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# Closing The Minority Achievement Gap in Georgia Middle Schools: Principals' Perspectives

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# CLOSING THE MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN GEORGIA MIDDLE SCHOOLS: PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES

by

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(Under the Direction of Meta Harris)

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to provide best practices and strategies for middle school principals that have been struggling to close the minority achievement gap in schools. Three Georgia middle school principals considered to be successful in closing the achievement gap were interviewed to determine the strategies and practices that they use to close the minority achievement gap. These practices and strategies were further examined to determine their effectiveness in the areas of reading and mathematics.

The researcher used in-depth interviewing procedures through a structured interview format to encourage research participants to speak openly and candidly about the strategies and practices that they use to address the issue of the achievement gap in their schools. The interviews were audio-taped to assure accuracy of data given by the participants. Each participant was asked nine research questions derived from a thorough review of the literature to determine their perspectives of the achievement gap and the practices and strategies that they use to address the issue.

The researcher discovered through the findings from the in-depth, structured interviews and an analysis of the data that the practices and strategies used by the selected Georgia middle school principals included a combination of similar, but routine

practices such as involving underachieving students in the process of improving their own academic achievement, offer additional assistance in reading and mathematics, incorporate minority students into gifted or honors classes, give common assessments, give teachers time for collaboration and professional learning to plan for student success, and provide differentiated instruction. Most importantly, these principals used data to make strategic decisions concerning the achievement of the students within their schools.

INDEX WORDS: Minority, Achievement gap, Opportunity gap, Institutional racism, Tracking, Education gap, Strategies, Latinos, Blacks, Middle schools, Principals, No Child Left Behind, Data

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# DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all of those that encouraged me along my educational journey. First I would like to thank God for giving me the patience and understanding to realize that I could achieve anything anyone else could achieve out of life. I just had to keep my eyes on Him.

Next, I thank my parents Johnnie and Emma D. Johnson. Daddy you began this journey with me, but unfortunately you had to leave before it was done. I know that you are watching over me and I also know that you are proud of my accomplishments. I thank my mother for always being there for me no matter what the obstacle. I was able to reach this point in my educational career because of the exercises in endurance that I learned from her. Thank you mama for everything that you have done for me, I will always love you.

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I would like to thank my committee for having patience with me throughout the writing of this dissertation. I appreciate your professionalism throughout it all. I could not have chosen a more knowledgeable and thorough group of individuals in which to work. All of you made the writing of the dissertation a very worthwhile experience.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

In 2001, the U.S. Congress was faced with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The reauthorization of this act, PL. 107-110, evolved into the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 (Kysilka, 2003). It has become the responsibility of school leaders to adjust what they are doing to meet the present and future needs of a changing educational system. School leaders face the challenge to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and, at a minimum, to pass the rigorous state academic assessments. They are now scrambling to comply with the law although they have been aware of this problem all along because of national attention to the disparity.

Even though the signing of the NCLB signified the federal government's acknowledgement that it plays a pivotal role in improving the academic achievement of all students, this still was not enough. An achievement gap between white and minority students continues to plague the educational system in the United States.

For the purpose of this study, the academic achievement of Blacks and Latinos is examined because these two groups represent the largest minority groups in the US, according to the 2000 Census. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2005 that Latinos, numbering 42.7 million as of July 1, 2005, are now America's largest minority, and 36.2 million people or 12.9 percent of the total population reported that they were Black.

## Preliminary Literature Review

The achievement gap, as it is most commonly referred to, is defined as a disparity between the academic performance of different groups of students, and in this case, the academic performance of White students and that of Black and Latino students. According to the National Governor's Association, the achievement gap is a matter of race and class, and a gap persists across the US between minority students and their White counterparts. It further states that this is one of the most pressing educational policy challenges that states presently face (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Haycock, Jerald & Huang (2001) offer this description of minority student performance as a result of the achievement gap:

> By the end of fourth grade, Black, Latino and poor students of all races are two years behind other students. By eighth grade they have slipped three years behind and when they reach twelfth grade, poor and minority students are about four years behind. This means that the average 17-year-old Black and Latino student is at the same academic level as a 13-year-old white student (http://www.ncrel.org).

These statistics concerning the achievement gap have proven to be cause for concern for people on all levels: policy makers, principals, parents and students. Even when researchers control for socioeconomic status, level of parental education, and other factors that contribute to scholastic achievement, the score gap between White and minority students persists, and no one is really sure why (Sadowski, 2005). Sadowski (2005) further states:

> Some researchers blame low standards, a lack of resources, and what they consider to be less skilled teachers in schools that serve large numbers of minority students. Others cite a change from the emphasis on basic skills development, which helped to boost schools of the lowest performing students in the 1970s and 1980s to one on higher order skills, for which students may be less well prepared. Still other researchers insist that, despite controlled study the effects of racism simply cannot be disentangled from the host of other economic and social factors that affect black students and their success in school (p. 1)

Many of these contributors to the achievement gap will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of this study.

During the 1970s, the achievement gap saw a turnaround. The gap began to narrow, and this trend continued throughout most of the 1980s. I am placing significant emphasis within this study on the closing of the achievement gap in the areas of reading and mathematics. Jencks and Phillips (1998) noted the reading gap between Black and White 17-year-olds (as measured by the National Association of Educational Progress [NAEP]) had narrowed more than 40 percent from 1971 to 1994 and that the mathematics gap had also narrowed, though less dramatically. It is significant that data released in 2000 from the NAEP revealed very different trends from those noted earlier. While overall scores have increased in reading and mathematics, the differences in scores for Black and White students in virtually every NAEP area and for every age group are greater than they were in the late 1980s (Sadowski, 2005). It is also important to note that the gaps have been getting wider every year.

## The Opportunity Gap vs. the Achievement Gap

Researchers have found that the disparity between White and minority learners is not always a difference of academic achievement, but is sometimes described as a difference in opportunity between the groups. Simply put, some students have greater access to certain things that encourage academic success in school than other, less privileged children, for example, computers or other technological resources, books or qualified teachers. Payne (2004) and a group of eight Patterson, New Jersey youth researchers sought to answer the following research questions in a study relating to the opportunity gap:

1. To what extent does attitude toward economic opportunity matter with respect to attitudes toward educational opportunity?
2. To what extent can we determine Non-White low-income youth's attitudes toward the learning process (i.e. educators, institution)?

This particular research is unique because it uses students to interview and survey other students to gain their perspectives toward factors that relate to the opportunity gap. The following are some statements extracted from the research. Even though the statements in the following quotes from Payne (2004) are a bit disjointed, are grammatically incorrect in style and often use slang, they still convey the thoughts of this group of students toward the factors contributing to the opportunity gap—race, social class and opportunity:

1. Students (non-white/economically poor) like us don't get the proper materials, that's what I think… Like our computers freeze up on us every time we sit down. If you

have good materials, good resources. We have books that are ancient. They (white/wealthy students) have new books almost every year.

2. They ask their parents for a computer, the next day, they got it. I want a book. Oh yeah, sure.
3. Our library is not even properly equipped. Because if we want a book, we have to order it from a white school in order to get it. Almost all my books I'm reading for my history project…I had to order it from a white school. There's not one book that was taken out of our library. They're all from white schools.
4. They come and work in our city and they take the money away. We're not getting anything from it (Payne, 2004).

The inequities that are present in some schools create an opportunity gap for minority students (Payne, 2004). The 2004 annual report of the Hewlett Foundation found that many California schools serving large numbers of low-income students of color lack fundamental opportunities to learn (shortages of qualified teachers, unstable teaching staff, inadequate instructional materials, and overcrowded facilities in disrepair) that undermine student achievement. Such schools are far less likely than schools serving majority white students to have qualified teachers, adequate facilities, and appropriate learning materials (William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2005).

The opportunity gap affects students as far back as middle school. Researchers have found that many students make the decision to continue their education past high school when they are still in middle school, and some often do not choose collegiate aspirations after high school because they do not feel that college is attainable. Students engage or disengage from school and learning most commonly between the ages of 10 and 14. The

transition to middle school has been associated with a decline in academic achievement, performance, motivation and perception (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2002). Minority students are less likely to enroll in college after high school because they are not encouraged to pursue the more challenging curricula or to enroll in advanced classes, Through no fault of their own, minority students are often deprived of the opportunity to prepare and plan for college. Minority students are taught different curricula at different levels of rigor, they experience cultural stereotyping, and they are underrepresented in academically rigorous courses (Silver, 2000).

## The Achievement Gap and Policymakers

As mentioned earlier, the NCLB is an acknowledgment of the federal government that it plays a pivotal role in improving the education for all children in the US. Former Secretary of Education Rod Paige (U. S. Department of Education, 2003) stated in a letter to parents of the United States in June 2003:

> Democrats and Republicans in Congress joined together with President Bush in an historic agreement to improve the educational opportunities for every American child. Accountability, local control and flexibility, new options for parents, and record funding for what works are now the cornerstones of our education system. If your child isn't learning, you'll know why. If your school isn't performing, you'll have new options and the school will receive additional help. Our commitment to you, and to all Americans, is to see every child in America—regardless of ethnicity, income, or background—achieve high standards (www.edgov/nclb/overview/welcome/index.html).

As a result of the promise made by the President to the American people, it makes it very difficult for policymakers to accept a continuation of the achievement gap in America's schools. Policymakers believe that schools can make a difference in closing the gap. Unfortunately, that difference is often felt as pressure from the federal government to make changes (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

> *No Child Left Behind* requires each state to define adequate yearly progress (AYP) for school districts and schools, within the parameters set by Title I. In defining adequate yearly progress, each state sets the minimum levels of improvement—measurable in terms of student performance—that school districts and schools must achieve within time frames specified in the law (www.edgov/nclb/overview/welcome/index.html).

## The Achievement Gap and Teachers

Teachers are a vital component in the effort to close the minority achievement gap in schools, and this has been proven by researchers throughout the years. Sanders and Rivers (1996, quoted in Haycock, 1998) conducted research to determine teacher effectiveness on the learning of different types of students, from low to high achievers. The researchers grouped teachers into quintiles based on their effectiveness in producing student learning gains. The results of this study indicate that on average, the least effective teachers (Q1) produced gains of about 14 percentile points during the school year. By contrast, the most effective teachers (Q5) posted gains among low-achieving students that averaged 53 percentile points. Similar results were observed for middle and high-achievers as well. It is also important to mention that a result of this study

determined that students of different ethnicities respond equivalently within the same quintile of teacher effectiveness. Results of this nature are important to note when trying to determine strategies and practices to close the achievement gap in schools.

Kati Haycock, Director of the Education Trust in Washington, D.C., illustrates this idea by discussing the research of others dealing with this topic in a meta-analysis (Haycock, 1998). Probably the most profound idea gleaned from this analysis involves the idea that the students who really need the support and guidance of effective teachers do not get them. Most often, the students who are in greatest need of effective teachers are minority students. Ingersoll (1998) (quoted in Haycock, 1998) states that minority and poor youngsters—the very youngsters who are most dependent on their teachers for content knowledge—are systematically taught by teachers with the least content knowledge. Because schools and school systems are seeking ways to close the achievement gap, it is important to assure qualified teachers for all children. Haycock (1998) states:

> This goes doubly for schools and communities with concentrations of poor and minority children … These schools and communities must insist on the very best teachers for their children. After all, poor and minority children depend on their teachers like no others. In the hands of our best teachers, the effects of poverty and institutional racism melt away, allowing these students to soar to the same heights as young Americans from more advantaged homes. But if they remain in the hands of underqualified teachers, poor and minority students will continue to fulfill society's limited expectations of them (p. 19).

This discussion illustrates the positive effect that effective teachers have on the academic achievement of low-achieving students. Just as teachers can have a positive effect on student achievement, so can they have a negative effect. Ferguson (1998) found that teachers have different perceptions and expectations for Black students than White students. He argues that these differing expectations lead to different teacher behaviors that, in turn, reinforce lower Black student performance.

Wayman (2002) conducted a longitudinal study of 2,409 Mexican American and non-Latino White dropouts, students at risk of dropping out, and students in the overall population to determine if these students perceive that teachers treat some students differently because of the student's ethnicity. The researcher found that student alienation from school is a major cause of dropping out of high school, and poor teacher-student relationships are often cited in describing student alienation. The researcher also found that the majority of the participants felt their teachers liked the Mexican American students as well as the non-Latino White students. However, a quarter of the participants felt that teachers liked students of non-Latino White descent better than students of Mexican American descent. Wayman (2002) challenged schools to address this issue because the perceptions of teacher ethnic bias are real for these students and are very possibly a hindrance to academic achievement.

Noted educator Martin Haberman (Haberman Foundation, 2003) discusses the idea that many schools are being less than effective with low-achieving students because of the high turnover of teachers as a result of teacher burnout. Haberman contends that over 3,000 students a day drop out of school in the US; this creates a pool of dropouts the size of the city of Chicago in a two and a half year period. Haberman states that the chances

for poor Whites, Latinos and Blacks graduating high school is less than 50 percent in that group of dropouts. Haberman believes that not enough attention is being paid to select teachers who will be successful in teaching low-achieving students. He feels that schools should seek teacher and principal candidates from outside the education sector. Haberman (Haberman Foundation, 2003) offers the following suggestions for improving schools:

> If we expand our pools beyond the traditional pools—for example, if we can get teachers who are career changers—30, 40, 50 year olds who have a lot to give, and who know a lot and bring them into teaching [we can improve schools]. If we can get principals who are not necessarily from the system. They didn't work their way up failing at all the preceding jobs to become a failure principal. We can turn schools around if [they] schools let us restaff those schools using our interviews. We can pick teachers within and outside the system, and new to the profession to restaff failing schools and turn them around. Cab drivers understand this, and people in department stores—it is not rocket science. When we get better people who can relate to the kids—people who know stuff, and are competent in teaching math, literature and foreign language. These are successful people [who can turn schools around] (www.habermanfoundation.org).

## The Achievement Gap and Students

Most often, when an educational issue is discussed, the perspectives of all stakeholders are voiced, with the exception of those who are most important or central to the issue—the student. The achievement gap ultimately affects the student.

The Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) understands that point. MSAN is a national coalition of multiracial, relatively affluent suburban school districts that was established to discover, develop, and implement the means to ensure high academic achievement of minority students (Ash, 2000). MSAN held a conference in October of 2000 with the primary purpose of allowing students to give their perspectives on the achievement gap. According to Ash (2000):

> The idea for a national student conference came from two recent graduates of Evanston Township (IL) High School, Maya Evans and Shanti Hubbard, who felt it was important for the Network to gain insights from high-achieving students of color. Maya and Shanti believed that this group of students, which is often overlooked, could provide valuable information regarding possible prerequisites for barriers to academic success. Maya and Shanti also believed that high-achieving students of color could benefit tremendously by meeting and networking with other students of color across the country (p. 2)

Students were able to discuss matters that were important to them concerning the achievement gap such as perceptions by other minorities of acting white and proving to teachers that they are intelligent and should be enrolled in Honors courses.

## The Achievement Gap and Parents

The NCLB has given parents more authority over the education of their children by encouraging parents to be more involved in monitoring the educational process. John Dewey, noted educator and philosopher, had this to say about parents and education:

> What the best and wisest parent wants for his [or her] child, that must be [what] the community wants for all of its children: Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; it destroys our democracy (Dewey, 1900/1968, p. 3).

The increased focus on high academic standards for all students has brought a heightened awareness of the disparities in student achievement as measured on various statewide assessments. This achievement gap has become a concern of parents, educators, legislators, and community members (see Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington, 2002).

According to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, The Nation's Report Card (NAEP) results prove the fundamental belief underlying NCLB that every child can learn. Thanks to the hard work of parents, teachers, principals, and state, local and national policymakers, we can see that all children are capable of tremendous improvement when our schools believe in them and hold them to high standards (Spellings, 2006). Kober (2001) advocates several strategies in which parents can help to close the achievement gap through methods outside of school which include increasing parental education and involvement. Minority parents can sometimes be unaware of techniques to help their children learn at home. Kober (2001) offers suggestions to educate parents on the things they need to know such as the purposes of testing, test reporting methods, ways to interpret test scores, and ways to help improve test scores.

Schools need to provide parents information on tracking practices and about differences between honors and advanced placement classes, regular classroom placement, and remedial classes. Parents also need to be helped in working with teachers to monitor and effectively enhance their children's academic progress (Ogbu, 2003).

## The Achievement Gap and Principals

Hale-Benson (1986) and Irvine (1990) argue that principals ultimately carry the burden of the achievement gap because they are identified as the instructional leaders of schools. The effective instructional leader must ensure that conditions are in place for all students to be more successful by eliminating the barriers that foster and maintain underachievement, by identifying forces that contribute to the continuing problem of underachievement, and by applying a variety of methodological interventions to allow positive academic achievement.

Only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement in student achievement (Fullan, 2002). Fullan (2002) further states that principals are concerned about closing the achievement gap between high-performing and lower performing schools and raising the achievement of—and closing the gap between—high-performing and lower performing students.

Principals are under more pressure today than ever before to be accountable for the achievement of all students (Goldring & Rallis, 1993; Murphy, 2002, Murphy and Louis, 1999). According to the Association for Effective Schools (1996):

> In the effective school, the principal acts as an instructional leader and effectively and persistently communicates that mission to the staff, parents

> and students. The principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program (http://www.mes.org/correlates.html).

The principal cannot eliminate the problem of the achievement gap alone, but the choices and decisions made by the principal can be critical to the success of the school. What does a principal do when confronted with the problem of the achievement gap especially after years of not making adequate yearly progress? What are the strategies and practices of principals who have been successful in closing the achievement gap? The answers to these and other questions will hopefully be answered in this study.

## Statement of the Problem

Recent research of the Georgia Department of Education website reveals that, during the year 2005, there were 209 Georgia middle schools out of a total of 450 middle schools that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements as set by the NCLB legislation. Analysis of this website further reveals that 74 middle schools are listed in their first year of Needs Improvement, 49 are in their second year of Needs Improvement, 20 are in their third year of Needs Improvement, 9 are in their fourth year of Needs Improvement, 14 are in their fifth year of Needs Improvement, 22 are in their sixth year of Needs Improvement, 11 are in their seventh year of Needs Improvement, and 10 are in their eighth year of Needs Improvement.

The NCLB Act has designated the year 2014 as the deadline for closing the minority achievement gap. This deadline may not provide sufficient or quality time needed to research and promote equity within school districts with large minority populations. How do principals and school districts concentrate on closing the gap between White and

minority students while they simultaneously work to achieve AYP for all students? Ensuring AYP for all students in a school population is the fair and equitable thing to do, and in so doing, the achievement gap among all groups of students will also close. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. The problem is that the impending cut-off date to close the achievement gap among all learners is quickly approaching. Even when AYP is achieved, will the gap in scholarly achievement between White and minority learners be closed?

As many school officials across the country began to disaggregate test data to determine where improvements were needed, they began noticing a disparity between the achievement scores of White and minority students such as Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, within school populations. Dillon (2005) wrote in an article for the New York Times:

> At least 40 states compiled scores by racial and ethnic groups before President Bush signed the NCLB law in January 2002. But even though scores were publicly accessible, many schools felt little pressure to close the gap before the law required that they show annual improvements for each category of student, including Blacks, Latinos and American Indians, or face sanctions (http://www.nytimes.com).

The problem of the achievement gap between White and other students is not a new issue. It was first officially documented in 1970 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the Nation's Report Card. However, the true problem of the achievement gap between White and minority students has been around for many,

many years. Therefore, it is difficult to understand why it has gained such national prominence only recently.

Even more difficult to understand are the reasons for some political and educational leaders wanting to reject the demands of the NCLB. According to a letter dated November 18, 2003, a group of 100 Black and Latino School Superintendents had the following to say about repeals to the NCLB legislation (quoted in Frahm & Gottlieb, 2003):

> Calls to repeal those demands are a thinly veiled attempt to turn back the clock to a time when schools—particularly in suburban communities—could coast comfortably on the performance of a handful of high-performing students and hide serious problems behind misleading averages (http://www.ctnow.com).

The above statement was issued in a letter sent on November 18, 2003 to Congress, the White House, and the Democratic presidential candidates by more than 100 Black and Latino school district superintendents. The purpose of the letter was to express their support for the demands of the NCLB. The letter further states (quoted in Frahm & Gottlieb, 2003):

> We strongly oppose the effort to roll back the accountability provisions of the law—including, ironically, the provisions that provide extra funding for low-performing schools and extra tutoring for low-performing students (http://www.pbs.org/makingschoolswork/dwr/nc/pughsley.html).

Even though the original purpose of NCLB was to improve the education of all students, especially those living in poverty, there is still growing debate about its effectiveness. In

a 2005 Public Broadcasting Service interview, James Pughsley, Superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, was asked if NCLB had a heldful or harmful impact on what he was doing. Pughsley responded (Smith, 2005):

> Sure. I agree with the concept of No Child Left Behind. I do have some problems with the mechanics. Has it had an impact here? Yes. It's had an impact here that's been both good and bad. But we have not had as much difficulty as some states simply because we had the concept in place before the federals [government] did. Prior to No Child Left Behind we were disaggregating data by different groups. Are there differences? Yes. Ours is a growth model. The federal [government] has an absolute target model. So we have done some fashioning to try and make one complement the other. No Child Left Behind still has some work that needs to be done on it, but I think it helps to keep people focused (http://www.pbs.org/makingschoolswork/dwr/nc/pughsley.html).

Although many efforts such as those in Charlotte have been made to close the gap in achievement between White and minority students, the gap persists nationally. Researcher Edmond Gordon (2000) notes that Black, Latino and Native American students at each social class level tend to do less well than their White and Asian American counterparts (p. 2).

According to McGee (2004), the gap is the difference between the achievement of poor students and their peers, between children of color and their peers. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2001) reports that low income children, mostly from

culturally diverse backgrounds, begin kindergarten with lower reading and mathematics skills than do more advantaged children.

The issue of the achievement gap is not new; however, it is a problem that is continuing to plague educators every day, and until it is properly resolved, it will continue to make its presence known in public education for years to come. In order to give the reader a better perspective of the impact that the gap has had on minority students, I will give a personal account of my own childhood education, and how I was affected by practices and strategies that were thought to be the best strategies of the time.

## Autobiographical Roots of the Study

When I began to determine how I would address the topic of closing the achievement gap in middle schools, I started to reflect upon my own experiences as a minority student in a Georgia junior high school in the 1970s. I decided to write about how I dealt with educational challenges that I faced as a middle school student and the educational challenges that I now face as an administrator.

Throughout my junior high experience, I struggled with mathematics, yet excelled in all other areas of academics. My lack of aptitude in math caused my aversion to math and the teachers who taught it. I perceived math teachers as critical, not helpful. My aversion to math teachers compounded my academic problems.

Schools today can ill afford to have students react as I did toward classes or teachers, especially minority students. As more attention is focused on the discrepancy of minority achievement through research studies, it seems that the breach is most pronounced in the subjects of reading and mathematics. Rabiner, Murray, Schmid and Malone (2004) indicate that over the past 30 years significantly fewer minority students have been

considered proficient in reading and have scored lower on standardized tests compared to White students. Shoenfeld (2002) reports that in spite of various reform efforts for teaching mathematics which have been implemented in the public schools of the United States an achievement gap still exists between White students and Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, particularly with respect to higher level mathematics coursework.

When I arrived in junior high school, I experienced tracking for the first time; it was called grouping. In each grade, students were divided into groups by using the letters A, B, or C and also corresponding level numbers 1, 2, or 3 according to assessment data. I was considered to be a B-2, which was an average grouping from fourth grade through eighth grade. It seemed odd that the initial assessment data determined my fate for junior high, and no other assessments entered into the factoring of my grouping. The B and C groups seemed to be comprised of a large number of Black and lower income White students, whereas the A groups were comprised of very few Black students and a large number of upper income White students.

Data gathered by the NAEP on the schools in the United States supported the view that a gap in achievement between White and minority students was evident. As I look back on my experiences as a student from 1970 to 1982, I can see why many problems did exist. If all school systems across the United were like the one in which I was educated, they unknowingly harmed good students through the year-to-year experimentation with practices like tracking and infrequent assessment for advancement.

Oakes (2005) defines tracking as the nearly ubiquitous secondary school practice of separating students for instruction by achievement or ability—a practice that seems to limit schools' attempt to be either equitable or excellent (p. xvi). I am not implying that

tracking alone contributed to the achievement gap, but from a personal perspective, it certainly did not help prevent it.

As a result of my own positive and negative educational experiences in school, I am intrigued about how students achieve or do not achieve. I am not overwhelmingly convinced that the problem of the achievement gap rests solely on minority students or their parents, but it rests squarely on the schools and the manner in which they choose to address the issue. My years in junior high school stood as a shining example that schools were not being very concerned about disparity in achievement between groups of students. The early practice of tracking, keeping students of various ability levels and ethnicity apart, did not help to close the achievement gap. It exacerbated and perpetuated an already increasing gap in achievement. This is one reason why research of this topic is particularly important to me. The achievement gap between White and minority students is a problem to this day and study, time and implementation of valid practices and strategies that address this problem is needed.

## Statement of Purpose

The state of Georgia has many schools that have yet to meet the requirements set by the NCLB. This law mandates that all states, local school districts and schools meet or exceed state standards by the year 2014. The purpose of this study is to determine what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap and to examine the effectiveness of these practices and strategies especially in the areas of reading and mathematics.

## Research Questions

The primary focus of this study is to determine what practices or strategies Georgia middle school principals use to help close the minority achievement gap and examine how effective these practices and strategies are in the areas of reading and mathematics. The over-arching question of this study is to find out how principals incorporate other factors such as stakeholders, curriculum, data and policy into what they do to help close the minority achievement gap in Georgia middle schools.

Other questions to be considered are the following:

1. What are the practices and strategies used by Georgia middle school principals to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics?
2. How do Georgia middle school principals use Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) data to improve minority student achievement?
3. How do Georgia middle school principals involve parents of minority students to increase academic achievement?

## Significance of the Study

The problem of the achievement gap is real, but to date no solutions have been found to eliminate the problem. Nevertheless, a real deadline of the year 2014 has been given to close the achievement gap, and some also very real stipulations have been placed on schools to perform or risk being identified as low-performing. Parents have been given options of removing their children from schools identified as low-performing or needing improvement to enroll them in high-performing schools. Also, the pressure to make adequate yearly progress for schools is always hanging over the heads of school

principals today. However, what is a principal to do when the students assigned to his or her school are all that he or she has to choose from? This study is significant because it provides practices and strategies for principals who are struggling to find answers to the difficult problem of the achievement gap to improve the academic performance of all students within their schools.

