bass Pro (another outdoor-oriented store), he takes the students to eat in a sit down restaurant, which is a "big deal" for them. Said Fessler, "I have expectations for how they have to act when we go out to eat, basically manners that sometimes kids don't know." According to the teachers, experiences like these may be the only time some of these students have had a chance to eat at a restaurant and use a cloth napkin.

Because they work with a number of the same students, Gray and Fessler collaborate with each other and to help students stay current in their other classes. Mr. Fessler explained,

One of the things Mr. Gray and I work very closely together on is keeping the kids in my program caught up in their other classes. They tend to blow those off. They very seldom miss my class, but they will blow off their other classes and not keep up. If I see them getting behind I will pull them out of my class and say, "Today you don't get to go with us. You have to stay with Mr. Gray. If I find your work is unacceptable or you don't get enough done, you will be there again tomorrow." That works fairly well to keep them up in their classes.

As students work through the Building Trades program it is not unusual for a junior or senior student to ask to stay and work with Mr. Gray to get caught up in one or more of his other classes. According to the two instructors neither of them has ever denied such a request. This type of cooperation was not found just between teachers, but also between teachers and students as well as teachers and parents.

Teachers felt a connection to the parents as well as the students. Many teachers talked about their willingness to contact parents and the parents' willingness to be

supportive. One teacher stated, “It’s one of those things where if a kid acts up in class, by the time they get home, Mom’s already heard about it.” According to teachers, communication with parents extended beyond phone calls. Because parents could view their student’s grades online and email teachers through district computer management software, parents and teachers are able to connect even more. As one teacher attested, “The parents seem to be more active since they can look at Powergrade I think we probably get more homework, even if it’s late, I think we get more assignments turned in.”

Like the parents and students, teachers felt the small size of the school was important to maintaining close relationships. They believed the size of the school enabled them to work more closely with students. One teacher expressed it this way, “It’s easier when you can corral the ones you’ve got. You don’t have 25 people to weed through. You can see them in the hall and say, ‘You need to see me.’ They can’t hide nearly as well.” Another stated simply, “Since you do know the kids and their parents, it’s personal. It’s not business.”

Teachers’ relations with administrators were as positive as their relations with students and parents. Teachers commonly used words like “supportive,” “proactive,” and “visible” to describe the administrators. All teachers agreed with the comment that a colleague made about Middleton High School’s administrators, “They’re always around. They make themselves seen. It’s not like they shut themselves in their office and we never see them. Kids know they will be walking the halls and in the cafeteria and in the classrooms.” Teachers expressed gratitude for the support they received from administrators, which included support for discipline in the classroom and support for

instructional innovations. One teacher summarized her positive opinion for the administrators in this way,

All the administrators are great. Any program we have seen they have been very supportive if we can tell them why it needs to be implemented and how it is going to help the students. That's always the first thing: "How does this help the students?" So if we can prove that it will benefit our students they are behind us 100%.

One teacher who works with at-risk students and students who are behind on their graduation credits described the administrators as "gamblers" and "risk-takers" willing to do whatever it took to help students be successful. A colleague told a story about a student who had been suspended. Mr. Watson approached the county and got them to pay for process intervention and counseling for the student. The educator talked about Mr. Watson's motivation for helping this student,

Tom was the one who had to kick him out and he *had* to kick him out. The behavior was so bizarre he had to do what he had to do. So the student said to Mr. Watson, "Why did you do that?" And Tom said, "Because I like you." That kid had needed to hear that.

Yet another teacher spoke about his desire to bring in a student who had exceeded the allowed number of absences and let him to make up work during teacher workdays at the end of the year. The teacher explained Mr. Watson's response, "Instead of saying 'no we don't do that for everybody else,' he said 'Try it. If he comes in and passes then give him credit.... If we can keep this kid in school and get him going, let's do it.'"

Perhaps most of all, the teachers appreciated that the administrators valued their input and did not “force” things on them. Although they did not force things on teachers, administrators did push teachers to improve and look for new and better ways to meet the needs of students. One teacher new to the school acknowledged,

They are constantly trying to find things to improve. I guess it would be easy to sit back and say we are doing things good enough and stay with the status quo but they are always pushing us to try new things and find ways to help all the kids a little bit more. This is very helpful to me.”

Even though teachers felt the administrators pushed them to try new things, they did it in a supportive and collegial manner. One teacher described how the administrators approach problems, “They get us together. They talk about it. They want ideas. They want us all to be a part of it more or less.” Another echoed this sentiment, “We’re more like a team than administrators and teachers.”

Despite the fact that Middleton teachers had been successful in raising the scores of all students on state reading and math assessments, like the parents they believed some students needed more vocational options. Teachers felt some students were forced into a course of study designed to prepare them for college even if they did not intend to go to college. According to teachers, those students would have benefited from additional vocational classes not available at Middleton High School. Many teachers felt the state did not value vocational courses because of the current emphasis on state assessments that narrowly defined success through achievement on reading and math assessments.

Teachers of elective classes in general expressed the emphasis on reading and math for accreditation purposes devalued their courses. The foreign language teacher

spoke accordingly, “My area connects with so many different areas. They don’t realize that is just as valuable. For kids to make connections in their brain is just as valuable as to perform on a state assessment.” Others thought the overemphasis on core skills might cause some students to disengage from school altogether. One teacher stated, “With the emphasis being on college prep I am afraid we will lose some of those kids if we don’t realize that not everyone is going to college.” Teachers felt that many of their “blue collar” students needed additional vocational classes to build work skills and thinking skills for when they graduated from high school and got a job. Others openly resented the practice of teaching to one high stakes test. As one particularly frustrated elective teacher stated, “That’s another thing. I think everything is geared toward that test. Toward the test, the test, the test. Are we really creating life-long learners? Isn’t that part of what education is about?”

Even though some teachers questioned the practice of judging their school’s effectiveness entirely on the basis of how students performed on reading and math assessments, they still felt it was important to do well on these tests. As can be seen in the perceptions of administrators, which will be presented in the next section, doing well on the state assessments became increasingly important at Middleton High School.

#### *Administrators Support Students and Teachers*

Administrator perceptions were consistent with those of teachers, students, and parents. They talked about how much the teachers care about the students and are willing to do whatever it takes to help students succeed. They talked about their roles in supporting students and teachers and having high expectations for them. One administrator summarized the teaching staff as caring with these words,

I think every kid in this school has at least one adult they can turn to, and feel comfortable talking to about things. And I think that's our challenge for these students, is to have somebody have a relationship with them strong enough that they can confide in them and feel comfortable filling them in on how things are going.

Another administrator talked about the cohesiveness of the staff and their focus on helping students, "Most of the time, it's not griping about kids, it's about what they're doing trying to help these kids. And they take them under their wings and try to do whatever's best for all our kids." All administrators spoke at length about how teachers get to school early and stay after school to help students. As one administrator stated, "You know, their contract day ends at 3:30, but there's hardly any of them get out of here by 4:00. They can walk out the door at 3:30 any time, but you're going to see them working with kids." Another administrator connected this type of dedication to the teachers unwritten mission for at-risk students, "They make a very concerted effort to make sure those kids are learning, to make sure they know that somebody cares about them in the school, and is trying to get them to a better place in their life."

Administrators admitted the most important support they provided for students was recruiting and retaining good teachers. They gave part of the credit for a quality teaching staff to their reluctance to grant tenure to "average" teachers. All three administrators spoke about the district's philosophy from the board of education through the administrators that only "above average" teachers would be tenured. As one administrator summarized,

We don't give tenure easily. Our board has stated they must be *A+* teachers to keep them. And they pretty much hold us accountable to that. We haven't granted tenure to some teachers who probably would have gotten it in a lot of other districts. You know, they were average teachers, but we're looking for above average.