This study is important to policymakers because it illustrates success stories of schools that have achieved the standards outlined by the NCLB and demonstrates that closing the gap in achievement is possible. This study is important to principals because it examines the practices and strategies of other principals who have been successful in closing the minority achievement gap. Often, principals struggling with an issue such as the achievement gap may feel that they are the only ones with this particular problem. However, the statistics indicate that this is not true. There are many schools dealing with the same issue year after year. The achievement gap is an issue that plagues many school principals in many districts across the country. It is not just a rural school problem, but also a suburban and urban problem. The schools selected to participate in this study represent all three areas in Georgia—rural, suburban and urban middle school settings. Principals who lead schools who serve these various populations will find it refreshing to read a study that presents best practices and strategies to help them confront their issues with the achievement gap.

This study is important to the community because it serves as a guide for schools and districts to improve the academic achievement of the children that make up local schools. It is always desirable to have a more educated citizenry and this study will help

communities to achieve this goal. Also, communities with successful schools and districts are economically more inviting than those that are not.

This study is important for teachers because it is a way for all other levels of society— policymakers, parents, community and students— to read and understand the multifaceted job that they have to perform on a day-to-day basis. This study will also enlighten teachers how parents and students view the role of the teacher and why some teachers are not successful in educating minority students.

Finally, this study is important for students because any research that is conducted to improve the academic achievement for them is always significant. Whenever time or money is invested and research is conducted to improve education, it is a significant step in the right direction for all students regardless of color.

## Procedure

The researcher conducted a qualitative study. Interviews were conducted with three Georgia middle school principals who have been successful in closing the achievement gap between White and minority students. The term *successful*, in regards to this study, is defined as Georgia middle schools that have decreased the disparity in achievement between White and minority students to less than twenty percent. Additionally, success of these schools was determined upon review of data from the Georgia Department of Education.

The Report Card from the Georgia Department of Education was used to find the top three schools with the lowest gap percentages in achievement between White and minority learners. Upon obtaining IRB approval (Appendix D), the researcher contacted the principals at the selected schools to request their participation in this study (Appendix

B). This was done by posting a letter to each principal and subsequently calling each to schedule interviews. The researcher assigned pseudonyms for each participant to protect the identity of the participant and the school that he or she represents.

The researcher traveled to each school site to conduct the structured interviews with each principal. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews (Appendix C) in order to gather as much information from each principal as possible on his or her perspectives on closing the minority achievement gap in Georgia middle schools. Marshall and Rossman (1999) offer the following format for conducting in-depth interviews:

> Typically, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses. The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it (p. 108).

The researcher carried a copy of the Informed Consent Form for the participants to sign prior to conducting the interview. The participants were informed that the interviews would last approximately 60 minutes; however, there may be a need to conduct follow-up interviews if necessary. The interviews were tape recorded to ensure that all information given by the participants was captured for analysis. Sacks (1992), as quoted in the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2003), states the following about recording interviews:

> We cannot rely on our own recollections of conversations. Certainly, depending on our memories, we can usually summarize what different

> people said. But it is simply impossible to remember (or even to note at the time) such matters as pauses, overlaps, and inbreaths (p. 354).

The researcher took handwritten notes of the interview conversations. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the notes from the interviews to determine the perspective of each participant on closing the minority achievement gap in Georgia's middle schools. It was from the information gathered that the researcher was able to determine if any similarities or differences arose from the conversations with each participant.

The literature suggests that the disparity in achievement between White and minority students is most evident in reading and mathematics. Reading and mathematics scores on state standardized tests were also used in determining AYP. Therefore, particular attention was paid to the differences in the test scores in these two areas. Special attention was devoted to the methodologies used to assess students' performances in these two areas.

## Summary

The issue of closing the minority achievement gap is interesting, and it has been plaguing schools and school principals for a very long time. Because of challenging legislation like NCLB, it is important for answers to this puzzling issue to be found now. This study is presented in five chapters and is designed to give the reader greater understanding of this particular issue and the circumstances that surround it.

Chapter 1 is an overview of the achievement gap and details the issue and how it involves all those affected by it. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature that gives an historical perspective of the achievement gap from the standpoint of Blacks and Latinos

in the United States. It traces the evolution of the gap for both groups, its causes, and the federal government's handling of the gap. Black and Latino academic achievement in reading and math is disucssed as well as promising gap closing strategies and teacher and parent involvement. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodology that was used to conduct the study. This chapter describes the research design, the participants, data collection methods, and the role of the researcher. It also provides a discussion of the structured interview process that was used, what data management and data analysis techniques were used, and how the data will be represented. Chapter 4 reports the findings from the study. The researcher provides an introduction to remind the reader of the topic of the research as well as a review of the research questions. The researcher also discusses in detail the research design, information about the participants, the findings of the study, an analysis of the data, and responses to the over-arching question as well responses to the research questions. The researcher concludes Chapter 4 with a summary.

Chapter 5 is a culmination of the study and it details and discusses the research findings and lists conclusions drawn from them. The researcher also suggests implications for future research on the topic as well as how others in the field of educational research may benefit from the findings of this study

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## Introduction

School districts and school administrators have been given the monumental task by the Senate and the House of Representatives of closing the gap in achievement between White and minority students by the year 2014. Schools and districts will no longer be able to rely solely on the achievement of their highest performing students to determine success or failure. The NCLB mandates that schools and districts disaggregate test data for all students and subgroups within schools and then ensure that every group meets standard by the year 2014. The problem of closing the achievement gap is an issue that is puzzling many principals and districts around the country, and it is a problem that is particularly puzzling for many Georgia middle school principals and districts as well. However, as mentioned in Chapter One, this is not a new issue. Why has the long-standing issue of resolving the achievement gap become such an important and timely concern now? It has taken the NCLB to focus national attention on the problem, but school administrators are accepting responsibility for the challenge and have initiated efforts to find viable ways to close the gap. This literature review begins with an examination of the historical perspective of the reasons for the gap as it relates to Blacks and Latinos in the United States.

## Reasons for the Black Gap: An Historical Perspective

The gap in achievement between Whites and Blacks can be traced as far back as 1619 when the first slaves arrived in the colonies. Slaves were not originally allowed to learn to read or write for fear that they would run away.

Anderson (2004) states that “the laws against teaching slaves to read and write grew out of a variety of fears and concerns, the simplest of which concerned the use of literacy as a means to freedom (i.e. the forging of passes by potential runaways)” (p. 2). Anderson (2004) also gives significant insight into the extent of the achievement gap between Whites and slaves during the 1800s:

> The first achievement gap that Blacks had to overcome was the “Literacy Gap.” As early as 1800 virtually all Whites in America were literate. Young White women, in a general population in which the median age was about 16, were just as literate in 1800 as White men. Both were approximately 90% literate. In contrast to the high rates of literacy among White Americans, Blacks were highly illiterate. Indeed, the Black illiteracy rate of approximately 90 percent in 1800 was the exact opposite of the White literacy rate of 90%. Although slavery and racial oppression were responsible for the astronomical gap in the Black-White literacy rate in 1800, it was nonetheless a major achievement gap that Blacks would struggle to overcome within and beyond slavery (p. 2).

Bullock (1967) showed a correlation between education and standards of society through a type of interracial permissiveness: “Many Southern Blacks were able to gain closer and more personal contact with the master class, acquire some degree of literacy, develop an unplanned-for leadership structure, and thereby experience upward mobility within Southern society by obtaining an education.” (p. 4) Even though educating slaves was illegal many were educated in secret by Whites and other educated Blacks.

Bullock (1967) further states:

> As the idea of interracial permissiveness became more prevalent in the South, those anxious to establish schools for Blacks became even bolder. Slave owners began to become more tolerant of religious education and allowed Sunday schools to be developed as a means to make slaves more obedient. However, slave owners were fearful that literacy would expose the slaves to abolition literature and stimulate revolt, even though there were religious leaders who thought of literacy as the potential savior of the slave system (p. 4).

## The Jim Crow Era as Contributor to the Black Gap

In his essay *Creating Jim Crow,* Davis (n.d.) states:

> The term Jim Crow is believed to have originated around 1830 when a White minstrel show performer, Thomas Daddy Rice blackened his face with charcoal paste or burnt cork and danced a ridiculous jig while singing the lyrics to the song, Jump Jim Crow. The word Jim Crow became a racial slur synonymous with Black, Colored, or Negro in the vocabulary of many Whites, and by the end of the century, acts of racial discrimination toward Blacks were often referred to as Jim Crow laws and practices (http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/creating.htm).

According to Davis (n.d.), the late 1890s signified a time in American history when southern states began to legally and constitutionally support the idea of Blacks taking a subordinate role in society. The focus of these steps were directed toward ensuring the separation of the races in all public areas that included transportation, schools, parks and

other public accommodations. Additionally, Jim Crow laws were inspirational in the prevention of adult Black males having the right to vote.

Davis (n.d.) further notes:

> The so-called Jim Crow segregation laws gained significant impetus from U.S. Supreme Court rulings in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In 1875 the Court ruled: That all persons … shall be entitled to full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement. Ironically, however, in 1883 the Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875: Chief Justice Joseph Bradley held that the Fourteenth Amendment did not protect Black people from discrimination by private businesses and individuals but only from discrimination by states. He observed in his opinion that it was time for Blacks to assume the rank of a mere citizen and stop being the 'special favorite of the laws'.
>
> Thus encouraged, southern states began enacting sweeping segregation legislation. For example, a law in Louisiana relegating Blacks to separate railroad cars led to the landmark 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. A light-skinned Black, Homere Plessy, had been arrested for boarding a car reserved for Whites. The Supreme Court ruled that Plessy's rights were not denied him because the separate accomodations provided to Blacks were equal to those provided to Whites (http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/creating.htm).

Because of its issue of separate-but-equal, the *Plessy* case had bearing on the future case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Not until 1954 did the issue of providing Black Americans an equitable education become a national concern. The case of *Brown v. Board of Education* was really five cases that were combined by the Supreme Court because each of them sought the same legal remedy: "declaring that the discriminatory nature of racial segregation … violates the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees all citizens equal protection of the laws" (Brown Foundation, 2004). The combined cases emanated from Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia and Washington, D.C. The cases included:

1. Delaware – Belton v. Gebhart (Bulah v. Gebhart) – 1951
2. Kansas – Brown v. Board of Education – 1950
3. South Carolina – Briggs v. Elliot – 1951
4. Virginia – Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County – 1951
5. Washington, D.C. – Bolling v. C. Melvin Sharpe – 1951 (Brown Foundation, 2004)

The *Brown* case was first led by Charles H. Houston, and later Thurgood Marshall. The full legal name given to the case *Oliver L. Brown et.al v. the Board of Education of Topeka (KS) et.al*. Oliver Brown, the father of Linda Brown, an elementary school-aged girl, was concerned because his daughter had to ride the bus for five miles to school each day even though a public school was located only four blocks from their house. Brown's daughter was denied the privilege to attend her neighborhood school because of separate but equal legislation. The University of Missouri-Kansas City, School of Law (n.d.) wrote:

6. Racially segregated schools, the Court concluded, are inherently unequal. The Court found support for its decision in studies that indicated that minority students learn better in racially mixed classrooms. Opposition to *Brown* was intense in some southern states. Governors stood in schoolhouse doors, and angry Whites terrorized Blacks. In some places, such as at Little Rock's Central High School, integration was only achieved after a powerful show of force by federal troops (Brown Foundation, 2004).

The victory in the *Brown* case made it possible for Blacks and Whites to attend school together; however, problems continue to exist as evidenced by the current gap in achievement between Black and White students that will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

## Reasons for the Latino Gap: An Historical Perspective

According to Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003, p. 101), many of the problems affecting the school performance of Latino children are rooted in their immigration background, in their movement back and forth across the border, and in the specific cultural characteristics of the families who choose to migrate. Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) provide the following definition of the term *Latino*:

> The term *Latino* refers to people of Latin American descent living in the US. The term Latino does not identify a single ethnic group but an ethnic category, an umbrella label that was first employed in the U.S. Census of 1970. The term embraces roughly two dozen national origin groups that have little in common beyond the fact that they originated in countries in

> the Western Hemisphere that once were part of the Spanish empire and that have remained predominately Spanish-speaking since then (p. 102).

From the nineteenth century to today, Mexicans have been the largest single Latino immigrant group.

Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) parallel the immigration practices of the first Italians to the United States with the Mexicans. Both the Italians and the Mexicans came to the US to live and work, and both groups had a tendency to want to go back and forth to their homelands. According to Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003):

> The Mexicans like the Italians showed promise educationally, but this is where the similarities end between these two groups. The ending of the immigration patterns in the 1920s seemed to force the Italians to assimilate more with American culture and schooling. Italians began to show improvement economically as well as educationally during this period in history. Mexican Americans were on this same path, but in the 1970s, legal immigration from Mexico accelerated to unprecedented levels. It averaged a mere 30,000 a year in the 1950s. By the 1970s, however, it was running at 64,000 a year, by the 1980s 165,000 a year, and by the 1990s, 225,000 a year, almost eight times the level of the 1950s (p. 104)

San Miguel as quoted in the work of Kloosterman (2003) states:

> The Latino community during the time from 1960 to the present significantly increased and became more diverse. In addition to Mexicans it included Puerto Ricans, and Spanish-speaking immigrants from Cuba,

> Central America, and South America. Because there are more and more first generation Latinos in America, the educational progress of this group has significantly slowed because of immigration (p. 11).

## Tracking as Contributor to the Gap

Tracking had a significant impact as a contributor to the Latino-White achievement gap. Oakes (2005) defines tracking as the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes. According to Kloosterman (2003), Latino children were classified as either intellectually or culturally deficient and given larger doses of non-academic instruction. Consequently, these students were often placed in slow or low ability groups or placed in non-academic, vocational, or general programs on the basis of racially and culturally biased standardized test scores (Gonzales, 1990). Similarly, Oakes (2005) found that in a study of three high schools chosen to observe placement practices although most students took some vocational education, low-income African American and Latino students took more than others. Black and Latino students also took low-track academic courses more often than White and Asian students (p. 231).

San Miguel and Valencia (1998) stated that not all Latino students did poorly in school. Contrary to popular and scholarly opinion, a small but significant number of Latinos experienced school success. According to Kloosterman (2003), although much more research on those who succeeded needs to be done, evidence suggested that a significant group of Latinos completed both secondary and post-secondary school during the years from the 1890s to 1960.

Oakes (2005) discusses the schooling phenomenon, as she calls it, of tracking, and how it has evolved in the American school system. Oakes (2005, p. 3) defines tracking in this book as the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes. She points out that some students are classified as fast, average or slow learners and placed in corresponding groups or tracks according to scores on achievement tests. Oakes (2005) mentions that when students are placed in these groups, predictable characteristics are created.

> First, students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction. Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type—high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on. Clearly these groups are not equally valued in the school; occasional defensive responses and appearances of special privilege—i.e.., small classes, programmed learning, and the like for slower students—rarely mask the essential fact that they are less preferred. Third, individual students in these groups come to be defined by others—both adults and their peers—in terms of these group types. In other words, a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving person, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, good. And those in the low- achieving groups come to be called slow, below average, and—often when people are being less careful—dummies, sweathogs, or yahoos. Fourth, on the basis of these sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way

> educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently (p. 4).

Oakes is careful to give examples of why some might consider tracking to be a positive school practice as well. According to Oakes (2005), educators strongly believe that students learn better in groups with others like themselves. They also believe that groups of similar students are easier to teach.

The first two chapters of her book give an historical account of how tracking evolved in American schools. It is interesting to note that she mentions that tracking was thought to be a solution to help students achieve academically and to develop personally and socially in positive and healthy ways. She further discusses that tracking emerged as a solution to a specific set of educational and social problems at a particular time in history. Through her discussions of tracking she highlights some very important events that led to current school practices, i.e. the development of the Latin Grammar Schools, Social Darwinism, European immigration during the 1920s, and the struggles of Charles Eliot to develop the human potential for learning in all students, just to name a few. Oakes (2005) states that these events clearly show the historical and social contexts that led to tracking systems we have in schools today.

> Little has happened in the twentieth century to alter these patterns. In fact, a dominant theme in curriculum making has continued to be differentiation. Certainly, the creation of the junior high schools in the 1920s was in part inspired by the wish to determine and institute appropriate curriculum placements (vocational or academic) by the time children were twelve years old. Appropriate differentiation was also an

> important focus of the life-adjustment movement of the 1940s. The emphasis of this educational thrust was to help young people adjust to existing conditions in society and to lead happy and productive lives within the limits of their abilities (p. 38).

## The Federal Government's Handling of the Gap

The frenzy surrounding the NCLB began when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was reauthorized in 2001 by the Senate and House of Representatives. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson saw the need to enact legislation that would improve the education of all students especially those living in poverty. ESEA was integral to President Johnson's War on Poverty. When the legislation was announced, President Johnson stated that "we [Americans] reach out to five and a half million children held behind their more fortunate schoolmates by the dragging anchor of poverty" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, p. 212). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) write further:

> Although passed at the crest of the civil rights revolution, ESEA was not a civil rights measure per se. But it disproportionately affected Black children, half of whom lived in poverty in 1965. In subsequent decades, the Latino population exploded, and by now, six out of ten students eligible for Title I assistance are either Black or Latino (p. 214).

Title I provided much needed funds for high-poverty school districts, but according to the Coleman Report in 1966, more money was not necessarily the answer. James S. Coleman, the author of the Coleman Report, conducted a massive study of 600,000 schoolchildren and 60,000 teachers that revealed that it did not matter if students attended

good schools (schools with all of the necessary materials and funding) or bad schools (schools without sufficient materials and funding). The difference related to family background. Students with similar backgrounds had similar test scores, whether they came from a good or a bad school (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, p. 217). The study of family background and the home as a culprit of the underachievement of minority students will be discussed later in this study. Haycock (2002) takes issue with the Coleman Report by stating that helping low-performing students and teachers means providing more money for instruction, professional development and assessment.

> Creating equity in resources means redirecting state funds to poorer schools. Forty-two states give more money to the wealthiest schools than the poorest schools. New York has the greatest inequity, spending $1.17 million less per elementary school in the poorest districts (p. 6).

Haycock concludes by stating that money won't help, but some of the things that money can buy will (p. 13).

Fryer and Levitt (2004) conducted a study of 20,000 children entering kindergarten during the fall of 1988. During their research they found that when certain observable characteristics were controlled, the Black-White test score gap in math and reading would be eliminated. The observable characteristics included certain pertinent information about the child's age, child's birth weight, a measure of socio-economic status, participation in the federal Women, Infants and Children program (WIC), mother's age at first birth, and a number of children's books in the home. These researchers found that these same characteristics accounted for much, but not all of the Latino-White difference in test scores as well. Fryer and Levitt (2004) found that when Black and White children entered

kindergarten with observationally equivalent initial scores, their paths diverge once they enter school. According to Fryer and Levitt (2004), between the beginning of kindergarten and at the end of first grade, Black students lose .20 standard deviations relative to White students with similar characteristics. If the gap in test scores for these children continues to grow at the same rate, by fifth grade the Black students will be .50 standard deviations behind their White counterparts.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a decline in the confidence in American public schools. In 1983, the now famous *A Nation At Risk* report was issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education:

> We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments (p. 1).

It is evident that much has been done to address the underachievement of minority students in the United States over the years. Even though many efforts have been made to improve the academic performance of minority students in the US, an achievement gap continues to exist.

The NAEP data show that minority eighth-grade students made progress in the 1970s and early 1980s and that there was some narrowing of a longstanding ethnic achievement gap at this grade level. Similar patterns were documented in a recent study of middle

grades student achievement in 14 Southern states directed by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002). Not only did the data show a wide gap between the performance of students in the highest and lowest quartiles, but they also showed a wide gap between the performance of White and Black students in reading, mathematics, and science.

## Additional Information Relating to the Gap

Various reasons have been given for why there is an achievement gap, but none have been conclusive. For the context of this study the term *gap* refers to an incomplete or deficient area of achievement between White and minority students. Poverty has been cited as one of the major reasons for the gap. According to Payne (1996), poverty occurs in all races and in all countries.

> In the 1990 census data, 11.5 million of America's children (individuals under the age of 18) lived in poverty. Of that number, the largest group was White. However, by percentage of ethnic groups, the highest percentages are minority. In addition to poverty, other factors contribute to the gap such as the following: family experience with education, cultural norms and values, racism, prejudice and segregation, inequities in school resources, school and teacher attitudes, student motivation and school environment (p. 2).

Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003), in a slightly different approach to the gap, contend that the achievement gap that is often studied by researchers is a non-issue. They state that it has become popular to refer to one of the perennial problems in education, that of low achievement by the large majority of Black students, as the achievement gap, that is,

the gap in comparison to the average performance of White students. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) state further:

> The gap between the present level of performance for Black students and the criterion performance standards that should be required is the academic achievement gap that must be closed. Too often, by using the White students' normative performance as the universal standard, not only do we use a low standard, but we tend to be satisfied with the performance of minority cultural groups when a substantial reduction in this gap occurs. The unconscious assumption seems to be that the traditional low performers cannot surpass—merely approach—the performance of the norm group (p. 138).

## The Education Debt

Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests a different way of thinking about the achievement gap. She argues that instead of an achievement gap or even an opportunity gap there is an education debt. Ladson-Billings (2006) defines the education debt as the following:

> The education debt is the foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low-income kids, which deficit leads to a variety of social programs (e.g. crime, low productivity, low wages low labor force participation) that require on-going public investment. This required investment sucks away resources that could go to reducing the achievement gap. Without the education gap we could narrow the achievement gap (http://www.cmcgc.com/Media/WMP/260407/49_010_files/fdeflt.htm#nopreload=-1).

Ladson-Billings (2006) further argues that the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt. She also questions how a debt of this magnitude could ever be repaid or calculated for those minority groups that have been deprived for so many years.

## Institutional Racism

Knowles and Prewitt (1969), in their book *Institutional Racism in America*, discuss institutional racism in terms of conscious or unconscious racial stereotyping by individuals. This type of stereotyping may be accompanied by intentional bigotry by various individuals or entire institutions. The researcher in this instance is referring to schools as institutions that exhibit racism through needless institutional practices. Some of these practices such as tracking have already been discussed, but other more subtle practices that occur in schools and school districts everyday, and are often not challenged, will be discussed later in this section.

Knowles and Prewitt begin their book with a quote by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, two notable advocates for civil rights, that defines exactly what institutional racism is in America. The quote is derived from the (1967) book written by Carmichael and Hamilton called *Black Power: The politics of liberation in America:*

> Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property. This type can be reached by television

> cameras; it can frequently be observed in the process of commission. The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type (p. 4).

Even though fifty years have passed since the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education, there are still blatant hints of racism in American schools. The following is an example of institutional racism that is experienced by minority students in an entire school system, according to the Intercultural Development Research Association (2006):

> A cluster of school systems have reached a settlement with the court to desegregate through an open enrollment system. The districts have agreed to allow Black students from the local urban area a choice to attend any of the schools in the county. In doing so, those predominantly White schools would be desegregated to some degree. The urban school district would also accept White students in a reciprocal manner. The receiving schools have made absolutely no attempt to prepare the gaining staffs or students for the possibility of receiving minority students. The curriculum, school culture, staff members and virtually all support personnel do not reflect the racial/ethnic diversity of the county (including the urban district which is predominantly minority). When asked by the state to explain why no changes were made to accommodate the presence of Black students, the districts took the position that they did not need to change. They stated

> that the very fact that Black students would be in a more enriched environment, around existing students and staffs, would be all they needed to improve their academic outcomes (http://www.idra.org/Newslttr/1996/Feb/Racism).

In a 2004 news release by the Seattle School Board, the School Board took a stand against institutional racism by committing its schools to the principles of Brown v. Board of Education and calls on school employees, volunteers, and community members to eradicate institutional racism:

> Institutional racism is a term that makes a lot of people uncomfortable, and it should. It's time that we acknowledge that White students and students of color have different experiences in school and really take a hard look at the ways in which our institutional practices and unthinking behaviors may prevent certain groups of students from achieving success in school (http://www.seattleschools.org/area/news/x40514nr.xml).

## Research Studies that Discuss the Gap

Bali and Alvarez (2004) conducted a study that controlled for factors other researchers discussed as contributing to the achievement gap (family background, school factors, socio-economic status, and language fluency). Particular care was taken to use a large sample of minority students (Black and Latino, including recent immigrants) to study how the gap develops between White and minority students. The evolution of the Black and Latino gaps in a racially diverse school environment was also studied.

A cohort of fourth grade students from the Pasadena Unified School District in Pasadena, California who had been in this district since 1999 (first grade) were chosen in

2002 to participate in this study. These students also had test scores for all four years. This cohort consisted of 1,147 students for reading scores and 1,221 students for math scores. The mean reading and math scores were examined from first through fourth grade for the fourth grade cohort.

According to Bali and Alvarez (2004), the results from this study revealed the following:

> In the first grade, the average reading score of Latino students is more than 13 points lower than that of White students, and Black students' average is over 6 points lower than that of White students. By fourth grade, Latinos' reading gaps are slightly reduced, by less than 1 point, whereas Black students' gap increased, by close to 2 points.
>
> There are some differences in math scores. In the first grade, both Latino and Black students average in math around 11 points below White students. By fourth grade, Latinos have reduced their gap in math, by close to 3 points, and Black students have slightly reduced it, by 1 point. Thus, in reading, the Black-White student gap increases; whereas the Latino-White gap slightly decreases; however, in math, an overall decrease in both the Black-White and Latino-White gaps is observed. It is important to note that in the raw scores Latino-White gaps are in general larger than the Black-White gaps (p. 399).

The results of this study show that gaps in achievement for Latino and Black students in the Pasadena Unified School District are smaller than in national studies. However, it should be noted that different tests were used for each study.

Bali and Alvarez (2004) determined that the onset of the Latino-White gap in math comes after the first grade, the onset of the Black-White gap is at or before the first grade, and both Black and Latino students increase their gaps in math in the early grades. By the fourth grade, Black students' gap in math is over twice the size of the Latino students' gap.

Schoenfeld (2002) analyzed data from schools in Pittsburgh to determine if it is possible to greatly reduce the gap in mathematics achievement between White and minority students through educational measures that do not directly target the achievement gap. According to Schoenfeld, what makes the Pittsburgh Public Schools unusual is that Pittsburgh has, since the early 1990s, made a coherent systemic effort to implement standards-based education in mathematics and other subject areas. Schoenfeld's analysis distinguished between what were called strong implementation teachers and other teachers. The strong implementation teachers were those in whose classrooms students were familiar with activities and procedures specific to the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum. Artifacts as visual aids and manipulatives were accessible and showed clear signs of use, students had frequent opportunities to work together and explain their work to one another, student work showed curriculum-specific projects and activities, and no other curriculum was evident. The study compared the mathematics performance of students in what were called strong implementation schools (schools in which all the teachers were considered strong implementers) with that of students in weak implementation schools (in which at most only one or two teachers were strong implementers).

Schoenfeld's (2002) results show that use of the reform curricula significantly narrowed the gap between Whites and underrepresented minorities while increasing the performance of both groups in all categories. On tests of so-called basic skills, scores for Whites increased from 48 percent to 72 percent (a 50 percent increase), while scores for blacks rose from 30 percent to 75 percent (a 150 percent increase). On problem solving, White scores increased from 18 percent to 54 percent (a 200 percent increase). On mathematics concepts, scores for Whites increased from 20 percent to 60 percent (a 200 percent increase), while scores for blacks increased from 4 percent to 40 percent (a 900 percent increase). Thus, while both groups improved, the scores for minority groups improved by much larger amounts. The reductions in the gap were achieved by a general focus on improving the educational achievement of all students, whatever their ethnicity, gender, or SES. Note that Pittsburgh has 97 public schools that serve 40,000 students.

### What the Gap Looks Like Nationally in Reading for Blacks

The NAEP project known as the Nation's Report Card has been reporting student data every four years since 1971. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the trends in average reading scale scores and score gaps for White students and Black students ages 9, 13, and 17 were all higher in 2004 than in 1971. However, a comparison of the average reading scale scores of White and Black students at each age level indicates a remarkable gap in achievement. The scale that the NAEP uses to measure academic progress ranges from 0 to 500 (0 is the lowest scale score and 500 is the highest scale score). The year 1971 shows the largest gap between the reading scores of these two groups with White 9-year-old students scoring 214 and Black 9-year-old students scoring 170—a difference of 44 points. The gap in reading achievement

seemed to close between these two groups in 1988, but widened again in 1992 and then closed somewhat in 1996 before reaching its closest point in 2004. In 2004, the average reading scale score for White 9-year-old students was 226, and the score for Black 9-year-old students was 200—a difference of 26 points.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the average reading scale score for White 13-year-old students in 1971 was 261 and the score for Black 13-year-old students was 222 a difference of 39 points. Remarkably, 1988 was the first instance that the scores of White and Black 13-year-old students appeared to close the reading achievement gap with White 13-year-old students. The average reading scale score for White 13-year-old students was 261 and the score for Black 13-year-old students was 243— a difference of 18 points. Black scores decreased after that point causing the reading gap between White and Black 13-year-old students to widen. However, the most recent NAEP reading scores indicate a reduction in the gap once again with White 13-year-old students scoring 266 and Black 13-year-old students scoring 244—a difference of 22 points. The gap between White and Black 13-year-old students is the smallest of all three groups, 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old students.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the 1971 reading scores for White students and Black students in the 17-year-old group indicates the widest of the gaps of all three groups reported. The reading score for White 17-year-old students in 1971 was 291, and the reading score for Blacks was a staggering 239—a difference of 53 points. The gap between these two groups continued to average around 50 points from 1971 to 1980. During the years between 1971 and 1980, Black reading scale scores increased slowly while White scores seemed to plateau. The years between

1980 and 1988 showed a dramatic 31-point increase in Black reading scales scores while White reading scale scores continued to make minimal gains.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the gap in reading achievement between White and Black 17-year-old students seemed to close in 1988 when the difference in scores was closed to 20 points. After 1988, the reading gain achieved by Black 17-year-old students slipped to 20 points in 1990, then to 37 points in 1992, and now most recently in 2004 the gap between White and Black 17-year-old students has arrived at a difference of 29 points.

### What the Gap Looks Like Nationally in Reading for Latinos

The NAEP did not report trends in average reading scale score data for the gap between White and Latino students in 1971 because until 1970 the Census did not have a separate category for Latinos. The members of this population were included in the census as White until 1971. Data for Latino students were included in the overall national results but not reported as a separate racial/ethnic category in 1971 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). NAEP began reporting reading data for Latinos in 1975.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), at all three ages—9, 13, and 17—Latino students' average reading scale scores were higher in 2004 than in 1975. In 1975, the average reading scale score for White 9-year-old students was 217 as compared to 183, the average reading scale score of Latino 9-year-old students. Incidentally, 183 was the lowest average reading scale score reported for Latino students in all three age groups during the NAEP reporting years. The most recent data reported for these two groups of students in reading show the narrowest gap in reading achievement between the two groups so far. The average reading scale score for White 9-

year-old students was 226 and the average reading scale score for Latino students was 205—a difference of 21 points.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the average reading scale score for White 13-year-old students in 1975 was 265, and the average scale score for Latino 13-year-old students was 232—a difference of 30 points. The closest average reading scale scores for these two groups of students was observed in 1988. During this year, the average reading scale score for White 13-year-old students was 261 and 240 for Latino 13-year-old students—a difference of 21 points. The reading gap widened to its original starting point in 1994. This score indicated that White 13-year-old students scored 265 in reading and Latino 13-year-old students scored 235—a difference of 30 points. The most recent 2004 average reading scale score results for White 13-year-old students indicate a score of 266 as compared to 242 by Latino 13-year-old students.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the average reading scale score results for the year 1975 illustrate the largest gap ever in reading achievement between 17-year-old White and Latino students. The average reading scale score for White 17-year-old students was 293 and the Latino score was 252—a difference of 41 points. The next 17 years indicated a steady reduction in the difference between the average scale scores of White and Latino students; however, in 1992 the average reading scale score for Latinos began to decline while at the same time the average scale score for Whites remained the same from 1990 to 1992. The year 1990 indicates the highest scores for both White and Latino 17-year-old students (Whites 297 and Latinos 275). The average reading scale scores for White 17-year-old students have slowly decreased since 1990 to a score of 293 in 2004. The average reading scale score for Latino 17-year-old

students decreased markedly from 275 in 1990 to 271 in 1992 to 263 in 1994. The 2004 average reading scale score results for Latino 17-year-old students was 264 as compared to 293 for White 17-year-old students—a difference of 29 points.

## What the Gap Looks Like Nationally in Mathematics for Blacks

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), in 1973, the mathematics scale score for White 9-year-old students was 225, and the mathematics scale score for Black 9-year-old students was 190—the lowest score for all three groups of Black students in the thirty-one year history from 1973 to 2004. These two scores indicate a 35 point difference between White and Black 9-year-olds in mathematics scale scores.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), by far the largest gap in achievement was indicated in 1973 in the mathematics scale scores of White and Black 13-year-old students. The mathematics scale score for White 13-year-old students was 274 as compared to 228 for Black 13-year-olds—a difference of 46 points. The year 1990 saw the greatest decrease in the gap in mathematics scale scores between White and Black 17-year-old students. The mathematics scale score for White 17-year-olds was 309, and the mathematics scale score for Black 17-year-olds was 289—a difference of 21 points. The mathematics scale score for White 17-year-olds in 2004 was 313 while the mathematics scale score for Black 17-year-olds was 285—a difference of 28 points.

## What the Gap Looks Like Nationally in Mathematics for Latinos

The data that is presented by the National Center for Education Statistics (2005) regarding the trends in average mathematics scale scores by race/ethnicity for the White-Latino gap indicate that over the years from 1973 through 2004 there has been a gap in mathematics achievement between White and Latino students. In 1973 the White scale score in mathematics for 9-year-old White students was 225 as compared to 202 for Latino students—a difference of 23 points. This particular gap has not approached being closed since 2004 when the mathematics scale score was 247 for White students and 230 for Latino students—a difference of eighteen points.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the same trend is observed for 13-year-old students in mathematics, which indicates the largest gap during the year of 1973 with White 13-year-olds reporting a scale score of 310 and Latino 13-year-olds reporting a mathematics scale score of 277—a difference of 33 points. In 2004, the White scale score in mathematics was 288 and the Latino score was 265—a difference of 23 points. The year 1986 indicated the closest that the two scores have gotten since 1973. The mathematics scale scores for White 13-year-old students was 274 and the mathematics scale score for Latinos was 254—a difference of 19 points.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the mathematics scale score for 17-year-old Latino students was just as wide and dramatic as that of the Latino 13-year-olds, but two points less overall. In 1973, the mathematics scale score for White 17-year-old students was 310, and the mathematics scale score for Latino 17-year-old students was 277—a difference of 33 points. The year 1992 saw the scores between these two groups come the closest when the mathematics scale score for White 17-year-

olds was 312 and the mathematics scale score for Latino 17-year-olds was 292—a difference of 20 points. The 2004 NAEP mathematics scale scores for White 17-year-olds was 313 while the mathematics scale score for Latino 17-year-olds was 289—a difference of 24 points.

The achievement gap as indicated by the mathematics scale scores for White and Latino students is alarming, but not as much as the gap between White and Black students at all three age levels—9, 13, and 17. Despite the dismal results of the scale scores, the National Center for Education Statistics (2005) states that at all three ages, the average mathematics scores for Black students were higher in 2004 than in 1973.

## What the reading gap looks like in Georgia middle schools for White, Black, and Latino Students

The average scale scores for reading grade 8 have been chosen for the purpose of this study since this is a study about Georgia middle schools. According to NAEP scores for 2005, the average reading scale score for White eighth grade students is 268 and the average reading scale score for Latino eighth grade students is 247—a difference of 21 points. The average scale score for reading for Black eighth grade students is 241 which is 27 points lower than the score for White eighth-grade students and 6 points lower than Latino eighth-grade students. These trends are consistent with national averages.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), the average scale scores for Georgia White eighth-grade students in mathematics is 284, and the average mathematics scale score for Georgia Latino eighth-grade students is 258—a difference of 26 points. The average mathematics scale score for Georgia Black eighth grade students is 255 which is 29 points lower than White Georgia eighth grade students, and 3 points

lower than Latino Georgia eighth grade students in mathematics. These trends are also consistent with national averages.

The review of national trends provided by NAEP (2005) indicates that the gap in achievement between White and minority students continues to widen at each age and grade level. If the results for 17-year-old Georgia students were reported here the trend would be the same. The academic achievement of Black, Latino and Native American students both nationally and in Georgia is in keeping with the observations made by Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003):

> Today, at age 17 the typical Black or Latino student is scoring less well on the nation's most reliable tests than at least 80 percent of his or her White classmates. In five of the seven subjects tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a majority of Black students perform in the lowest category – below basic. The result: By twelfth grade, Blacks are typically four years behind White and Asian students, while Latinos are doing only a tad better than Black students. These students are finishing high school with a junior high education (p. 2).

## Promising Gap Closing Strategies

Although little published information specifically relates to strategies that middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap, available research identifies commonalities between the things that principals do to successfully close the gap between White students and the minority subgroups within schools. In all cases, these successes have occurred in schools that are considered to be low-performing. Some common practices of principals who have been successful in closing the gap are high

expectations for all stakeholders within the school, an established strong and consistent discipline program, regular assessment and use of data to ensure continuous achievement, employment and empowerment of highly qualified teachers, a belief that all students can learn, support given to the learning process, and setting measurable goals for the school (Oberman, 2002; Bainbridge & Tocco, 2003; Butcher & Kafer, 2003; Brynjulson & Storms, 2005).

The Association for Effective Schools, Inc. (1996) has outlined many of the same strategies in its correlates of effective schools. *Effective schools* refer to schools where all students learn regardless of the diversity and multicultural populations of the students and the teachers in the schools. The developers of the correlates believe the following (Association for Effective Schools, 1996):

> The correlates are the means to high and equitable levels of student learning. It is expected that all children (whether male or female, rich or poor, black or White) will learn at least the essential knowledge, concepts and skills needed so that they can be successful at the next level next year (http://www.mes.org/correlates.html).

The correlates as defined by the Association for Effective Schools (1996) include a clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, frequent monitioring of student progress, opportunity to learn and student time on task, a safe and orderly environment, and home school relations. Additionally, the Association for Effective Schools (1996) states that when school improvement processes based upon the effective schools research are implemented, the proportions of students that achieve academic excellence either improves or at the very least remains the same.

Probably the most dramatic gap closing study was conducted by Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) of the Brazoport Independent School District in Clute, Texas. The Brazoport ISD managed to close the achievement gap between White and minority students over an 8-year period from 1992 to 2000. The change occurred in a district much the same as any other district in the United States today. The district was required to disaggregate student results of the Texas Assessment of Achievement Skills (TAAS) and use passing rates by subgroups such as economically disadvantaged or minority students to judge school success. Because Brazoport operates on a site-based management plan, the responsibility for improvement was placed on each principal and the staff in his or her building. The school district is located in an area that has a large number of chemical corporations. The Brazoport School Board was familiar with Deming's 14-step process that focuses on the quality of goods and services provided by an organization.

One of the key elements of Total Quality Management (TQM) is the use of data to guide improvements. Brazoport used TAAS data to identify problems and to plan improvements. Another important element is team-based problem solving. The district used this approach in all schools to address the issue of low TAAS pass rates. Lastly, the district adopted a no-excuses attitude toward failure. They did not accept any of the traditional reasons for minority failure. Everyone realized that they were accountable for student success or failure.

In addition to using TQM, Brazoport also incorporated Effective Schools correlates and committed to provide related training for staff and then implemented the correlates in the district. The correlates identified by the Effective Schools research are strong leaders, high expectations for all students, and a strong focus on instruction. The next step that

Brazoport took to ensure success in their district was to implement an 8-step instructional process that was a modification of the Plan-Do-Check-Act approach of TQM but customized for a school setting. In this 8-step instructional process the following things are accomplished (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001):

1. Disaggregate Data: Teachers received individual student and classroom reports on TAAS results for both their previous year's classroom and the students they will teach during the current year. Principals received the same information. Data are also available from periodic assessments developed by teachers in the district.
2. Develop a timeline: Based on both the knowledge and skills in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and the assessment data available from the TAAS, grade-level teachers develop an objective-based teaching calendar for the year.
3. Deliver instructional focus: The timeline is used by each teacher to identify the objective to be taught. The instructional focus, the objective, is announced and taught at the beginning of each day or class period.
4. Administer an assessment: Assessments, some commercially developed and many developed by district teachers, are administered periodically to ensure that students have mastered the objectives taught during the specified time period. Data from these are used to determine if whole classes need additional reteaching or if special assistance is needed for specific students. The approach is intended to help teachers detect and correct problems early (p. 22)

Based on assessment, Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) recommend to deliver to students either enrichment activities or tutorials to reteach.

5. Enrichment activities are provided for those students whose short-term assessment shows they have mastered the skills just taught. They are scheduled during the time other students are involved with tutorials.

OR

6. Tutorials to reteach are provided to students who have not mastered the objectives just assessed. The tutorials typically include fewer students than a regular class. Help is also provided after school and on Saturdays.
7. Maintain and reteach: Teachers include short, periodic reteaching/maintenance activities in their instruction to ensure that skills already taught are retained.
8. Monitor: Principals visit classrooms during the time allotted for the instructional focus to monitor progress and to maintain knowledge of the progress of individual students and classes (p. 24)

It is interesting to note that within this extensive study of the Brazoport ISD the researchers interviewed principals of the various schools to obtain information on how other schools could make similar improvements. Each principal discussed what he or she did to improve reading, writing, and mathematics scores in their schools. All of the principals discussed how they utilized any additional funds received from the central office for extended day programs for at-risk learners, and how they disaggregated test data to plan for instruction. One elementary school principal offered information about how she structured the instructional day at her school that is noteworthy for other principals. According to Cawelti and Protheroe (2001), in addition to after-school tutorials and a summer school program, the school offers a reading lab, staffed with 1 ½ teachers and 1 ½ instructional assistants. These additional staff members provide

individualized instruction to 15 students in each 30-minute session. The students are typically pulled from science or social studies classes.

The researchers also found that one of the elementary schools also staffs a Content Mastery room to which students can be sent for highly individualized extra help either beforeschool or during the day (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001).

> Each student is sent with a pass that specifies the help needed and is then sent back to the classroom with a note reporting on activities and progress made. As the program has evolved, the resource teachers staffing the room and regular classroom teachers have realized the importance of providing consistent approaches to, for example, teaching fractions so that students are not confused. The children are encouraged to say, that's not how we're doing it in my class. This is a sign to the resource teacher that additional information from the classroom teacher is needed (p. 29).

Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) discuss the idea that there are many instances of schools that have closed the achievement gap. He states:

> There is no mystery. There has never been a time in American education when there have not been gap closers, that is, teachers, and school leaders who demonstrate their capability to move students who typically perform in the lower quartile by standardized tests measures even into the top quartile, indeed in some cases into the lead position within their schools and districts (p. 142).

They discuss the fact that the gap closers do not sit idly by wondering about the intelligence of students. Gap closers are more concerned with the learning opportunities

provided for students and their own teaching. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) give the example of William Johntz, the creator of Project SEED. Project SEED has shown high achievement with typically low-performing students. They state that Johntz had been cited in a 1970 *Newsweek* article because of a demonstration conducted by Johntz, then a teacher at Berkeley High School, where fifth and sixth grade students were learning college-level algebra material. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) use this example to base their point that gap closers do not allow excuses for underachievement to dictate how much students learn. The primary excuses that they attack pertain to student, family, and cultural deficits. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) repeatedly show that low-performing students tend to achieve at high levels when challenged academically, and when their deficits are not brought into consideration.

Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) mention that a class of Johntz's sixth graders were observed learning logarithms and exponentiation.

> The whole method involved the use of Socratic questioning. Johntz told the students very little, rather required the students to solve the problems as a consequence of questioning. The questioning was used to probe the student's understanding of concepts and operations, to probe to discover the assumptions that the students were using, in order to respond to questions. Then questions were used to determine where the whole class stood on the responding student's answer. Hand signals revealed instantly whether students agreed or disagreed with a response. Then Johntz would sample those who agreed or disagreed. Sometimes he would take a student who gave an unexpected answer to a question, then after probing to

> discover the student's assumptions and definitions, use that student's logic to follow up with more questions that assumed the logic of that student, to see where it would lead. More questions were then asked to determine agreement or disagreement. Students were encouraged to use their gestures of intellectual protest, a hand signal where hands were waved in front of and across the body. The idea here was to build students' confidence and willingness to take a position, even if it was not the popular one (p. 150).

Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) mention that in a classroom of this type it is very difficult for a student to be inactive or not to be engaged. The knowledge level of the subject matter is an important factor as well. They also mention that in order to be able to frame questions in an instant as observed in the logarithm lesson, the teacher would have to have a deep knowledge of the subject. It was also mentioned that the absence of behavior problems were evident because of the high level of engagement by the teacher.

There have been many evaluation studies performed on Project SEED. According to Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003),

> even though the students in the program are being taught algebra, trigonometry, and even calculus more recently, they gain about two years in arithmetic scores on standardized achievement for each single year of instruction. This means significant gains in arithmetic achievement and mathematics achievement, enormous gains in academic self-concept and self-esteem, and improvement in communication and social skills are evident (p. 151).

A study conducted by Wenglinsky (2004) sought to discover a link between instructional practices of teachers and the racial gap in middle schools by analyzing data of 15,694 eighth graders who took the NAEP in mathematics. The NAEP data provided evidence that middle schools can make a difference in Black-White and Latino-White test score gaps. Wenglinsky used multi-level Hierarchial Linear Modeling techniques (HLM) to determine which instructional techniques used by middle school teachers closed the achievement gap between White and minority students. The overarching research questions of Wenglinsky (2004) were as follows:

1. Do instructional practices affect the achievement gap primarily at the between school or at the within-school level?
2. What kinds of instructional practices are most effective for reducing the achievement gap?

For the purpose of the present study, the results pertaining to question 2 will only be given because they relate directly to the present study on closing the achievement gap between White and minority students. There were 14 mathematics instructional practices observed in the study. These were two items about time spent on math, class time, and homework time; four items on the conceptual emphasis of the teacher, emphasis on facts, emphasis on rote learning, emphasis on mathematical reasoning, and emphasis on communicating math ideas; and eight teaching techniques, using textbooks, engaging in group work, working with objects, taking tests, writing about math, doing math projects, and solving problems grounded in real world solutions (Wenglinsky, 2004).Wenglinsky's (2004) results indicate the following:

> Time spent on math by eighth graders is relatively high, averaging more than 2.5 hours per day in class and a half hour per day at home. In terms of emphasis, there seems to be a greater emphasis on basic skills approaches (facts, rote) than on higher-order thinking (reason, problem solving), talking about math, and working in groups. The primary conclusion of the study is that depending upon what techniques the middle school teacher employs, the teachers can close the achievement gap at least within their schools (p. 5).

It is important to note that Wenglinsky (2004) also reports on two earlier studies that he had conducted using NAEP scores.

> Using the 1996 NAEP in mathematics, Wenglinsky (2002) found a series of classroom practices, including an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills and hands-on learning, to be positively related to student mathematics performance. Also, Wenglinsky (2003) used the 2000 NAEP in reading and found a link between teaching metacognitive skills and student reading performance (p. 3).

The North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) published a study of high performing, high poverty schools in Wisconsin (Manset et al., 2000, quoted in McGee, 2004). Researchers found that these schools had some common characteristics. Though none of the schools had all of these characteristics, all of them had more than one of the following: strong leadership, professional development, curriculum and instruction, parent/community involvement and structure and organization. Similarly, Haycock et al.'s (1999) study of high-poverty, high-performing high schools found the following

characteristics were common among the schools they observed: (a) standards are used extensively to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teachers; (b) instructional time for reading and mathematics is increased; (c) schools devote a larger proportion of funds to support professional development focused on changing instructional practice; (d) comprehensive systems are implemented to monitor individual student progress and provide extra support to students as soon as it is needed; (e) schools focus efforts to involve parents in helping students to meet standards; and (f) schools have in place accountability systems that have real consequences for adults working in the schools.

Robinson (2003) shows that Conyers Middle School in Conyers, Georgia is working to close the gap in achievement between White and minority students. This school has worked to show improvement by using a revised school improvement plan with a new set of study and test designs. Their approach to school improvement has been systematic. For example, the school improvement team continuously studies and revises their standards along with analyzing student test data. Students are made aware of specific areas that need improvement and they are also informed of where they have made academic gains. Some of the strategies used have been to (a) recognize that helping every student reach high standards is a task that involves ensuring teachers have the necessary resources, time, instructional strategies, and research-based programs, for students falling behind; (b) realize that revisiting, revising, and prioritizing standards and continually diagnosing students are crucial steps in helping every student reach high standards; (c) focus on high standards for all: administrators, teachers, and students; (d) systematically use test data, and continually search the data to learn more about each student and how the data can be

used to improve student learning and achievement; and (e) believe that students need to see and understand the gains they have made. The results are discussed and analyzed with the eighth-grade students, giving them pride and encouragement when they succeed and the correct diagnostic support when they do not (Robinson, 2003).

Oberman and Symonds (2005) report that the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) conducted a study in 2002 and 2003 to ascertain the effective policies and practices of schools in the San Francisco Bay area. A survey was used to collect data from 32 kindergarten through eighth grade San Francisco Bay Area Schools. Three schools were used in the study because of their success in narrowing the achievement gap. According to the researchers of the BASRC schools were organized into groups based upon their ability to close the achievement gap. Further, schools were categorized according to how quickly the top performing students and the bottom performing subgroup improved. Also, schools that failed to close the gap were redefined as those that increased the gap over the span of four years. The high-performing subgroup made greater gains than the low-performing subgroup.

According to Oberman and Symonds (2005), the study challenges four beliefs about what matters most in closing the achievement gap in schools. The four beliefs include the following: (1) testing does more harm than good; (2) focusing on one particular group means ignoring the rest of the school population; (3) teachers' attitudes and beliefs matter more than anything else; and (4) race should not be discussed in closing the gap.

Oberman and Symonds (2005) found that testing is not punitive, but it serves as a valuable tool to assess the school's improvement methods. Schools who use assessments frequently were more successful at closing the achievement gap. The second assumption

that was discussed by the researchers pertained to the idea that a focus on the achievement of low performers detracts from the performance of high achievers. Findings show that all students can benefit from the practices used to help low achievers. This practice can succeed in helping the school provide the needed instruction for all students.

Oberman and Symonds (2005) also found evidence that in one of the case study schools success was evident when the low-achieving groups were identified. In this particular school, Latino boys were the low-achieving group. Each teacher chose a Latino boy to mentor. This strategy helped this group of students to improve academically. The teachers in this school became more efficient in changing their teaching strategies.

According to Oberman and Symonds (2005), the same type of result occurred at Roosevelt Middle School, another of the three case study schools. This school also focused on its lowest achieving subgroup—Black students. Black students received more attention in the area of reading because the faculty had determined that reading was a weakness. When the teachers focused on this group, they began to revise their methods for teaching reading.

The third assumption questioned by Oberman and Symonds (2005) was that the attitudes and beliefs of teachers matter more than anything else. The research, however, revealed no significant differences between gap-closing and non-gap-closing respondents regarding attitudes and beliefs of teachers.

The fourth and final assumption examined by the researchers related to the idea that discussions of race do not matter most in closing the achievement gap. The findings of this study revealed that race does indeed matter. Oberman and Symonds (2005) state that "when reality is decidedly color-conscious, with African-American and Latino children

languishing far behind their White and Asian peers, color blindness appears to compound the problem" (p. 5). The findings of this study strongly suggest that addressing race is essential to narrowing the achievement gap in schools. According to the survey findings, schools in which teachers have structured time to discuss the complexities and impacts of race/ethnicity on school, students have more success closing the gap. The research specifically points to the importance of leaders encouraging reflection on race/ethnicity and equity.

Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert and Sobel (2002) conducted a cross-case analysis of seven high-performing, high-poverty, turnaround middle schools to investigate how these schools managed to demonstrate strong academic improvement to perform at levels consistent with, and in many cases better than, higher income schools in their states. The middle schools selected for this study included Hambrick Middle School, Houston, Texas; Inman Middle School, Atlanta, Georgia; John F. Kennedy Middle School, Utica, New York; Memorial Junior High School, Eagle Pass, Texas; Pocomoke Middle School, Pocomoke City, Maryland; Rockcastle County Middle School, Mount Vernon, Kentucky; and Tonasket Middle School, Tonasket, Washington. The researchers mentioned that these middle schools represented a variety of school sizes, community types, geographic locales, and student populations. This variability implies that improving student performance is not dependent on any given set of criteria or circumstances.

The study by Picucci et al. (2002) was conducted between November 2001 and March 2002. The researchers used trained staff members at each school site to assist with conducting the research. The trained staff members made one four day visit to each middle school. The research teams interviewed various stakeholders such as

administrators, parents, central office staff, and in some instances community members to discover the success of these schools. The researchers also conducted focus group sessions with teachers, students, and parents. A variety of observations were conducted to gain a sense of the climate in each of the participating middle schools. A minimum of four classes were observed at each school. The researchers also sat in on staff meetings, observed school transition times, and collected pertinent artifacts that provide information that would not be easily observed in a school visit. Other artifacts that were collected included lesson plans, student work, and school improvement plans. Finally, all teachers at each school were invited to complete a survey.

The findings from Picucci et al (2002) indicated the following:

> The seven study schools challenged the low performance trend established by high-poverty middle schools and demonstrated those strategies and practices that are necessary to attain high academic achievement in schools. The following four characteristics essential to supporting, teaching, and learning were revealed at these schools: (1) there should be a focus on high expectations for all students; (2) an intentional collaborative relationship should be built between school staff, with district offices, and with outside agencies; (3) a focus should be placed on human and non-human resources, thoughtfully implementing organizational structures; and finally, (4) there should be a focused attention on the individual student, providing targeted interventions and extra services to ensure that no child becomes invisible. These schools improved because their staffs recognized the challenges of their schools and reacted positively to

> changes in their environments. They understood how changes on the state and local levels affect the improvement process and chose to react positively and proactively to changes in the environment (p. 7).