This support was not limited, however, to the hiring process. When asked how he saw his role in the education of economically disadvantaged students, Mr. Watson replied modestly, "I'd say I am just a person who supports kids." This attitude was found in the responses of all administrators who declared their most important task was supporting students first and teachers second. When asked how the school maintained a high graduation rate for low-income students Mr. Watson touched on his passion for helping every student, "I mean, our at-risk kids, I was trying to determine what we could do to help them graduate. I didn't care what they scored on the state assessment or anything else, I just wanted them to be able to graduate." It was common for students who failed to graduate with their class to return to school on a part-time basis to get the credits they needed to graduate. One staff member explained, "During the past three years the superintendent, board president, and high school principal have delivered two diplomas to adults at work. We hand them the diploma. Take a picture. It's a big deal."

Mr. Watson was always willing to work with students even though they could not be counted as graduates on the official building report that had already been submitted to the state's department of education. Sometimes his support for at-risk students was unconventional. This included his practice of bluffing students into staying in school. Until recently, Mr. Watson had been telling parents and students who wanted to drop out

that it was against the law, which is somewhat, but not entirely true. He purposely neglected to inform them that once a student reaches the age of 16 in the state of Kansas, a parent can sign them out of school and exempt them from compulsory attendance. This practice of deception on his part helped to keep students from dropping out and continued until one parent recently discovered the exception to the law and is certainly a departure from the standard role of principal.

The administrators told stories about how one or another of them went out of their way to help students. One said this of Mr. Watson, “He’s not afraid to go support a kid all the way through, try to get him if he’s a drop out, and bring him back. Do all the things. Tom’s a great man and an exceptional principal.” One example of such support occurred when one teacher tried to place blame for their failure to make AYP on one specific group of low-achieving students. Mr. Watson responded by telling that individual, “You don’t talk that way. These kids are good kids and we’re not blaming it on anybody. We all failed if we don’t make it. Not just that group of kids.”

Like the teachers, administrators saw their students as predominantly blue-collar and parents as supportive of their children and the teachers. One administrator proclaimed the students were, “Poor kids, but they’re still classy, they’re good kids. I think they’re hard workers.” Another summarized the nature of the parents and students the following way, “We’ve got small industries with low wage jobs, and their kids are sometimes at-risk in a lot of areas.” Because many of the students come from low-income families the administrators find ways to support students who need a little extra assistance. As one administrator stated, “We pay for a kid’s insurance to play football. We’ve got a booster club that’s very supportive. If our kids need something we can get it

for them.” This attitude of support could be found in the programs and interventions developed to help students succeed and enabled the school to make AYP, which will be explained in the coming sections.

*Middleton’s Response to NCLB: From Failing to Award Winning*

After NCLB was signed into law in 2001, the Middleton School District failed to make AYP and was conditionally accredited, which was a significant step toward non-accreditation. At that time in Kansas, schools were either accredited, conditionally accredited, or non-accredited. Being conditionally accredited caused administrators in the district to realize they would have to make some dramatic changes in order to make AYP and regain their fully accredited status. According to one former administrator,

We were put on a plan of improvement. We were 1 of 118 “leper” schools in the state. A group of administrators and teachers went to a meeting at the state department of education where they told us we were the worst schools in the state. That got our teachers’ attention.

One current administrator reinforced that point stating, “Our elementary schools were failing. Our high school was failing, and we were getting ready to be put on probation for not making AYP.” He went on to testify that in the decade prior to NCLB the district had developed a number of innovative programs and formed a good working relationship with the community by establishing an active volunteer program, an alternative school for drop-out recovery, and partnerships with businesses in the district. Many of these innovations, however, were not “academically focused” and those that were academic in nature did not align with the state standards and therefore did not result in improved performance on state assessments. As a result, reading and math scores for all students

and subgroups of students were not at a level that fulfilled the requirements of AYP. Other stakeholders corroborated the fact that the district was involved in a number of innovative initiatives, but they were not focused on a curriculum built around the state standards.

One of those innovations implemented district-wide in the decade prior to NCLB included the “mastery learning” philosophy, which adult participants described as a massive failure. Under mastery learning, students were allowed to take tests until they demonstrated mastery over the subject matter. A majority of the adults interviewed expressed relief the district had abandoned this philosophy. According to teachers, administrators and parents, mastery learning failed for two reasons. First, as one teacher stated, “One of the reasons it wasn’t successful was because there were kids who wouldn’t study the first time so that they could know what was on the test because you have to give them the same test again.” Another teacher added, “It made kids lazy. Why study the first time if you can take the test over and still get an *A*?” Second, although teachers were involved in writing outcomes for mastery learning, the outcomes were not connected to the state standards, which contributed to the initiative’s lack of success. As one administrator emphasized, “We were really big on writing high-level outcomes that our kids reached. The problem with that was they were not even close to being associated with the state standards.” The combination of mastery learning and a lack of focus on the standards placed the district “on improvement” for failing to make AYP.

#### *The Role of District and Building Leadership*

Once the principal of Middleton High School recognized the importance of making AYP, he became convinced the school needed to change direction and focus their

efforts toward state standards. At that point he needed to convince his staff they needed to change as well. The superintendent explained how the principal convinced his staff at this critical point in time,

Tom supported his staff, almost against school improvement, because he believed he had good people. Then, he started looking at the data and talking about the data saying, “Let’s look at this. Even though I know you’re a good teacher, we’ve got a problem.” So he brought his staff along at a slower pace, but it accomplished the same thing. They realized that they had to look at data to be able to answer the question “How do we get from here to here?” So they began to figure out, and then, that’s when he helped them find strategies. The on-line curriculum, the assessment conditioning exercises, the interventions, all those pieces fell into place because they knew they had a void.... They got to that point where they were willing to begin to search for something to help them get from here to here.”

The teachers affirmed this perspective by talking about how valuable their input was at this critical point in time. They appreciated Mr. Watson taking the time to gain their support and solicit their input before proceeding with a plan of his own. One teacher in particular was impressed and stated,

This was about the time we found out how badly we were doing on some tests and Mr. Watson said, “Listen, all the excuses don’t work anymore. Everybody else has the same students we do. Everybody around us is fighting the same battle. We have to turn this around.” He didn’t try and stuff it down our throat. He said, “We are in the same boat and we are not getting it done.” It was a very impressive presentation. I think we believed then we had to put an emphasis on all the kids,

even the ones that didn't want to be here. We had to make sure even if they don't want to be here, we're going to make sure we do our job.

Once the teachers shared in the responsibility for the school's failure to make AYP, they started working with the administrators to develop the technical and support interventions detailed in the sections that follow.

#### *Elementary School Interventions Credited with High School Success*

In response to a growing awareness of the importance of teaching the state standards, the district abandoned the mastery learning philosophy and began searching for programs to improve students' reading and math scores on state assessments. After researching reading programs administrators settled on two essential interventions that were implemented at the elementary grade levels. The first came when the superintendent at the time wrote a federal grant to obtain funding to implement "Success for All" (SFA), a comprehensive, prescriptive reading program for grades K-6. The second intervention came in the form of Accelerated Math, an individualized computer based math program developed by Renaissance Learning. Teachers received extensive training in both programs during the summer of 2002 and the programs were implemented in all grades K-6 in the fall of 2002.

Success for All is a comprehensive, research based approach to reading instruction designed to teach students in grades K-6 to read on grade level. The program is highly prescriptive and requires 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading instruction with students in small flexible groups across classes and grade levels by reading ability. Middleton teachers were provided with two weeks of professional development to learn how to implement the program. The schools also partnered with parents and asked them

to assist in supporting reading instruction. Parents were asked to listen to each student read 20 minutes each day.

Accelerated Math is an entirely computer based instructional program. Like Success For All, the Accelerated Math program uses flexible groups. It requires 60 minutes of instructional time per day and allows students to progress at their own rate. Students are given assignments at their ability level and objectives are customized to each individual's needs. After completing lessons toward his or her objectives, the student takes a computerized assessment and is given new lessons to address the objectives he or she has not yet mastered and new objectives to replace those already mastered.