Picucci et al. (2002) noted that these same elements can and should be replicated in other high-poverty schools.

## What Principals are Doing to Close the Gap

As noted in the preceding sections, schools across the nation have had considerable success with research-based practices and strategies designed to close the achievement gap. Still, because the problem of the achievement gap is such a pressing issue, principals will occasionally try personal, school-based strategies to address the achievement issue that are specifically designed to meet the needs of their unique school populations. The following is an excerpt from an article (Delisio, 2002) that discusses one principal's strategy to address the issue on the achievement gap in his middle school in California:

> Faced with a persistent achievement gap on tests and in overall performance between students who are white or Asian American and students who are Latino or Black, California middle school principal Phillip Moore is dealing with parent groups separately to find a school-wide solution. Meeting with parents of different races separately, Moore says, yields more candid, focused discussions (http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues304.shtml).

Moore, the Black principal of T.R. Smedberg Middle School, discusses in the meetings with parents overall student performance and individual group performance. Then, teacher facilitators discuss ways to improve achievement. The parents support the

meetings even though meetings of this type may seem divisive in nature. According to Moore, as quoted in Delisio (2002), different meetings allow parents to discuss issues specific to their culture in a more relaxed forum … The ultimate goal of the meetings is to raise the achievement levels of all students. Moore considers the achievement gap at Smedberg to be significant. Moore states, as quoted in Delisio (2002):

> For example, 39 percent of white and 41 percent of Asian students scored above the 75th percentile on the state's mathematics test; in contrast, only 23 percent of Latino and 11 percent of Black students scored above the 75th percentile. In reading, 39 percent of white and 35 percent of Asian students scored above the 75th percentile compared with 19 percent of Latino and 14 percent of Black students (http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues304.shtml).

According to Delisio (2002), the enrollment for Smedberg Middle School is 1,564 with a diverse mixture of ethnicities that includes 51 percent White, 16 percent Latino, 15 percent Asian, 10 percent Filipino, and 1 percent Native American. According to Principal Moore, about 550 parents—250 white parents, 100 Latino, 100 Black, and 100 Asian—attended the meetings. Parents of mixed-race students could attend any meeting they chose, and all the meetings were open to any parent. According to Delisio (2002), Moore struggled with how to present the information to the community and discussed the issue with student leaders, who suggested he be direct with parents.

Interventions offered during the parent meetings include the creation of a better work ethic for Black and Latino students. According to Moore, as quoted in Delisio (2002), his school "has to get families to accept that this is an issue pertaining to image and

performance. Students need to see themselves as learners. We have to work together to change perceptions." Moore further states that "in order to deal with the issue of achievement it must be discussed. If we're going to close the achievement gap, we need to have tough conversations. If I don't do it, who will."

Some parents exhibited surprise at the size of the achievement gap and wanted to know what they could do to help, while other parents were concerned about having meetings for different races. The comments of one Native American parent who attended the meeting for white parents illustrates this concern (Delisio, 2002):

> I do commend Mr. Moore for facing the problem head on. But I don't think zeroing in on race was that good. Race is only one variable in student performance; socio-economic status has a lot to do with it, too.

Other school leaders that have had similar meetings report positive results when the meetings are tactfully done and are not perceived as exclusionary. The primary concern of separate parent meetings to address the achievement gap centers around making all parents feel comfortable about discussing the issue.

## The Effect Teachers Have on Academic Achievement

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) in its 1995 position paper *This We Believe* addresses the issue of expectations for all students in a section devoted to this idea which is appropriately entitled *High Expectations For All*. The NMSA (1995) states the following about developmentally responsive middle level schools and educators:

> Educators in developmentally responsive middle level schools hold and act upon high expectations for all students, and the students themselves have expectations of success. Such confidence promotes positive attitudes

> and behaviors and serves as motivation for students to achieve; low expectations lead to alienation, discouragement, and lack of effort. As young adolescents are quick to sense, teachers convey their expectations by their own examples as well as by gestures, casual remarks, and overall attitudes (p. 15).

The NMSA (1995) further states that in schools genuinely responsive to young adolescents, the teachers and administrators also hold high expectations for themselves and for one another.

Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) indicate that teachers play a critical role in the achievement of all students. These researchers conduct a meta-analysis of studies done by various researchers on the role of teachers on student achievement. One of the most important studies cited is that of Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) involving some 60,000 students. They found that teachers are the most important factor affecting student learning.

According to Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997),

> The immediate and clear implication of this finding is that seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor. Effective teachers appear to be effective with students of all achievement levels of heterogeneity in their classrooms. If the teacher is ineffective, students under that teacher's tutelage will achieve inadequate progress academically, regardless of how similar or different they are regarding their academic achievement (p. 63).

Cotton (2001), in a meta-analysis of 46 studies done for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory concerning teacher and schoolwide expectations of students, found evidence of the relationship between expectations and student outcomes. Other critical findings of this study include:

> (a) high expectations are a critical component of effective school, (b) high expectations are communicated through policies and practices which focus on academic goals, (c) a minority of teachers treat low-expectation students in ways likely to inhibit their growth, e.g., by exposing them to less learning material and material that is less interesting, giving them less time to respond to questions, and communicating less warmth and affection to them and, (d) teachers who form expectations based on inappropriate data, are rigid and unchanging in their expectations, and/or treat low-expectation students in inhibiting ways are generally not aware of their harmful thinking and behaviors (p. 11).

It is also important to note that while Cotton's (2001) study found the above teacher behaviors to be inappropriate, it also found that teacher expectations and accompanying behaviors have a very real—although limited—effect on student performance, accounting for five to ten percent of student achievement outcomes.

Marachi, Friedel, and Midgley (2001) conducted a year-long study of 1,085 sixth grade students to determine relations between changes in students' perceived beliefs about their teachers (and about themselves) and changes in reported disruptive behavior over the course of the school year. The researchers controlled for gender and ethnicity

and were interested in how the change in students' perceptions of the performance goal environment, low teacher expectations, and teacher support related to changes in student reports of disruptive behavior across the school year. The mediating variables included changes in academic efficacy and changes in projective coping.

The findings of Marachi et al. (2001) include:

> (a) Students were more likely to be disruptive when they perceived a decrease in teacher support and teacher expectation. These relationships were partially mediated by students' reports of projective coping, (b) students' perceptions of an increase in performance goals related to higher levels of disruptive behavior. This relation was mediated by their use of projective coping and, (c) when teacher support increased and low teacher expectations decreased positive changes in student academic efficacy were reported. Changes in students' sense of academic efficacy did not emerge as a mediator between these variables and change in disruptive behavior. The major conclusions drawn from this study highlight the importance of maintaining a classroom in which students experience both high academic expectations and a supportive student-teacher relationship. Also, placing emphasis on students' relative ability may hinder the learning process rather than help it, both through its relation to students' use of maladaptive coping mechanisms and its indirect relation to students' disruptive behavior in the classroom (p. 12).

## Parental Involvement as a Strategy for Closing the Gap

Parental involvement has been cited as a vital source of raising student achievement. Noguera (2005) believes the following about school success for most students who have involved parents:

> Most students who do well in school have at least one characteristic in common: parents who are involved in their education. While the form of involvement may vary, students who experience the greatest academic success tend to have parents who have taken an active interest in their education (http://livecurrent.latimes.com/livecurrent/2005/06/when_parents_go.html).

Miedel and Reynolds (1999) interviewed 704 low-income parents of eighth graders about their involvement when their children were in preschool and kindergarten. The students were all participants in the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS) and consisted of 97 percent Black students and 87 percent low-income students. The purpose of the study was to determine if parental involvement in early childhood programs affects student achievement in the later years. Miedel and Reynolds (1999) wanted to answer the following questions by conducting the study:

1. Are the frequency of parent involvement and the number of activities in which parents participate in preschool and kindergarten associated with kindergarten and eighth-grade reading achievement?
2. Are the frequency of parent involvement and the number of activities in which parents participate in preschool and kindergarten associated with lower rates of grade retention and special education placement at age 14 (eighth grade)? (p. 379)

In other words, the researchers wanted to discover how often parents need to be involved to have a positive effect, and if some activities have more impact than others. The parents were asked questions that related to the education of the children, their involvement, their expectations for the future, current problems, and general background. In Miedel and Reynolds' (1999) study the parents were asked:

1. How often did you participate in this child's school when this child was in preschool or kindergarten, for example, by volunteering in the classroom or attending an event at school?
2. Did you participate in any of the following school activities when this child was in preschool or kindergarten?

   Attend programs in the parent resource room

   Attend school meetings

   Attend school assemblies

   Go on class field trips

   Volunteer in classroom (help the children or teacher)

   Receive home visit from teacher or other staff member

   Have a parent-teacher conference

   Drop off or pick up my child from preschool or kindergarten (p. 386)

The parents were also asked questions that related to family background that included race/ethnicity, gender, income (free or reduced price lunch), and education level. The researchers also wanted to discover if the amount of parental involvement affected kindergarten and eighth grade reading achievement (Iowa Test of Basic Skills), rates of grade retention (not passing a grade), and placement in special education.

Miedel and Reynolds' (1999) study revealed the following findings about parental involvement:

> Results indicated that even after controlling for family background, the number of activities in which parents participated in preschool and kindergarten was significantly associated with higher reading achievement, with lower rates of grade retention at age 14 (eighth grade), and with fewer years in special education…Findings support the benefits of parental involvement in early childhood programs (p. 379).

Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens, and Sims (2001) conducted a study of 15 middle schools operated by the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) in five domestic and five overseas military districts to analyze the factors believed to play a role in narrowing the performance gap between majority and affluent students and minority and disadvantaged students in DoDEA schools. The average academic performance of all students in these schools is high, and the performance of Black and Latino students is among the highest in the nation as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The researchers of this study presented a report to the National Education Goals Panel detailing the high achievement of Black and Latino students in DoDEA schools to identify practices and strategies that could help others working to meet the challenge of improving the academic achievement of similar students. Smrekar et al. (2001) wrote:

> The researchers found that Black and Latino students comprise at least 40 percent of the student population of DoDEA schools. This ratio is approximately the same as the ratio that is found in the public schools of New York State. The researchers also found that approximately 50 percent

> of all DoDEA students qualify for free and reduced price lunch which is a common measurement used to determine low-income households.
>
> Extensive interviews of 130 educators, parent leaders, and counselors in middle schools in both domestic and overseas military districts were conducted. Samples were collected including curriculum guides and staff development plans from each site, and those samples combined with classroom observations contributed to the information. The findings from this study indicate expectations and educational values of parents and patterns of involvement and of out-of-school influences on achievement.
>
> Research indicates that Black and Latino students are successful in DoDEA schools because of many different variables. Several of these variables are contrasted with those of urban public schools in the United States. These variables include teacher quality, high academic expectations, and policy structures. One important difference between public schools and DoDEA schools is that DoDEA schools are smaller than most public schools (p. 184).

According to Smrekar et al. (2001), recent research suggests lower income and minority students benefit most from smaller middle and high schools. The researchers found that families living on military bases had more stable incomes and housing opportunities than civilian families. However, the level of mobility and transience is very much similar to that of civilians. Military parents place a high degree of value on education which is supported by the military (Smrekar et al., 2001). Also, the culture of order and discipline contributes to the success of DoDEA students. The researchers also found that because

the U.S. military demonstrates a commitment to education and requires that parents be supportive of schools by attending meetings and volunteering students in these schools are successful. DoDEA schools also demonstrate a type of chain of concern to attend to the needs of military children. This is especially prevalent in times of deployment and when student anxieties are high when separated from their parents. The researchers call this a social organization within the school. The DoDEA schools increased communication between school and home by increasing the amount of electronic mail and voice mail capabilities to parents. Parental involvement is encouraged in the DoDEA schools. According to the researchers, parents are encouraged to serve on school advisory panels and participate in policies and programs.

The study by Smrekar et al. (2001) concludes with recommendations for civilian schools that may be seeking strategies and practices to improve education for students. The conclusions of the study by Smrekar et al. (2001) recommend the following improvements for public schools:

> (a) an academic focus and high expectations for all, (b) continuity of care for children, (c) schools should have a corporate commitment to public education, (d) centralized direction setting balanced with local decision making, (e) policy coherence and efficient flow of data regarding instructional goals, parent-teacher relationship, assessments, accountability, and professional development, (f) staff development that is job-embedded, intensive, sustained over time, relevant to school improvement goals, and linked to student performance and, (g) small

school size, conducive to trust, communication, and sense of community (p. 185).

## Summary

The body of research compiled in this review of literature reveals that there is a definite gap in achievement between White and minority students that did not just surface in the last few years. The gap in achievement between White and minority students was created by an educational system that was unfair and unequal for minority populations, but in the last few years that same educational system has been scrambling to undo the atrocities of over 300 years of disservice to minorities. This is being accomplished by working to close the achievement gap by the year 2014.

Aside from the long list of reasons, no definitive answer for the problem exists. However, researchers seem to agree that the schools and districts that have been successful in closing the achievement gap between White and minority students have been those that have recognized that there is a problem and have systematically planned a process of reviewing student data to find areas of strength and weakness within their school populations. Secondly, the successful school districts have provided necessary funding to schools to accomplish improvement efforts. Third, teachers are given the necessary training to address the areas of need within their schools, and lastly and most importantly, all school and district employees seem to accept a no excuses approach to closing this gap in achievement. It appears that the schools and districts that are successful in closing the achievement gap do not concentrate solely on the minority population, but they concentrate on school-wide efforts that improve the achievement for all students

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap and to examine the effectiveness of those practices and strategies, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics. This chapter outlines the methodology that is used in the study. The following components are discussed to build the process for the research: a statement of the research questions, the research design, a description of the participants, procedural details of how the sample was chosen, the instrumentation that was used, and details about how the data were collected, analyzed and reported. Finally, a summary of the methodology is given at the conclusion of the chapter.

This study has a two-part focus. The first is to determine the practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap, and the second is to examine the effectiveness of these practices and strategies especially in reading and mathematics, two areas in which the gap in achievement is the greatest. This particular methodology will serve to be an asset to middle school principals who are searching to find ways to close the minority achievement gap in schools.

## Research Questions

The over-arching question of this study is how principals incorporate other factors such as stakeholders, curriculum, data and policy into what they do to help close the minority achievement gap in Georgia middle schools?

Other questions to be considered are the following:

1. What are the practices and strategies used by Georgia middle school principals to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics?
2. How do Georgia middle school principals use Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) data to improve minority student achievement?
3. How do Georgia middle school principals involve parents of minority students to increase academic achievement?

## Research Design

The researcher conducted a qualitative study in order to gather a sufficient amount of data to try to determine what the strategies and practices are that select Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap. The researcher interviewed three principals of Georgia middle schools that the Georgia Department of Education has identified as successful. The term *successful,* in regards to this study, refers to Georgia middle schools that have decreased the disparity in achievement between White and minority students to less than twenty percent. Additionally, success of these schools has been determined through the review of data from the Georgia Department of Education. The researcher believes that the information received from the principals of these three successful schools will give other principals pertinent new and different practices and strategies to address the achievement gap in their own schools. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) state that interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings. The researcher obtained permission from each principal to tape record their interviews, to ensure that all comments made in the interviews will be accurately and thoroughly documented. Sacks as cited in the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2003) states the following about recording interviews:

> We cannot rely on our own recollections of conversations. Certainly, depending on our memories, we can usually summarize what different people said. But it is simply impossible to remember (or even to note at the time) such matters as pauses, overlaps, and inbreaths. (p. 354)

## Participant Selection

Two of the three middle schools selected to participate in this study are located in the northern, suburban region of Georgia, and the third middle school is located in the middle, suburban region of Georgia. The middle schools will be from this point referred to as Apple Blossom Middle School, Rolling Hills Middle School, and Stoneybrook Middle School to protect the identities of the principals and the schools that they represent.

The three middle schools were chosen because they were recently selected by the Georgia Department of Education as 2005 Single Statewide Accountability System Award Winning Schools. Apple Blossom Middle School was selected as a Platinum Award winning school for greatest gains in students meeting and exceeding standards. Rolling Hills Middle School was selected as a Gold Award winning school for highest percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards. Stoneybrook Middle School was selected as a Bronze Award winning school for highest percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards. Other schools also received equal distinctions by the Georgia Department of Education; however, they did not meet one important criteria for this research: percentages of minority students in the schools were negligible, or there were no minority students in the schools altogether.

Apple Blossom Middle School was selected for this study because of its continued gains in academic excellence and its efforts to close the achievement gap between White and non-white students. The CRCT scores in reading for students attending Apple Blossom Middle School for the years 2003 through 2005 have remained above 80 percent and the difference in achievement between Black and White students is reported at a low 11 percent. The CRCT scores in mathematics for students attending Apple Blossom Middle School for the years 2003 through 2005 show a difference in achievement of 12 percentage points.

Stoneybrook Middle School was also selected for this study because of its continued gains in academic excellence and its efforts to close the achievement gap. The CRCT scores for students attending Stoneybrook Middle School during the 2003 through 2005 school years indicate a dramatic increase in both reading and mathematics skills. The gap in reading has been completely closed to a level of 98 percent with no percentage difference between White and non-White students. The gap in math has been closed to within 2 percentage points between White and Black students to 95 percent and 93 percent, respectively.

Rolling Hills Middle School, unlike the two previously mentioned middle schools, has been selected because of its success in closing the gap in achievement between White, Black, and Latino students. The CRCT scores in reading for White and Black students have remained above 80 percent during the years 2003 through 2005. The difference in reading scores between White and Black students is 14 percent while the difference between White and Latino students is 19 percent. However, the mathematics data is most interesting to note about the students at Rolling Hills Middle School. The

achievement gap between White and Black students in mathematics has been closed to a difference of 7 percentage points, and the gap between White and Latino students has been closed to a difference of 3 percentage points. The researcher believes that these three schools give three of the best opportunities to observe schools that have low gap percentages between White and minority learners.

The researcher requested Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval because this study required the use of human subjects. The researcher complied fully with all of the requirements regarding ethical research practices as outlined by the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board.

## Data Collection Methods

The primary method of collecting data for this study was through structured interviews. This study determined what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap, and examined the effectiveness of these practices and strategies especially in the areas of reading and mathematics.

The researcher contacted each principal by posting a letter or by telephone to request an interview. The interview process was loosely based on procedures outlined by Leedy and Omrod (2001), and was employed for all interviews with principals in this study:

1. Get written consent to participate in the study from each principal.
2. Set up the interview well in advance.
3. Ask for permission to tape the conference.
4. Confirm the date immediately in writing.
5. Send a reminder of the date of the interview.
6. Transcribe the notes from the interview into a Microsoft Word document

The Georgia Department of Education Report Card website was used to collect test score and demographic data about each school prior to the interview.

## Role of the Researcher

I am presently the Assistant Principal in charge of Student Affairs at Morgan County Middle School in Madison, Georgia. I do not have any affiliation with any of the middle schools or middle school principals selected to participate in this study. I interviewed each principal and transcribed the notes from the interviews. The notes are presented in the final analysis of findings in Chapter 4. I also collected any necessary samples or artifacts which include curriculum guides, staff development plans, lesson plans, student work, school disseminated information, and school improvement plans. These materials help to determine the strategies and practices that the three middle schools have used to close the achievement gap.

## Structured Interviews

The researcher designed interview questions to assist in determining the strategies and practices that middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap. The questions were developed in a manner to generate the most thorough responses relating to how middle school principals address the issue of the achievement gap. The researcher presented nine interview questions to the three Georgia middle school principals to gain their perspectives on how to close the achievement gap in Georgia middle schools.

The researcher paid careful attention to receive informed consent from each principal before the interviews were conducted. The informed consent form detailed all of the expectations of the participants in the study. The participants were also informed that the

structured interviews would be audio taped. The researcher conducted the interviews at each principal's school. The interview questions were as follows:

1. During (specific year) the achievement gap in your school was significantly narrowed. What things did you and your faculty do to narrow the gap during this particular year?
2. What activities are employed at your school to improve student performance in reading and mathematics, and does your school offer any additional programs to address the needs of students who are not meeting standards in other academic subjects as well?
3. What efforts do you take to ensure that minority students in your school are enrolled in challenging mathematics courses and are improving their individual reading levels on a consistent basis throughout each school year?
4. What reading and mathematics programs are you currently using in your school, and how long have you used these programs?
5. Do you use CRCT data to improve student achievement, and how do you use this data to improve student achievement?
6. Do you meet with others to discuss low-performing student achievement data, and if so, who attends the meetings, what things are discussed in the meetings, and what solutions have resulted from these discussions?
7. How do you ensure that teachers have the necessary resources, time, instructional strategies, and research-based programs to help students who are performing poorly in school?

8. How do you involve parents of poorly performing minority students in helping their children to improve their academic performance?
9. Do you have any comments, suggestions or recommendations that you want to make to other educators who want to work towards eliminating the achievement gap between White and minority students?

## Data Management

The data collected from each principal's interview were stored on the researcher's computer and on a travel disk drive. The audiotapes from the interviews were securely stored at the home of the researcher. None of the data collected or the audiotapes are accessible by anyone other than the researcher of the researcher's committee members.

## Data Analysis

The researcher used the Creswell Data Analysis spiral to analyze the data for this study. Creswell (1998) developed a data analysis spiral for use in qualitative studies. This spiral takes the researcher through the data several times before a final report is achieved.

The following steps were used to analyze the data for this study:

1. Organize the data by using index cards, manila folders, or a computer database. Break large bodies of text into smaller units, perhaps in the form of stories, sentences, or individual words. This step also assists the researcher in managing the data.
2. Peruse the entire data set several times to get a sense of what it contains as a whole. In the process, the researcher develops possible data categories for interpretation.

3. After identifying general categories or themes, and perhaps subcategories or subthemes, the researcher classifies each piece of data accordingly. This step gives the researcher a sense of what the data mean.
4. Integrate and summarize the data for the reader.

The researcher reviewed the tapes from the structured interviews with the three selected principals and compiled the responses according to those thoughts and ideas that are similar and those that are different. The researcher also compiled any unique practices and strategies that each principal uses to help close the achievement gap. Then the researcher applied Creswell's Spiral to analyze the data.

## Summary

The purpose of this study is to determine what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to attempt to close the minority achievement gap. The study also examines the effectiveness of these practices and strategies particularly in the areas of reading and mathematics. The over-arching question of this study is how principals incorporate other factors such as stakeholders, curriculum, data, and policy into what they do to help close the minority achievement gap in Georgia middle schools. Other questions that this study tries to answer are:

1. What are the practices and strategies used by Georgia middle school principals to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics?
2. How do Georgia middle school principals use data to improve minority student achievement?

3. How do Georgia middle school principals involve parents of low performing minority students to try to increase the academic achievement of these students?

The three Georgia middle school principals of schools considered to be successful in closing the achievement gap were interviewed during the month of July 2006 to determine the practices and strategies that they use in their schools to close the achievement gap. A portraiture of each of the middle schools was used to provide an accurate depiction of each school. The data derived from the structured interviews of each principal were compiled, organized and analyzed. Findings and conclusions are presented in Chapter 4 at the completion of the overall analysis of the data.

# CHAPTER 4

# REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

## Introduction

This study was designed to determine what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap and to examine the effectiveness of those practices and strategies, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics. Three Georgia middle school principals identified by the Georgia Department of Education as successful were interviewed to gain their perspectives of the achievement gap and to discover the practices and strategies they have used to close the gap. The term *successful*, in regards to this study, refers to Georgia middle schools that have decreased the disparity in achievement between White and minority students to less than twenty percent. Additionally, success of these schools has been determined through the review of data from the Georgia Department of Education.

The method of discovery in this research study was qualitative. The researcher conducted the interviews during the month of July 2006. Each interview was conducted at each principal's respective school. Each principal and the researcher read and signed the Participant Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) before the interviews were conducted. The researcher further reiterated three important facts from the Informed Consent Form; the interviews would be recorded, there might be a need for follow-up interviews, and the identities of the principals and the schools would remain anonymous.

The researcher personally transcribed the notes from each interview and then organized the data derived from the interviews into logical categories that depicted any

commonality in thoughts and ideas or important information that each principal may have had to offer.

## Research Questions

The overarching question of this study was how principals incorporate other factors such as stakeholders, curriculum, data and policy into what they do to help close the minority achievement gap in Georgia middle schools. Other questions that were considered were the following:

1. What are the practices and strategies used by Georgia middle school principals to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics?
2. How do Georgia middle school principals use Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) data to improve minority student achievement?
3. How do Georgia middle school principals involve parents of minority students to increase academic achievement?

## Research Design

The researcher employed a qualitative research design because this approach allowed for deep and intense questioning about the practices and strategies that each participant used to close the minority achievement gap in his or her school. It also gave each participant the opportunity to tell their perspectives of the achievement gap and what practices and strategies they had to offer other principals who are struggling not just to close the achievement gap, but struggling to make AYP as well. This research design was effective because the principals were able to relax and express sincerity in their comments, suggestions, and practices.

The interview questions were developed from ideas that emerged from the review of literature regarding best practices for closing the achievement gap especially in the areas of reading and mathematics.

## Respondents

The middle school principals who were chosen as respondents for this study were two White females and one White male. One of the females, the Principal of Apple Blossom Middle School, had earned her doctorate degree and has served as both an elementary and middle school principal in a large, urban school district located in the northern region of Georgia. She has been in education for the last twenty years and is 45 years old. The other two respondents had earned Specialist degrees. The Principal of Stoneybrook Middle School had served as an assistant principal for five years at Stoneybrook Middle School before she eventually became principal of the school. She has also taught in Title I middle schools prior to her arrival at Stoneybrook Middle School. Stoneybrook Middle School is located in suburban Central Georgia. She is 41 years old. The Principal of Rolling Hills Middle School is currently in his third year as principal of Rolling Hills Middle School, a large middle school in a large, urban county located in the north eastern region of Georgia. He will be leaving Rolling Hills Middle School to become the principal of a low-performing high school within the same county. He is 34 years old.

Two of the three principals have only been in their schools since 2003, the years identified in this research as the three years of longitudinal study. The researcher found that particular credibility was added to the research that was being conducted because each of the principals had been serving in the capacity of principal in each of the schools during the years that the achievement gap was closed. The principals were given

alphabetical letter pseudonyms that identified the principal and his or her school. The principals were identified as the principals of Apple Blossom Middle School, Stoneybrook Middle School, and Rolling Hills Middle School throughout the research.