Even though both interventions were implemented at the elementary level, they are credited with Middleton High School's remarkable turnaround on state assessment scores. All current and former administrators and many other staff members interviewed credited these two interventions exclusively with the improvement in test scores. One administrator said,

It (the turnaround) really started at the grade school level and it carried on to the high school. They purchased a reading program called, "Success for All." They also purchased a math program called, "Accelerated Mathematics." They bought into that and it was a very expensive program.

One high school teacher believed the district's renewed emphasis on reading in the upper elementary grades paid off once students entered high school, "They had left off with formal reading instruction in the third grade for a long time when they started the SFA Program. Now they're formally teaching reading all the way through sixth grade and

that's made a big difference." Another staff member credited the high school's success with the changes made in the elementary math curriculum,

Probably four or five years ago, the elementary totally redid their curriculum in math. It's taken about that long for those kids to get up to this level. They're a lot better at their basic skills when they come into junior high and high school,

Yet another staff member reinforced this belief, "Two of the most instrumental things, I felt, were when we implemented Success For All and the Accelerated Math program."

She went on to demonstrate her point with graphs she had created that contrasted the performance of students on the state assessments who had been through these programs with the performance of students who had not. The graphs showed the positive effects of these two initiatives on state assessment scores.

Parents also felt the effects of the programs. While some admitted to resisting the parent involvement component of Success For All in the beginning, one low-income parent drove home his point about the demands and benefits of the program in the following statement,

Going back to elementary reading program. I have been somewhat impressed with it. At times it gets old to have to sit there and listen to three kids read to you for 20 minutes each. But to see the kids eyes light up when they get to move to another level, they feel like they have really accomplished something.

In addition to formal programs like Accelerated Math and Success for All, the district aligned curriculum to the state standards and raised academic expectations. As one administrator remembered, "When I first got here, I couldn't find a curriculum." Another stated, "We got rid of outcomes based and the mastery learning concept. We

started to focus on the state assessments and the state standards.” A third explained, “We began really pushing our teachers to learn the standards, to go through the material that they teach and associate it with the standards and how it is being measured on the state assessments.” All English and math teachers interviewed spoke about the importance of teaching the standards so that students can perform well on the tests. One teacher put it simply when she said, “We also began teaching the state standards. We aligned with the standards.”

#### *Attending to State Assessments*

Under the threat of being conditionally accredited for not making AYP, the teachers not only began to teach to the standards, they also began to emphasize to students and to each other the importance of doing well on the tests. To improve state assessment scores in reading and math, teachers and administrators started using advisory time, a 30-minute block of time each day where students do not have a class and can seek assistance from teachers, for that purpose. That strategy provided additional instructional time for reading and math for those students who were in grades that would be tested. Seventh and eighth grade students began to take an additional reading class. Teachers doubled up on math classes for students who struggled in math and added a class specifically designed “to prepare students for that state assessment.” As one student put it, “they teach us what will be on the test.” In an eighth grade math class the teacher asked the students why they needed to learn the concept she was teaching. They responded in unison, “Because it will be on the state assessment.”

In addition to aligning curriculum and instruction to the state standards, teachers conducted focus lessons, short mini-lessons at the beginning of each class period to

review tested indicators. They also used alternate test preparation activities, and administered online practice tests to prepare students for the official test. One teacher explained how important it is for students to be accustomed to the format of the state assessments, which is different from the tests she and other teachers routinely give students. Another teacher summarized how she examines the results of the practice test and provides remedial assistance to those students who scored below proficient: “we just drilled the things that were really hurting them.” These efforts did not go unnoticed by students, as one explained, “The teachers prepared us ahead of time and they are still doing that. They give us little state standardized pre-test sheets. We go over them in class and the teachers break them down word by word.”

In addition to ramping up instruction on the standards measured by the state assessments, teachers and administrators ramped up the motivation level of the students with a variety of incentives. A majority of the students interviewed felt it was important to do well on the state assessment. When asked if it was important to do well on the tests all students interviewed replied “yes” and stated that “only a few” students do not try their best. Some students were motivated intrinsically like the one who stated, “Some kids actually care and they want to get good grades on the state assessment.” Others were motivated extrinsically with rewards provided by teachers and administrators which included pizza, hot dogs, movies, an extended lunch period, and even getting out of school a couple of days early for reaching the standard of excellence. As one teacher put it, “We made the test a big deal. We made it important.” While another one added, “Extrinsic rewards are important because not everyone is into intrinsic.” And a third elaborated, “Appealing to their self esteem doesn’t work too well. “ All students agreed

that getting out of school a day or two early as a reward for reaching the standard of excellence was a powerful motivator.

To summarize, Middleton High School responded to the threat of losing their accreditation and the possibility of not making AYP by making structural and technical changes. They aligned curriculum to standards, adopted programs that emphasized the acquisition of basic skills, and emphasized the importance of state assessments. Many schools; however, take those same steps but do not achieve the same results. At Middleton, these changes came about within a culture where relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students were paramount. In the next chapter I demonstrate how this culture of positive relationships contributed to the progress made by the Middleton High School community in successfully addressing the achievement gap while simultaneously raising the achievement of all students.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusions and Implications

As noted in the previous chapter, Middleton High School reacted to the challenge of NCLB by instituting technical and structural changes aimed at improving test scores. While these programs and interventions were effective in meeting the needs of disadvantaged students, they were effective in large part because of the caring leadership in the district and teachers in charge of the programs, and because of the closure of the social network among the adults in the community and school. Middleton High School achieved success with these changes at least in part because of the relationships that existed among the stakeholders of the school that promoted expectations for student learning and teacher support for all students. In this chapter the findings of the research are examined through the theoretical framework that combines the theory of caring (Noddings, 1992) and social capital (Coleman, 1988). I then use the concepts of caring relationships in Laursen's (2003) framework to examine the specific behaviors of teachers and administrators that students perceive as caring that contributed to a caring school culture and the generation of social capital.

#### *Caring as an Attribute of Social Capital in Middleton High School*

Caring as social capital was demonstrated at Middleton High School in a number of ways. Teachers and administrators responded to the challenge of NCLB and that response led to improved test results. It was not, however, the response itself that was significant, but the caring manner in which it took place. Teachers and administrators also demonstrated caring toward students, which contributed to their academic achievement. In addition, the relationships among administrators, teachers, and parents

served as supportive network for students and provided for them an additional source of school social capital (Muller, 2001; Muller et al., 1999). Administrators and teachers demonstrated caring toward students and their acts of caring served as sources of social capital for students.

### *Caring Leadership at Middleton High School*

As was evident in the previous chapter, Middleton High School's administrators operated from an ethic of care. They acted in ways consistent with Noddings' definition of caring as "stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's" (p. 24). By selecting and retaining quality teachers, by involving teachers in decision making, by resisting the temptation to reduce teaching to mechanical methods, and by making individual exceptions to rules and procedures, they made students the focus of their work, which also served to demonstrate and model care for teachers and parents.

Middleton High School administrators exhibited caring leadership long before the school was placed on improvement. Adopting a philosophy that they would tenure only above average teachers, the administrators demonstrated a caring attitude about students. By not retaining marginal teachers, the administrators improved the quality of the teaching staff and the corresponding potential to transfer more of collective intellectual capital to students. This resulted directly in the production of additional social capital for students.

Administrators continued to demonstrate caring in their response to being placed on improvement. Rather than addressing this challenge by imposing programs or mandating a response from teachers in a top-down hierarchical manner, principal Watson involved the teachers in developing strategies to improve their test results. Remember,

teachers were resolute in making the point that administrators involved them in decision-making, and they felt more like a team of equals than administrators and teachers.

Conversely, the elementary school leaders at the time elected to respond to the challenge of NCLB by implementing administrator driven technical interventions that reduced the teaching act to a mechanical delivery system. Noddings (1992) refers to the reduction of teaching to methods as automation, a typical response to top down accountability driven reform efforts. Because high school administrators resisted this type of response, the teachers were better able to maintain and develop positive relationships with students, resulting in the generation of social capital for students.

When strategies to address the poor assessment scores were discussed, administrators acted in caring ways by seeing the problem from the student's perspective. Recall the teacher who described Principal Watson's response to a teacher who made a remark blaming low-achieving students for poor test results, he was quick to point out that any student's failure was everyone's failure. By adopting a "we're all in this together" attitude, principal Watson was able to effectively change the culture of the building to one where everyone, teachers and administrators, accepted responsibility for the achievement of all groups of students. Principal Watson helped to avert a "blame the victim" response by staff members. Critics of NCLB have argued that low achieving students will be blamed for a school's failure to make AYP (Fusarelli, 2004; Haycock, 2004; Hertert & Teague, 2003), and others have worried that disadvantaged students will be pushed out of schools in efforts to raise test scores (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Fusarelli, 2004). Clearly this did not happen at Middleton, as the graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students consistently exceeded the graduation rate for all

students. Because everyone accepted responsibility for all students, no students were marginalized and pushed out of school. Students felt a sense of belonging rather than resentment because teachers cared about them and took responsibility for their learning instead of blaming them for the school's failure to make AYP.

Once all teachers had accepted responsibility for the learning of all students, they were able to collaborate with the administrators to implement interventions that would support students and provide them with additional social capital. ZAP and VPL were two such programs specifically implemented out of a desire to assist students who had fallen behind in credits and to keep them from falling behind even further. These programs supported students and helped them to stay on track to graduate with their grade level peers. Because they had not been forced on teachers from a top-down perspective, the teachers assumed responsibility and ownership of the programs. They volunteered their time after school to tutor ZAP students and adjusted their curriculum to give VPL students a chance to earn credit.

In addition to providing leadership in response to NCLB, the administrators of Middleton served as an important source of social capital for students in the high school by putting the needs of individual students above rules and policy. Administrators routinely bent the rules to help students. An example was Mr. Watson's practice of purposely not informing students who wanted to drop out of school of the exception to the compulsory attendance law, which allows a parent to sign them out of school. This practice of deception helped to keep students in school and was certainly a departure from the standard role of principal and consistent with an ethic of caring that establishes the importance of the student over the importance of rules and procedures. One staff

member went so far as to refer to the administrators as “gamblers” because they took a lot of chances and were willing to try anything to help a student.

By acting as caring leaders, MHS administrators modeled caring for the teachers. Teachers articulated clearly the belief that new programs and ideas were encouraged as long as the administrators could be convinced the ideas would be good for students. Teachers were also allowed to work in ways to support students that would not have been acceptable to traditional rule-bound administrators. This type of leadership allowed teachers to step out of their normal frame of reference to find ways to teach and reward students. Not only were the building trades teachers allowed to “pay” disadvantaged students with gift cards and take them on fishing trips, Mr. Watson sometimes went on the trips with them. Rather than make a student wait a year to take geometry, the VPL teacher asked to work with the geometry teacher to design a computer-based geometry class for the student. When teachers asked if they could do something outside the norm to benefit students, administrators almost always granted permission. As a result teachers felt the administrators supported them. In turn, the students felt the teachers cared about them.

In summary, by involving teachers in decision making, by resisting the temptation to reduce teaching to mechanical methods, and by placing the needs of the students above rules and procedures, the administrators modeled caring for the teachers. While these were the primary ways in which administrators demonstrated caring leadership, their caring actions extended to their personal relationships with students. The caring nature of personal relationships between teachers, administrators, and students will be considered next.

### *Relationships as Social Capital at Middleton High School*

The benefits of social capital found in the caring relationships between the teachers, administrators and students played an important part in the improved test scores and narrowed achievement gap on state assessments at Middleton High School. These same benefits were of critical importance in establishing and maintaining the high graduation rate for Middleton's students of poverty. The technical and structural interventions implemented were an essential part of the increased test scores for all students at Middleton High School, including economically disadvantaged students. Without the supportive relationships with teachers and administrators; however, it is unlikely test scores would have improved as dramatically as they did. Many high schools across the state have made similar changes, aligning curriculum and increasing their focus on reading and math instruction, but have not achieved comparable or even similar results. Therefore, caring as social capital is useful for understanding what has taken place at Middleton High School.

Students who are pushed academically and supported by teachers and administrators do better in school (Lee & Burkham, 2003; Muller et al., 1999). The benefits accruing to students as a result of relationships that both challenge and support students have been referred to as school social capital (Muller, 2001). According to Coleman (1988), social capital provides resources in three ways: by the existence of trust which allows for mutual expectations to be met or exchanged, by an exchange of information, and through norms that facilitate action. Using Coleman's definition then, in order for a relationship between students and educators to contain social capital, it must assist the student by contributing to his or her academic progress. Muller (1999) posits,

“Just as social capital in the parent-child relationship is a condition for creating human capital, so the presence of social capital between teacher and student is necessary if the teacher is to convey human capital to the student” (p. 330). A central element of Noddings’ (1992) definition of caring is that it cannot occur in isolation; it involves a reciprocal relationship between two human beings, a carer and a cared-for. Each must benefit in some way from the relationship. According to Noddings, a caring teacher-student relationship is one in which both actors feel mutually “understood, received, respected and recognized” (p.xi). In order for acts of caring to become social capital they must provide an academic benefit to the student and be received and acknowledged by the student as an act of caring.

Muller (2001) posits the relationship between teacher and student hinges on the commitment each brings to the relationship. Students will expend more effort and commit more to the relationship when they perceive the teacher cares about them. Conversely, teachers will expend more effort and commit more to the relationship when they perceive the student is trying his or her best. The teacher must agree to do everything possible to help the student succeed, while the student must agree to try. This agreement fulfills the reciprocity necessary in Noddings’ definition of caring. Each actor must get something from the relationship. Muller (1999) argues, “the associations among caring, expectations, and achievement appear to be the basis for the growth and maintenance of social capital in the classroom” (p. 301).

Building on resiliency research, Laursen (2003) breaks down the caring relationships between teachers and students even further. He identified seven elements of caring relationships, which he labeled “seven habits of reclaiming relationships.” These

habits include: trust - doing what you say you will do; empathy - seeing the world through their eyes; availability - making time for youth; affirmation - giving them positive, genuine compliments; respect - letting them have input in things that affect them, and virtue - holding them accountable for their behavior without blaming them. Each of these behaviors enhances an adult's worthiness of trust by teenagers. Evidence of most of these habits was found in the interactions of teachers and administrators with students at Middleton High School.

Using a framework that combined caring (Noddings, 1992, 2003) and social capital (Coleman, 1988) with Laursen's seven habits we can interpret the acts of caring by teachers and administrators that had a positive impact on students in an educational or social context. According to Coleman (1988), the presence of social capital in a relationship may be evaluated by whether the relationship facilitates action. The caring relationships between teachers, administrators, and students were created as a result of the caring actions the educators took to support students academically. The positive relationships that developed with students served to both motivate the students to work for teachers and supported the students when they needed it. The following sections will consider the types of caring actions most commonly exhibited by teachers and administrators at Middleton. While evidence of all 7 habits was found at Middleton, the preponderance of evidence points primarily to availability, attention, and virtue (Laursen, 2003) as those habits most practiced by teachers and administrators resulting in social capital for students.

### *Availability as Caring Capital*

Teachers and administrators at Middleton demonstrated caring by making themselves available to students. According to Laursen, availability represents the belief that young people are important and worthy of the investment of an adult's time. The value of this kind of behavior has also been verified by Croninger and Lee (2001), who found "For those students most at risk of dropping out, students who are both socially and academically at risk of failure, informal exchanges with teachers outside of class are especially beneficial. Such contacts with teachers considerably boost their chances for graduation" (p. 569). By making time for students a priority, teachers at Middleton demonstrated they cared for students. Teachers frequently came in before school, stayed after school or sacrificed evenings or weekends to work with students. The students talked about how the teachers were always willing to come in early and stay late to work with them.