## School Portraitures

The school portraiture gives the reader an opportunity to look at the school from several perspectives: the demographics of the school, including principal, students, faculty, and other associated employees in the school as well as other principals, the community in which it is located, the educational programs offered, and a statement of the school's mission. Two of the three middle schools selected for this study, Apple Blossom Middle School and Rolling Hills Middle School, are considered to be urban schools. Stoneybrook Middle School is located in a suburban area of the state. All three schools made considerable gains in student achievement for the 2005-2006 school year; however, for the purpose of this study, the trend data for the years 2003 – 2005 were also observed.

### *Apple Blossom Middle School*

Apple Blossom Middle School has a student enrollment of 656 students in grades 6 – 8. The school met AYP for the school year 2004 in 10 out of 10 areas. It is a Title I school and has a school improvement status of *distinguished*. According to the Georgia Department of Education (2006), the percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards at Apple Blossom Middle School in the current year is 92.26 percent. This percentage reflects a gain over the prior year of 3.45 percent. This change was at or above 99.3 percent of the middle schools in Georgia. Apple Blossom Middle School did not meet the 2005 award criteria for Highest Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding

Standards. However, Apple Blossom Middle School received the 2005 Platinum Award for Greatest Gain in Percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards.

According to data from the Georgia Department of Education, the CRCT scores in reading for students attending Apple Blossom Middle School for the years 2003 through 2005 have remained above 80 percent and the difference in achievement between Black and White students is reported at a low 11 percent. The percentage of Black students that received free and reduced lunch for Apple Blossom Middle School for the years 2003 – 2005 are listed respectively for each year mentioned: (2003) 48 percent, (2004) 58.16 percent, (2005) 62.46 percent. The percentage of Latino students that received free and reduced lunch for Apple Blossom Middle School for the years 2003 – 2005 are also listed respectively for each year mentioned: (2003) 48 percent, (2004) 42.10 percent, (2005) 60 percent. The CRCT scores in mathematics for students attending Apple Blossom Middle School for the years 2003 through 2005 show a difference in achievement of 12 percentage points.

Figure 1. *Percentage of students passing the reading CRCT in Apple Blossom Middle School, 2003–2005.*

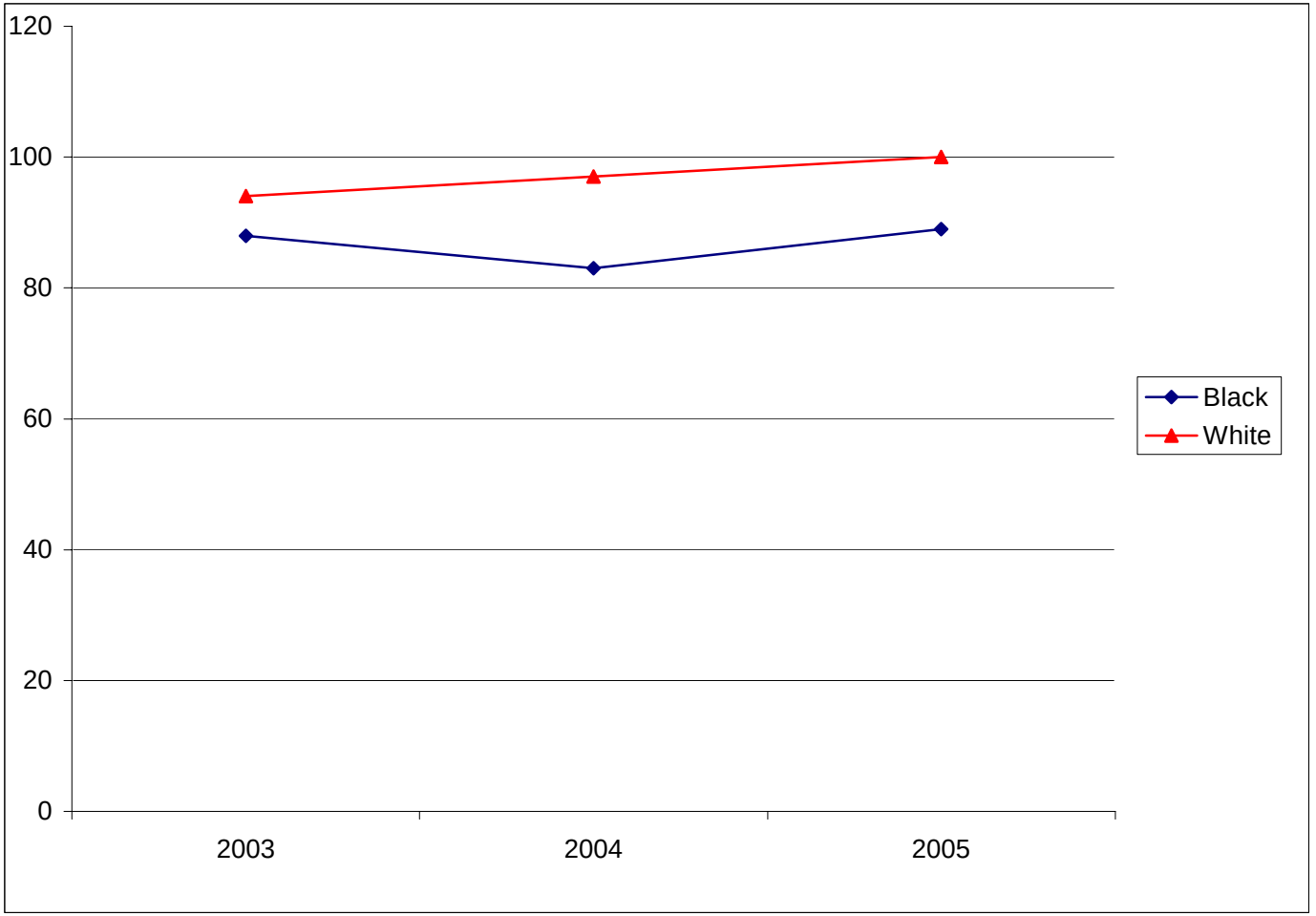
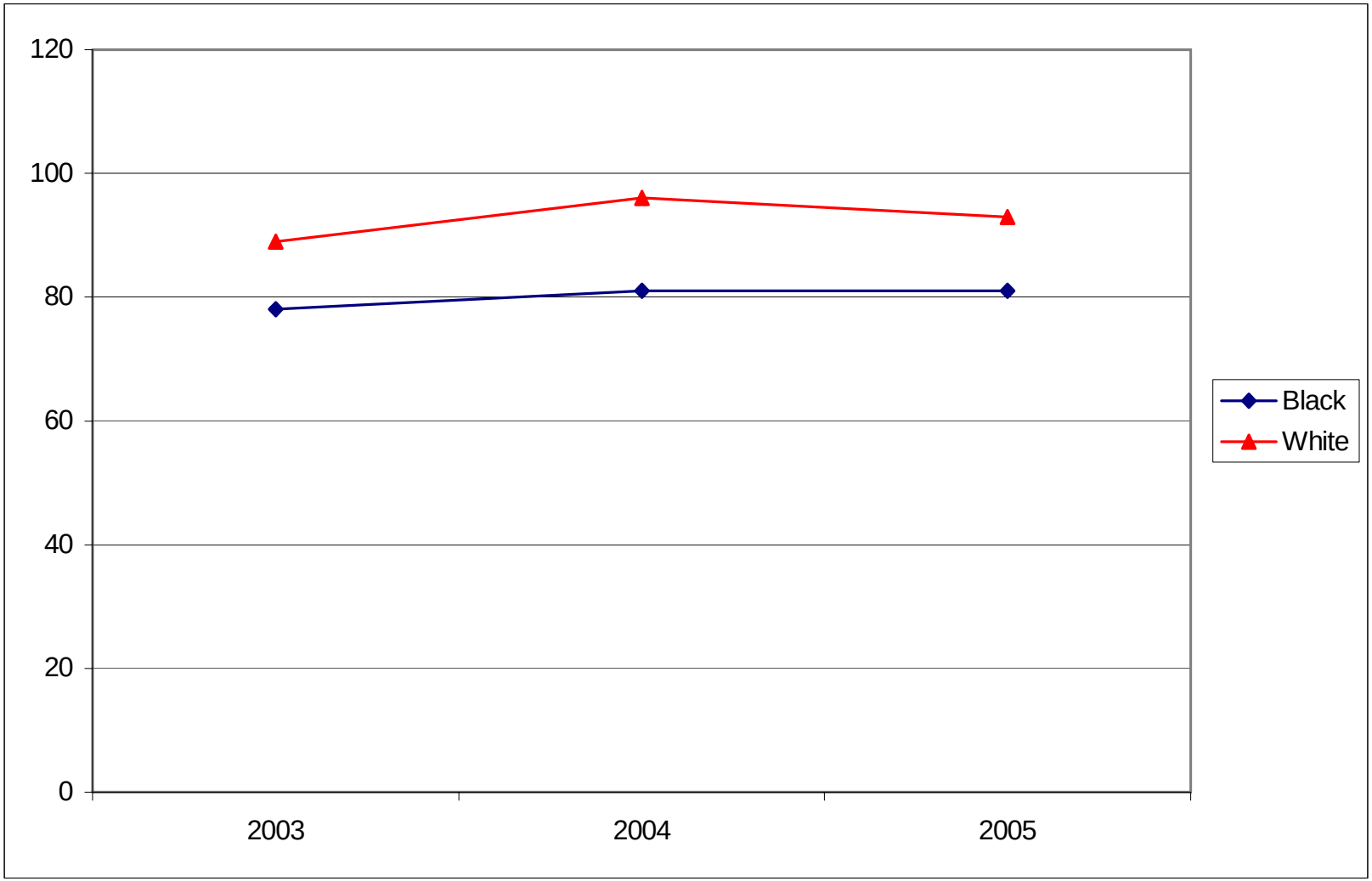


Figure 2. *Percentage of students passing the mathematics CRCT in Apple Blossom Middle School, 2003–2005.*



*Stoneybrook Middle School*

This school met AYP in 12 out of 12 areas. It is a Non-Title I School, and has a school improvement status of *adequate*. The percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards in the current year is 95.99 percent which reflects a gain over the prior year of 2.03 percent. This change was at or above 70.56 percent of the middle schools in Georgia. Stoneybrook Middle School received the 2005 Bronze Award for highest percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards. This school did not meet the 2005 award criteria for greatest gain in percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards. The percentage of Black students that received free and reduced lunch for Stoneybrook Middle School for the years 2003 – 2005 are listed respectively for each year mentioned: (2003) 50 percent, (2004) 37 percent, (2005) 37.71 percent. The percentage of Latino students that received free and reduced lunch for Stoneybrook Middle School for the years 2003 – 2005 are also listed respectively for each year mentioned: (2003) 7.7 percent, (2004) 13 percent, (2005) 17.64 percent.

According to data from the Georgia Department of Education, the CRCT scores for students attending Stoneybrook Middle School during the 2003 through 2005 school years indicate a dramatic increase in both reading and mathematics. The gap in reading has been completely closed to a level of 98 percent with no percentage difference between White and non-White students. The gap in math has been closed to within 2 percentage points between White and Black students to 95 percent and 93 percent respectively.

Figure 3. *Percentage of students passing the reading CRCT in Stoneybrook Middle School, 2003–2005.*

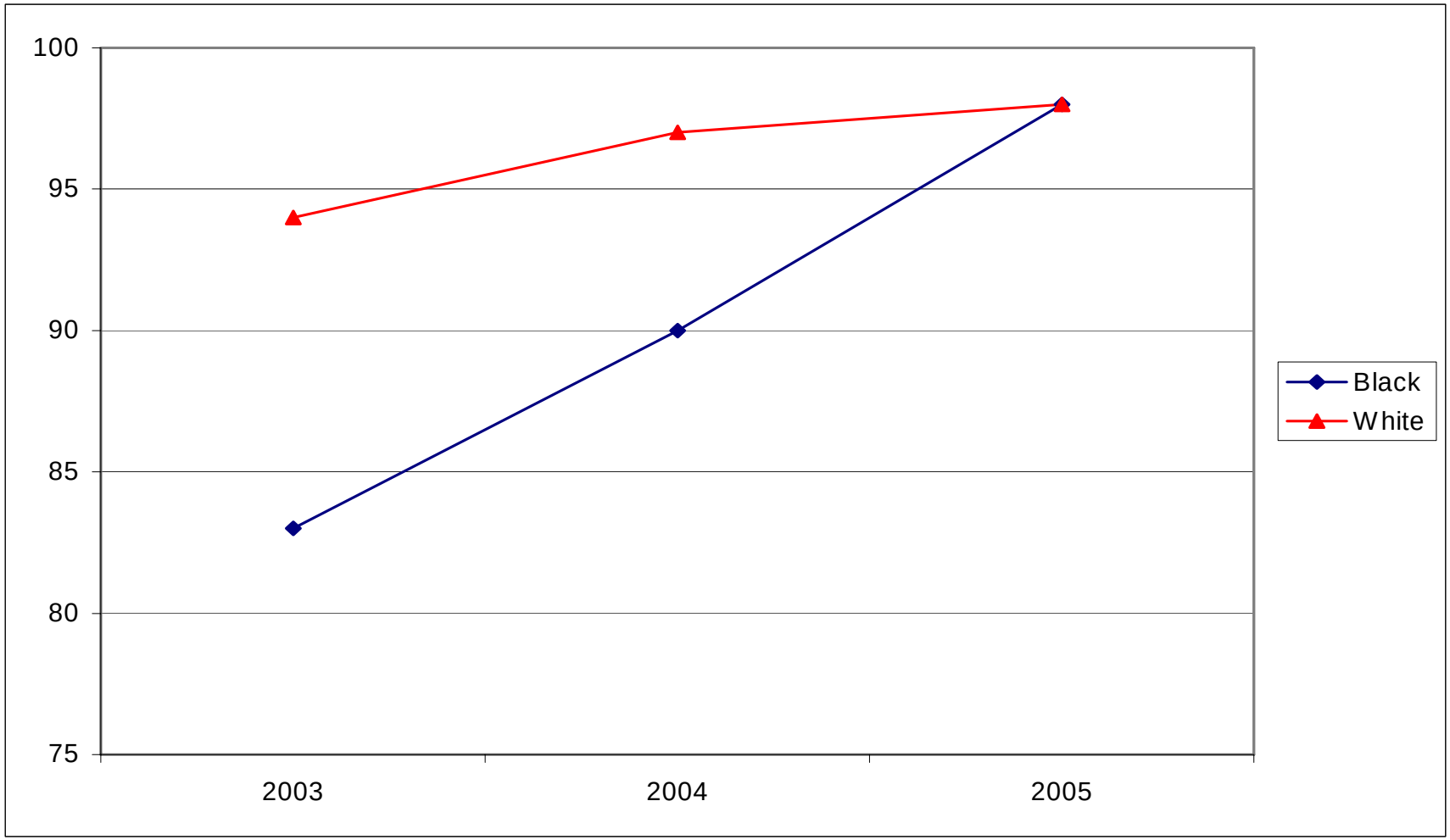
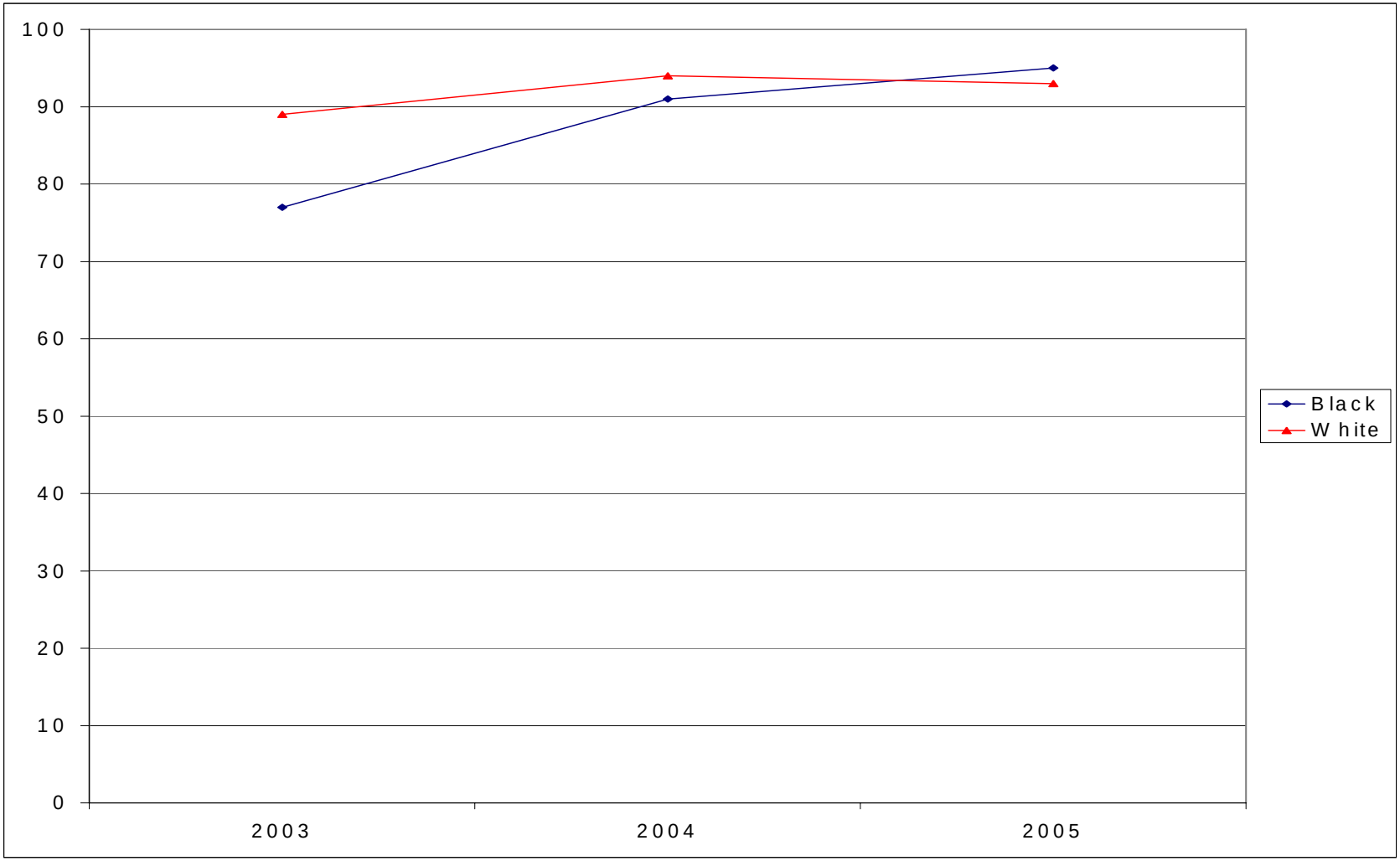


Figure 4. *Percentage of students passing the mathematics CRCT in Stoneybrook Middle School, 2003–2005.*



*Rolling Hills Middle School*

Rolling Hills Middle School has a student enrollment of 1,274 in grades 6 through 8. According to the Georgia Department of Education website (2006), Rolling Hills Middle School met AYP for the 2004-2005 school year. The school met the criteria in 15 out of 15 areas. Rolling Hills Middle School is a Non-Title I school and the school improvement status of this school is rated as *distinguished*.

The percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards in the current year is 97.07 percent which is a gain over the prior year of 0.58 percent. This change was at or above 51.87 percent of the middle schools in Georgia. Rolling Hills Middle School did not meet the 2005 award criteria for highest percentage meeting and exceeding standards; however, it did receive the 2005 Gold Award for highest percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards. The percentage of Black students that received free and reduced lunch for Rolling Hills Middle School for the years 2003 – 2005 are listed respectively for each year mentioned: (2003) 31.43 percent, (2004) 33.3 percent, (2005) 28.22 percent. The percentage of Latino students that received free and reduced lunch for Rolling Hills Middle School for the years 2003 – 2005 are also listed respectively for each year mentioned: (2003) 46.2 percent, (2004) 42 percent, (2005) 37.70 percent.

The researcher selected the three middle schools to participate in this study because of the low achievement gap percentages between White and minority students in reading and mathematics. The figures below explain three year trend data for cohort groups from each of the schools represented in this study beginning in the sixth grade and ending in eighth grade during the years 2003 through 2005.

According to data from the Georgia Department of Education, the CRCT scores in reading for White and Black students in Rolling Hills Middle School have remained above 80 percent during the years 2003 through 2005. The difference in reading scores between White and Black students is 14 percent while the difference between White and Latino students is 19 percent. However, the mathematics data is most interesting to note about the students at Rolling Hills Middle School. The achievement gap between White and Black students in mathematics has been closed to a difference of 7 percentage points, and the gap between White and Latino students has been closed to a difference of 3 percentage points.

Figure 5. *Percentage of students passing the reading CRCT in Rolling Hills Middle School, 2003– 2005*

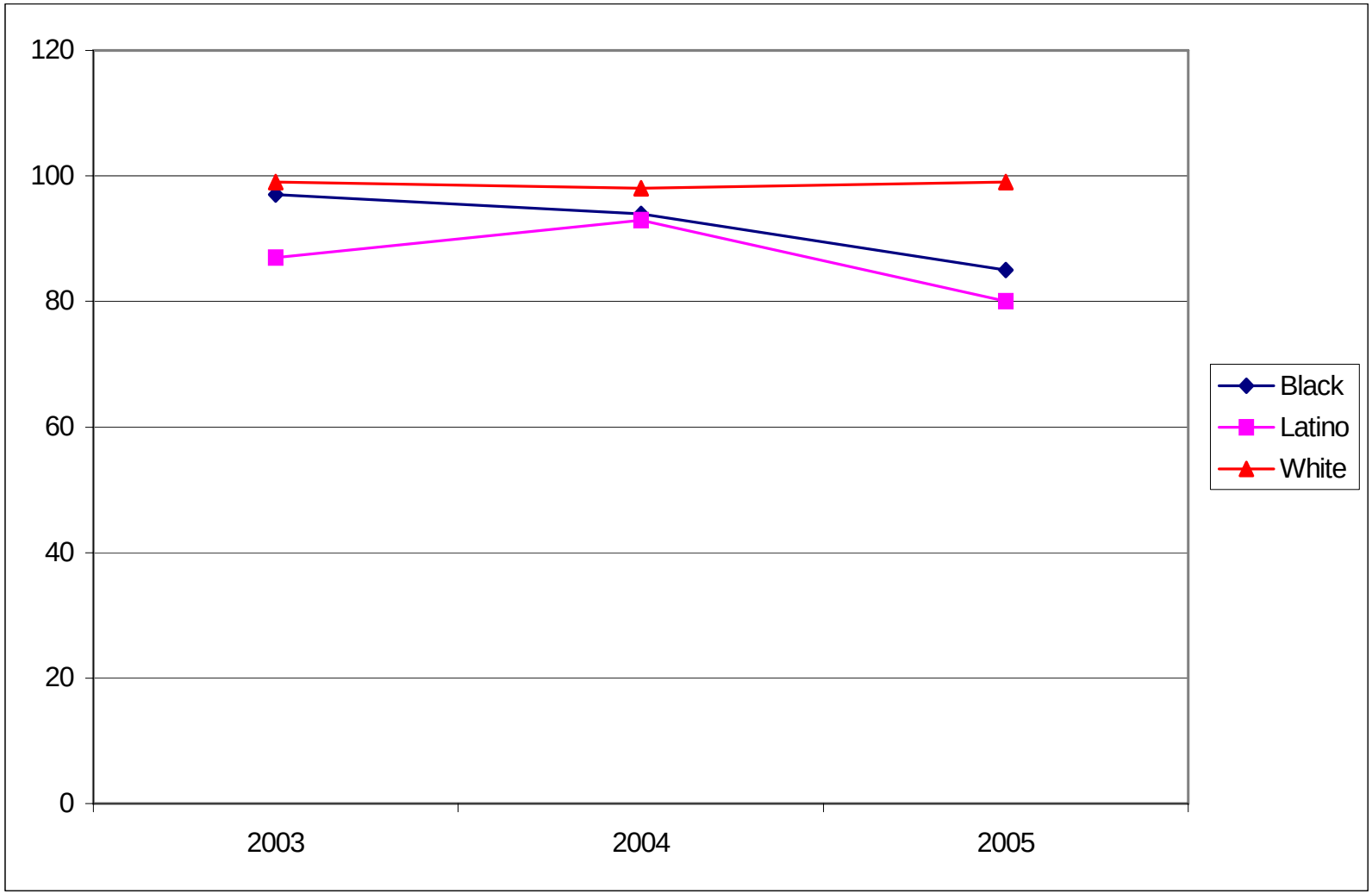
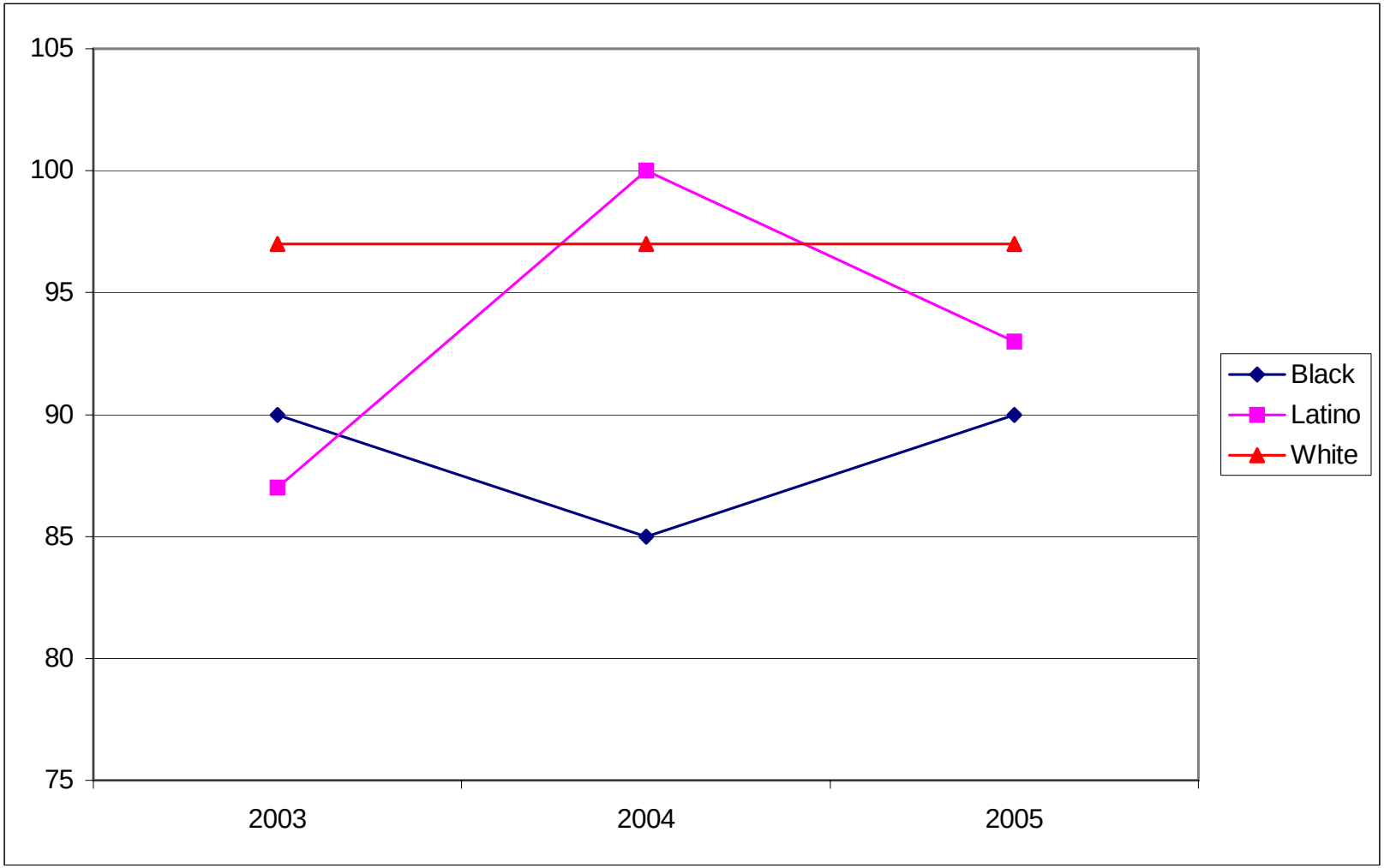


Figure 6. *Percentage of students passing the mathematics CRCT in Rolling Hills Middle School, 2003–2005*



## Qualitative Data Analysis

Three Georgia middle school principals were selected to participate in this study. They were initially contacted by phone to determine if they would be willing to participate in the study after the researcher gained Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. They all verbally agreed. Once the researcher gained IRB approval, the participants were mailed a letter explaining the research, and he then followed up the letter by a telephone call to arrange interview appointments. Each participant agreed to do an interview.