The administrators demonstrated availability through their attendance at school functions. Parents and students remarked how grateful they were that the administrators were at every after school event whether it was an athletic contest, a band concert, or a dodge ball tournament to raise money for the sophomore class. In addition, students talked about how the administrators went to everything and were "there for them" when they needed them and always willing to help them even if just by listening.

ZAP is an example of a support program that channeled teacher availability into social capital. Principal Watson implemented the program to keep students from falling behind in their schoolwork. He believed students fell behind in class and lost credits during the first few years of high school, and once they reached their junior year and

were so far behind on credits they dropped out of school. The intent of the program was to help students, not to arbitrarily and systematically coerce students into compliance. This is an important difference that separates caring educators from bureaucratic ones (Blount, 1996).

The ZAP program provided an opportunity for teachers and administrators to keep students from falling behind in their work and therefore stay in school. It was successful in large part because the teachers willingness to stay after school and work with students who were behind in their class or subject area. Students received valuable assistance from a teacher in the appropriate subject. In addition, students and teachers developed more positive relationships during this time. As a result, students were more likely to work for these teachers who had gone out of their way to help them.

#### *Attention and Empathy as Caring Capital*

Educators at Middleton High School also practiced caring for students through attention and empathy. Laursen (2003) defines attention as “putting the young person at the center of concern” and empathy as “seeing the world through the young person’s eyes” (p. 4). Sometimes this involves listening to students. Other times it involves a dialogue with students. Noddings (1992) emphasizes the importance of dialogue in her theory of caring as an open-ended conversation or a search for understanding. It is dialogue that creates intimacy in the relationship. Teachers and administrators at Middleton effectively practiced attention and empathy when they entered into dialogue with students.

Parents noted the teachers’ ability to put students at the center of attention as an act of caring. Parents stated that when there were problems the teachers were willing to

talk about them and work it out. Again, this involves stepping out of one's own frame of reference and seeing a situation through the eyes of the student, putting the student at the center of concern. Parents also talked about how the teachers were willing to work with their children. The students felt like they could talk to their teachers as real people, not just as teachers. Students often went to teachers to talk about their problems.

Administrators cited the strong relationship between teachers and students as an important part of the school climate.

Administrators demonstrated attention and empathy in much the same way as teachers. Students spoke about how they were allowed to tell their side of the story when they were sent to the office. They appreciated the fact that the administrators listened to them and tried to understand instead of just waiting for the student to stop talking so they could dish out the punishment. Students felt that the administrators did not already have their minds made up and automatically assume the student was wrong.

In addition to listening to students, the administrators worked with teachers to meet the needs of students in unconventional ways. They sometimes permitted exceptions to the rules. When Mr. Fessler wanted a student to be given another opportunity to make up time during end of the year teacher workdays, the administrators relaxed the rules and gave permission for that to happen. The student made up the time and passed the class. Again, these educators stepped out of their own frame of reference to view things from the point of view of the student. This type of caring behavior was seen consistently from Mr. Gray and Mr. Fessler. They used end of the semester field trips as a way to encourage kids to complete their work in other classes, putting the needs of the students above their own. Mr. Gray, for his part, was always willing to allow a student to come in

to his class to make up work, again operating from the student's perspective. In addition, he worked as an advocate for his students, asking regular classroom teachers for accommodations or modifications to their curriculum when necessary for his students. Teachers always responded by accommodating Mr. Gray's requests.

### *Virtue as Caring Capital*

Perhaps the most important way educators at Middleton transferred caring into action for students was by practicing virtue (Laursen, 2003), or holding students accountable without blaming them. Virtue involves setting appropriate boundaries for young people. It communicates the belief that students must learn self-discipline and those who teach them must demonstrate self-discipline as well.

Virtue was most often seen at Middleton when teachers refused to allow students to fall behind in their assignments. Students spoke about knowing their teachers' cared because the teachers would track them down in the hallway and make them stay after school or come in early to finish an assignment. The teachers who cared never let them off the hook. This type of caring accountability has been found to have a positive effect on the achievement of at-risk students (Muller et al., 1999; Uekawa & Bidwell, 2004).

ZAP was also an example of a support program that embodied the school's practice of virtue. Students who had three or more zeros in a class were required to attend ZAP after school. Students were not blamed or lectured or scolded for falling behind. They were simply assigned to ZAP and teachers worked with them to help them get caught up.

The reward program implemented by building trades teacher Mr. Fessler was another example of how students were held accountable without blame. Rather than

lecture students about the importance of attending class and working hard, Mr. Fessler paid them with gift cards. Students were docked for missing class and were rewarded for attending class and working hard. Students understood the message more effectively than if they were given detention or simply a lower grade for missing class or not participating.

In addition, Mr. Fessler, and the VPL teacher, Mr. Gray, often worked together to hold students accountable in their other classes. Mr. Fessler required students to be caught up in all classes to participate in the end of the semester field trip to Cabela's. Mr. Fessler encouraged other teachers to use this as an opportunity to help students get caught up in their work. To accomplish this goal, Mr. Fessler allowed students to miss his class and go to Mr. Gray's class to make up their late work. Mr. Gray always allowed the students to do this. There was no observable direct benefit to either Mr. Fessler or Mr. Gray, but they were able to see things from the perspective of the student and understood the importance of staying caught up in all classes, not just their own.

Administrators practiced virtue by holding students accountable without blame as well. All students were held accountable for following the rules, even the student council president. Yet, when students were sent to the office for misbehavior, they still felt the administrators liked them, "even when they got into trouble." Students appreciated the boundaries set by the administration and felt these boundaries applied to all students and made the school a safe place. Some students remembered a time before Mr. Watson became principal and fights in school occurred regularly. They were grateful that when an issue arose, Mr. Watson would address the whole school on the intercom and clarify his expectations.

The VPL program provided the school with another conduit to hold students accountable without blame. Rather than blame students for failing classes, students were placed in a VPL class to make up the class the next semester. Students who failed a required class were placed in VPL where the teacher worked with them in small groups with a computer based curriculum to recover the lost credit. This high level of support allowed them to stay on schedule for graduation and communicated the expectation that all students will graduate. Students were given the opportunity with additional support to recapture lost credit, but were still held accountable for the subject matter. By holding students accountable without blaming and by not allowing them to fall behind in class, Middleton High School teachers and administrators transferred caring into social capital.

In summary, the teachers and administrators at Middleton High School demonstrated caring through the actions of availability, attention, empathy, and virtue (Laursen, 2003). Through their own independent actions and through the support programs designed as safety nets for students, teachers and administrators made themselves available to students, put students at the center of their concern, listened to them, and held them accountable without blaming. Noddings (2003) sees these types of acts as central to the caring process, a commitment to action that arises out of an impulse to care. Without the action, there is no act of caring and no caregiver. For the act of caring to be complete, the student must recognize it, receive it, and acknowledge it. When asked what their teachers did that showed students the teachers cared about them students replied the teachers were always there for them, indicating they recognized these acts as caring, and achieved the reciprocity necessary to fit Noddings' definition of a caring act. This reciprocity is best summarized as an unwritten and unspoken contract between

teachers and students at Middleton. Teachers would do whatever is necessary to help students succeed. In return, students would behave in class and do their work. When both parties fulfilled their terms of the contract, the students learned and achieved. This type of association forms the basis of social capital in the classroom (Muller et al., 1999) by building a high level of trust between educators , students, and parents.

According to Coleman (1988) this type of trust allows individuals to form expectations that obligations will be met and is a cornerstone for the development of social capital. Positive relationships between students and teachers can also serve as a powerful incentive for disadvantaged students to come to school, even if they are struggling with their schoolwork (Lee & Burkham, 2003) and enhance the ability of the teacher to academically motivate the student (Uekawa & Bidwell, 2004). This high level of trust is also useful in establishing closure of the home-school network.

#### *Bonding Social Capital and Closure of the Social Network*

Students at Middleton accrued bonding social capital based on their relationships with teachers and administrators, which contributed to the academic success and high graduation rate of economically disadvantaged students. The social capital created for students through their interactions with teachers and administrators was primarily bonding in nature and helped to achieve closure of the social network surrounding and supporting the students. Putnam (2000) refers to bonding social capital as “inward looking” and explains that it tends to bond homogenous groups together, excluding external groups. He cites fraternal organizations and country clubs as bonding organizations. The community and the high school of Middleton functioned much like a fraternal organization, bonding together those within the organization, while minimizing

external influences. This was evident in the relationships among stakeholders that resulted in a tight social network which formed norms that were beneficial to the students, much like Coleman's concept of social norms that function as capital (Coleman, 1988). In addition to teachers and administrators acting out of concern for students and putting students at the center of concern, the relationships teachers and administrators had formed with the parents at Middleton served as intergenerational closure (Coleman, 1988) which further strengthened the bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) inherent in their relationships with students. Access to this type of closed social network can be critical to the success of at-risk students (Coleman, 1988; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Dika & Singh, 2002; Fritch, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). According to Fritch (1999), "Schools that exist in a dense social network where everyone 'knows each other' should be able to produce a large amount of social capital that could serve as a resource for all" (p. 9). This appears to be the case in Middleton. The social network among Middleton stakeholders provides social norms that included expectations for students to behave and achieve in school and for teachers and parents to support students and communicate with each other.

According to Coleman (1988), "Closure of the social structure is important not only for the existence of effective norms but also for another form of social capital: the trustworthiness of social structures that allows the proliferation of obligations and expectations" (p. 106). Middleton students, parents, teachers, and administrators spoke of the dense social network that exists among them. This type of closure facilitated the development of effective norms of behavior for students and teachers, which produced more positive relationships. The norms governing teacher-student behavior included the

expectation that teachers were to do everything possible to help students be successful. In return, students were expected to behave in class and do their work. The norms governing parent-teacher relationships included the expectation that teachers would contact parents when students misbehaved or fell behind in class. In return, teachers expected, and received, support from home in matters of discipline.

Coleman (1988) also stated, “A group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust” (p. 100). A high level of trust existed among the teachers, administrators and parents of Middleton. To trust educators, parents must feel they will care for their children and meet their needs. The existence of this type of trust is necessary to achieve the type of intergenerational closure found in Middleton and is more easily built in communities that share social, cultural and geographic roots (Larson & Ovando, 2001). This was the case at Middleton. Teachers believed the smallness of the school made it easier for them to keep track of students. Similarly, parents and students felt the small size was an advantage because everyone knew everyone else. This familiarity helped to establish a high level of trust between home and school. Some of the teachers at Middleton had even taught the parents of their current students, which also helped to strengthen the trusting relationships between teachers and parents. Parents, teachers, and administrators communicated with each other about the students and moreover, parents trusted the decisions teachers and administrators made in regard to their students. Conversely, teachers and administrators listened to parents when they questioned a decision that had been made. Students emphasized the importance of this type of positive relationship between parents and teachers when they talked about

what motivated them to do well in school. When they spoke about the “three or four” students who were not successful in school, they attributed this lack of success at least in part to a lack of interest or concern on the part of the parent.

The community was part of this extended social network by providing for the schools and the students. Staff members spoke about the community’s willingness to provide for the students, through the booster club or community resources, which resulted in a culture of “If our kids need something we can get it for them. We go to industries, and they’re more than willing to provide things for people.”

### *Bridging Social Capital at Middleton High School*

While bonding social capital is abundant in the administrators, teachers and programs at Middleton High School, bridging social capital is less evident. Putnam (2000) described bridging social capital networks as “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (p. 22). He cited as examples the civil rights movement, youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations. Bridging social capital is outward looking and is necessary to connect students to resources, social networks, and opportunities outside their existing social network (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Bridging social capital is found in two basic forms in Middleton: school trips and foundation scholarships.

The school trips were provided to students who participated in co-curricular activities like forensics and FCCLA and to students enrolled in building trades. Students in co-curricular activities traveled to local and national competitions as well as national conferences. These trips provided them with experiences not available in Middleton and connected them to people and resources not otherwise available. Students in building

trades class took a trip to a regional outdoor sporting goods store to spend the gift cards they earned in class. Teachers took this opportunity to treat students to a sit down dinner in a restaurant and teach them social skills they did not learn in the course of their normal experience in Middleton. Trips outside of Middleton provided students with an awareness of the opportunities and resources outside their existing social network.

Scholarship money available through a private community foundation set up by a former graduate is one other form of bridging capital available for Middleton students. Foundation scholarships are available to any graduate of MHS and are renewable for up to four years and a total of \$4,000. This money represents a bridge to a college, university or community college, and additional opportunity for MHS graduates. It can act both as a resource and connect graduates to resources beyond their current network in Middleton.

In summary, most of the school social capital created for students at Middleton High School was bonding capital. Teachers and administrators of Middleton High School acted in caring ways and entered in to caring relationships with students that created significant amounts of bonding social capital with academic benefits to students. They did this by making time for students, putting students at the center of concern, and holding students accountable without blame. In addition, the parents, teachers, and administrators created a closed social network that produced norms that governed both teacher and student behaviors and also served as bonding capital. Bridging social capital was limited to student trips and scholarships available through a private foundation.

#### *Bonding and Bridging*

The students of Middleton High benefited academically and socially from an abundance of social capital that functioned primarily as a bonding force and supported

students and improved their chance for academic success. The caring actions of teachers and administrators supported students and created a culture where students were the center of concern. As a result, more students were successful, and more economically disadvantaged students graduated from high school. While the school was successful in developing forms of social capital that helped students experience success in high school, there was limited access to sources of bridging capital to connect students to the world outside Middleton. Therefore, students were graduating with the skills to be successful, but only students with enough access to bridging social capital outside the school were effective in making the transition to post-secondary career and educational opportunities outside Middleton. Students with little or no family social capital stayed in Middleton to work the low-wage, non-union jobs that were available. Over time this pattern strengthened the bonding social capital available to students through intergenerational closure with the school, but limited the bridging capital available to them.

### *Implications*

This section will discuss the implications of the findings and conclusions from this study. I will discuss the relationship of this study to prior research, consider the theoretical implications of the study, and explain the implications for practice that emerged from this study

### *Relationship to Prior Research*

Previous studies of student-teacher relationship have established the importance of a caring environment in creating academic success (Beaulieu et al., 2001). Such studies have determined the importance of student access to school social capital as well as family social capital (Parcel & Dufur, 2001a; Shaefer-McDaniel, 2004). Babcock

(2005) concluded that higher social capital in high school was positively associated with long-term skill related student outcomes and that being part of a more connected school cohort was associated with higher levels of educational attainment. These studies have defined school social capital in a variety of ways. Parcel and Dufur (2001a) referred to school social capital as bonds between parents and schools that facilitate educational outcomes. This definition is similar to the concept of intergenerational closure (Coleman, 1988). Muller, Katz and Dance (1999) build on Coleman's more functional definition of social capital by defining school social capital as any action a teacher takes that results in the creation of human capital in the student. They argue that associations among caring, teacher expectations and achievement are the basis for the growth of social capital in the classroom.

The findings from Middleton validate both of these conceptualizations of school social capital. It is readily apparent that the students of Middleton benefited from both the dense social network of the school and community and that caring teachers acted as a source of social capital in creating human capital in students. The trust between parents and teachers facilitated the development of norms for student and teacher behavior that contributed to student academic success. In addition, caring teachers and administrators made themselves available to students, placed students at the center of concern, entered into dialogue with students and held students accountable without blame. These caring actions were reciprocated by students and resulted in more student investment in school and improved academic performance.

In the large school versus small school debate, research has been contradictory. Some researchers have found no difference in student achievement in small schools once

the effects of student background characteristics had been controlled (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Conversely, Fritch (1999) concluded, “In small schools, there was a denser social network than was found in the large school” (p. 25). Fritch found it was easier in small communities to know each other, trust each other, share information, and enforce the norms of the community. Thus, the small size of the school facilitates the development of school social capital.