The data derived from the analysis of the interviews with the principals are presented to correspond with the research questions of the study. The researcher has taken particular care to present the perspectives of each principal in a logical and sequential order as guided by the research questions. Also, any thoughts, central ideas, unique responses or similarities of their responses were emphasized in this section.

### *Practices and Strategies*

| Research Subquestion 1. What are the practices and strategies used by Georgia middle school principals to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics? |
|---|

**Offer Additional Assistance in Reading and Mathematics.** *The following passages extracted from the three principal interviews discuss the additional assistance that each principal provided in the areas of reading and mathematics as a strategy to determine or improve minority student academic success. All three principals offered additional assistance in these areas; however, the amount of additional assistance and the method of delivery tended to vary from school to school. It was the general consensus of all three principals that additional assistance in reading was needed. The principal of*

*Stoneybrook Middle School contributed the following perspective on the manner in which additional reading and mathematics courses are handled in that school by saying:*

We have done a couple of things. In mathematics, until this next year because we have math where it needs to be. I gave up a connections slot. One of the hard things to do in the middle school is to involve your Connections teachers. We still don't do a good job of it. I went to them and said that we really need to have some remediation for some of our lowest math kids. They need some extra time in math. So for 5 years we had a Connections class of math remediation. For kids who really needed it, they had math with their teacher, and they went for an additional 45 minutes every day to a remediation math. It worked really well; every nine weeks some kids would stay in and some would improve and would come out for nine weeks and might go back in or they may not have to go back into the class. They had enough support from when they had it earlier. What made the class successful, and it was very successful, was that we had a teacher in there who wanted to work with at-risk kids. When we started this program I told him there is no book. They [the students] can't go in there with a textbook because they have already had regular math. It has to be hands-on. It's got to be different and life-focused, or they are going to die on you because they could be in P.E. or Art for example. The way we kept it going was the kids who were in that class, we would talk to them real honest. We would say this is why you are in here and made sure they understood. We would give them some choice on what else they had to take. We would say, 'what else would you like to take?' If they really wanted to be in art we would get them in art. We tried to let them know that they had some choice. It really worked well. There is a lot of communication. The key to it, I think, was the close communication between the sixth

grade math teacher and the remediation teacher. For example, next week was going to be starting fractions and this is what we are going to be doing. The remediation teacher would begin reviewing a few days before and introducing fractions. So when his kids would be sitting in class and that teacher would introduce it to the rest of the class, they would just been planted with that prior knowledge and they would say, we would say, 'we just did this in Mr. Lewis' class.' It gave them some confidence and it helped them a lot. We didn't have any data tracking on these students, but we saw their classroom grades come up as well as their confidence. We would have kids that would come out and ask if they could go back into math. I need to go back in there next nine weeks. Our math scores have really leveled out so next year because everybody is doing really well in math. We have a really strong math department, and we have a really strong math department head. I think that is also a key to our success, is using department heads. Next year we are going to do reading. If I were a Title school, I would use my money to hire a new teacher, and I would keep both teachers in place all of the time [reading and math]. We have no additional funding here, so I have to give up a slot. My Connections teachers had to buy into it because their class sizes went up to 30 and 31 kids because he would never have more than 12—where normally he would carry a load of 28, and everybody else would level out. It's kind of a sacrifice for them, but next year the county has allowed every school to keep one slot. So we have that one slot, and our Connections numbers are good. But instead of math next year I have a phenomenal language arts teacher here. She has just finished her reading endorsement and she is going to teach one sixth, one seventh, and one eighth grade reading class to our bottom 10 or 12 kids. I mean our really low reading kids. She is going to be a literacy coach for the other half of the

day. She will be free to go into every grade level's academic classes and model-teach. She is really going to work with our social studies and science teachers to incorporate more reading strategies. She is going to work with our language arts teachers. She is phenomenal, and I am really excited about that. Now, how long we are going to be able to fund it, and it may hurt our math, and we may have to make some decisions next year, but with the GPS—we have 75 minute classes here and our math scores are where they need to be. So I feel like our math department is really running, so it's time now for us to pull back—especially with the new rule that the students have to read the 25 books. Our language arts teachers are so overwhelmed. We really have got to get our science, social studies, and math teacher incorporating more reading. This will be a way to do that, but also to help the lowest readers.

Another thing that we did last year was with our after school program. We always use our 20-day money for the after school program. We have a good computer software program in our county called Classworks. It remediates math and reading. This is a good time for our after school students to do homework, but they could also rotate and spend some time on Classworks. This is done only two days a week because that is all that we can afford to do it. During the last two years, we also had teachers that volunteered to give up an hour of planning twice a week. The after school program ran on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so these teachers would tutor during their planning on Mondays and Wednesdays. They would pull some of their students who were struggling out of P.E. for 30 minutes for tutoring. They would do some one-on-one tutoring and one-on-three tutorial sessions. I think that worked with some of those real low students who just needed someone to organize their binder and say 'okay, let me see what you have [in the

binder]. Where's your work—where's your homework?' It was more of that than the tutoring. The tutoring was more after school. It worked well. I think that helped us because that gave us some more support in reading and math and homework. This helps our minority and low-socio-economic kids because a lot of times these kids do not have that homework support. We recognize that and have gotten away from that thought of homework is for home. Some kids need to do homework at school.

Next year instead of spending that after school money after school, I am not going to do that. I am going to pay teachers to give up their planning time. I will hire teachers to tutor some during the day. You know all the research says during the day, during the day. They may do an hour on Monday and an hour on Tuesday. They are giving up two hours of their planning. I will pay them for two hours. If they tutor for an hour on Mondays and Wednesdays, they will stay after school for an hour and plan and get extended day pay. I am going to use that money that way, so they can tutor two days a week. I had a teacher tell me last year that the after school program was good 'but after teaching all day I was tired'. I said, 'think how the kids feel'. The money that we had to spend on transportation and snacks, we can put it all into teachers and maybe have 5 to 1. Well, that is going to be a big initiative we are going to do next year. We are still remediating and tutoring, but we will be doing it during the day. This will not be on a volunteer basis, but on a more structured basis instead of after school. A lot of these kids need to go home after school. I mean they need to go home or to play ball. They are worn out.

*The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School had a slightly different perspective toward offering additional assistance in reading, but had similar feelings about additional*

*assistance in mathematics. The following was stated by the principal of Rolling Hills Middle School:*

We're not doing what we should do in reading, but the data says that we do not need to work on reading a whole lot at this school. We can compare it and we can get better at it. But that's a problem here, and that's not one of our strengths is working on reading, I don't think. We work on writing, but we don't work on reading a whole lot. It's a problem. The thing of it about reading is that you need to teach kids to be better readers which is what were trying to do, but you're also supposed to give them time to read, and that's hard when were dealing with instructional time. Like what are you going to take away? Are you going to take away from math to give kids some time to read? No. Are you going to give kids time to read comic books? No. That's a hard thing. We've obviously looked at the data for math. To improve kids' reading, we take the lowest kids for reading, query their scores, and we do intervention classes with them to make sure that they are successful on the assessments. But that's not getting at the core piece. What we're trying to do is increase their appreciation for reading—to increase their reading levels in that respect. I think that the nation really struggles with that for reading. I don't think that anyone has a silver bullet with how to get kids to be able to read more. We're becoming a country whose kids are not growing up reading and it is becoming harder and harder to get kids to read.

*The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School further stated:*

We have a reading specialist for reading. I can talk more to math. We actually have a math Connections teacher that takes a lot of the struggling kids, and she does something called pre-teaching which is a great, great concept. Instead of it being a remedial type

class, because these kids usually know that they are behind. They have been behind since kindergarten. She teaches three days ahead of the regular teacher. She introduces the concept and goes over the vocabulary, and then three days later when the students are getting it [the instruction] in the regular classroom, they are actually raising their hands for the first time, they are actually getting it. We have been keeping a lot of data on that program, and it has been a tremendous help. It really makes a connection between why they are in that class. Usually you go to a Connections class just as a separate class. This is truly a connection to the regular math class. She bases her grades on how much they improve their tests in their regular math class. She communicates with their teachers. So, this pre-teaching concept for math has been a huge strategy that we have used. We also have summer programs for math as well with Jump Start. When we talk about rigor of curriculum, we feel that more kids can be in an Honors Algebra class than what we originally put in there. Who else could really do it? What if we just threw a kid in there? Could they really do it? How do you ever know? I ask the teachers to recommend who you want for Honors, but then go back and recommend more. Who else could possibly do it? We then get them in during the summer in a Jump Start to Honors class and we pre-teach some Honors skills. We have gone from having three sections of Honors Algebra to this coming year we are going to have seven sections of Honors Algebra.

*The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School offers a novels class for reading just as the principal of Stoneybrook Middle School. The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School discussed the following about offering additional assistance in reading:*

Every child takes a reading class and if you have tested out of reading class, then you take novels study which is an advanced reading class. Parents also have a choice if you

have tested out of the reading, and you want your child to have something else besides novels study, which is really a literature group. Say, if we read Maya Angelou's (1969) I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings—they do that for four weeks—it is like a book group. If the parent chooses, they can have them in an advanced foreign language French or Spanish during that period. It is an advanced class so they get a little choice there, but it gives the kids something to shoot for to get out of the reading program. We have had really good success with that.

*Principal X further discussed the requirements used to move students from one level to another in reading that has created a positive challenge for the students in that school:*

The students start at B-1 which is basic decoding. We only have about 15 kids in that. Those are kids who are on a first grade level. There are about five levels to where they test out. Kids can move 3 or 4 levels in one year. They know what they have to do. They have to get 90% mastery. They know exactly what they have to do to get up and get out. They want to do that in reading. They don't want to be in that group where they are reading the same story over and over again. They have to have a certain amount of errors—that sort of thing.

*Principal X further stated:*

They are assessed often and they can move often—about every six weeks there is a huge movement of kids. They move up to the next level. So that's change—a different reading teacher, but that means that's progress. Our counselors just go crazy with it, but it's progress. In math, we have never had a math program *per se*. We try to follow the QCC's or the GPS. We try to do a good scope and sequence–a lot of assessment, and, really, that targeted remediation and enrichment. Some of the teachers have wanted the math Direct

Instruction (DI). The D.I. reading is so scripted, and the teachers had such a hard time with that in the beginning. I really didn't want to do another very, very scripted program at this point. There is a point of how much the teachers can take before they start leaving. You don't want the good ones to leave. We don't do a math program. We feel that we can get what we need through the math paths. It doesn't seem to be an intense need for a math program other than following the GPS and QCC. We offer some different math courses. I mean we offer algebra, geometry—whatever kids need. So we have kids in seventh grade taking algebra. We even sent some kids to an area high school to take advanced math classes. I had four kids doing that.

*Incorporate Minority Students into Gifted or Honors Classes*

*It appeared to be an overwhelming consensus that a strategy or practice to determine student academic success in reading and mathematics was to get all students, especially minority students, enrolled in challenging mathematics programs, and then monitor their success in these programs. All three principals discussed ways to get more minorities into the gifted program even though the stringent requirements of this program prevented the participation of many minority students. If the principals were unable to successfully place minority students into the gifted programs, they tended to replicate the rigor of the gifted model by creating Honors mathematics programs in their schools that created challenging mathematical opportunities for all students.*

*The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School had the following to say about the practices and strategies to incorporate minority students into gifted and honors programs in that school:*

Our philosophy has always been to try to push our kids, all kids as high as possible. Specifically what we have looked at is opportunities to get as many students as possible into our Honors and gifted classes. Obviously gifted is a little bit harder to break into because you have to qualify for gifted. Traditionally, that has been difficult to skew those numbers the way that we need to skew them in terms of getting more kids into the gifted classes. It is my belief that if you get them in there and you give them the support that they need and anybody can be successful for the most part who has the drive and the will and the intellect to be able to do it. Some kids just like the opportunity. So we have tried to do that with our African American population with our Honors classes because we can skew those things… We also have summer programs for math as well with Jump Start. When we talk about rigor of curriculum, we feel that more kids can be in an Honors Algebra class than what we originally put in there. Who else could really do it? What if we just threw a kid in there? Could they really do it? How do you ever know? We then get them in during the summer in a Jump Start to Honors class and we pre-teach some Honors skills. We have gone from having three sections of Honors Algebra to this coming year we are going to have seven sections of Honors Algebra.

We can put kids in there who historically would not be picked out of the crowd to go in there. We have asked teachers to go back and look at their data and pick some more kids out. It's sort of like the high school model where they would increase their AP classes in terms of trying to first get kids in there, and then have them be successful. We are trying to get more kids into our Honors classes and have them be more successful. All kids but targeting our African American population has been one of our goals. Our purpose in doing that is rigor of curriculum. They have got to be exposed. If we want to

get good results from all kids they have got to have the opportunity to be exposed to a rigorous curriculum and be able to be successful at that. In my opinion that is key.

*The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School was very passionate in responding to incorporating minority students into gifted or honors classes because this was an area that was badly in need of change when Principal X arrived at this school. Principal X described the issue as not only an academic issue, but also an equity issue. The students in the gifted program seemed to exude an air of superiority because of their position in the gifted program. Principal X discussed the fact that there was a definite divisive feeling that existed within the school between the gifted and non-gifted students. This was something that Principal X worked hard to change. Principal X had this to say about the subject of the gifted model:*

We did some very, very different things with our gifted model. When I came here, it [gifted] was very segregated—the school was by gifted and non-gifted. The gifted kids had three separate classes a day with all gifted kids, and one not. I noticed right away that created a very unhealthy situation because it also tended to be heavily skewed to be black-white. Upstairs because of construction happened to be where a lot of the gifted classes were, downstairs was regular ed. The kids referred to it as uptown [pointing upwards] and downtown [pointing downward.] The words uptown and downtown were used in the place of the actual terms to preserve the anonymity of the principal and the area of the school; however, uptown is an exclusive area of the city and downtown denotes a less exclusive area of the city.] I knew that couldn't happen anymore, so we researched different models for gifted. We researched how to deliver gifted education. We completely blew up the gifted education model in my second year 2004-2005, and

went to a much heavier focus on differentiated instruction. We did a lot of teacher training, and we still do that on how to differentiate within the regular classroom. Now the kids only have one class of gifted pull out versus three, and it's a much, much healthier situation. I think that's why our kids' scores zoomed last year because everybody was exposed to higher level content. We didn't segregate and give it to a few kids. It's difficult. It's more work on teachers, but I think the students were all exposed to higher level of content.

*The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School seemed to have a great deal of insight on what works to improve academic achievement, especially in the area of mathematics. When asked what efforts were taken to ensure that minority students are enrolled in challenging mathematics courses, this principal had the following to say:*

Well, of course we have to follow the state's new curriculum now. Which is either you are accelerated or on grade level; those are the two paths they call them. But again we don't go by what they did in elementary school. We start all over again in the sixth grade and we have a five point criteria for getting into the accelerated math program. The reason we did that—we developed it for the school system last year. It looks at their fifth grade math scores—their grade, the CRCT, the ITBS. We give them the California Achievement Test (CAT) in math and we also give them the algebra readiness test. If they score 90% or better on four of the five, they are automatically in the accelerated program. And then the ones that score 3 out of 5, we look at them very closely. We go ahead and put them in the accelerated, and then we evaluate it after 4 ½ weeks at the mid point to see if they are able to keep up because it is a year and a half of math in one year.

That's when we are able to get a lot of minority students—Latino and Black kids who were not in the gifted program in elementary school. The gifted test is heavily skewed toward reading and language arts in the first and second grade, so their math skills haven't really been observed. So we developed that system really to bring more kids in rather than to go on the typical scale of if they made an A in fifth grade, ITBS and CRCT. I felt that we were missing some kids. Last year was the first year that we did that and were able to get a lot more Black kids into the accelerated math class.

We also do some leveling—in seventh grade. We offered pre-algebra, algebra and on grade level math, so we had three different classes. We placed the kids based on how they did in sixth grade. We tell the kids that in reading and math especially you have a chance to move up every year. It's up to you how you achieve and then what that sets you up for in high school.

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School shared the perspective of Principals X and Z that minority students should be enrolled in the gifted or school created honors mathematics programs. Principal Y stated the following:*

We have very few minority kids in our gifted program. We have had great discussions about that. That is a concern. There is a state criterion [for gifted]. Either you make it or you don't make it. What we have done to push minority students [that are] outside of our Honors program is that we have ability groups in math. Now in language arts we did that for a while, but our language arts teachers backed off of that. They felt like in language arts they needed more of a mixed group. But in math where it's so technical we've ability grouped, and we have pushed as many kids as we can in upper level math, especially minority students. And let me tell you what's been really

successful, when we've had some minority kids who were really struggling and really didn't need to be in that advanced class, and they were having behavior problems and things. We would pull them and put them in there anyway. You wouldn't believe the success that we saw with that because it got them away— what happens a lot of times, and these kids are smart. And I'm not talking just minorities, I'm talking about these kids from poverty. They are smart. They don't feel comfortable anyway in a middle class environment because that's not the way they grew up. So, they would rather not do well in class because they say 'if we don't, we will all be in this group and we will all be here together'. They will make that teacher's life miserable. One of the things that we did was target some kids who we felt could do it, but weren't doing it. We put them in that advance class anyway. The teacher did some differentiated instruction to make sure that they weren't left behind. But what we saw without their buddies that they had been tracked with their whole career life that they didn't have anybody to clown around with and all of a sudden it became, 'hey I'm in the advance class and I'm doing well'. That was successful with some kids.

*Give Common Assessments*

*It was revealed from discussions during the interviews that two of the three middle school principals (Principal Y and Principal Z) felt very strongly about the use of common assessments to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics. These two principals thought that the common assessments or the same tests allowed teachers the opportunity to discuss and determine the progress of individual students as well as whole groups of students within a particular grade. As a result, these two principals perceived that the use of common assessments in their schools had a*

*favorable effect on increased student achievement. The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School did not mention the practice of using common assessments as a strategy for improving student academic achievement. However, this principal discussed the fact that teachers are encouraged to work together and share ideas so that no one team of teachers would be considered by parents and students as better than another. This statement made by Principal X will be discussed more in the section pertaining to collaboration.*

*The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School discussed the fact that in order for common assessments to be effective, teachers had to be honest and trusting about sharing the results of common assessments. If they were not honest and trusting in the use of the practice, it would be unsuccessful. Here is an example of what the principal of Rolling Hills Middle School had to say about common assessments:*

We share our data with each other. Every week after our common assessments—we all give common assessments, the same tests, so that the next week we all talk about them very honestly. You have to have a trusting relationship because you have to talk honestly. Example: Am I going to be able to say that my kids didn't do so well and 'what can I do or what did you do because your kids did do well'? A trusting relationship among our teachers I think is really the key. When new teachers come in, we spend a lot time with our new teachers to make sure that they are part of that culture as well.

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School seemed to be a firm believer in common assessments and appeared to insist that the teachers in that school use this practice regularly. This principal was of the thought that teachers are more effective*

*instructionally when they are assessing all students using the same assessments. The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School had this to say about common assessments:*

Common assessments instead of having teachers—I think more independent. We saw all of our kids' scores improve, and we saw that significant gap close. We talked a lot about having the same expectations for all kids … But the collaborative planning and the common assessments—that's the key. Because I knew without a doubt what every teacher was teaching at any moment. I kept in touch and I stayed in meetings. For example, when the sixth grade language arts teachers planned and they had their curriculum maps, I knew what they needed to be doing. If I went into a classroom and the teacher was not teaching that curriculum the kids would not test well—because the test is the curriculum.

*Give Teachers Time for Collaboration and Professional Learning to Plan for Student Success*

*Again, it was revealed that the principals of Stoneybrook and Rolling Hills Middle Schools were similarly aligned in their perspectives of giving teachers time for collaboration and professional learning. They seemed to believe that if enough time is given for teachers to work and plan together in reading and mathematics or any content area, that students would experience increased academic success because the teachers would have a better idea of student strengths and weaknesses from increased collaborative discussions. Principal Y shared this example of why the use of collaboration as a practice is important for principals who are struggling to close the achievement gap in the areas of reading and mathematics:*

I think a lot of time what principals do is when their math scores are low or their reading scores are low, they go out and buy a program. They may go out and spend $10,000 on AR [Accelerated Reader] or they get Math Their Way or Saxon Math, which I hate. I hate Saxon Math. They think there is a book or they send their teachers somewhere and think that is going to do it. It's not about that. You've got to get your teachers working together because everybody is responsible for all of the kids. [Teachers] have got to get away from the mentality of 'my sixth grade class' or 'my language arts students'. Everybody—when they plan together they all have the responsibility for everybody's kids. When those test scores come out at the end of the year, we don't spend a lot of time talking about test scores here. We don't do a lot of test prep because when those test scores come back that should be a natural outcome of the teaching and the curriculum they have done all year. I tell them when we plan together and those test scores are not where we want them to be—we all have a piece of that. We are all in it together. If we succeed, we accelerate together and if we have an area that we didn't do what we want, then we put our heads together and try to do better. But why would anyone want to be on a limb by themselves? I wouldn't if I were teaching. Everything that we do here we talk about it's a team, it's a team, it's a team, it's a team.

We mandate every Thursday for grade level meetings … They meet a lot more than that Thursday, but we decided that would be our holy day. That's what we call it. We try not to do conferences, SST's, nothing on that day. We say that [Thursdays] are sacred. We don't do faculty meetings anymore. The first 30 minutes is for some kind of professional learning. It may be on poverty or differentiated instruction. It's all on best practices. None of it is on announcements. We don't do any of that. We do our

professional learning piece and in 30 minutes we say ‘cut it off’, and that is when they go, and the teachers divide into academic course teams to plan. They must answer these essential questions: What do we want our students to learn next week? How are we going to know when they have learned it? What are we going to do if they don’t, and most importantly at our school, what are we going to do if they already know it because we have a lot of high achieving students? Those are the questions that they have to answer.

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School shared an interesting story about a positive result of the use of collaboration between two first year teachers and a group of veteran teachers:*

Last year I had two teachers … both first year teachers, and they both struggled. One of them was a language arts teacher, and the other was a social studies teacher. They struggled with different things, but one of them struggled instructionally. She was a first year teacher, and she really had a hard time getting a feel for it and getting instruction out there. I was real concerned early on as to what were the kids getting. Of course, I spent a lot of time with her and in her classroom, but the other two language arts teachers planned. They planned together. So when they would come together to plan, they would make sure that they worked with her. They asked ‘do you understand how we’re going to teach this unit?’ They really held her hand, and she was grateful for it. It was not done in animosity or ‘we’re better than you’. It was like ‘hey we’ve been where you are. We’re in this together.’ They really took her under their wing. Well, when the test scores came out, her kids scored well. Now she did not teach as well as the other two teachers, but her kids did not suffer. There were several times during the year that the three language arts teachers traded some kids around at key points. The other teachers took some of her kids

who struggled. When we got those test scores back, I said ‘now she came a long way and this is a credit to her.’ She is going to be a great teacher. She’s going to hang with it, but in the old days of throw that first year teacher out there and leave them alone. It’s about the kids. The kids suffer [when that is done]. We all took it on as our responsibility for these kids to learn. We said we have got to help her [the struggling teacher]. The teaming and the collaboration is why we got through it.

*The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School was just as passionate about the use of collaboration and professional learning opportunities. This principal had many similar ideas that pertained to collaboration that were mentioned by Principal Y. However, this statement specifically regarding the use of collaboration was key:*

Really, school’s not going to get great one teacher at a time. You have got to do it pervasively throughout your school to make leaps and bounds. Our teachers really are committed to collaborating and sharing and helping way more so than any other school that I’ve seen. It is just a part of our culture and it is embedded in what we do.

*The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School further stated:*

We meet weekly with curriculum groups. I think that is one of our assets of our school because there is a different person on the leadership team that is responsible for each subject area. We can really, really concentrate … The big thing is that you can’t have time to collaborate if you’re not going to talk about data. The umbrella of collaboration is assessment—looking at your assessments, looking at your calendar and acting upon that data. So specifically the core things are professional development which includes peer coaching, instructional strategies that we offer, collaboration which includes looking at calendars making sure everyone is teaching what they are supposed to

be teaching and having very high expectations … We meet weekly in small instructional groups to collaborate and weekly to meet as a large group and then break into small groups for professional development. That's basically what we are doing. In those small groups, what you do is look at the data, and you share the data. It becomes very clear if someone [teacher(s)] is not being as successful as another. It's not for us to jump down that person's throat about not being successful. It's 'how can I help you to become more successful because if you are successful, then I am successful.' So that's part of our culture. That's hard to establish at school and it's hard to develop a culture in which teachers want to help each other because usually what we do is that we go in and we close the door behind us, and we go about our business.

*It was mentioned earlier that the principal of Apple Blossom Middle School did not specifically discuss common assessments nor did that principal formally discuss collaboration. However, the principal of Apple Blossom Middle School achieved very similar achievement results as the principals of Stoneybrook and Rolling Hills Middle Schools. The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School had this to say about teachers working together:*

If someone comes to me with an opportunity or an idea, I try to support that, but I also try to get the teachers to talk about these ideas with the other members in their content area and grade level. When I first got here, there were all these little independent islands operating. This teacher was great, but they never talked. I try to let them keep some individuality, but understanding that there has to be some consistency. I can't have parents saying that I want so and so because they do this great fieldtrip or this great project. I try to get them to collaborate, but it has been difficult. I try to support great

ideas, but I also try to spread that great idea as well. I try to say to that teacher 'have you talked to this teacher or that teacher' and 'how can you all do that?'