The findings from Middleton clearly support the position held by Fritch (1999). Everyone in Middleton knew everyone else. Parents trusted teachers and administrators. This trust facilitated the creation of a dense social network between home and school that assisted with the reinforcement of the norms of behavior for students and the expectation that teachers would do everything possible to help students. Findings from Middleton also support Parcel and Dufur’s (2001a) theory that school size is similar to family size and a low ratio of teachers to students can provide students with access to key adults in their lives. Teachers spoke often about how much easier it was to track students down in a small school and hold them accountable for their work.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Noddings (1992; 2003) advocates caring as the centerpiece of education. She fully explores the dynamic of the caring relationship and the importance of reciprocity in that relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. Four major components comprise Noddings (1992) ethic of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Modeling is teaching by example. Dialogue is open-ended conversation. Practice shapes attitudes and provides the opportunity to develop an attitude of caring. Confirmation is an act of affirming and encouraging the best in others.

Many researchers have advocated changing the culture of public schools to incorporate a more caring environment (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Eaker-Rich & VanGalen, 1996; Mercado & Members of the Bronx Middle School Collaborative, 1996; Quindlen, 2005; VanGalen, 1996; Webb-Dempsey et al., 1996). Noddings (1992) theory of caring has been used by a number of researchers as the basis for investigating the nature of teacher and student relationships in the classroom (Muller, 2001; Muller et al., 1999). Recent studies have attempted to link caring with the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988). In their study of teacher and student relationships, Muller, Katz and Dance (1999) described the importance of teacher expectations and incorporated the concept of social capital with caring. Their findings included a description of the traits of favorite teachers that included a sense of humor, a fun pedagogical approach, accessibility, fairness, and empathy. In a study with a similar focus, Croninger and Lee (2001) discovered drop-outs characterized their relationships with teachers less positively than other students and had fewer teacher-based resources to draw on in school. To help at-risk students, they suggested, “Teachers can provide students with emotional support and encouragement, information and guidance about personal or academic decisions, and additional assistance with schoolwork” (p. 550). Muller (2001) found a number of connections between academic achievement and caring. Students will expend more effort if they perceive teachers care about them. At-risk students attained higher levels of math achievement in classrooms where teachers cared about them, thus caring and social capital are particularly important for vulnerable students.

The results from this study verify the above studies. Students at Middleton described what teachers did that showed students they cared. Using Laursen’s (2003)

framework, these teacher actions included availability, attention, empathy, and virtue. These findings are consistent with Muller's (1999) research that students wanted their teachers to be empathetic, fair, accessible, and expect students to do quality work. They are also consistent with Croninger and Lee's (2001) findings of the importance of teachers providing emotional support, guidance, and additional assistance with homework. The findings from this study also indicate the specific teacher actions that were interpreted as caring by students. These included teachers giving up their own time before and after school for students; engaging students in dialogue; holding them accountable for their work without blame; and putting the student at the center of concern.

The results from this study also expand on the findings of previous studies, which have tended to focus solely on the teacher - student relationship. The findings from this study clearly suggest administrators can function as valuable agents of social capital for students. Middleton administrators acted in much the same caring ways as teachers, by practicing availability, attention, empathy and virtue. Administrators often intervened on behalf of students and these interventions usually resulted in improved academic progress for the student, fulfilling the definition of school social capital. By modeling caring behaviors administrators at Middleton also influenced the behavior of the teachers, resulting in a more caring culture in the school. This caring culture helped to produce additional social capital for students.

#### *Implications for Practice*

Although the findings reported in this dissertation are not generalizable, it is still possible to identify a number of implications for schools, administrators, and teachers.

NCLB has emphasized the importance for students to score well on statewide assessments linked to accountability standards. It is evident from this study that technical and structural interventions are necessary to improve student achievement on those types of standardized assessments. It is also evident that technical interventions are more effective when supported by caring relationships. As educators continue to align curriculum to standards, focus instruction on reading and math, and develop strategies to address low-achieving students, it becomes tempting to reduce the act of teaching to mechanical means. Results from this study suggest technical interventions are more effective when implemented in a caring culture. School leaders must be careful not to adopt a win at all costs attitude that places more importance on test scores than on students and impedes the formation of caring relationships between students and teachers or reduces the act of teaching to a following a scripted program. This study suggests that interventions designed to help and support failing students are more successful than interventions designed solely to raise test scores.

For teachers this study suggests that they can serve as valuable sources of social capital for students by acting in a caring way. To demonstrate caring for students, teachers must be available for them, place them at the center of concern, and hold them accountable without blame. It is not only important for the teachers to demonstrate caring in this way, it is important the caring be received and acknowledged by students. True caring is not one-sided – teachers often claim to care about students, but if the students do not receive their actions as care, then it is not an act of caring. Only when students see these acts as caring is the caring act complete. Then, students will put forth more effort because they feel their teachers care about them and their effort is likely to result in

success. Students want teachers to provide high levels of support with high levels of accountability.

It is important for administrators to act in a caring manner as well. Administrators can be more effective by stepping out of their own frame of reference and considering the perspective of the student when searching for interventions to support disadvantaged students. They can also act as caring leaders by considering the individual needs of the student rather than adhering strictly and automatically to published rules and regulations. In addition, by making themselves available to students and holding them accountable without blame administrators can provide a direct source of social capital. Finally, like administrators in the study, school administrators would be wise to hire and tenure only quality teachers.

Undoubtedly in this era of accountability with the emphasis on testing and research-based practices, schools are being pressured to continually raise test scores. As a result, administrators, and teachers are under extreme stress. Increased stress makes it much more difficult to maintain caring relationships. Evidence from this study shows that not only do caring relationships and social capital assist disadvantaged students, they can also alleviate some of the pressures students, teachers, and administrators are feeling to raise test scores. The relationships among administrators, teachers, and students in this study seemed to sustain them under the pressure of being placed on improvement and the attitude that “we are all in this together” helped students and teachers to feel supported even when they were labeled a “failing” school.

Finally, evidence from the study supports the proposition that institutions can indeed be caring – and that schools should aspire to create caring cultures to mitigate the

mechanistic effects of NCLB. Schools must remember the importance of caring relationships and the potential for these relationships to help schools better meet the academic needs of economically disadvantaged students. By practicing availability, attention, empathy, and virtue, teachers and administrators can develop relationships with students that facilitate learning and creates greater student investment in school. Students who feel their teachers and administrators care about them will reciprocate by investing in these relationships through work in the classroom. These acts of caring can become important sources of social capital for disadvantaged students and schools should be careful to adopt interventions that enhance those relationships rather than impede them.

For small, rural communities and schools the study highlights the importance of providing bridging capital in addition to bonding capital. The study explains the tie between small rural communities and bonding capital, as well as the important role bonding capital plays for economically disadvantaged students. It also spotlights the shortage of access to bridging capital for all students and the tendency for most small communities to try to hold on to their graduates. The findings from this study suggest the need for small, rural communities to develop more bridging capital to encourage students to leave to attain higher education in the hope they return to the community, bringing with them more social capital to benefit the community more in the long term.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Individual Interview Questions Administrator/teacher leader

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me about your association with Middleton High School.
2. Middleton High School has made a great deal of progress raising the level of achievement of economically disadvantaged students on state assessments in reading and math the past three years. Can you tell me how you think the school accomplished that progress?
  - a. What does the school do to meet the needs of those students?
  - b. Any special programs or interventions?
  - c. How would describe your role in the success of disadvantaged students?
3. What do you think happened in Spring 2005 when scores declined?
4. Please describe students you consider economically disadvantaged.
  - a. How do they “fit in” at school?
  - b. How do other teachers perceive them?
5. Please describe how your staff members relate to students?
  - a. Disadvantaged students in particular?
6. In what ways do teachers help students succeed?
7. In what ways do they hinder student success?
8. How do students respond to teachers?

## Appendix B

### *Focus Group Interviews for Students*

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me what grade you are in and a little about yourself.
2. What do you like most about being a student at Middleton High School?
  - a. What do you like least?
3. Tell me about the students that go to school here. What are they like?
4. Over the past three years Middleton High School students have scored very well on state assessments in reading and math. Why do you think the students have scored so well?
5. Tell me about your teachers. What are they like?
  - a. How do they relate with students as a whole?
  - b. How do you individually get along with them?
  - c. What do you think they understand/know about your life outside of the classroom? Your life away from school?
6. What do your teachers do to help you succeed?
7. What could they do that would help you be more successful?
8. Tell me about your principals?
  - a. How do they relate with students as a whole?
  - b. How do you individually get along with them?
  - c. What do you think they understand/know about your life outside the classroom? Your life away from school?
9. What do they do to help you be successful in school?
10. What could they do that would help you be more successful?

## Appendix B-1

### *Focus Group Interview Questions for Teachers*

1. Please introduce yourselves and tell me what you teach and how long you have taught at Middleton High School.
2. What do you like most about teaching at Middleton High School?
3. What do you like least?
4. Over the past three years Middleton High School students have scored very well on state assessments in reading and math. Why do you think the students have scored so well?
5. How important is it that all students succeed? How do they know that?
6. Tell me about the students here.
7. Tell me about your administrators.
  - a. What do they do that helps students succeed?
  - b. What do they do that hinders student success?
8. Tell me about yourself.
  - a. What do you do to help students succeed?
  - b. What could you do to help students be more successful?
9. Tell me about your colleagues.
  - a. What do they do to help students succeed?
  - b. What could they do to help students be more successful?

## Appendix B-2

### *Focus Group Interview Questions for Parents*

1. Please introduce yourselves and tell me about your association with Middleton High School.
2. What do you like most about Middleton High School?
3. What do you like least?
4. Over the past three years Middleton High School students have scored very well on state assessments in reading and math. Why do you think the students have scored so well?
5. Tell me about the students here. What are they like?
6. Tell me about the administrators.
  - a. What do they do to help students succeed?
  - b. What could they do to help students be more successful?
7. Tell me about the teachers.
  - a. What do they do to help students succeed?
  - b. What could they do to help students be more successful?

Appendix C

*Individual Interview Consent Form*



*Department of Educational Leadership*

October , 2005

Dear Administrator/Teacher Leader,

My name is Marty Stessman, and I am a doctoral student in Wichita State University's Educational Leadership program. I am studying Middleton High School's recent progress in closing the achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students in reading and math. I hope the results of this study will help us better understand the needs of students who have historically not performed well in public schools and increase our knowledge of how to help those students be more successful.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you are an administrator or teacher leader at the high school who possesses unique insight and perspective about the conditions at Middleton High School that may have led to the recent success. Your participation will consist of an individual interview that will take no more than an hour and will be scheduled at a time and location that is mutually agreeable.

Neither you nor your responses will be personally identified in the final document. With your agreement, the interviews will be tape recorded to assist me in accurately describing responses. To insure accuracy, I will summarize your responses at the conclusion of the interview and will provide you with a copy of the transcript from the interview. Because others might benefit from what I learn through this study, the findings may be presented at conferences or published in academic journals or books.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University, your school district, or school. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at 785-267-5117 or my advisor, Dr. Jean Patterson, Dept. of Educational Leadership, Wichita State University at 316-978-6312. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study. You are welcome to keep a copy of the form. Thank you for assisting me in this important study.

Sincerely,

Martin Stessman

I consent to participating in this research study conducted by Mr. Stessman.

---

Signature

Date

Appendix C-1

*Teacher Focus Group Consent Form*



*Department of Educational Leadership*

October , 2005

Dear Teacher,

My name is Marty Stessman, and I am a doctoral student in Wichita State University's Educational Leadership program. I am studying Middleton High School's recent progress in closing the achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students in reading and math. I hope the results of this study will help us better understand the needs of students who have historically not performed well in public schools and increase our knowledge of how to help those students be more successful.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you are a teacher at the high school who possesses unique insight and perspective about the conditions at Middleton High School that may have led to the recent success. Your participation will consist of a group interview with other teachers that will last no longer than 60 minutes and be scheduled at a time that is mutually agreeable.

Neither you nor your responses will be personally identified in the final document. With your agreement, the interviews will be tape recorded to assist me in accurately describing responses. To insure accuracy, I will summarize your responses at the conclusion of the interview and will provide you with a copy of the transcript from the interview. Because others might benefit from what I learn through this study, the findings may be presented at conferences or published in academic journals or books.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University, your school district, or school. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at 785-267-5117 or my advisor, Dr. Jean Patterson, Dept. of Educational Leadership, Wichita State University at 316-978-6312. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study. You are welcome to keep a copy of the form. Thank you for assisting me in this important study.

Sincerely,

Martin Stessman

I consent to participating in this research study conducted by Mr. Stessman.

---

Teacher Signature

Date

Appendix C-2

*Student Focus Group Assent/Consent Form*



*Department of Educational Leadership*

October , 2005

Dear Parent,

My name is Marty Stessman, and I am a doctoral student in Wichita State University's Educational Leadership program. I am studying Middleton High School's recent progress in closing the achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students in reading and math. I hope the results of this study will help us better understand the needs of students who have historically not performed well in public schools and increase our knowledge of how to help those students be more successful.

Your student has been selected to participate in this study because he or she possesses unique insight and perspective as a student about the issues and conditions at Middleton High School that have led to their recent success. Your student's has been asked to participate in a group interview with other students that will last no longer than 60 minutes and will be scheduled at a mutually convenient time during the school day.

Neither your student nor his or her responses will be personally identified in the final document. With your agreement, the interviews will be tape recorded to assist me in accurately describing responses. To insure accuracy, I will summarize your student's responses at the conclusion of the interview and will provide your student with a copy of the transcript from the interview. Because others might benefit from what I learn through this study, the findings may be presented at conferences or published in academic journals or books.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to allow your student to participate or not will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University, your school district, or high school. If you agree to allow your student to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw your student from the study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at 785-267-5117 or my advisor, Dr. Jean Patterson, Dept. of Educational Leadership, Wichita State University at 316-978-6312. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research

subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

Your student is under no obligation to participate in this study. By signing one copy of this form, the legal guardian is granting permission for a minor student to participate in this interview. The student signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study. You are welcome to keep a copy of the form. Thank you for assisting me in this important study.

Sincerely,

Martin Stessman

I consent to allow my child to participate in the research study conducted by Mr. Stessman.

---

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

#### Assent Form for Students Under 18

I have been informed that my parent(s) or guardian(s) have given permission for me to participate, if I want to, in a study about why some students are more successful in school than others. My participation in this research project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation at any time. If I choose not to participate, it will not affect my grades in any way.

---

Student Signature

Date

Appendix C-3

*Parent Focus Group Consent Form*



*Department of Educational Leadership*

October , 2005

Dear Parent,

My name is Marty Stessman, and I am a doctoral student in Wichita State University's Educational Leadership program. I am studying Middleton High School's recent progress in closing the achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students in reading and math. I hope the results of this study will help us better understand the needs of students who have historically not performed well in public schools and increase our knowledge of how to help those students be more successful.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you have a student at the high school and were recommended by staff members of the school as someone who possesses unique insight and perspective about the conditions at Middleton High School that may have led to their recent success. Your participation will consist of a group interview with other parents scheduled at a time that is mutually agreeable.

Neither you nor your responses will be personally identified in the final document. With your agreement, the interviews will be tape recorded to assist me in accurately describing responses. To insure accuracy, I will summarize your responses at the conclusion of the interview and will provide you with a copy of the transcript from the interview. Because others might benefit from what I learn through this study, the findings may be presented at conferences or published in academic journals or books.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University, your school district, or school. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at 785-267-5117 or my advisor, Dr. Jean Patterson, Dept. of Educational Leadership, Wichita State University at 316-978-6312. If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study. You are welcome to keep a copy of the form. Thank you for assisting me in this important study.

Sincerely,

Martin Stessman

I consent to participating in this research study conducted by Mr. Stessman.

---

Signature

Date