*It was interesting to hear a slightly different perspective of the collaborative work environment given by the principal of Apple Blossom Middle School. This principal felt that it is good for teachers to work together if they were actually going to be professional and work to find ways to improve student achievement. However, the principal of Apple Blossom Middle School discovered that the teachers of that school differed in their interpretation of how common planning time was to be used. It appeared that this principal used common planning time and time for collaboration as a means of control over the staff. The teachers abused the time and did not use it to discover ways to determine student academic success, but they certainly wanted to continue to receive recognition from the district officials for high academic performance. The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School had this to say:*

They have weekly meetings with their team. They have meetings with their grade level. They have SST meetings. They have IEP meetings. This is where you will hear the griping. There is not a lot of free time. There is maybe one planning period a week that is not scheduled with something. Teachers are used to having ninety minutes. They would go out for lunch. There was some really bad stuff going on here. They were used to having ninety minutes, so they would go get lunch—bring it back—eat. Our day is from 8:45 with the kids till 3:45, and it is slam out. The teachers get a 30-minute lunch, and then they get the hour planning period, but there is some kind of meeting going on all the time. There is a lot of grumbling about that. 'When do we grade papers?' It has been rough. I knew that coming in. I knew that it would be. I tell the teachers that you have to

come up with systems so that you can start the year off—templates or Excel spreadsheets or something so that when I say to you in a week 'I need to see all the data of where your children are' you don't go into a [frenzy]—and then you blame me because—no. no. You need to have this set up so that all you are doing is plugging stuff in so that when I ask for it you can just show it to me. It's not that I'm going to get on to you, but I need to know where the kids are. They need to set it up in the beginning, but that means that they have to share with each other. You will have some teachers who know how to do templates and Excel spreadsheets like you wouldn't believe. Well those teachers need to share with maybe the 55-year old teacher that didn't grow up with technology.

*Provide Differentiated Instruction*

*It appeared that the principal of Stoneybrook Middle School was the most direct in bringing up the idea of differentiated instruction as a key to determining and improving student academic success in school. The principals of both Apple Blossom Middle School and Rolling Hills Middle School discussed having teachers make decisions about how the teacher knows when a student understands a concept, what the teacher is going to do if the student does not understand a concept, and what the teacher should do to accelerate the students when a concept has been learned. Nevertheless, all three principals used differentiation as a strategy to determine student academic success. Principal Y stated the following about differentiation:*

I think that the most significant thing that we have done here to close that gap is to focus the curriculum and really involve teachers in collaboration. The way that closed the gap for us is that we did a lot of training in differentiated instruction, training in how different children learn and we changed our focus to learning. We had a lot of really great

teachers that were teaching great lessons, but kids weren't getting anything. So when we started collaborating and meeting with these teachers and talking about children from poverty and children that come from different backgrounds and different cultures—and how they learn, and how do we gauge that learning, and how do we know when they are learning, and how often are we assessing their learning before we move on? We started having those conversations and had teachers teach the same thing.

*Involve Students in the Process*

*An overwhelming consensus among all three principals was to conduct test talks with students to help them with improving their own academic achievement and to set individual achievement goals. The idea behind this practice is that by talking directly to the student about his or her area of strength or weakness helps the student to determine what he or she needs to do to achieve academic success in any subject, but especially reading and mathematics. The researcher discusses the concept of test talks a bit more in a later section that relates to meeting with others to discuss test data.*

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School had this to say about test talks:*

We did test talks with kids where we have taken some of these kids who are struggling and brought them in to talk one on one. I've done it with them. My assistant principals [have both done it with them] and sat down and said let's look at your permanent record. We look at it with them. I will say 'Have you ever seen your permanent record?' The student will say 'No.' 'Well, let's look at it. Look at you in the first grade, look at you.' We talk. I say 'Look how good you did in the first grade. What happened in fourth grade?' and we talk about it. 'I see C's and F's, but look at this. This is called an I.Q. score. Do you know how smart you are? You are right here with

everybody else.' We talk about where they are. I say that you have the ability to do so much more. What happens in these classes? Is it the way the teacher teaches? We have real, honest conversations. Then I say 'Let's talk about some goals. What do you think that you can do? You're not going to go from C's to A's in one year and you could do it, but what do you think that you can do this next nine weeks?'

I'm going to tell you though, with some of our minority kids, they had no idea, no idea. No one ever talked to them about what their test scores were. No one ever showed them [the permanent record]. No one had ever said 'Let's talk about your grades' or 'Let's look at your permanent records.'

When we have advisement next year, the kids that will go will go for silent sustained reading because I don't want my teachers to feel like that is another prep. So for those two days when we are running SUCCESS for those kids with zeros, the advisement students will come in that room—and it will be 45 minutes. They [students]will take the first 10 minutes for a character moment. We have a little canned television program that is pretty good, though. Then it will be silent sustained reading, but the advisement teacher will pull a couple of kids every week and 'How are your grades?'—just talk to them and set some goals. They will do some test talks with some kids in advisement.

It is just talking to kids about their test scores and getting them to set goals. For example, at the beginning of the year, 'Here are your CRCT scores from last year. You met in math with a 305. That was close, but this year let's see if we can go higher.' The teachers also look at the concepts with them. 'Look at how great you did here—it's just this one little area that brought you down.' It's just making kids aware of where they are weak and where they are strong. You know what you're going to hear from your

teachers. We don't have time to do this with all of our kids. I say you do have time to do it with your ten neediest kids on your team or every homeroom teacher that has time to do it with the five in their homeroom. You start with those five and then if you don't get to the gifted kid that's okay, but he needs it, too. He needs at least a session on 'What do you want to do with your life?' That might be done a little more informally in the cafeteria. But these kids who need it—who no one has ever talked to them about 'What do you want to do with your life?'—I say you have time for them.

*The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School had this to say about test talks:*

We are doing test talks for the first time this year where we're going to sit with each child to make sure that they understand their test results. We are going to thoroughly explain the report to the child and then it's going to be sent home to the parents like it always is.

*The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School stated the following about involving the students in the process of self-improvement of his or her academic achievement:*

We try to tell them a lot. We bring them into the loop. The teachers sit down with the kids and go over their test score history—CRCT, that sort of thing. They say 'You scored a 322 last year in science. I really want you to get 350. I want you to get into the exceeds category. Here's where you are weak. You are weak in inquiry. You missed 7 out of the 14 questions. You've got to work on that.' Kids don't even know what those scores mean. Kids are the ones who take the test. 'Let's try to spend some time with some goal setting. What do you want to do?' We try to explain that you may not be in the accelerated math or you did get into the accelerated math. 'You have got to keep it up or at the end of the quarter we're going to move you. You're going to go into on-grade level

math because it's too much for you. We're going to give you a chance, but you have to rise to the occasion.'

*The Use of Data*

| Research Subquestion 2. How do Georgia middle school principals use Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) data to improve minority student achievement? |
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*To Use CRCT Data or Not To Use CRCT Data*

*All of the principals agreed that data is very important in their quest to improve not only minority student achievement, but the achievement of all students. It was a general consensus that data has become very vital because it provides a detailed picture of the progress that each school has made. However, every principal interviewed used the CRCT as a short range measure of student achievement. They all used and placed more emphasis on other types of assessments for measuring student academic progress. When asked if the CRCT is used by that school to improve student achievement, this is what the principal of Rolling Hills Middle School had to say:*

We do and we don't. The CRCT is basically a basic skills test. We want our kids achieving at national high levels, not necessarily just at CRCT high levels. So doing great on the CRCT gets us excited but not overly excited. Doing well on the ITBS, which is nationally normed, gets us excited more. But doing well on AP exams when we follow our kids through high school gets us more excited. We definitely look at the data, and we definitely analyze it, but do we only teach to those weaknesses? No. We set our bar much higher than that. I think what we can say is that we understand that there is a balance between formative tests, summative tests, basic skills tests. We try to have a combination

of all those things in what we are doing. We're getting better at that every day. It's not the assessment that is important as much as the data that we get from the assessment that's most important. If the data tells us that we are doing a good job at what we're teaching, great! If it's telling us that we're not, that is the information that we're trying to get. So, having an environment, a culture that appreciates the data has been one of the pieces that has always been strong here.

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School was also quite assertive in giving a firm perspective on the use of CRCT data to improve minority student achievement.*

We use our CRCT data as a measuring stick of how far we have come and which group we need to focus on. But to improve achievement, I would say it is our mini assessments that we really use because that's what they [teachers] use as immediate feedback that changes their instruction for the next ten minutes or the next ten days. CRCT doesn't impact instruction, and I don't think that improves anything. It gives us a measuring stick. It is a measure of what they [teachers] are paid to teach. This is the state curriculum. It is your job to teach it. This is the measuring stick to make sure that we have taught it to every child. It's good in that sense because it does give us good information about whether we are leaving a group behind or is there an area [that needs to be taught better] or is there a curriculum standard that we are leaving behind, but as far as improving student achievement, I think that it's our mini assessments because the teachers act on that immediately–that impacts that child right there.

*The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School was less passionate than the principals of Stoneybrook and Rolling Hills Middle Schools about the use of CRCT data to improve minority student achievement. The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School used the*

*data as a framework for starting each year. However, after a few weeks into the school year, CRCT data from the previous year would no longer be sufficient for continuous student improvement in this principal's school. The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School felt that more and varied assessments needed to be used to assess student progress.*

*Here is what the principal of Apple Blossom Middle School had to say about CRCT data:*

We use it [CRCT data] quite frequently as a jump start to the year. It creates a framework for the teachers. It gives the kids something that they can know as far as where to move up, and what goals they want. It's used more at the beginning of the year. I focus on that through first quarter. I will then start looking at assessments—like weekly assessments—or ongoing assessments, benchmark tests, that kind of thing with the teachers. It is more up-to-date data rather than April of the year before.

We do a lot of—well. I don't want to call it test prep during the year. We don't just slam into it in March. We do a lot of practice questions. We use the CRCT Coach books which we like a lot for practice questions. The math teachers this year would always have two or three on the board as the warm-up—CRCT related math questions—just to get kids in that mindset. So we do some practice along the way, but I firmly believe that if you are teaching the standards, then you are teaching the test. There is no such thing as teaching the test; if you are teaching the curriculum, then they [students] should do well or you should know way before April that they are not going to do well.

*Data Driven Decision Making (i.e., Instructional Strategies, Resources, Time, or Policy)*

*In all cases, the principals agreed that the decisions that they made within their schools pertaining to instruction, the use of resources, time, and addressing policies such*

*as NCLB were all driven by what the data had to say about their particular situation. The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School was quite adamant about the fact that if the data didn't suggest that they do something, they didn't do it. This was noted in the section above concerning reading. The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School mentioned that the data did not suggest that reading was an area of concern for that school, so emphasis was not placed on that subject. Consequently, this approach to the data suggests that time is not wasted in areas that do not need addressing. The statement made by the principal of Rolling Hills Middle School stated in an earlier section sums up this particular perspective of how data should be used:*

It's not the assessment that is important as much as the data that we get from the assessment that's most important. If the data tells us that we are doing a good job at what we're teaching, great. If it's telling us that we're not, that is the information that we're trying to get. So, having an environment, a culture that appreciates the data has been one of the pieces that has always been strong here.

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School used data much like principals Apple Blossom and Rolling Hills Middle Schools. However, an interesting, yet useful way in which this school plans to use data in the coming year is to make decisions about student progress after common assessments have been administered. The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School has created an environment within this school that allows for cross-teaming of students after common assessments in order to remediate and enrich.*

*Here is an example of the plan that the principal of Stoneybrook Middle School has chosen to use as a result of data derived from common assessments:*

They [teachers] do look at data on those [common assessments] as a grade level, and they compare each others' kids and do a lot of discussion and go back and reteach. One of the things that we're going to do this year—on the next day or at a natural break point after a common assessment—is to say [as teachers within grade levels] that I am going to take this group tomorrow, and I'm going to go back over this with them, and you take the kids that have already gotten it and move on and do this enrichment. We are going to build in some days at natural break points where the students might cross teams where one teacher will work with some kids. For instance, on Friday, if I'm the math teacher, I may pull these two kids aside and say 'Tomorrow for 2nd period you will go down to Mrs. Smith's room because you need to work on these areas, and she is going to be reteaching that part, and I don't want you to miss that.' The ten kids that Mrs. Smith has that already had it may go into Mrs. Jones' room so that she can go over the enrichment activity. For example, eighth grade writing is a perfect example, as our eighth graders get ready for the writing assessment. We have one teacher whose strength is style. We have other teachers that work on other components. Well, after they have done some mock writing tests and, they see where the kids are, they may take every other Friday for two months and all the kids that struggle in style will go to this teacher for remediation. The students that need help in grammar will go to this teacher because that's her thing. They rotate the kids first so that they really teach all aspects of writing. I think that it's good for kids because sometimes if you hear it from somebody else [you get it]. You have had that same language arts teacher all year, but if you go down here for an hour in Mrs. Smith's room it kind of perks you up a little bit. It gives teachers some flexibility. That's another thing that really promotes the idea that it's not just my kids. We are all responsible for that

grade level of kids [regardless of subject matter]. If your math kids aren't getting it, then what can the other two subject area teachers do to help your kids get this?

*Meet with Others to Discuss Low-Performing Student Achievement Data*

*The degree to which each principal chose to share information with others seemed to vary. They all shared and discussed data within the confines of the school building and also with their various school councils. However, as one principal felt that more support in terms of funds and resources was needed, that principal involved outside stakeholders for this support. The next few paragraphs are examples of how each principal chose to meet with others to discuss low-performing student achievement. The principal of Rolling Hills Middle School stated the following:*

We meet with teachers. They will do student profiles of their students when the school year begins. They will know their level 1 students. We'll make some decisions as to how best to meet their needs. But, yeah, that data is not a secret. We meet weekly. Is it always strictly about level 1 kids? No, but it's part of the conversation. We also have a data analysis team that meets pretty regularly. Our county has put our data at our fingertips in a program called START. We can look up at our fingertips anything we want about any child. Our teachers get very familiar with the START program and are able to pull up data at their fingertips such as student profiles, every test they have taken, standardized tests. They can see how they have performed over history [the teachers]. There are teacher profiles, student profiles, school profiles. I mean, our county has done an amazing job with this program. We do have data at our fingertips, but our teachers have to learn how to use it. So yeah, we meet weekly. It's pretty much this weekly group that meets. We have someone from leadership, a curriculum leader which we pay. It's a paid

position. It's getting bang for your buck. These curriculum leaders have worked very, very hard leading the way for us in the way we need to go. For instance, sixth grade math—there is a curriculum leader. She is incredible. She really runs the meeting. She really knows what needs to be discussed. She sets the agenda. I really just sit there and facilitate and if anything comes up—she really runs the meetings. Basically we meet in grade level subject areas to discuss the data. We also have weekly curriculum meetings, not weekly gripe meetings focused on instruction, as well as professional learning and data analysis.

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School had the following things to say about meeting with others to discuss low-performing student achievement:*

I discuss it with my school council. I share test scores with them and we talk about what we are doing, and we share the goals. I get their input. We talk about school-wide data. We have a lot of communication across grade levels about data like our math department. A real strength here is our departments, and I have real strong department heads. We meet after school once a month. Administrators go to all department meetings. I don't run the meetings. The department head runs the meetings. I sit in there as an observer listening to the conversation. I chip in if I need to, but that is a wonderful time. The seventh grade teachers are saying 'This is what we are seeing' and each grade is helping one another. That's when they are having this conversation about the curriculum flowing across the grade. Probably the single most important thing that we do for curriculum here is to meet as departments. It has to happen. That's something that they didn't have here until I came. It is something that I wanted to do in another middle school, but the principal said 'No, no we are a middle school, not a high school.' We

meet as a department, so for instance as math teachers they talk about what kids are doing from grade to grade, and how they are teaching it. This year it was so great because the GPS was implemented in sixth grade, and there were all these gaps. Seventh and eighth grade math teachers at the beginning of the year were saying 'We're going to focus the money. Sixth grade will need this and sixth grade will need that.' They [seventh- and eigth-grade math teachers] were helping them. It's going to pay off for seventh grade math teachers this year, and it's going to pay off for eigth-grade math teachers next year. When you do it that way, then they see that it's not just my seventh grade math students, but it's all the math kids in the building. So, departments are strong. Sometimes during those meetings we invite central office staff in if there is something in particular in which we need help. Sometimes we will have the language arts coordinator come in to our language arts department meetings, or we may bring in somebody to do a staff development.

Our discussions are not so much on minority students as much as we discus socio-economic students which I guess equates to a lot of minority students. But mostly our discussions are just on any kid that fails. We have had more discussions on our poor kids who a lot of them are minorities. Those discussions have centered around how do we give homework support? How can we contact and give their parents access to the school? How do we lend support for them not having the technology that some of the other kids have? So, yeah, there have been discussions along those lines. We look at the student work, too. They [teachers] will bring in samples of what the students do and talk about 'Is this the best way to assess this kid's work?' We did a whole faculty book study on Ruby

Payne's poverty. That was a big discussion in our grade level meetings, and that was all about minorities and kids in poverty.

*The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School has taken the approach that she will do whatever it will take to improve low-performing student achievement. So if having discussions with others about test score data will improve achievement, she will do it. Here are some of the perspectives that this principal shared on this subject:*

Well, I discuss data with our local school council. We talk a lot about data—that's monthly. I have a technology foundation that we started this year with community members. The whole point is to raise money for more technology. The school system is woefully inadequate with technology. In those meetings I talk about performance and what we need to raise performance. Again, it goes into the differentiation, so we can hit all kids—different attention spans, different ways they learn, different modalities. We need technology to do that. I am not afraid—I learned that from my first year when I started disaggregating data and putting them up there on the overhead for teachers—Latino kids and Black kids. I learned to use that. It was painful the first year to say then, 'This is not acceptable; there is a 40-point difference between our Black kids and our White kids.' That is not acceptable, and how can anyone argue with that? I talked about that to anybody. I have never shyed away from race. It's difficult in this city. It is such a polarizing, inflammatory thing, but to use [data] in a way to say here is where we are and here is what we are going to do. Not that our Black and Latino kids can't. It's—we need to do something different. That's how I changed our whole gifted model. Our White parents won't argue with that because it says that you're racist if you argue with me. I just had to guarantee them that everybody would stay high. I also work with the

neighborhood association. I will meet with them a couple of times a year to talk about the school and what we are trying to do. I share data. I meet with the fifth grade teachers in the fall from the three major feeder schools. We talk about the program here—our strengths and our weaknesses. I'm never reluctant to share the reality of the school.

*Additionally, the principal of Apple Blossom Middle School discusses the school's personal struggles with improving the scores of Special Education students. This principal mentions what types of discussions they have had with others to make those improvements.*

It has been a radical shift in two years that I said publicly that we were going to close the achievement gap and that every child would gain and that nobody would decline. We have kept to that. I am still disappointed in our special ed. I mean we made AYP again, but math special ed. was less than adequate. I don't know how else I can say it. We have tried so many things. I now have a partnership with a local speech school because I didn't know what else to do with special ed. I've got 13 people in the special ed department here with para-professionals and teachers, and we are not making the gains. We have done small class sizes, inclusion co-teaching, so I had to set up a partnership to ask them for help to do better co-teaching. It's real difficult with middle school special ed. These kids have had four and five years of failure. We make gains, but we can't make five years of gains in three years with kids that come in on a second grade level. We can get them up to a fourth grade level—maybe a fifth grade level. I have said this is the year for PEC (Special Education Program). We have got to focus on special ed. I got an additional position this year to try to give even more attention to especially special ed math.

*Parental Involvement of Minority Parents*

Research Subquestion 3. How do Georgia middle school principals involve parents of minority students to increase academic achievement?

*To Involve Parents or Not to Involve Parents*

*There was a big separation on the issue of whether to involve parents of minority students to increase academic achievement. Two of the three principals felt that gaining parental support in working to increase academic achievement of minority students was key. However, the principal of Rolling Hills Middle School was emphatically against involving parents. This principal felt that bringing the parent in would not be helpful, and that it is unnecessary. Here are the comments that were made by the principal of Rolling Hills Middle School on this subject:*

Our philosophy has been we can't change where they [students] live, who their parents are, or how much money their parents make. I don't care. I could care less. I don't want to spend my energy trying to do a culture night here at [Rolling Hills Middle School]. I don't care where you are from. To some degree I don't care if you know that I appreciate where you are from. I want you [students] to do well—period. I want to make sure that you are pushed as hard academically as anything else and that is my primary focus. Now, as part of getting to know you as a child to get you to work harder for me as a teacher—getting to know you personally. That's the key, but to develop programs here at this school to try to get parents in to have International Night or something. I would rather talk about math. Let's have a math night. I'll go get a bus, and I'll go get as many International kids as I can get, but I don't want to be talking about International stuff. I want to be talking about math and language arts. It's just having that as a belief system.

We do as much as any other school does with that in terms of we do an average amount of trying to get those parents involved in their child's education. We want them to be involved in the part of teaching and learning. The part that I spend a lot of time with is putting all of my eggs in that basket. If they don't want to be involved in their child's education by coming to conferences, PTSA nights, learning about the curriculum, learning how they can be a help. My vision and mission every day is not to get more parents involved in their child's education. That is not the core of my business. The core of my business is when I've got these kids in my building for 6 plus hours, I better be doing a !@#$% [expletive] good job with them in the building. I am the person responsible for their education. That's all that I can deal with. I can't change that they have responsibilities outside of school. I can't take them all home with me. I can't be their mamas and daddys. I can be their mamas and daddys while they are here. If their mamas and daddys don't want to come in and don't want to value their education which we talk about a great deal. I don't mind going to churches, and I don't mind going to do all of these things. But I better be spending time on what's really important and that is when I have them in that classroom for 55 minutes and in some schools for 75 minutes, I better be doing a !@#$ [expletive] good job with them while I have them in there. Because you know what—that's when it really matters. There are several things that I need to be doing there that will help the other. To offer them the best opportunity to get the best instruction possible and follow that up with the best assessment possible to tell our teachers where they are doing well.

The other piece that I need to do on the human side of it is that I want to hire teachers that can establish relationships with kids to get them to run through walls for them and

that will work harder than they ever thought they would work for them. They [students] will do their homework because they know the teacher is expecting them to do their homework not because their mamas and daddys know that the child needs to do their homework. That's our x-factor—the relationship between our teachers and our students—to get the parents more involved. I bet the parents will come if the kid says 'Mama I want you to come to this meeting,' But if all they hear is negative stuff i.e., through the kid—they won't. The kid is our best and our worst asset. We are not capitalizing on our assets here in terms of getting the kid on our side, and that is by having a relationship with our kids. Other than that we don't spin our wheels trying to create opportunities for parents to come in and do this and do that. We want them involved, and it's an open invitation. I have an open door policy, but you know what my thought is—they [parents] are busy people and unfortunately to some degree they put on us a gigantic responsibility to educate their children. I am okay with it, though. I know that, and I better do a darn good job at it. I better push hard, and I better get their children to achieve. That's the instructional piece where I put my time and energy. I don't waste time trying to beg people to come in. I don't care if you don't want to come in—don't come, but make sure that your kid comes to school.

We spend time on what we think matters, and that is getting them here, getting them in class and letting them learn. That's all that really matters to me is making sure that the kids learn, and that we have good teachers that can do that. We do right by the children in that aspect. Our parents are really trusting us to do right in that aspect. I don't care about social issues. I don't want to spend time on social things. We are here to teach and learn. They [students] are here to get an education—period. No other blah, blah, blah after that.

I'm just not here for the kids to have an opportunity to make friends, that's natural. That's not my agenda. My agenda is math, science, social studies and language arts—some fine arts in there and some P.E. in there, and it's good to go with me.

*The principal of Apple Blossom Middle School had a slightly different perspective about involving parents in the process of improving student achievement for minority students. The following is a discussion of this principal's perspectives:*

I have high expectations for the parents. I sent out a letter with test scores to any child that scored below expectations, but also to the ones that barely met that I expect their children to be in tutorial. I expect them to put that into their weekly schedule—that they have to be at weekly tutorial. I try to explain to parents what all of that means. We offer a wide range of activities to involve parents from food related things to art related things—academic.

We do these really neat family math nights, family science, family language arts and family social studies nights where the children teach what they have learned to their parents. Its overflow crowds. The parents will go to two different classes, and the children will teach what they have learned. For instance, in math they were teaching algebra to parents. The parents had to do it. Parents really enjoy that—seeing their kids perform because you know in Stoneybrook Middle Schoolou don't get a lot from kids at home.

We have a PEC breakfast [Program for Exceptional Children] for special education twice a year—they do family breakfast on Saturday where we talk about high expectations for our special education kids—testing, where they are and what they have to do and that they have to pass the test to go to ninth grade. We have pancakes and

bacon—just in a casual atmosphere because those parents are probably the least involved special ed parents.

We do a lot of mailings and we spend a ton on postage. We have a monthly newsletter that is very extensive—six or seven pages that the PTA puts out—just a lot of communication. Homework Hero—which is a cheap $30.00 a year website that parents can go into that posts teachers homework for the week. You can also put on there that there is a fieldtrip coming up. It is very cheap and very easy to use.

I do principal's coffees every quarter that are specific to a grade level. We have PTA meetings that are like workshops for parents—middle school development, drugs and alcohol, diversity stuff.

We have a huge transition program where I meet three times during the year. Fifth grade parents come over here, and I go to their schools—the three major feeder schools. There is a lot of parent contact here—a lot. Because you have to, because they have such high expectations. You have to involve them, or they go right to the superintendent if they feel slighted in any way.

I have a parent curriculum advisory committee that meets once a month with my instructional specialist and myself. We talk about what we are going to do, and they give their opinion. It's very strong. These parents are used to being very involved in elementary school. I have to spend a lot of time thinking about how much do I tell them because they can work the community like you wouldn't believe. I mean one soccer game on Saturday and 300 people know if I am just going to change some little thing. As a principal you have to be really certain about what you are doing, and you have to explain it. You can't get defensive—that's probably the most difficult [thing]. I was an

elementary principal for a number of years, but I have to be a different principal now than I was then because of *No Child Left Behind.* There are so many regulations that parents don't understand—that every child has to achieve—special ed, ESOL, the kids with disabilities, the kids with economic disadvantages, the white kids, and the black kids. I try to juggle all that when they are really concerned about their gifted white kid. I try to explain that nobody's going to lose, but everybody has to gain.

*The principal of Stoneybrook Middle School shared the perspective of the principal of Apple Blossom Middle School that parental involvement is important to improving the academic achievement of minority students. This principal was quick to mention that even though parental involvement is important, it is also not an easy strategy to implement. Here are some of the comments made by the principal of Stoneybrook Middle School concerning parental involvement:*

It's hard. Most of the students in our after-school program are minorities, and most of our failing minorities are boys—black boys are tough. I mean that's probably our toughest group. And they constitute a lot of our kids who stay after school. So, this year we had an after-school open house which were those kids and those parents. We had a meal and anything that we could do to get them in. We provided transportation, and we let the parents walk around to see what their kids were doing after school. We had the test scores of kids so that the parents could talk to the teachers about the scores. We probably had 30% percent participation. It was kind of disappointing. We don't do a good enough job of that, but it's hard. We try to think of ways to get them involved, but this is my personal philosophy, and I haven't read this in a book, and I don't know if it's even true. But I believe from working in two different schools that are so different—from high

minority, high poverty schools to a school like this—is that a lot of time people in a school like this have a misconception that parents of these kids don't care and don't want to come. That's not true. I don't feel that's the truth. My experience has been that they are hardworking parents. A lot of single mothers, and they have two jobs. They are doing everything that they can do.

In my mind from working with these parents they say 'You're the professional; you're supposed to know how to do it. I send them to school for you to teach them.' That really is their mentality, but at the same time they have a lot of respect for teachers. They believe that you're the professional. A lot of time parents of minority students will call and ask if he is behaving. That's their first question. They expect their child to come to school and behave, and they expect the teacher to teach them. Upper class parents don't have that much respect, I don't think. They want to blame the teacher or 'What are you doing?' or [say] 'What can I do?' I try to make teachers understand that sometimes when parents aren't coming in they can't. They don't have transportation. They are doing all that they can do to provide for the family. It is your job to teach their children, and they trust you to teach them. Communicate with them and ask them what can you do to help them? Do you need to give support for homework at school because they don't have the means or the education? I have a biology degree. I have a college education. I need help with my child's seventh grade math sometimes because I haven't done seventh grade math. If we need help and have college education, what about those parents who are working long hours with an eighth grade education? I say 'Look at what you are asking them to understand.'

So I try to get teachers to change their stereotypes. It is real hard to get those parents involved when they have to come across town because their kids are bused. I just try to make teachers understand that involving them means just calling them more, emailing them, making them understand that you're on their side. It may not necessarily mean physically being here, and if they are not physically here, we cannot pass judgment on why they aren't here. Let me tell you something—I have had good experiences with parents from low socio-economic homes. I tell teachers that parents don't send them to your classes to misbehave. They send them to behave and to get an education. If they could fix them, they would fix them. If I could fix my child, I would fix him. The teacher gets frustrated and says 'If the parent would only do this.' I say 'If the parent could do it, they would do it.' I say 'Trust me: they don't want that phone call.' We need to take care of them in school and let the parent take care of them at home.

## Summary

The method of discovery used in this research project was to determine what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap, and to examine the effectiveness of those practices and strategies, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics. The qualitative data was collected through the use of in-depth structured interviews with three Georgia middle school principals identified by the Georgia Department of Education as successful.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher and then transcribed. The anonymity of each principal was maintained by assigning each principal an alphabetical representation with a corresponding numeral (i.e., P-1, Apple Blossom Middle School). The data transcribed from the interviews was then organized according to similarities and

differences of perspectives of each principal in regards to practices, strategies, or general thoughts and ideas that they used to help close the minority achievement gap. The researcher found that when the data was organized in this manner, certain natural subheadings began to emerge from the data that helped to present the findings. The transcribed data was then color-coded according to each subheading and then presented according to each particular finding. The significant findings regarding (a) practices and strategies, (b) the use of data and, (c) parental involvement of minority parents were presented through text selections from a given principal working at a given middle school. A discussion of the significance and implications of the findings as well as recommendations for further research are included in Chapter 5.

# CHAPTER 5

# SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was designed to determine what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap and to examine the effectiveness of those practices and strategies, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics. The study was conducted using qualitative research techniques. The data derived from in-depth, structured interviews of three Georgia middle school principals identified by the Georgia Department of Education as successful formed the basis for the findings to determine those practices and strategies used to close the minority achievement gap. A discussion of the significance and implications of the findings of this study are presented in the present chapter.

## Summary

The issue of the minority achievement gap is not new. It is a problem that has existed in the United States for at least 300 years since slavery. However, despite its longevity, no real solutions have been found for this persistent and pervasive problem. It has taken federal legislation of the NCLB to bring national attention to a problem that has always existed. Today, there seems to be a sense of urgency to close the achievement gap in schools.

The sense of urgency rests on the fact that the NCLB has placed a great deal of accountability on schools and school principals to meet certain criteria or standards in each state for what every child should know and learn in reading and math in grades 3-8. Student progress and achievement is measured for every child, every year. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that public schools face sanctions if progress has not been made

to meet standard in every area stated in the legislation, and for the purposes of this research, especially progress in the areas of reading and mathematics as well as closing the achievement gap between White and minority students. NCLB mandates that all of this should be accomplished by the year 2014.

The timeframe outlined in the NCLB legislation may not be sufficient for schools that have large numbers of low-performing minority students to close their gaps. There have already been many schools that have faced sanctions for not meeting the requirements of this legislation. They have faced corrective actions such as restructuring, have been identified as needs improvement, and have lost students to other schools due to school choice. As a result of the stringent standards and impending deadline of NCLB, principals are constantly seeking strategies and best practices to help close the achievement gaps in their schools.

Fortunately, there are principals that have been able to close the achievement gap in their schools using best practices and strategies. Using qualitative research techniques, this researcher interviewed three Georgia middle school principals identified as successful by the Georgia Department of Education to determine what the practices and strategies are that they use to close the minority achievement gap, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics. This researcher asked the three principals probing questions that elicited their perspectives on the things that matter most in closing the achievement gap in their schools. The data from the interviews were transcribed and organized using the Creswell Data Analysis Spiral.

The overarching question of this study was how principals incorporate other factors such as stakeholders, curriculum, data, and policy into what they do to help close the

minority achievement gap in Georgia middle schools. Other questions that were considered were the following:

1. What are the practices and strategies used by Georgia middle school principals to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics?
2. How do Georgia middle school principals use CRCT data to improve minority student achievement?
3. How do Georgia middle school principals involve parents of minority students to increase academic achievement?

The findings derived from these research questions were used to draw conclusions and to consider implications for this study.

## Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine what practices and strategies Georgia middle school principals use to close the minority achievement gap, and to examine the effectiveness of those practices and strategies, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics. The qualitative data derived from the interviews provided first-hand knowledge of the perspectives of each principal as to the practices and strategies that they use to close the gap in their schools, especially in the areas of reading and mathematics.

RESEARCH SUBQUESTION 1: What are the practices and strategies used by Georgia middle school principals to determine student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics?

### *Discussion*

It was determined from the qualitative data derived from the interviews with the three Georgia middle school principals that the practices and strategies used to determine

student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics overwhelmingly pointed to the fact that each principal was proactive in monitoring the instructional and academic needs of their students using assessment data. These principals had mechanisms in place to address and focus on students who needed extra help in any subject area, but especially in mathematics. They all agreed that offering the most challenging mathematics curriculum to all students was also important, and they all made concerted efforts to place minority students into these classes. Yet again, they relied heavily on various assessment data to make those decisions.

The principals felt that because they were constantly assessing students to determine what they did or did not know and incorporating school level intervention strategies such as reteaching and enrichment activities that there was very little room for error. During the interview with one of the principals, the topic arose about principals conducting appeals for students who did not pass the CRCT. These students were being retained because they failed either the reading or math portion of the test and were appealing to the principal and either the math or reading teacher to be placed or promoted to the next grade. This principal was very passionate about the fact that the appeals process is reactionary. This principal felt that there is no reason for an appeal because there should not be any reason for the student to have failed. The principal mentioned that he knew if a student was going to meet the goal or not based on the benchmark data going into the CRCT. It was interesting that this principal mentioned that because of the data he knew where they were strong and where they were weak, and even more interesting is that he emphasized this point by saying that school improvement is not rocket science. He stated that if certain practices such as graphic organizers and scaffolding to build upon students'

understanding were used, then the academic achievement of students increases. This research finding may seem simplistic, but the principals felt strongly that being proactive about the needs of every student and monitoring the progress of these students on a continuous basis using data was key to their success. This point is corroborated by Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) who found that an entire school district, the Brazoport ISD, was successful in closing the achievement gap by using data to guide improvements. Other findings from the Brazoport study that support the findings of this study include administering assessments to ensure that students have mastered the objectives taught during the specified time period. Data from assessments are used to determine if whole classes need additional reteaching or if special assistance is needed for specific students. The approach is intended to help teachers detect and correct problems early. Lastly, principals physically monitored the progress of individual students and whole classes by conducting classroom visits.

In addition, all three Georgia principals agreed on the following practices that were discussed in detail in Chapter 4 as strong determinants of student academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics: (a) involve students in the process, (b) offer additional assistance in reading and mathematics, (c) incorporate minority students into gifted or honors classes, (d) give common assessments, (e) give teachers time for collaboration and professional learning to plan for student success, (f) provide differentiated instruction, and (g) frequent monitoring of classroom instruction.

RESEARCH SUBQUESTION 2. How do Georgia middle school principals use CRCT data to improve minority student achievement?

*Discussion*

The general consensus among all three principals was that they use CRCT data as a measure of basic student knowledge, but they did not rely only on this data for all decisions regarding student achievement. They mentioned that the CRCT data is mainly used at the beginning of the school year to make basic determinations for placement or just to give teachers an idea of where to begin working with students academically, but none of the principals used the CRCT as the sole method for helping to improve minority student achievement.

All of the principals used various other assessments to gather data in combination with the CRCT which included, but was not limited to, teacher developed mini assessments, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), and the California Achievement Test (CAT). One of the principals stated that the CRCT is a basic skills test. The goal of their school is to have students achieve at national high levels, not necessarily just at CRCT high levels. The perspective of this principal was that doing great on the CRCT was exciting, but not overly exciting. Doing well on the ITBS, which is nationally normed, is more exciting.

As mentioned above, all of the principals used some type of data to make decisions regarding student achievement for all students within their schools. Again, they all believed that the continuous monitoring of student data to make important decisions about all aspects of the instructional program was important.

Other key findings regarding data that was discovered in the principal interviews included using data when meeting with others to discuss low-performing student achievement. The principals used their student achievement data to their advantage. The data was used to determine how best to use monetary resources, where students should be placed in regards to challenging mathematics and reading courses, and in one school the data was used to inform teachers about their low-achieving subgroups as well as the parents. In the last instance, this principal explained that this school was a classic example of historically riding on the achievement scores of their most talented students. This principal had to explain the data to the faculty in terms of the NCLB legislation.

As it was explained to the researcher, when the principal told the faculty that they would have to begin disaggregating data according to race to begin making data-driven decisions, the faculty became inflamed because in their minds the principal was singling out black students. This faculty had not been accustomed to disaggregating data in this way. The principal knew from that point on that in order to get what she had to get done with regards to improving the academic achievement of the subgroups in her school that she had to preface any data regarding race in the form of 'this has to be done for NCLB or AYP.' If not, she would face a barrage of criticism from her staff and parents. The parents felt that when they were shown the data that academic achievement for their gifted white children would be affected. The principal had to explain by using data that all students would benefit by any changes made as a result of data-driven decisions.

The problem that this principal encountered is confirmed in the 2002-2003 study conducted by the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) that determined what set of school-level policies and practices contributed to closing the achievement gap

(Oberman & Symonds, 2005). The Bay Area Study challenged four beliefs about what matters most in closing the achievement gap in schools. The belief that the principal mentioned above encountered had to do with the fact that focusing on one group means ignoring the other students within the school population. In that study the researchers learned that not only was this assumption not true, but a focus on a low-performing group could actually benefit all students. The focus can help teachers become more adept at differentiating instruction and can prompt the school community to address deficiencies in school services and the academic program for all student groups. If this principal did not use data to her advantage to make critical decisions about the underachieving subgroups within her school she would not have been as successful as she has been as a middle school principal.

RESEARCH SUBQUESTION 3. How do Georgia middle school principals involve parents of minority students to increase academic achievement?

*Discussion*

The researcher found that the responses to this research question were in some instances contrary to the research discovered in the literature review. Haycock et al. (1999), Miedel and Reynolds (1999), Noguera (2005), and Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens and Sims (2001) all found that when minority or low-income parents were involved in the schooling of their children an increase in academic achievement was a result. The researcher found that two out of the three principals interviewed agreed that parental involvement was important in increasing the academic achievement of minority students. They mentioned that they invite parents into the school for various activities and

communicate with parents about the progress of their children as often as possible. They admitted that not all parents were able to attend conferences and other functions held by the school, but the parental support from home was more than evident.

However, the third principal did not see the importance in involving the parents of minority students to increase academic achievement. This principal felt that parental involvement was not the core of his business. He felt that his business was educating children, not their parents. This principal is of the belief that if he does his job well with educating the child for the number of hours that he or she is at school during the day, he does not have to involve the parents in the process. The researcher mentioned to this principal what other research that confirmed about the positive effects of parental involvement in schools and how it helps academic achievement, but the principal's perspective was unchanged.

| OVER-ARCHING QUESTION. How do principals incorporate other factors such as stakeholders, curriculum, data, and policy into what they do to help close the minority achievement gap in Georgia middle schools? |
|---|

*Discussion*

It became very evident to the researcher that the three principals interviewed made every effort to incorporate other factors to close the minority achievement gaps in their schools. They all mentioned in some manner that they meet often to discuss student academic progress for not only low-performing minority students, but for all students within the school population. They all agreed that the curriculum is the basis of what they do every day and that it drives the instruction. All three of the principals mentioned the concept of curriculum mapping and the use of curriculum calendars. They all mentioned

the practice of mapping out the curriculum to make sure that the concepts that were important were covered and to ensure that the things that were not important were excluded. They felt that this was not negotiable. It was also stressed by all of the principals that teaching from a book and going chapter by chapter has a detrimental effect on student achievement. Instead, they were very much in favor of collaborative discussions of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

As mentioned throughout the presentation of the findings, each of the principals overwhelmingly supported the use of data to guide decision-making involving instruction. One of the principals mentioned that if the data did not say to do something, they did not do it. Consequently, it was found that the use of data was important as a practice or strategy of the three principals interviewed for this study.

The use of policy did not come up a lot during the conversations with the principals, but it was the feeling of the researcher that a lot of the practices and strategies that the principals did employ were a result of the NCLB legislation. However, these principals did not speak a great deal about the policy aspect of what they were doing. All of them were more concerned with the instructional aspect of their jobs. They were all very much in touch with what was happening in their schools in regards to instructional practices. It appeared to the researcher that nothing happened concerning instruction in any of the three schools studied that the principal of those schools did not know about. They all appeared to be true instructional leaders in the sense that they were very much aware of their roles in the school building.

They all spoke of their mission and philosophies from time to time. They also mentioned the high expectations that they have for all stakeholders. This was also not

negotiable. They felt that it was important to demand high expectations of all stakeholders, that is, parents, students as well as themselves as it relates to improving academic achievement. This idea is similar to that advocated by the statement of the Association of Effective Schools (1996) that when school improvement processes based upon the effective schools research are implemented, the proportions of students that achieve academic excellence either improves or at the very least remains the same. The following are the correlates advocated by the Association of Effective Schools: clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn, spend student time on task, safe and orderly environment, and home school relations.

## Analysis of Research Findings

The findings indicated that the perspectives of the three principals are very similar in many respects and different in only a very few. The interviews revealed that all of the principals are similar in the practices and strategies that they use to determine academic success in the areas of reading and mathematics. They all used strategies to get as many students as possible into challenging mathematics classes, and they all highly recommended providing teachers time for collaboration. Two of the three principals felt very strongly about collaboration and administering common assessments as strategies to determine student academic success.

The information gathered from the interviews with the three principals strongly indicated that they use data on a regular basis to make decisions about student and

whole-grade level academic progress. Because of their constant monitoring of the data, they are able to make very accurate predictions about how their students will perform on standardized tests.

Furthermore, two of the three principals stated that they involve parents of minority students to help increase academic achievement. These two principals saw the importance of this practice; however, one principal did not find that involving parents was a worthwhile strategy.

## Conclusions

Three conclusions can be drawn from the results of the study. First, principals that have closed the minority achievement gap in their schools are those who are first and foremost dedicated and concerned about instruction. They are instructional leaders. They are concerned about closing the minority achievement gap, but they are more concerned with educating all children by providing a challenging curriculum, providing professional learning opportunities for teachers, and making sure that the instruction in every classroom is differentiated so that all students can learn in the manner in which it is best for them. These principals are also very knowledgeable about best practices and strategies to enhance instruction.

Secondly, the principals that have closed the minority achievement gap in their schools have very high expectations of all stakeholders with which they work: the students, teachers, and parents. They set instructional goals for the school and then monitor to make sure that these goals are met. They are not afraid to correct teachers who are not meeting goals by teaching to their potential in the classrooms nor are they hesitant to conduct conferences with individual students to improve their academic achievement.

These principals are also not afraid to discuss difficult instructional issues with parents or other stakeholders when necessary.

Lastly, the principals that have closed the achievement gap in their schools are those who frequently monitor assessment data to make the best instructional decisions for all students.

## Implications

The implications of this study relate directly to principals who may be struggling to find ways to close the achievement gap in their schools. First, the results of this study suggest that a great deal of time and energy should be spent making decisions about what the academic needs of the schools are that are struggling to close the achievement gap. The principals that were interviewed for this study all had a firm understanding of what their individual schools needed to do in order to improve because they constantly studied the data of their schools. They also assessed their students frequently to determine if knowledge was increasing. These principals were very much proactive in trying to increase the academic achievement of their students. It is this type of dogged determination that principals struggling to close the minority achievement gap in schools must possess. Struggling principals must be willing to work smarter, not harder at closing the achievement gap. For instance, one of the principals mentioned that she planned to use her 20 additional day money that her school had been allotted to pay teachers to tutor during their planning periods each day. Consequently the teachers would have to stay after school in order to plan, but they would be less tired in the afternoons and the students would get to go home. It is this type of creativity that struggling principals must utilize in order to overcome this issue. A strong implication of this study is that the

answer to closing the achievement gap is not found by waiting and watching for the gap to be closed, but it is achieved by actually doing things in a consistent and pervasive manner. For instance, all three of the principals interviewed in this study relied heavily on what the data from assessments indicated about the academic achievement of all of their students. These principals appeared to be serious about consistently using assessment data to determine how to best serve their students. These principals also are not afraid to apply a certain amount of pressure on teachers to be accountable for the academic achievement of the students, but they are quick to mention that the academic improvements are a team effort among everyone within the school.

Secondly, principals struggling to close the achievement gap must begin to use strategies like collaboration and common assessments on a regular basis, and then they must stick with these strategies until they begin to see progress. If they do not choose to use collaboration or common assessments, they must embrace some type of practice or strategy and continue using that strategy until results are seen.

Thirdly, once these principals find a strategy that they believe will be useful with their particular student population, they must monitor that strategy or practice to make sure that the teachers and students are being devoted to using it. Progress will not occur if a strategy or practice is being half-heartedly used. One of the principals mentioned that any practice or strategy worth incorporating in the school is worth monitoring. Struggling principals cannot institute strategies and practices and then sit back and think that the practice will maintain itself. All three of the principals interviewed said at some point during the interview process that they had to work hard every day at observing what was happening with their instructional programs. Principals struggling to close the

achievement gap in their schools will have to be just as devoted to working hard and continuously thinking of ways to increase academic achievement just as these principals did. The statement that the principal of Rolling Hills Middle School made regarding what works in schools to improve academic achievement is instruction. He said that school improvement is not rocket science. If certain best practices are used in schools on a consistent basis, then the achievement of all students will show an increase. Principals struggling to close the achievement gap must decide that they will attend content area meetings on a regular basis. They must demand that teachers supply pacing guides and curriculum maps for every subject that they teach. They must require that teachers assess students often in order to determine what they know and what they do not know. Finally, they must develop professional learning communities within their schools so that teachers will begin to share and appreciate data for the benefits that it offers.

The long term implication of this study is that by the year 2014 all schools will have closed the achievement gap because principals will have begun to use and accept research-based best practices to improve student achievement. The short term implication of this study is that schools that have been struggling to close the achievement gap will begin to use the best practices and strategies outlined and then begin to see dramatic improvements in the achievement of all of its students.

## Recommendations

This researcher recommends that future researchers take the findings of this study and apply them to three middle schools that have been struggling to close the achievement gap and conduct a longitudinal study to determine the effects of these practices and strategies on student achievement in those schools.

## Dissemination

The National Middle School Association would be very interested in the results of this study because the results are beneficial to all of its members across the United States. The issue of the achievement gap is an interesting and puzzling one, so the researcher is confident that middle school principals will be interested in reading an article on the results of this study in the *Middle School Journal* to improve the achievement of all students in their schools.

Every school district across the US has a board of education that is very much interested in the academic achievement of the students in their district. *The American School Board Journal* is a publication that is circulated to every school board member in the United States. The results of this study could possibly influence a large number of school board members to support schools in their efforts to promote professional learning to improve student achievement and also make improvements in technology to be able to improve data collection especially in districts that have limited technology resources.

Other sources of dissemination will include the *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* and the *Principal*. The researcher plans to make contact with each of these publications by sending copies of the dissertation to them for their review.

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# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A

## LETTER TO MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Stacy E. Johnson
8138 North Links Drive
Covington, Georgia 30014

Dear,

I am a doctoral candidate at Georgia Southern University in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation. My dissertation is entitled: Closing the Minority Achievement Gap in Georgia Middle School: Principals' Perspectives. It is a study of selected Georgia middle school principals' perspectives of the practices and strategies that they use to close the minority achievement gap in their schools. Research indicates that the gap in achievement is most evident in the areas of reading and mathematics, and therefore these are the primary focus of this research.

I plan to interview three Georgia middle school principals that have been successful in closing the achievement gap in their schools. The term *successful*, in regards to this study, is defined as Georgia middle schools that have decreased the disparity in achievement between White and minority students to less than twenty percent. Based on these criteria, your school has been identified as one of these schools; thus, I would appreciate it very much if you would agree to allow me to interview you about your practices and strategies for helping your school to address the issue of low minority achievement.

A review of the Georgia Department of Education website indicates that your school has consistently shown promise in its efforts to close the achievement gap for several years now. I am interested in learning from you the things that you and your teachers are doing to achieve this success. It is my desire that when this study is complete, it can be used to assist other middle school principals who are seeking to close the minority achievement gap. I would like to assure you that the information that you provide in the interview will be used in a most professional manner. With your approval, the interview will be audio-taped so that I will be able to record your comments accurately for my data. You are also asked to participate in a follow-up interview, if it is necessary, to clarify answers that you provide in the initial interview.

I have enclosed a copy of the Informed Consent Form that you will be requested to sign at your interview. Your identity and that of your school will not be revealed in this research. Thank you in advance for your consideration and assistance in this study. If you have any questions concerning this study, please contact me at (Home) 770-787-9022, (Work) 706 –342-0556, or by email, at (stajohn@bellsouth.net). Upon your request, I would be extremely happy to share the results of the study.

Sincerely,

Stacy E. Johnson

# APPENDIX B

# PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

# PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

My name is Stacy Johnson, Assistant Principal for Student Affairs at Morgan County Middle School in Madison, Georgia. I am also a doctoral student in the College of Education at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia. I am conducting a study to determine Georgia middle school principals' perspectives of the practices and strategies used to close the minority achievement gap in reading and mathematics. Your perspectives of the strategies and practices that you use in these areas will be the focus of this study.

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to participate at all, or choose to stop your participation at any point in the research, without fear of penalty or negative consequences of any kind.

If you participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview session to answer questions relating to this topic. Your participation will take approximately 60 minutes. Your comments will be recorded on audiotape to accurately detail comments for research data. After the interview process has been completed the audio tapes will be stored at the residence of the researcher for one year, May 2006 – May 2007. The investigator and the faculty advisor will only have access to the audio tapes. All audio tapes will be destroyed after one calendar year.

Although studies have some degree of risk there is no potential of risk in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. You can ask questions about the research. The person in charge will answer your questions. Contact Stacy Johnson at 770-787–9022 with questions. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or the process of IRB approval, contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-486-7758.

Per your request you will be provided a copy of the findings from this study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. Additionally, a copy of the results of this research may be obtained by contacting the investigator at the address below:

Title of Project: Closing the Minority Achievement Gap in Georgia Middle Schools: Principals' Perspectives

Principal Investigator: Stacy E. Johnson, 8138 North Links Drive, Covington, GA 30014, 770-787-9022, sjohn100@georgiasouthern.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Meta Harris, Department of Leadership, Technology and Human Development, P.O. Box 8131, Statesboro, GA 30460-8131, 912-681-0275, myharris@georgiasouthern.edu

Although there are no personal benefits from your participation in this research your input will provide valuable information that can be used to assist middle school principals who are seeking to find ways to close the minority achievement gap in their schools.

I, _____, have read and understand the foregoing information explaining the purpose of this research and my rights and responsibilities as a subject. I also understand that I must be 18 years or older to consent to participate in this research study. My signature below designates my consent to participate in this research, according to the terms and conditions outlined above.

Participant Signature_____ Date_____

Print Name_____

The informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature_____ Date_____

# APPENDIX C

# IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participant Interview Questions

1. During (specific year) the achievement gap in your school was significantly narrowed. What things did you and your faculty do to narrow the gap during this particular year?

2. What activities are employed at your school to improve student performance in reading and mathematics, and does your school offer any additional programs to address the needs of students who are not meeting standards in other academic subjects as well?

3. What efforts do you take to ensure that minority students in your school are enrolled in challenging mathematics courses, and are improving their individual reading levels on a consistent basis throughout each school year?

4. What reading and mathematics programs are you currently using in your school, and how long have you used these programs?

5. Do you use CRCT data to improve student achievement, and how do you use this data to improve student achievement?

6. Do you meet with others to discuss low-performing student achievement data, and if so, who attends the meetings, what things are discussed in the meetings, and what solutions have resulted from these discussions?

7. How do you ensure that teachers have the necessary resources, time, instructional strategies, and research-based programs to help students who are performing poorly in school?

8. How do you involve parents of poorly performing minority students in helping their children to improve their academic performance?

9. Do you have any comments, suggestions, recommendations that you want to make to other educators who want to work towards eliminating the achievement gap between White and minority students?

# APPENDIX D

## IRB CONSENT LETTER

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Phone: 912-681-5465
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**To:** Stacy E. Johnson
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**CC:** Dr. Meta Harris, Faculty Advisor
P. O. Box 8131

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** June 20, 2006

**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered: **H06234**, and titled **"Closing the Minority Achievement Gap in Georgia Middle Schools: Principals' Perspectives"**, it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

***Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.***

**This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter.** If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol, you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,

Julie B. Cole

Julie B. Cole
Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs