

1-1-2009

# A Case Study Of Reform At One Urban High School

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A CASE STUDY OF REFORM AT ONE URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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By

Linda N. Sorenson

August 2009

Advisor: Dr. Susan Korach

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Degree Date: August 2009

### Abstract

Our schools in America are in crisis. At particular risk are poor and minority students who attend high schools in urban areas. With so many urban high schools failing, reformers have sought ways to improve schools and increase student achievement. Effort toward urban high school reform is occurring across the United States. What happens to a school during the process of reform?

The purpose of this case study was to describe the significant events and changes that characterize one urban high school's reform efforts and analyze stakeholders' perceptions about the reform themes found in the researcher literature on high school reform: leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture.

The results of this descriptive qualitative single case study (Yin, 2003) describe lessons learned from the reform efforts at Star High School. The researcher chronologically organized documents and archival records and described the events and changes made during the reform efforts. The researcher also interviewed ten participants in the reform who represented all stakeholders. The role of the researcher was that of participant-observer.

Findings revealed that the reform events were implementations of a plethora of programs and strategies rather than a systemic effort of reform. The efforts to build a coalition of support amongst all stakeholders resulted in a political struggle for power and

control. This struggle derailed the reform efforts at Star High School. The findings also revealed that the multiplicity of programs and strategies, led to a lack of consistency and cohesive focus needed to guide teachers toward effective instruction. The struggles for power and lack of focus resulted in a culture of blame and politics. The passion that all stakeholders shared about providing a better education for its students was compromised by power struggles and it turned into an emotionally painful experience. This study portrayed the complexity of high school reform and informed leaders of the realities and potential pitfalls of leading school reform in a politically charged environment.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wonderful family for their support and encouragement through this educational process. Heather and Sarah, you are a wonderful gift from God – thank you for your love and support in this educational endeavor. Thank you to my colleagues in the PhD program, particularly our study group; Linda, Carla, Ann, Bill, Will and John - thank you for the collaboration in studying for the comprehensive exams and dinner meetings to encourage the completion of our dissertations. Thank you, wonderful professors, for your patience and guidance through this awesome learning experience. Dr. Susan Korach, thank you for your advice, guidance and support in writing the dissertation, Dr. Ellie Katz, thank you for your encouragement, Dr. Kent Seidel, thank you for helping us through “boot camp” and Mary Stansbury for serving as an outside chair for the dissertation defense. Lastly, thank you Mary Sue Brown for your technical assistance in formatting the dissertation.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Our schools in America are in crisis. At particular risk are poor and minority students who attend high schools in urban areas. In his book *Amazing Grace*, Jonathan Kozol reports indicators of high school failure: “I count the graduating class,” writes City University professor Michelle Fine, in speaking of one of these segregated high schools – ‘a total of 200 in a school of approximately 3,200 (1995, p. 150-151).’” In *Ordinary Resurrections* (2001), Kozol reveals that some of the educators that work with students boldly talked about their low expectations for their students: “...these children will not be lawyers or psychiatrists – they’ll be lucky to get jobs as medical assistants or sanitation workers. We owe it to these children not to let the doors be closed before they’re even old enough to know how many rooms there are (Kozol, 2001, p. 290).”

Jeff Howard (2003) asserts, in his report “Still at Risk,” that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) presents evidence that staff in inner city public schools hold low expectations and believe that poor students do not have the capacity to learn at the level of affluent students, this belief restricts poor students to a life of poverty. To escape generational poverty, Ruby Payne (1996) stresses the importance of an education. An adult in the school who takes an interest in a student, such as a teacher, mentor, coach or counselor, plays a vital role in helping students of poverty succeed. Payne recommends that student-adult relationships and encouragement

are vital in an inner city student's success in school (1996). The importance of an education is clear, but national graduation rates for 2001 show distressing news for our high school students, especially minority students: 72% of White students, 52% of Latino students, and 51% of African American students completed high school in 2001 (Greene, J.P. & Forster, G. 2003). Statistics from Strong American Schools (2008) reveal the need for dramatic change in the American high school:

- 1.2 million students drop out of high school every year
- 1/4 of high school students do not graduate on time
- 2/3 of jobs require a college education
- Three out of ten students and college freshmen repeat high school courses
- High school graduates don't have needed skills
- The United States ranks 20<sup>th</sup> in graduation rates – 40 years ago we were 1st

(Retrieved December 14, 2008, from <http://www.strongamericanschools.org>.)

All of this research provides evidence that urban high schools are in trouble.

With so many urban high schools failing, reformers have sought ways to change the way schools operate to educate their students. High School reform is bringing about performance-based accountability for not only students, but for teachers and leaders as well. Some reform efforts seem to be working. In her paper, *The Power to Change*, Chenoweth (2005) describes a high school in New York with 75% minority population that has 100% of its seniors graduating and 97% of those students going on to college. A culture of high expectations leads to success for students and teachers. A strong emphasis on instruction with rich teacher dialogue focused on improving the lessons, questioning

techniques and student engagement are practices within this high achieving school (Chenowith, 2005). Increasingly, stories of successful urban high schools are beginning to appear across the nation.

In Atlanta, the Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) Model placed an emphasis on instruction and helped students achieve more through continuous monitoring of student growth. This district of 55,000 students, with a population consisting of 89% Black, 7% White and 3% Hispanic and over 76% eligible and reduced lunch continuously monitored student learning in the classroom. Instruction focused on standards and curriculum and district personnel carefully monitored its efforts to improve performance of its students. High schools students enrolled in higher-level courses and received support to ensure success. In 2001, the Atlanta schools saw an increase of 25% in PTA (Parent Teacher Association) membership. In addition, the high school dropout rate decreased to 32%, which was a 4% decrease from 1990 (Vail & Knowles, 2000, as cited in Reed-Williams, 2007).

Boston Public Schools followed a reform model that provided high schools with literacy and math coaches as well as master teachers that assisted teams of teachers in improving their skills. They facilitated the development of Six Essentials that involved personalized instruction for students, improved learning through assessments and analysis of data, democratic policies, developing partnerships with the community, smaller schools and classrooms with equitable outcomes for all students. Boston Public Schools enrolled 62,858 students as of 2002 and included a population of 48% Black, 28% Hispanic, 14% White, and 10% other. Of those students, 62% were eligible for free

lunch and 9% were eligible for reduced lunch. Strong leadership, professional development for staff and tutoring brought student performance up to grade level.

“Students demonstrated statewide gains in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System exams in nearly every grade and subject (p.44)” and the reform strategies reduced the drop out rate (Vail & Knowles, 2000, as cited in Reed-Williams, 2007).

Houston urban schools focused high school reform efforts on core curriculum through Project CLEAR (Clarifying Learning to Enhance Achievement Results).

Houston’s school system included 210,000 students of which 56% were Hispanic, 31% Black, 9% White and 4% other while 79% of students were eligible free and reduced lunches. Their goals were to raise student achievement, lower the dropout rate and decentralize the school system. Strategies to improve achievement included increasing parental involvement, tutoring for students, clear expectations for teaching and learning, assessments and integration of learning across the curriculum. In 2001, the district received the Broad Prize for Urban Education and the Council of Great City Schools for significantly increasing student achievement (as cited by Reed-Williams, 2007).

These examples of successful reform efforts included school-wide initiatives to improve student achievement. Strong leadership, community and parental involvement, a culture of high expectations, support through literacy and math coaches, and a focus on improving instruction while monitoring student growth were strategies used in raising levels of student achievement.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The examples of high achieving urban high schools are the exception rather than the rule. Effort toward urban high school reform is occurring across the United States. Vail and Knowles (2002, as cited in Reed-Williams), investigated urban high schools that were successful in “raising test scores, narrowing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates and restoring the faith of their parents and community members in public education (Vail and Knowles, 2002, p. 1).” Studies like Vail’s and Knowles’ (2002) report that there are examples of successful high school reform. Most of these studies are retroactive and investigate demonstrated success. What happens to a school during the process of reform? What are the perceptions of stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members and alumni) as they go through the reform process? These questions have guided the development of this study to document the reform efforts at one urban high school. The researcher wanted to learn the inside story of reform efforts and selected a high school that had been the subject of intense scrutiny by the community, school district and local media. There were varying perspectives on the success of the reform efforts at this school. The researcher hoped that listening to the perspectives of stakeholders along with documenting the events of the reform would lead to an understanding of the impact of the school reform process.

### *Description of Context*

One urban district, Galaxy School District located in a western state, experienced closing a high school due to poor academic performance. At the time of this study, Galaxy School District had ten traditional high schools and eleven charter high schools.

As of 2009 two of those high schools were rated as excellent on the School Accountability Report, six were rated as average, eleven were rated low and one was rated unsatisfactory. Since the implementation of *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* in 2001, one of these high schools, Star High School, has held a low rating due to unsatisfactory or low-test scores. The results from Star High School's 2002 NAEP (National Assessment of Education Progress) indicated that gaps were widening among twelfth grade students in reading: 48% of Black students, 41% of Latino students and 22% of White students were below basic proficiency levels in reading. NAEP also reported that 70% Black students, 58% Latino and 27% White students were below basic proficiency in math for 2002 (*The education trust*, 2004, December presentation to Star High School Staff and Reform Committee).

In 2004, Star High School started down a path of reform, guided by the research on effective high school reform. Star High School had been losing hundreds of students every year to the streets:

Chronically low test scores, attendance, inconsistent discipline, tolerance for mediocrity, high teacher turnover, five principals in seven years, a culture of resistance and negativity are some of the issues that needed to be addressed to change the culture at Star High School (Griego, T., 2007, February 26. Local newspaper).

In the 2003 report by the Galaxy School District's Department of Planning and Research, 60% of Star High School graduates enrolled in college were required to take remediation in math, reading and writing, and 70% of the students enrolled in high school indicated

that they wanted to attend post-secondary opportunities after graduation from high school (Summary of Demographics of Star High School, 2002-2003).

Star High School's student population in 2003 was 1,525 with an attendance rate of 76.9% and graduation rate of 76.8%. Statistics revealed that of Star High School students 68.7% were on free and reduced lunch, 19.5% were limited English proficient, 11% Special Education students and 17% Gifted and Talented students. The ethnic breakdown of the student population was 82.9% Hispanic, 11.8% White, 2.3% American Indian, 2.3% Black and 0.6% Asian (School Improvement Plan, 2003-04).

Barriers to high achievement included the low attendance rate of 76.9% in 2002-2003, high attrition rate with 81.9% students transferring out of Star High school or transferring in, an English Language Acquisition rate of 19.5%, and a 76.8% graduation rate. From 2002-2003, 276 out of 1521 students were suspended, and the annual state assessments revealed low numbers of students scoring proficient or above. All of these statistics indicated the need for the reform of Star High School and identified barriers to the academic achievement of its students (School Improvement Plan, 2003-2004).

Star High School was a school rated low by the state's accountability measures. Evidence of low reading, writing and math scores on the State Student Assessment Program tests; poor attendance; low graduation rates; and the number of students required to take remedial courses in college prompted the school, district, community, alumni, and staff of Star High School to look for change in the way it was educating its students.

In an effort to improve academic achievement, Star High School began to explore reform efforts that would connect students, families, school personnel, and community.

Student surveys, community and business surveys and community meetings with various parent and community groups gathered data to launch the school's reform. The primary concerns of each of these groups were:

- The low number of students who demonstrated educational proficiency.
- The need for better communication between the school and families.
- The need for instructional differentiation in teaching strategies.
- The need for a more supportive school climate for students, teachers and families (Galaxy public schools, 2003-2004, Star high school, Comprehensive school reform progress report).

In January 2004, plans for creating a reform committee began to take shape; the Star High School Collaborative School Committee (CSC) laid the groundwork for improving the education of its students by seeking to improve student achievement, increase graduation rates, increase retention rates and decrease drop out rates.

The researcher organized the events of the reform processes into three distinct stages: Pre-Reform – January 2004-June 2004, Reform – June 2004-December 2006 and Redesign - February 2007-June 2008. The pre-reform stage consisted of data collection, the identification of the key initiatives for reform, and the formation of the Reform Committee. The implementation and evaluation of the major initiatives of the reform occurred during the reform stage. Concern about the slow progress toward the reform goals launched the redesign reform stage. Each of these stages has a rich set of events that provide a detailed description of the processes during this reform.



### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the events and perspectives of stakeholders during the reform at Star High School. The results of this case study provide school reformers with an authentic story of potential pitfalls and successes. The perceptions of stakeholders from the three stages of reform provided multiple perspectives about the events of the reform. An analysis of the literature on high school reform revealed four common reform strategies: leadership, students' academic preparedness for high school, instruction and school culture. These strategies were explicitly present in the *Blueprint for Reform* at Star High School. These reform strategies guided the creation of interview questions for the stakeholders. An analysis of the chronological events and perceptions of multiple stakeholders revealed lessons for reformers.

The role of the researcher was to describe the significant changes and events that happened during the reform of Star High School and to analyze the perceptions of stakeholders who experienced the reform during its three stages. The principal granted permission for the researcher to gather and copy documents from the reform files. The chronological order of documents established a timeline of the reform efforts. Interviewed were ten stakeholders involved in the different stages of the reform effort to determine their perceptions of the reform strategies of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction, and school culture.

The researcher expected that results of interviews would identify illustrations of the reform strategies found in the research literature: leadership, students' academic

readiness for high school, instruction and school culture. However, the findings from the interviews revealed that struggles for power and control, politics and blame characterized the reform and impeded the effectiveness of any reform strategies. Dissension and multiplicity of programs led to a fractured academic program and community. Modest gains of the school state assessment scores occurred in 2005-2006, but dropped to low levels in 2006 – 2008 as the political pressures intensified.

### *The Importance of the Study*

Students in low income, urban settings need a rigorous academic education, in order to have the chance to succeed in our democratic society. Without an intellectually based education, they will not be able to function with freedom in our society (Sizer, 2004). In 1949, W.E.B. DuBois asserted, “Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.1).” The William T. Grant Foundation (1988) found that high school dropouts have less than one chance in three of finding a job – a job that will earn less than half of what they could have earned twenty years ago (Darling-Hammond, 1997). *A Nation at Risk* (1984) asserted that to keep our leadership in world markets, learning is the investment required for our students to succeed in the information age in which we now live. Reform goals of today “...call for all students to master rigorous content, learn how to learn, pursue productive employment, and compete in a global community” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 23).

Five years have passed since the initial call for reform at Star High School. Urban high schools across the United States are engaged in similar school-wide reform efforts.

The story of the reform at Star High School could identify some potential pitfalls and successes for other participants in urban high school reform.

### *The Research Questions*

The following questions guided this study:

What happens to a school during the process of reform?

1. What were the significant events and changes during the reform of one urban high school during each stage of its reform?
2. What are stakeholders' perceptions about leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture during the reform efforts at one urban high school?

When arriving at Star High School in August 2004, the researcher became interested in the reform process that was taking place at Star High School. The Reform Committee included students, parents, community members, alumni, teachers and administrators, creating a broad constituency of stakeholders that were interested in improving the academic achievement of its students. To include the entire community in reform was exciting; perhaps this particular reform effort would be successful and could be a model to other high school reformers. Although the potential for "greatness" was there, politics and inter-group relations negatively impacted the potential of the reform.

### *Organization of the Study*

This dissertation is five chapters in length. Chapter One contains the introduction, statement of the problem, description of the context, purpose of the study, importance of

the study, the research questions and organization of the study. Chapter Two includes the introduction, a review of the literature of high school reform in America and reform strategies in areas of leadership, students' academic preparedness for high school, instruction and school culture. Chapter Three contains the methodology, the research questions, and the rationale for qualitative research. Also included in Chapter Three are the setting, demographics, the role of the researcher, interview code, procedures, confidentiality, protocol, bias, data analysis and limitations. Chapter Four includes the overview, the research questions, the chronological events and changes during all stages of the reform, perceptions of stakeholders and conclusion. Chapter Five includes the purpose of the study, and the discussion. Chapter Five also includes the purpose of the study, the discussion of findings, the conclusion, limitations of the study, recommendations for school reformers, and recommendations for further research.

## Chapter Two

### Review of the Literature

#### *Introduction*

High School Reform is systemic change that brings about performance-based accountability (Elmore, 2004). Reform at Star High School came from external and internal forces. New expectations and requirements replaced existing procedures and policies (Conley, 1993). This literature review gives a brief overview of high school reform in America and focuses on the reform strategies of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture. This review addresses leadership styles, student grouping and instruction in high school reform learning theory, learning styles, brain based learning and assessment. The term school culture is used in this study as an encompassing term for climate, culture and engagement. Nurturing school culture is vital, particularly its importance and influence on high school reform.

#### *High School Reform in America*

“Learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the ‘information age’ we are entering (*A Nation at Risk*, 1984, p. 7).” As the authors of *A Nation at Risk* feared, schools have not kept up with the expectations of the public; rather, the education of students has stagnated and they are not producing to the expected learning outcomes, graduating from “high school ready neither for college nor for work” (*A Nation at Risk*, 1984, p. 15). Some politically influential people and others believe that “schools are

inept, their students ill prepared for life” and that the nation will be unable to compete in today’s world economy (Sizer, 1992). Ineffective schools demonstrate poor academic performance, absenteeism, truancy, suspension/expulsion rates and student’s lack of preparation for the academic rigor of college or work (*A Nation at Risk*, 1984). In a study by Hertzog, et al (1996), indicators of potential drop outs include the number of absences, low grades, difficulty in adjusting to high school and a lack of connectedness (Capstick, 2007).

Peggie Klekotka, program associate for Learning Point Associates, states that high schools in the United States need to improve. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) tested more than 250,000 fifteen year olds from 40 countries; students from the United States placed twenty-eighth in mathematics and twenty-ninth in problem solving. Ms. Klekotka recommends that a change needs to occur in relationships between teachers and students as well as improvement of instructional practice in teaching students how to think and engage in intellectual dialogue (Klekotka, 2005).

With the information age that currently exists, the work force will require more technical skills and knowledge than workers have needed in the past. In Ernest Boyer’s book, *The Basic School*, (1995) Peter F. Drucker asserts that knowledge has become our most important resource and graduates will require a high level of literacy, technical competence and become lifelong learners. Workers of today will probably change occupations two to three times during their careers. High school dropouts will have

difficulty in finding jobs and earn half as much as high school graduates (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

The authors of *The Shopping Mall High School* (1985) studied comprehensive high schools from different locations in the United States to find the themes that influence school culture. Research included observations, individual and group interviews in private and public high schools of English, Social Studies and Science classes at the low, middle and high levels. Elements that emerged from their study included the horizontal curriculum, vertical curriculum, extra curriculum and the services curriculum. The multitude of courses offered to students in the comprehensive high schools was an attempt to reach the diverse learning styles and intellectual capabilities of its students, creating the shopping mall effect. Advanced Placement courses followed a sequence of learning, while regular courses did not. In addition, the researchers found themes that included student engagement, instruction and interactions between students and teachers, particularly for students in the middle; they observed that the students in the middle were often the ones who were “un-special.”

High school reform has taken on entrepreneurial qualities in response to a changing environment. The change required of today’s high schools is the transformation of our education system to more effectively educate our children and prepare them for college and work (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Policymakers need to make decisions that are learner centered, meet the needs of diverse students, their learning styles and engage them in challenging content (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Susan Fuhman in *A Nation Reformed* (2003) contends that the quality of education needs to improve, particularly instruction.

In his study, Gary Liebold (2000) found that the degree of bonding to teachers and peers determined the effectiveness of the school as perceived by students. He asserts that the perceptions of the students are critical in the reform efforts of a school.

Reform efforts at a low-income urban high school in California attempted to increase student participation as studied by Mitra (2002). By strengthening student ownership, participation would aid students in feeling valued, teach decision-making, responsibility and prepare them for adult roles. The students felt that the reputation of being a “ghetto school” pervaded the culture and climate of this particular high school.

Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) found that students in restructured, democratic schools are achieving at high levels and graduating with more skills than traditional schools. It is important that teachers know students on an individual and personal basis as well as use inquiry in their learning. Vanderslice (2004) found that students perceive their teachers as non-caring when they receive little individual attention with their teachers (Capstick, 2008). When students have relationships with their teachers, Croninger and Lee (2001a; 2001b) found that students are less likely to drop out of high school (Capstick, 2008). Schools that have a strong sense of community enhance student self-esteem, sense of worth and competence; those students also have better attendance and achievement (Leibold, 2000).

Howard Gardner proposes that each child receive an individually centered education constructed around the student interests, abilities and accommodate the varied



learning styles of each learner (Gardner, 1983, 1993; Zemelman, et al., 1998). In the forward to *Breaking Ranks II*, Theodore Sizer emphasizes the needs for student personalization and the ending of student anonymity (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004). Dennis Littky and Samantha Grabelle speak about learning: In education we want to create a love for learning while becoming a life-long learner, “learning is personal” (Littky, 2004, p. 8), and rather than being competitive, learning should be cooperative (Littky, 2004; Palmer, 1998); learning should also teach the learners how to think and problem solve (Littky, 2004).

In her case study on urban high school reform, Cone (2000) found that staff development is vital for successful reform; implementation of change requires time, discussion, reflection and adjustment when necessary. Training teachers to be reform leaders with support from a strong principal was also vital in sustaining change (Cone, 2000). Schools are service organizations and students are the consumers, with communication being the key in determining success or failure. Building relationships with families involves two-way communication between the home and school. Marzano, et al (2005), found that if schools can maintain four years of reform, the years that follow result in dramatic improvement.

In *Breaking Ranks II*, principal, Tim Westerberg made several changes to improve the education of students at Littleton High School. Strategies implemented during the five-year reform effort included the personalization of student education through advisement periods, content standards and elimination of remedial classes. Other strategies implemented included International Baccalaureate (IB), constructivist learning,

modified block scheduling, and staff development for improvement of instruction. Advanced Placement (AP) courses were increased, a freshman academy, and the establishment of learning communities. Graduation requirements based on performance rather than Carnegie Units of seat time were and a senior year plan to assist students in transition to life after high school (NASSP, 2004).

### *Leadership in High School Reform*

Leadership is vital in any organization, particularly in education. Strong, effective, thoughtful leadership will have a significant impact on the lives of students and their achievement. Hoy & Hoy emphasize that the role of a principal is that of instructional leader (2003). Leadership must develop a school culture that supports the curriculum (Glatthorn, 1994). Tirozzi (Owings et al, 2003) contends that the role of principal has changed from being a school operations manager to that of instructional leader who is directly responsible for student achievement. The principal has a direct influence on student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005; Marczely, 2001). Leadership affects academic success by increasing opportunities for the students and building capacity at the school (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). The principal is a “teacher of teachers (Owings et al, 2003, p. 62)” who needs to have emotional, physical and intellectual energy, strong focus and people skills. The leader must possess a great deal of willpower and is a teacher who fosters learning for everyone (Senge, 1990).

Robert Evans (2000) speaks of the leader who builds trust by leading with consistency, confidence, integrity and authenticity, and driven by personal ethics, vision and a belief in others. Margaret Wheatley (2000) encourages leaders to support diversity,

creativity, a commitment to do the right thing, and create self-managed teams that convene often to gain clarity. If people work together, they can accomplish much more than one person can do alone. Shared leadership, cooperation and teamwork, ongoing professional development as well as problem solving and decision making by using of data are essential to effective schools (Glatthorn, 1994).

Richard Elmore advocates the following principles of leadership, which include improving instructional practice and performance, continuous learning, modeling, expertise, creativity in learning, accountability and capacity building (2004). Jim Collins asserts that transformation of an organization occurs through disciplined people, analytical, intuitive thought and action with a high degree of consistency (Collins, 2001; Ubben et al, 2001). Jim Collins in *Good to Great* (2001) also espouses getting the right people on board, confronting the brutal facts, and operating with simplicity that reflects deep understanding of people, thoughts and actions, a culture of discipline and carefully selected technologies that will aid in getting work done. Level five leaders direct their ambition to the organization that they are leading rather than themselves. There must be a great deal of rigor in bringing an organization from good to great by bringing in the right people and always looking toward change in efforts for improvement (Collins, 2001; Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Ubben et al, 2001).

By inviting others to share responsibility, a leader can lead a school through effective change (Schlechty, 2000). Rapid learning takes place when people are responsible for their actions (Senge, 1990). Thomas Sergiovanni (2000) asserts that leadership is based on moral authority that “taps what is important to people and

motivates them (p. 270)” and involves stewardship that is based on a deep commitment to values. Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) also assert that the school leader is not only a leader and manager, but also a “colleague, teacher developer, keeper of the vision and designer of learning opportunities (p. 6).” When personnel changes are necessary, the leader should act on it without hesitation and put the best people on the opportunities, not the problems (Collins, 2001).

Good results come by making good decisions, leading with vision and creating a strong culture of excellence, which depends on truth and facts (Collins, 2001). In leading, Collins recommends using questions, dialogue, a search for understanding, learning and monitoring. The goal should be to build something great with the right people on board, rigor and use of data to drive decisions and opportunities.

### *Leadership Styles*

Team leadership is a leadership style that relies on the organized group working together to reach common goals. Team leaders serve as facilitators and managers of interpersonal relationships by developing others (Peters, 1994). Both leaders and subordinates collaborate in a way that raises motivation and instills high expectations for all. Subordinates are empowered, nurtured and changed as they go through the change process (Northouse, 2004; Senge, 1990).

Transformational leadership shares power, includes charisma and visionary leadership by transforming and inspiring individuals, encouraging the involvement of others, and possesses the courage to do what is necessary to pursue the vision (Northouse, 2004; Senge, 1990; Marzano et al, 2005; Ubben et al, 2001). In reforming our schools,

transformational leaders are vital in keeping the vision in the forefront, inspiring people to persevere and do the necessary hard work to attain excellence until it is embedded in the culture of the school (Peters, 1994). By asking questions, a leader can reframe situations that help people see things in new ways, thus being more effective (Kotter, 2002).

Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) recommend 21 leadership responsibilities that are researched-based and shown to have a positive effect on student achievement:

- Affirmation through celebration of accomplishments
- Change through challenging the status quo
- Contingent rewards for individual accomplishments
- Communication with all stakeholders,
- Developing culture
- Discipline
- Flexibility through adaptive leadership behaviors
- Focus on sustaining improvement
- Strong ideals and beliefs
- Input through collaborative decision making
- Intellectual stimulation through effective and current practices in education
- Involvement in curriculum, instruction and assessment with administrative support
- Knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment with use of best practices

- Monitoring and evaluating through feedback
- Optimism of the school leadership
- Orderly school environment
- Outreach through advocacy to stakeholders
- Relationships with staff
- Resources
- Situational awareness
- Visibility

Leadership requires practicing skills to influence others, goal setting, direction, and high expectations, which lead to high performance (Ubben et al, 2001). Warren Blank states that mastery in leadership manifests itself by a true change in yourself (2001); we re-create ourselves when we are learning (Senge, 1990).

Michael Fullan suggests that effective leaders want to make a difference and possess a deep sense of moral purpose. To improve society, educators must create change by having personal vision, inquiry, mastery and collaboration (Fullan, 1993). Leaders must possess a great sense of self-awareness that leads to self-confidence (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), take decisive action, open communication, encourage others to participate in decision making, build rapport, ask questions, match talents and personalities, and communicate by clarifying expectations (Blank, 2001; Gardner, 2000; Murphy, 2000). Leaders influence others to willingly follow, develop others as leaders and gain commitment through motivation and trust (Blank, 2001; Peters, 1994).

Dufour & Eaker (1998) stress the importance of communication in transforming a school: “effective communication requires constant repetition (p. 115).” When speaking it is important to tell people what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you have told them (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Leaders listen to their inner voice, are passionate about what they do and lead with a laser-like focus for the vision. Failure is an opportunity for growth, to learn from life’s experiences and learn from the mistakes of others (Blank, 2001; Peters, 1994; Brown & Cornwall, 2000; Senge, 1990).

The vision is the what, the mission (purpose) is the why and core values drive the daily decision making of how we want to act (Senge, 1990). Leadership involves having a plan for the future, striving to make things better (Blank, 2001) and removing the factors that limit growth (Senge, 1990). A leader evolves, has a vision for the future of the organization, a mission, which gives direction, and values that drive behavior, including establishing culture and celebrations (Blank, 2001; Bolman & Deal, 2002; Gardner, 2000; Marsh, 2000).

Authentic leaders are transparent, collaborators, use honest dialogue and negotiating skills (Palmer, 1998). Dufour & Eaker (1998) recommend that the leader focus on behavior rather than beliefs. Tom Peters (1994) tells us that, “behavior changes attitude (p. 72).” Buckingham and Clifton (2001) recommend that when leading, one should remember that each person has unique talents that contribute to the organization and the greatest area of growth should be in a person’s strengths, not weaknesses. An individual’s strength is a combination of talent, knowledge and skills.

### *Students' Academic Preparedness for High School*

The ninth grade year is critical in determining success and graduation according to the study by Legters and Kerr (2000). Ninth grade students transition from a nurturing, personal environment to a bureaucratic system with new rules and expectations (Capstick, 2008). Cone (2000) found that tutorials for ninth graders and a program called Freshman Foundations assisted students in college and career exploration. Staff rated ninth grade achievement scores as “low,” “middle” or “high” and then heterogeneously grouped students to assure equal distribution.

Educational consultant, Patricia Floriello (2009), reiterated the difficulty of students transitioning to the high school environment due to the size of the physical building, new rules and culture. Course requirements are overwhelming to students who have come from life in elementary or middle school. Dr. Floriello recommends the following interventions to aid in this period of transition: A transition team to identify at risk students by monitoring grades and attendance, academies, advisory times, personalization and ongoing communication with the family (Retrieved 1/3/09 from <http://ezinearticles.com>).

Wheelock and Miao (2005) contend that failing ninth graders create a bottleneck when they fail to progress to tenth grade and that it directly affects the declining graduation rate in high schools. They recommend using data for school improvement and strengthening the bonds between ninth graders and the adults in the high school setting. Students felt that teachers cared about them as individuals because of the small learning communities that made them feel welcome in the high school environment. Support



services through academic support, summer school for incoming ninth graders, direct instruction in study skills and community involvement were strategies for engaging ninth grade students in the high school.

How a student transitions to high school determines their success for future educational experiences. Urban, high-poverty schools experience forty percent attrition, while low-poverty schools experience twenty seven percent attrition. One failing grade per semester is an indicator that a student is at risk. A recommended intervention is the creation of ninth grade academies (National high school center. Retrieved January 3, 2009 from: <http://www.betterhighschools.org>).

### *Student Grouping*

Heterogeneous grouping of three or four students aids in cooperative learning. In her study of fourteen years of reform efforts at an urban high school, Joan Cone (2000) found that the heterogeneous grouping of students was effective in increasing student achievement. Likewise, Leibold (2000) discovered that tracking students harmed their achievement. Cone (2000) found that un-tracking increases a sense of community among students, ends institutional inequities and allows rich insights in problem solving. She also advocates for common time built into the daily schedule for teacher dialogue and planning; the block schedule allowed teachers to see fewer students during the day and more time to intensely study a subject (Cone, 2000). The Education Trust (Rorie, 2008) advises that all students benefit from heterogeneous grouping.

In her study of the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program at a middle-class, public school district, Linda Rorie's research (2008) showed that

tracking is inequitable and that students of poverty and minority groups are disproportionately placed into lower tracks, preventing them from higher placement opportunities. Tutoring and AVID programs provide the needed support to students, especially those of low socio-economic and minority status. In her research, Rorie found that creating a personalized learning environment, not allowing students to become invisible, assisting students in developing a plan for their success in learning, providing tutoring and personal adult advocates, were strategies that allowed students to achieve success in high school (Rorie, 2008).

The writing skills that take place in AVID and other classes enabled students to develop the process of thinking through their writing. Higher-level questioning and inquiry helps students access prior learning and construct new knowledge. The use of collaborative and active learning and along with Costa's questioning techniques also aids students in higher level thinking (Rorie, 2008).

#### *Instruction in High School Reform*

Parker Palmer recommends, "A healthy school displays a love for learning and the learner (Palmer, 1998, p. 90)." Hoy and Hoy reiterate, "Schools are about teaching and learning, while the barometer of school reform is the focus on student learning (Hoy & Hoy, 2003)." Gordon Cawelti (Owings et al., 2003) asserts that reform must result in the improvement of instruction for students. "To think well, one needs to practice. Going to school is practicing to use one's mind well (Sizer, 1992)."

In his book *Schools That Learn* (2000), Peter Senge compares learning to the Chinese characters that mean to study and practice constantly; he suggests that when

those letters merge, a meaning for learning is “mastery of the way of self-improvement (Senge, 2000, p. 11).” Students of today are required to learn how to compete in a global economy through rigorous content, know about themselves and how they learn, as well as seek productive employment through discovering their strengths and passions (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Senge, 2000).

In her study of one urban high school, Reed-Williams (2007) found that accountability in monitoring student learning was vital in raising student achievement. The principal visited classrooms, required learning plans from teachers to improve student performance, heterogeneously grouped students and tested students to measure academic progress. Curriculum was a major focus with the use of student inquiry in constructing knowledge. Teaching to high standards through focus on lesson plans and building relationships between students and teachers created a positive learning environment (Reed-Williams, 2007)

### *Curriculum*

The principal serves as the curriculum leader of a school; when planning curriculum, Glatthorn (2000) recommends that curriculum is research-based, has depth for greater understanding and retention, is complex in building problem-solving skills, meaningful in building essential skills and knowledge, sequential and connected to previous knowledge, and integrated among other subjects. Teachers are the change agents in the classroom and have a profound influence on their students (Espinoza, 2006). When teachers collaborate to be more effective with instruction, students become more successful in their learning (Espinoza, 2006).

Allan Glatthorn (1994) recommends aligning classroom instruction to the curriculum guides, the supported taught and tested curriculum along with resource materials. According to Bruer (1993), the improvement of schools should involve changing the curriculum, raising expectations, implementing site-based management, increasing school, teacher and student accountability and allow school choice.

Instructional planning includes setting learning goals, monitoring student progress and measuring the achievement of those goals. Standards give a framework for the curriculum development. In *Succeeding with Standards* (2001), Carr et al, tell us that, “standards are a balanced, coherent articulation of expectations for student learning (Carr et al, 2001, p. 19).” Standards provide the framework, curriculum includes the “what” of student learning, and assessments determine the learning by the student (Carr et al, 2001). The use of data and learning in context is critical in determining whether student learning is taking place (Littky, 2004; Gardner, 1993). Data is also used to determine changes in teaching strategies to improve student learning (NASSP, 2004; Carr et al, 2001).

Keeping abreast of new findings in educational research is necessary in meeting needs of today’s students in this rapidly changing world. Curriculum mapping, first created by Fenwick English and further developed by Heidi Jacobs, links the curriculum to the standards and brings teachers together in designing curriculum by asking three questions: “Who is doing what? How does our work align with our goals? Are we operating efficiently and effectively?” By meeting together on a regular basis, teachers adjust curriculum maps to meet the needs of students, check for alignment to standards, establish timelines, and determine assessments (English & Steffy, 2001).

John Dewey had a vision for the schooling of children:

All school subjects should have meaning and connect to the world in a natural way...Teaching methods should stress active and engaged learning, focus on the interests of the student, and encompass the emotional side of the child (Altenbaugh, 2003, p. 191).

Jeff Howard advocates that teachers expect proficiency from all students and use data to drive teaching strategies and curriculum, so that students can reach their maximum potential. He expresses it best when he says, “you are not just born smart – you can get smart by applying effective effort (Howard, 2003 p. 81).” Teachers can assist students in learning higher order thinking skills by asking questions, using conversation and collaboration in the classroom (Sizer, 1992).

Parker Palmer asserts that, “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher (Palmer, 1998, p. 10).” Good teaching practices and sensitivity to students result in effective teaching (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Japanese teaching practices place an emphasis on the classroom lessons and their continuous improvement (Sergiovanni & Starrett, 2002; Wiggins et al, 1998). Sizer recommends that teachers vary ways of instruction, be clear about goals and communicate expectations to their students (1992).

Practicing, modeling, think time, feedback and debriefing are effective tools in the teaching and learning process (Marzano et al, 2001; Wiggins, et al, 1998).By examining student work together teachers can collaborate on improving instruction. Research on best practice includes inquiry, integrated learning, collaborative learning in small groups,

expressing learning through writing and demonstration, authentic real world learning and assessing learning through reflection (Glatthorn, 1994).

Ted Sizer (2004) recommends that teachers provide fewer answers while allowing students to search for answers. Senge (2000) and Wiggins et al (1998) recommend that teachers practice the art of inquiry. By focusing on how kids think, and restructuring the school day to include large blocks of time to allow for in-depth learning, teachers will enhance the learning experience for students. Teachers assist the student in learning, but the worker in the school needs to be the student. Ted Sizer informs us that we have not asked enough of our students; “the focus of high school should be on the use of the mind (Sizer, 2004, p. 174).” Without realizing it, we learn all of the time, and as Robert Frost said, “education is...hanging around until you’ve caught on (Sizer, 2004, p. 151).”

Wiggins & McTighe recommend that teachers plan by using three stages of backward design:

1. Determine the evidence that leads to the desired results
2. Plan the instructional strategies to obtain the desired results

(Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p. 9)

By working smarter, instead of harder, teachers can be more effective in planning the learning for students. A student demonstrates understanding of learning when he can: Explain, interpret, apply, see in perspective, demonstrate empathy and reveal self-knowledge (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Sizer emphasized that work for students be personalized to achieve maximum learning (2004). Concept mapping is an effective tool to help students organize and

prioritize their learning. Sizer (2004) also asserts that school reform needs to include how students learn. Four strategies that aid in comprehension are summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting. Planning for writing includes the topic, purpose, audience and text conventions. He asserts that writing is a form of problem solving; processes in writing include planning through generating and organizing context, setting goals, translating and reviewing. Tutoring helps the lowest performing student the most (Sizer, 2004).

“Learning is a goal and a process (Hoy & Hoy, 2003).” Linda Nathan (Owings et al, 2003) recommends two grades for student work; one for process and one for content so that students can demonstrate individual growth. “Learning in the arts naturally integrates process with content (Owings et al, 2003, p. 203).” Students develop life skills through the practice of self-control, creative thinking and problem solving. In Senge’s book, *Schools That Learn* (2000), Art Costa recommends practicing the art of “kid-watching (Senge, 2000, p. 197; Zemelman, et al, 1998)” to determine student learning, work habits and growth.

### *Learning*

One of the teachers in Sergiovanni & Starrett’s book, *Supervision: a Redefinition*, tells students:

You do not have the moral option to choose not to learn. Choosing not to learn is choosing not to know what you will need to know in order to make a contribution to the world (Sergiovanni & Starrett, 2002, p. 67).

In the book *Classroom Instruction That Works* (2001), Marzano et al, give research-based strategies that help students learn. Students demonstrate understanding of a concept when they can identify similarities and differences in their learning. Summarizing and note taking help students find the most important concepts in their learning. The more effort that a student puts into classroom work, the more successful the student will be. Pausing, prompting and praising are concrete ways of recognizing and reinforcing learning. Assigning homework is a way of reinforcing classroom learning; thirty minutes of homework each night increase the student's grade point average; it is important that teachers comment on written work and homework. Models, graphs, pictures and activities, particularly dramatic presentations, aid in increasing activity in the brain.

Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a student needs to happen early in the learning process so that the student's educational plan is effective (Gardner, 1993). Learning is an individual and social process (Elmore, 2007; Littky, 2004). When students work in cooperative groups, student learning and participation improves (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Action learning, learning by doing and serving helps students in their self-development. When students take ownership for their learning, they build a sense of responsibility to themselves and the community (Ubben et al.,2001; Zemelman et al, 1998; Wiggins et al, 1998).

Best practice learning centers on the student, is active and hands-on, authentic, integrative across the curriculum, reflective and collaborative. Use of scaffolding processes, student choice in learning, higher order thinking, constructivist and



challenging curriculum are vital to effective best practice learning (Glatthorn, 2000; Zemelman et al, 1998). An arts program that is infused into the core subjects creates learning across the curriculum. Students that are involved in the arts earn better grades, have higher standardized test scores, acquire a better work ethic, are more involved in service learning in the community, have better self-confidence and self-esteem (Zemelman, et al, 1998). Learning is best when integrated among all course subjects, connected to the real world and to what students are familiar with or interested in (Glatthorn, 1994). Students must do the work if they are to learn (Sizer, 1992; Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Focusing on the learning task rather than punishment enhances student discipline (Sergiovanni & Starrett, 2002).

Having students practice goal setting gives them a direction for their learning and teacher feedback is best when it is timely and specific. When students explain their learning, their understanding is deepened (Marzano, et al., 2001; Sergiovanni & Starrett, 2002; Wiggins et al, 1998; Stevenson et al., 1992). Reviewing of subject matter that has been learned is crucial in setting the foundation for new learning; effective teachers use cues and questioning for bringing to the forefront the important learning (Marzano, et al., 2001; Stevenson et al., 1992). Advance organizers such as describing, story telling, skimming for important facts and concept mapping are also important in student internalization of learning. Authentic learning tasks enable student to apply learning, skills and abilities to the real world (Hoy & Hoy, 2003).

Comprehension seems to follow performance and production (Winner, cited by Gardner, 1993). Instruction should teach for depth of understanding using many

modalities to reach diverse learning styles. After age two, a child learns the most from social interaction. Students working together on multifaceted projects, which are interesting and challenging lead to depth of understanding. School achievement, study, hard work and commitment determine intelligence in Japan. The ultimate goal in learning is to empower the student to engage in his own learning (Gardner, 1993; Palmer, 1998; NASSP, 2004; Zemelman, et al, 1998; Hoy & Hoy, 2003). The goal for teachers is for continuous improvement of lessons for student learning (Wiggins et al, 1998).

### *Learning Styles*

Howard Gardner defines intelligence as “the ability to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural/community settings (1993, p. 7).” He proposes that there are seven intelligences: Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Bodily-kinesthetic, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal. He feels that schools should help students develop these intelligences to reach vocational and ‘avocational’ goals, which in turn will allow them to feel more engaged, successful and constructive in their learning (Gardner, 1993).

Gardner asserts that people have different interests, abilities and learn in different ways (Gardner, 1993). There are multiple ways to determine and demonstrate student learning; Learning is authentic when one can explain, use, integrate and transfer learning into other areas (Littky, 2004; Pellegrino et al, 2001). Demonstration of learning, through exhibitions, performance, portfolios and narrative, with follow-up through feedback, discussion and reflection add to an effective long-term learning experience. Real learning takes place when the students do the work, especially through project based

learning that is connected to the real world through apprenticeships and internships (Littky, 2004; Gardner, 1993; NASSP, 2004). Assimilation of knowledge occurs when meta-cognition takes place and when the student is able to process the learning through reflection (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). Sandra Berger (Owings et al, 2003) reports similar findings by recommending that learning be connected to what students already know, applying new learning to real world problems, having learning organized around specific goals, and learning through using their interests and strengths (Owings et al, 2003). “School should be like the sensible, real world, with teachers as facilitators of learning and the student as the active doer and thinker (Sizer, 1992).”

### *Brain-Based Learning*

The arts are important in schooling because of the way they engage the learning and aid in developing intellectual ability (Sizer, 1992). Effective teaching can be enhanced by understanding student learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, connections from old learning to new learning, and discovering how the brain works in connection with student learning. Hermann Ebbinghaus (Bourtchouladze, 2002) studied how memory works, how we remember and why we forget. The two types of memories are short-term and long-term memory and “Long-term memory appears to have a virtually boundless duration and capacity (Bourtchouladze, 2002, p. 26).” Practice and repetition aid in converting short-term memory to long-term memory. Researchers found that learning material from beginning to end aids in effective learning. If the learner understands the learning material, memorization will follow. Learning new material depends on the mastery of previous learning (Sizer, 1992). John Brown and Margaret

Peterson (Bourtchouladze, 2002) discovered that if a person was distracted when learning something new, it will be forgotten in a few seconds. Ramon y Cajal found that learning develops and changes the brain, plasticity, which aids in memory storage (Bourtchouladze, 2002) and “knowledge is embedded in other knowledge (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 39).” As learning takes place, the synapses between brain-cells get stronger as they communicate, creating strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

Caine & Caine (1994) stress the importance of embedding content, context, judgment skills, and meaningfulness for the learner. Brain based learning includes ambiguity, problem solving, questioning, and patterning, so that what is learned makes sense to the learner (Caine & Caine, 1994; Gardner, 1983). In preparing students for the real world, the needed skills include problem solving, choices, negotiating, self-control and flexibility. Reflection is a vital part of the learning process that aids in critical thinking (Gardner, 1983; Palmer, 1998; NASSP, 2004). Teachers must be creative and connect meaningful learning to the real world. School reform includes the necessity of teaching students to think reason and make sense of their world (Cain & Cain, 1994).

### *Assessment*

Ronald S. Brandt (Owings et al., 2003) reinforces the need for assessments in the learning process. Aligning tests with the standards aid teachers in identifying what they need to teach or re-teach. Tests also help students know what is important to learn, and aid them in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. “The adults...must think about what young people need to learn, what experiences might help them learn, and how they will know whether it has been learned” (Owings et al, 2003, p. 199).

Gardner (1993) advocates a new approach to the assessment of learning; his definition of assessment: “The obtaining of information about the skills and potentials of individuals, with the dual goals of providing useful feedback to the individuals and useful data to the surrounding community” (Gardner, 1993, p. 174). He recommends creating intelligence fair assessments, which assess Intelligence Quotient (IQ), student desire, performance, and using the assessment as a learning tool. The Committee on the Foundations of Assessment recommends that the purpose of assessments should be to assist in learning, measure individual achievement and evaluate programs (Gardner, 1993).

In *Knowing What Students Know*, the editors suggest that the assessment triangle provides the basis for determining the effectiveness of student learning. The assessment triangle includes, cognition - as the learning that is to be assessed, observation - in which evidence is gathered to determine the level of learning and interpretation – in analyzing the effectiveness of the learning. Assessments should closely follow the taught curriculum and guide improvement of instruction. Feedback is a vital part of the learning process, giving the student specific steps to improve their learning that result in greater achievement. Transfer of learning to other subjects deepens the understanding of the student (Pellegrino, Chudowsky & Glaser, 2001).

Intellectual habits in learning include awareness and logic. School goals should allow students to develop perspective through debate, argument and separate opinion and fact. Learning to analyze, using imagination, developing empathy through respect,

learning how to communicate, making and keeping commitments, humility and joy are qualities that a school should reinforce with students (Sizer, 1992).

### *School Culture in High School Reform*

The culture of a school is an inclusive term that includes climate, culture and engagement. Deal and Peterson (1999) speak of school culture as the “underground flow of feeling and folkways [wending] its way within schools.” The principal plays a vital role in establishing the climate in a school that is conducive to instruction based on best practices. The climate of a school becomes the personality of the school (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). Sociologist, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot studied the cultures and patterns of the educational classroom and cultures of schools (Retrieved Jan. 3, 2009 from <http://herbandshills.com>). Lawrence-Lightfoot advocates creating educational communities through smaller schools and building relationships with students and their families (Retrieved Jan. 3, 2009 from <http://www.answers.com/topic/sara-lawrence-lightfoot>). In her opening remarks (2001), she stated, “I believe that respect is the single most important ingredient in creating authentic relationships and building healthy communities” (Retrieved Jan. 3, 2009 from <http://www.essentialschools.org>). Students indicated that they feel respected when teachers hold high standards, insist on learning, and make them feel visible, worthy and valuable as human beings (Retrieved Jan. 3, 2009 from <http://www.essentialschools.org>). Mutual respect among staff and students creates a climate in which each person feels valued and an important part of the school community. Thoughtful schools are safe, engaging, inviting and joyful places (Sizer,

1992). Successful schools exhibit cooperation, collegueship, expertise and teamwork (Hoy & Hoy, 2003).

Philosopher and advocate of a rigorous liberal arts education, Mortimer Adler believes in the improvement of education for all students. Teaching students to have sensible and critical thinking skills, reading, writing and speaking prepare students for every situation that life may present. Through self-directed and life-long learning, he believes that education develops good habits that result in the betterment of man and assist individuals to become contributors of society (Retrieved January 3, 2009 from: <http://www.ac.wvu.edu>).

In learning to use their minds well, it is important that students are given opportunities to practice being responsible. Practicing responsibility by making wise decisions, demonstrating respectful behavior, and giving to others through community service, aids students in becoming independent and ready for adulthood. Support from the community will reinforce good habits and encourage thoughtfulness (Sizer, 1992).

Elmore's (2004) model for effective school reform includes empowerment, accountability and restructuring (Elmore, 2004, as cited in Reed-Williams, 2007). Reed-Williams (2007) studied the reform of an urban high school that created three small schools within one building. Raywid (1996) found that in downsized schools, students performed better academically, had better attendance, less truancy, fewer discipline problems, better attitudes toward school and more participation in extra-curricular activities. A small learning environment provided extra attention for each student, gave students a sense of belonging and community (Raywid, 1996, as cited in Reed-Williams,

2007). By building educational themes on student interests and needs, students obtain opportunities to become independent learners. When restructuring, efforts should focus on common goals and improvement of climate and culture. In addition, decision-making centered on three concepts of high school learning: Relationships, relevance and rigor (Shireman, 2004, as cited in Reed-Williams, 2007).

DuFour & Eaker (1998) suggest that we can improve communication with our students is by building professional learning communities in our schools. Building a professional community starts with the adults in the building sharing the mission, vision and values that will influence each decision. Through collective inquiry, the staff searches for teaching methods that best fit the needs of students and align them with the vision, mission and values. Collaboration among staff allows for communication and improvement of teaching practices to promote student learning and adopting teaching practices that fit each students learning style. By continually seeking to improve the teaching and learning that goes along with reviewing results through examination of data, staff members can find ways of improving their effectiveness in meeting the learning needs of students (DuFour & Eaker).

Glickman et al, (2001) identify collaborative behaviors for leading, teaching and learning, which include, clarifying, listening, reflecting, presenting, solving problems, negotiating and standardizing:

Graduates of the innovative, teacher-involved schools had higher grade-point averages, received more academic honors, and were found to be more precise,



systematic, objective, and intellectually curious than those schools that did not involve teachers in curriculum development (Glickman et al, 2001, p. 394).

Teachers are the designers of the learning environment in a school (Senge, 2000). Improvement of student learning depends upon what is happening in the classroom (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). According to Michael Fullan, educational focus needs to be on offering a quality curriculum, instruction and assessment of student-learning (Owings et al, 2003). Open communication with parents and students is vital to the learning process as well as building relationships and accountability. Feedback and narrative on student work is critical in maximizing the learning process for the learner (Gardner, 1993; Palmer, 1998). “How” we teach is just as important as “what” we teach (Bruer, 1993; *Breaking Ranks II*, 2004).

Parker Palmer suggests that by teaching with a passion for the subject and keeping the focus on learning, students can expand on their life experiences and thinking, which will help them establish a sense of community (1998). Developing a dialogue through question and answer sessions enables students to learn more from each other and establish a sense of cooperation in learning (Palmer, 1998; Gardner, 1983). *The Breaking Ranks High School* “will be a learning community that reflects a culture born of respect and trust, where the spirit of teaching and learning is driven by student inquiry, reflection, and passion (*Breaking Ranks II*, 2004, p. 3).”

Educators model life-long learning to their students by continuously improving their craft (Carr et al, 2001). Teacher isolation is the enemy of improvement and when adults collaborate, share ideas and work together, students will do the same (Waters,

2007). Martina (2005) found that when students worked together in their learning they were able to attain academic success and excellence (as cited by Waters, 2007). When teachers use strategies that help students focus on the learning and students see the value of the learning, student confidence in learning is developed (Hoy & Hoy, 2003).

Learning can be rigorous while being interesting by moving from simple to complex through spiraling. When students can transfer learned knowledge to other academic subjects, they are demonstrating understanding (Leibold, 2000).

There must be a strong connection between the school and home to be truly successful with a student. Consistency and reinforcement of standards by all stakeholders will assist our young people in becoming all that they can be. Marzely (2001) addressed the importance of supervision of adults in the school. Adults should have self-directedness, enthusiasm for their job, and rapport with students. Teachers must possess knowledge of subject matter while asking open-ended questions, problem solving and promoting critical thinking skills; practicing a high degree of collegiality among adults characterizes a “good” school (Marzely, 2001).

Alternative high schools in San Francisco offer a program of learning to at-risk, disenfranchised students who have been unsuccessful in the traditional setting. The project-based curriculum allows students to make choices and find connections to the real world. The core tenets include “integration, challenging academics, real-world focus, experiential study, applied learning, and authentic assessment (Morehouse, L. Retrieved Nov. 3, 2008 from: <http://www.edutopia.org>)

## *Conclusion*

Chapter Two included the review of the literature in school reform in areas of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction, instructional strategies, teaching, learning, and school culture. Leadership is vital in creating a professional learning community that is collaborative and focused on the vision of the school. There are various leadership styles and today's leader relies on teamwork to accomplish the work in a school. Transition to high school is a vital year for ninth grade students and heterogeneous grouping aids in cooperative learning. Instruction is at the heart of reform and a successful school. Curriculum and articulation of curriculum are vital in sequential learning for students. Many experts have proposed strategies for effective learning in the classroom. Multiple strategies in teaching and learning meet the diverse learning styles of students. Learning activities are more effective when the learning is stored in long-term memory. Assessments are essential to measure the teaching and learning progress. School culture creates the learning environment. Maximum learning can take place when the school culture is personalized, safe and encouraging for all stakeholders. The culture is stronger when there is a strong connection between the school and home. Chapter Three includes the methodology used in this study.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe what happened to one high school during the process of reform. The researcher examined the artifacts and documents from the reform process of Star High School to describe the events and changes that took place during three stages of reform. By interviewing ten stakeholders representative of all groups involved in the Reform Committee at Star High School, the researcher was able to gather their perceptions regarding strategies of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture. Interviewed stakeholders also shared their perceptions about lessons learned, positive outcomes and obstacles to the reform.

#### *Research Questions*

The researcher organized the reform into three distinct phases: Pre-Reform, Reform and Redesign. The pre-reform stage occurred from January 2004 – June 2004, and included laying the foundation for reform through planning and making decisions about the areas of education that needed to change in order for students to be successful at Star High School. The reform phase from June 2004 – December 2006 included the implementation of strategies to increase student achievement to prepare students for college and post-secondary options. The redesign phase, February 2007 – June 2008 took place after community protesters demanded a change in the teaching staff of Star

High School because even though state assessments scores had increased reform was not happening fast enough. The following questions guided this study:

1. What were the significant events and changes during the reform of one urban high school during pre-reform from January 2004 – June 2004, to reform from June 2004 - December 2006, and redesign from February 2007 to June 2008?
2. What were the stakeholder's perceptions about leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture during the reform efforts at one urban high school?

Sub-questions:

- What were stakeholder perceptions about leadership at Star High School?
- What were stakeholder perceptions about the students' academic readiness of incoming ninth graders at Star High School?
- What were stakeholder perceptions about instruction, instructional strategies and teaching & learning at Star High School?
- What were stakeholder perceptions about school culture at Star High School?
- What were the lessons learned by stakeholders from the reform process at Star High School?
- What were the positive outcomes of the reform process at Star High School?
- What were the obstacles to the reform process at Star High School?

The case of Star High School portrays the phenomenon of one example of the efforts of one urban high school toward reform. The chronological events of the five-year plan revealed the process of reform, and the perceptions of stakeholders revealed

how the reform efforts affected principals, teachers, students, parents, community members and alumni.

### *Rationale for Qualitative Research*

The researcher determined that a descriptive qualitative single case study (Yin, 2003) was appropriate in telling the story of reform at Star High School. A single case study allowed the researcher to investigate all aspects of the high school reform efforts that including the perceptions of administrators, teachers, community members, students and parents. It was an exciting time for Star High School because the entire community was coming together with a single purpose; to improve the academic education of its inner city students in preparation for college and post-secondary opportunities.

To understand the need for reform of this school, the researcher needed to explore the history of this school, the dynamics of the neighborhood, and issues that brought the school to this point. Interviews provided the researcher with the perceptions of the people involved in the reform. Multiple data sources were necessary to tell the story of this reform. The researcher gathered archival records and documents, and obtained the perceptions of stakeholders who were involved in the reform process through interviews (Yin, 2003). The qualitative, single case study seemed appropriate for this particular study since the context strongly affected the phenomenon of the reform. Yin's definition of case study research:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident. The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from

the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2003, p. 13-14).

By examining the sequence and content of steps and changes made during the reform process and capturing the perceptions of the stakeholders that were involved in the reform, the researcher was able to look at the relationship between the events and the perceptions and draw themes regarding this school's experience with reform.

### *Setting*

The setting for this study was an urban comprehensive high school located in a large city in the western part of the United States. Built in 1911, this high school has a rich history and many famous people have graduated from this school, including world leaders. The original building, enlarged in 1927, 1959, and the 1980s, at one time grew to serving over two thousand students.

Galaxy Public Schools demographic data of Star High School showed a decline in academic performance, a high number of students opting out of attending the high school through school choice, low expectations and infestation of gang influence. Many of the students entering Star High School, as ninth graders were at least two grade levels behind in reading, writing and math (Star high school website, history, accessed October 2008).

Almost two-thirds of students who live in the Star High School demographic area were opting out to attend other public, private or home schools. Many students attending Star High School were students who lived in rental units, city funded housing, or homeless shelters. Some of the students had a criminal history and were under the influence of gangs or drugs. Attendance and chronic truancy plagued this school for many years and the physical size of the building made it very difficult to secure. Because

of the many additions to the building, there were 68 doors to the exterior, which made it a difficult place for safety, security, attendance and truancy. In the years preceding the study, the neighborhood had begun a new change due to gentrification of the neighborhood and homes that were owner occupied, torn down or restored. Many “turn of the century,” homes were in process of restoration and occupied by singles, seniors or upper middle class families with young children. The process of reclamation had changed the neighborhood to one of the hottest real estate markets in the metro area as well as restored the community to its original beauty with a strong sense of community.

At the time of the study, the following table displays Star High School’s demographics:

| Demographics<br>Principal:                          | 2003-2004<br>Dr. Spock | 2005-2006<br>Dr. Spock | 2007-2008<br>Captain Kirk |     |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| Student Population                                  | #1525                  | #1230                  | #1080                     |     |
| Average Daily Attendance                            | 75.70%                 | 77.50%                 | 75.10%                    |     |
| Free and Reduced Lunch                              | 64.30%                 | 79.60%                 | 86.40%                    |     |
| English Language Learners                           | 18.00%                 | 30.20%                 | 16.20%                    |     |
| Special Education Services                          | 12.00%                 | 15.10%                 | 18.10%                    |     |
| Gifted/Talented                                     | 17.90%                 | 10.70%                 | 10.60%                    |     |
| Graduation Rate                                     | 77.60%                 | 49.50%                 | 60.50%                    |     |
| <b>Star High School State Assessment Scores</b>     |                        |                        |                           |     |
| Ninth Grade Reading: Scoring at Proficient or Above |                        | 24%                    | 27%                       | 25% |
| Tenth Grade Reading: Scoring at Proficient or Above |                        | 30%                    | 31%                       | 21% |
| Ninth Grade Writing: Scoring at Proficient or Above |                        | 15%                    | 18%                       | 10% |



| Star High School State Assessment Scores            |        |        |        |
|---|--------|--------|--------|
| Tenth Grade Writing: Scoring at Proficient or Above | 22%    | 19%    | 13%    |
| Ninth Grade Math: Scoring at Proficient or Above    | 4%     | 9%     | 5%     |
| Tenth Grade Math: Scoring at Proficient or Above    | 2%     | 6%     | 6%     |
| Number of AP (Advanced Placement)                   | 13     | 10     | 20     |
| Course Offerings                                    |        |        |        |
| Star High School Eleventh Grade ACT Scores          |        |        |        |
| Reading:  | 15.9   | 15.7   | 15     |
| Writing:  | 14.2   | 14     | 13.5   |
| Math:   | 15.9   | 15.6   | 15.3   |
| Star High School: Ethnicity                         |        |        |        |
| Hispanic  | 83.60% | 86.50% | 88.51% |
| White   | 10.70% | 7.60%  | 6.21%  |
| Black   | 2.40%  | 3.40%  | 3.24%  |
| Native American                                     | 2.60%  | 1.70%  | 1.11%  |
| Asian   | 0.07%  | 0.07%  | 0.93%  |

Demographic changes in the neighborhood resulted in students with strong academic skills choosing to leave Star High School. The population change included a growing number of minority students (mostly of Hispanic descent), a greater number of students in need of special education services, and a greater percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Through the years, it was reported that curriculum had

been “dumbed-down” because students coming into Star High School possessed fewer academic skills and were unprepared for the rigor of high school curriculum. In addition, some students who entered Star High School through school choice were expelled students from other schools. Many of these students possessed few academic skills, and had serious discipline issues.

Star High School experienced several changes in leadership before the call for reform. Starting in 2000, there were changes in leadership almost every year. In 2002-2003, the district hired a principal from out of state to “clean up” the school. From reports of stakeholders, this principal used transactional leadership to accomplish the task assigned to him. There were firings and lawsuits, but no apparent change in the instructional program for students. The literature review identified the importance of school culture in efforts to reform a school. In 2003, the superintendent of the Galaxy School District asked one of his assistant superintendents to become the principal of Star High School with the charge to “calm the school down and create calm out of chaos (P1).” This action set the context of the call for reform at Star High School in 2003.

#### *Role of the Researcher*

The researcher became a part of the teaching faculty at Star High School in fall 2004, as a vocal music teacher and chose to become a part of the Reform Committee that met twice monthly. Studying school reform in graduate school and looking to strategies that might increase the level of learning for students was of high interest after becoming a member of the Star High School faculty. As a child of poverty, the researcher felt a bond

to students of poverty and desired to help students attain educational tools so that they could pursue future dreams.

The role of the researcher was that of participant-observer. She was a member of the resources sub-committee, which identified the physical needs for an effective school including musical instruments, textbooks and supplies. Through grant monies obtained during spring 2004, the resources sub-committee compiled a list of equipment and supplies necessary to provide maximum learning for students. Through her role as a teacher at Star High School, the researcher was able to gain access to the reform meetings, archival records and documents used in the process of reform. By researching this school's reform from "inside" the case rather than as an "outsider," the researcher was able to study this phenomenon more accurately (Yin, 2003).

### *Participants*

The researcher examined the significant events, changes and perceptions of stakeholders during the three stages of the reform. To understand the breadth and depth of the reform, ten interviewees participated in this study to determine stakeholder perceptions about leadership, academic preparedness for high school, instruction and school culture during the reform process at Star High School. To gain perspectives from various stakeholders, the range of interviewees were principals, teachers, students, a family, community members and an alumnus. Interviewees included one Hispanic, middle-aged, female principal that was the leader from pre-reform in January 2004 through August 2006. Also interviewed was the principal who came to Star High School at the request of the superintendent in August 2006 and brought the school through the

redesign phase of the reform. This principal was a middle-aged, Hispanic woman. Interviewed were two teachers who were both involved the Reform Committee during the 2004 pre-reform phase. Both teachers were middle-aged and female, one was Anglo and one was Hispanic. One of these teachers was “let go” during the redesign in 2007, and the other teacher was rehired during the staffing phase of redesign. One former student interviewed was a Hispanic male, who was working his way through college and studying to be a police officer. He was involved in pre-reform, reform implementation and graduated in June 2006. One family interviewed, was actively involved at Star High School during pre-reform and reform. The parents were middle-aged and Anglo, living a block from the school. Their daughter was a single parent, working her way through college and living at home with her parents. One parent in the family was a member of the CSC and Reform Committee. Another parent was a member of the planning committee for the renovation of the original building. Their child was a student at Star High School who was involved in the Reform Committee and graduated in June 2005. One parent interviewed, was a middle-aged, Anglo, single parent that became involved at Star High School during the middle of the reform and served as the Parent Teacher Association president. One community member was a middle-aged, Anglo man who lived and owned businesses in the community, involved at Star High School as a member of the CSC and the Reform Committee since inception and coached at the school. Also interviewed was one of the leaders of the Sulu community group. He was a young, married Hispanic man with a baby, and was a student at Star High School who graduated in 2006. This community group leader was involved in the reform from inception

through redesign. The Sulu community group called for reform in 2003 and in August 2006 called for a redesign of Star High School asserting that although CSAP test scores were up slightly, it was not enough. The alumnus interviewed for this study, was a middle-aged, retired, Anglo woman who graduated from Star; her children graduated from Star High School. She was actively involved in the reform since inception and through redesign and served as a volunteer at the alumni center at Star High School. All of the participants in the study were over the age of 18. The following table identifies the participant and the coding used to identify their responses.

*Interview Code:*

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|    |               |   |
|----|---------------|---|
| P1 | Administrator | Hispanic, middle-aged female  |
| P2 | Administrator | Hispanic, middle-aged female  |
| T1 | Teacher       | Anglo, middle-aged female– not<br>Hired to teach after Redesign   |
| T2 | Teacher       | Hispanic, middle-aged female -<br>Hired to teach after Redesign   |
| S1 | Student       | Hispanic male – member of the Reform Committee  |
| F1 | Family        | Anglo female – student member of the Reform<br>Committee Anglo, middle-aged Male who was a<br>Member of the Master Plan Committee for the<br>Renovation of the school Building<br>Anglo, middle-aged female who was a member of the |

|     |           |  |
|-----|-----------|--|
|     |           | Collaborative School Committee and Reform<br>Committee   |
| Pr1 | Parent    | Anglo, middle-aged female – Member of the Reform<br>Committee – President of the PTA   |
| C1  | Community | Anglo, middle-aged male – owned Businesses in the<br>Community – Member of the Collaborative School<br>Committee – Coach                 |
| C2  | Community | Hispanic male, former student –Representative of The<br>Sulu community Group – called for the Reform and<br>Redesign of Star High School |
| A1  | Alumnus   | Anglo, middle-aged female –Member of the Reform<br>Committee – actively involved in the Alumni<br>Association                            |

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*Procedures*

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Denver, the Galaxy School District and the principal of Star High School granted permission for this study. Collected for this study were documents and archival records from the files of Star High School obtained with permission from the principal in June 2006. The sorted documents and archival records revealed the chronological order of events and changes that took place during the three stages of reform. The researcher began with the *Blueprint for Reform* that identified the initial outcomes for the reform, created in 2004 and revised in 2005.

## Blueprint for Reform

### I. Mission and Vision for the Star High School Reform:

To attain high levels of academic performance and proficiency for all students at Star; and

To achieve high graduation rates and improved attendance rates at Star; and

To prepare all Star High Students for college and post-secondary education options;

### II. Specific Five-Year Goals and Strategies:

#### A. Goals:

Proposed Goals to be accomplished in five years (2005-2009)

Star High School will utilize research-based best practices, data-driven instruction, and continuous student assessment to obtain our goals.

1. 100% of all 9<sup>th</sup> graders will graduate from high school within five years;
2. 95% attendance rates will be achieved;
3. 100% of all courses (core and elective) will be college and career preparatory and/or at levels that meet national certification standards (connected to a professional association and standards); and
4. Incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders from the schools that feed into Star High School will be proficient in reading and math (CSAP based) upon

their arrival at Star (Star High School, Blueprint for Reform, April 5, 2005).

The researcher conducted ten interviews with stakeholders who were actively involved in the Reform Committee. These included two principals, two teachers, one former student, one family, one parent (mom, dad, and former student), two community members and one alumnus. Participation was voluntary and confidential. The interview time was approximately one hour long; two interviews lasted for two hours and one was three hours. Each interviewee received a folder that contained the research questions, interview questions, the participant consent form, and the *Blueprint for reform*. Interested adult participants granted verbal and written consent, and the interviews were audio taped with permission granted by the interviewees who were all of legal age.

#### *Confidentiality*

The researcher maintained the confidentiality of all interviewees through number coding. Pseudonyms used in the text of the study protected identities, and only the researcher had access to the individual data. Interviewees granted the researcher permission to tape record the interviews.

#### *Protocol*

Interviewees read and signed the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) Invitation to Participate in Research form. Participants received a copy for their records and the researcher retained the interviewees' signed copies. Interviewees also received a copy of the research questions, the interview questions and the *Blueprint for Reform* document.



Interviews began with an explanation of the study, its purpose and methodology. All interviews were audio taped to ensure accuracy.

The researcher asked the interview questions in the listed order. Some interviewees requested the audio tape recorder to stop when they wanted to share confidential information. Private information shared with the researcher was not included in this study. Two of the participants provided the researcher with additional documents that were pertinent to the reform.

The researcher transcribed the audiotaped interviews, and emailed the transcriptions to each interviewee to check for accuracy (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interviewees received the opportunity to make corrections, and to add or delete information shared during the interview. The researcher gave interviewees the opportunity to share any other thoughts about the reform process, thanked each of them for their participation and sent a thank you message via email. Interviews began on January 18, 2009 and were completed on May 19, 2009.

### *Bias*

Because of the researcher's role as a participant-observer, there is the possibility of bias. The researcher used multiple checks to verify the data from interviews. During the interview process, the researcher consistently asked clarifying questions to ensure accuracy of understanding. The researcher also sent the transcription of each interview to the interviewees for their verification of the data.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher gathered reform documents and archival records from the files of Star High School and sorted them into chronological order to determine events and changes that took place during the three stages of reform. The researcher constructed a narrative from these findings.

The literature review revealed four major strategies of high school reform: leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture. These strategies provided an initial organizing structure for the interview data. Once the researcher received the reviewed transcripts, she created a document that organized the interviewee responses according to the interview questions based on the strategies of school reform: leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction, school culture and the general questions regarding positive outcomes, lessons learned and obstacles to the reform. This initial organization of the data by the interview questions revealed characteristics of the reform at Star High School that were common to all questions and all respondents.

The researcher then coded this data by highlighting evidence of the strategies of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture. Leadership was identified when the responses revealed the people skills of turning the plans into actions. Responses indicated issues with ninth graders were coded as students' academic readiness for high school, and comments regarding the technical aspects of the work of teachers were designated as instruction. School culture was identified with responses that described the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that characterized the school.

During this process, the researcher noted that even though stakeholders referred to the events of the reform, the events themselves did not seem to carry a lot of significance. The researcher had anticipated that the events in the three reform stages and the interview questions that centered on reform strategies cited in the literature review would identify the significant strategies of reform at Star High School; however, the interviews revealed unanticipated findings. Themes of politics, power and control emerged as the real story of reform at Star High School. These themes seemed to permeate the reform and contaminate the effectiveness of any of the strategies. The school culture was characterized by finger pointing and blame among and between stakeholders. The findings revealed that a struggle for power, control, politics and media affected the effectiveness of leadership. A lack of focus and multiplicity of programs affected instruction, and the personal nature and politics negatively affected the school culture.

#### *Limitations*

This study was limited to one urban, comprehensive high school. The researcher's role as a teacher in this high school provided access and context, but it also presented a potential limitation through bias in reporting the story of reform.

## Chapter Four: Results of the Study

### *Overview*

What happens to a school during the process of reform? An investigation into the changes and perceptions of stakeholders during one urban high school's attempts with school reform, offer insights to others engaged in the work of school reform. Chapter Four describes the events and changes through the three stages of this reform effort along with the perceptions of stakeholders.

The story of this school's attempts toward reform is ongoing. The community, media and the district identified a need to bring significant change to this school. The researcher organized the events of the five years of change at this school into three phases: pre-reform, reform and redesign.

### *The Research Questions*

- 1) What were the significant events and changes during the reform of one urban high school during pre-reform in January 2004 to June 2004 - to reform from June 2004 to December 2006 - to redesign from February 2007 to June 2008?
- 2) What are the stakeholder perceptions about strategies of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction, and school culture during the reform efforts at one urban high school?

An examination of documents and archival records collected from the reform files of Star High School revealed the events and chronological steps taken in an effort to bring about educational reform at Star High School. In addition to recounting the actions taken to change this failing urban high school, stakeholders shared their perceptions of the reform through interviews. Based on the literature review of high school reform that highlighted strategies of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture; the researcher constructed interview questions to reveal stakeholders perceptions of these important strategies of reform. The results of these interviews surfaced issues that cut across all stages of the reform and all stakeholders. These issues became the real story of the reform at Star High School because they interfered with the potential for any of the changes to have any significant impact or bring about reform.

### *Findings*

The following narrative presents a chronological account of the events and changes that occurred in the attempts to bring reform to Star High School and the perceptions of stakeholders regarding strategies of leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction, school culture, positive outcomes and obstacles for reform.

The chart below includes the coding for the interviews to obtain perceptions of stakeholders that were included in this study:

*Interviewee Code*

|     |               |   |
|-----|---------------|---|
| P1  | Administrator | Hispanic, middle-aged woman   |
| P2  | Administrator | Hispanic, middle-aged woman   |
| T1  | Teacher       | Anglo, middle-aged woman, not hired to teach at the school after redesign   |
| T2  | Teacher       | Hispanic, middle-aged woman, hired to teach at the school after redesign  |
| S1  | Student       | Hispanic, male, graduated in 2005   |
| F1  | Family        | Anglo student, female, graduated in 2005<br>Anglo, middle-aged male, member of the master plan for the renovation of Star High School<br>Anglo, middle-aged female, member of the Collaborative School Committee and Reform Committee |
| Pr1 | Parent        | Anglo, middle-aged female, member of the Reform Committee, PTA President  |
| C1  | Community     | Anglo, middle-aged male, Member of Collaborative School Committee, Reform Committee, Coach  |
| C2  | Community     | Hispanic, male, graduated in 2005, representative of the Sulu community Group   |
| A1  | Alumnus       | Anglo, middle-aged female, member of the Alumni Association   |

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## *Chronology*

### *Pre-Reform: January 2004 – June 2004*

An examination of documents and archival records from the reform files of Star High School revealed the chronological steps taken as an attempt to bring about educational reform at Star High School. Calls for change at Star High School by various stakeholders had begun at least a year before.

In fall, 2002, Sulu, a community activist group who advocates for educational justice for minorities, surveyed over 700 students at Star High School. Fifty percent of students did not feel that the school culture respected them and 58% of students did not feel motivated to succeed by its teachers or administrators (P. Martinez, personal communication, April 2, 2004).

In the school year 2003-2004, a local newspaper reporter wrote articles about Star High School in the city newspaper. The reporter was at Star High School almost daily, interviewing people as they came into the doors of the school, taking pictures and walking the halls. In one of her articles, she reported that:

In 2002-2003, the last year for which numbers are available, Star had a higher percentage of absent students than any other traditional high school in Galaxy Public Schools. Its average daily attendance was 76.9 %; almost 10 percentage points lower than the district average. ....Star's attendance has been on a decline since at least 1998. Every day [of the] week, at least 500 kids missed at least one class. On Monday, 624 students were absent for at least one class. Nearly all simply skipped (T.Griego, Local newspaper, 2004, November 15).

The reporter brought attention to the problems at Star High School that were in need of change, however, the articles in the newspaper contributed to the already “bad” reputation of Star High School. In addition to the concerns of the local community, the district found that in the school year 2002-2003, over 70% of students enrolled at Star High School indicated an interest in pursuing post-secondary education; however, 54.6% of students who went to college required remediation in 2002 and 60% required remediation in 2003. The data suggest that students were not receiving the preparation necessary to succeed in post-secondary educational opportunities (Galaxy public schools, department of planning and research, 2003).

Prior to the start of this reform, Star High School experienced a high turnover of principals in a relatively short period, four principals in five years. One of the students reported, “...after four principals, there was no consistency (F1).” After hiring a principal from out of state in the school year 2002-2003, there were allegations of sexual misconduct, harassment, firings and a lawsuit. After this tumultuous year, the superintendent of the Galaxy School District asked Dr. Spock to step in as interim principal of Star High School in order to bring healing to the school, students, staff and community. Dr. Spock commented on the school environment when becoming a leader at this high school, “it took a significant amount of leadership to get it off the ground – to calm the school down, create calm out of chaos, it took a team (P1).” To bring the staff back together, Dr. Spock encouraged collaboration with the teaching staff, used consensus during reform meetings and rallied the community in the efforts to reform Star High School. She developed relationships with local businesses and because of her



ability to speak Spanish; she was able to make strong connections with the Hispanic community. One of the students commented:

It was the first time that we were going to have a leader that was going to listen to the students. ‘What do you want changed?’ After four different principals, there was no consistency; we’re looking for role models, we didn’t know who we could trust at that time, the kids were in control (F1)

Not only did the new principal connect with the students, but she also brought in the greater community. An alumnus reflected that:

I think that Dr. Spock spearheaded the reform, and, so it was under her leadership that it got all put together. And she was very careful to include all the players in the area that had a buy in to Star High School, which included the community, alumni, neighborhood people, parents, interested activist groups; I think that she bent over backwards to include all the players, to be sure, there was a facilitator (A1).

Dr. Spock brought the heads of each department at Star High School together once a month. This collaborative group, the Instructional Council, discussed ways to improve the instruction of students in the school.

Under the leadership of Dr. Spock, plans for reform evolved during the School Collaborative Committee (CSC) meetings. They were determined to make the annual school improvement plan a “living document.” The CSC represented the diversity of the school population and included the principal and elected members: four teachers, four

students, four parents, one classified employee and one community member in these volunteer positions.

The 2003-2004 school improvement plan included goals for raising academic performance in areas of reading and writing, using Bloom's Taxonomy to increase higher level and critical thinking skills and Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI). Interventions included math tutoring for students during and after school and training for staff in Cognitive Tutoring and the Interactive Math Program. Improvement of classroom instruction by use of active and constructivist teaching strategies, cooperative learning, best practices, peer observations, pre and post testing of students with connections across the curriculum and continuous assessments were strategies that were put into place to improve the teaching/learning at Star High School. Implemented strategies began in January 2004. The school improvement plan also called for reading and writing across the curriculum in all subjects and scaffolding of learning for students, addition of Advanced Placement (AP) course offerings, and increasing rigor with high expectations in all courses (Star high school improvement plan, 2003-2004).

As previously mentioned, test scores on the state achievement tests indicated deficiencies in readiness of incoming ninth grade students entering Star High School for the rigor of high school work, especially in the area of math. In 2003-2004, Star High School included goals in its school improvement plan that would address improving the academic achievement of its students. These interventions included Studio English, Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Cognitive Tutoring, Interactive Math and professional development for teachers to implement these new programs and strategies. The school

improvement plan also indicated a need for a more supportive school climate and communication for students, teachers and families and professional development for staff. Improving the climate at Star High School included creating a learning environment that was clean, safe and focused upon high expectations for learning. Projects to improve the climate included beautifying the school, improving display cases and boards, advertising on outdoor signs, displaying exemplary student work, physical improvements to the school building, community and school recognition celebrations, and conflict resolution training for staff and students. Expectations for student included behavior, attendance, encouragement of service learning for students, and increased communication with parents (Star high school improvement plan, 2003-04).

The Sulu community group that initially launched the public outcry about the school in 2003 was involved in the reform from its inception. The Sulu group proposed that Star High School offer a bilingual tutoring center after school and on Saturdays for students, create ninth grade teams, with four core teachers sharing a group of student in English, Mathematics, Social Studies and English. The Sulu community group also proposed the recruitment of adult mentors for students. Funding of these proposals came from school budget and funds from a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant. The expenditures for this improvement process involved purchasing books and supplies, hiring a bilingual tutor, and community service for students on Saturdays. They also advocated for a school to community liaison, a bilingual attendance clerk, increasing community events for parents, students, community and alumni, a bilingual parents group, a mentor program and Saturday school for students that needed extra assistance

with their studies. In addition, the Sulu community group suggested the implementation of bilingual support and training with use of a cultural curriculum through the El Alma Program (Star high school improvement plan, 2003-2004; comprehensive school reform progress, 2003-2004).

In addition to the CSR Grant, the taxpayers residing in the Galaxy School District had passed a mill levy in November 2003, which allotted two million dollars to the district to provide staff development, program development, and strategies to improve graduation rates and close the achievement gap between ethnicities in its high schools. One element that came out in the mill levy proposal was the inequity of educational opportunities among ethnicities that included the AP course offerings in its high schools:

There is great disparity in Advanced Placement (AP) participation rates among schools and different ethnicities. Whites account for 54 percent of AP courses taken, but only 38 percent of the membership. Hispanics count for 38 percent of the membership but only 23 percent of AP enrollments. For Blacks, results are 23 percent and 10 percent, respectively. AP test pass rates for the district are 15 percent for blacks, 38 percent for Hispanics, and 48 percent for Whites (Mill levy proposal, 2003, September 24.).

The Galaxy School District allocated \$2.5 million dollars to improve academic achievement in the Galaxy School District's under-performing schools, such as Star High School. Schools in this category were encouraged to establish choice and or magnet programs to attract students. Staff development and instructional materials were also

included in the assistance given to these schools. Schools chosen were required to meet the following criteria:

- A. Operation at or below 70 percent of its student enrollment capacity;
- B. Academic underperformance results as demonstrated by a *low or unsatisfactory* SAR rating; and
- C. Thirty-five percent or more of the children in the neighborhood choice out to another public school or a nonpublic school (i.e., 65 percent or less of children choose the neighborhood school). (Mill levy proposal, 2003, September 24,).

The receipt of this additional revenue from the district necessitated the creation of a committee to build on the reform started by Dr. Spock through the school improvement plan. This new committee would involve the whole community; the intent was that stakeholders would work together for the education of its children. From December 2003 to March 2004, Dr. Spock and the CSC worked on a vision document for the soon to be formed Reform Committee under the directive of the district called “The New Generation Schools of the Future.” The vision was to “re-examine the purpose of schooling for all students.” A timeline guided the selection of Reform Committee members. Stakeholders interested in participating in this committee submitted a letter of interest. The final composition of the committee would include ten to twelve teachers, two administrators, one staff member, two community members, eight students and two parents (The new generation schools of the future, vision document, leadership development, 2004, March 25).”

Dr. Spock asserted, “Instruction was really the focus of our reform (P1).” A student commented, “She was excited and passionate about it [reform], she inspired kids (F1).”

The proposed five goals of this newly constituted committee were to:

- 1) set high expectations and accountability for all students, parents and staff
- 2) create options for students and engage them in the process of their own learning;
- 3) foster world class quality teaching and school leadership; and
- 4) build transitions to middle college and post secondary education, training and careers and
- 5) Build sound family and community partnerships in support of these goals  
(The new generation schools of the future, vision document, leadership development, 2004, March 25).

The Sulu community group met with Dr. Spock on April 1, 2004 with their reform proposal and protocol guidelines. They proposed the following goals for the Star High School reform:

- Keep students in school and learning: student access to the school building and athletic fields, per district guidelines, math tutoring in the evenings with a bilingual math tutor, tutoring and access to computers and the library four days a week and on Saturdays, before and after school and at lunch, conflict resolution for discipline issues, restorative justice

- Prepare students to graduate and go to college: more rigorous curriculum, professional learning communities, AVID, increase AP and Accelerated classes in English and Spanish, La Alma Curriculum, on-going professional development to improve teaching quality, assist all students to explore college options, one on one counseling, ACT, SAT preparation, college path publication, college options, library, support the passage of the DREAM Act, strengthen the counseling department
- Improve student support systems to ensure academic success: ninth grade teams, school based clinic and support systems, professional learning communities, establish a reform committee
- Create a school climate of respect: bilingual administrators, translation of all school activities, meetings, announcements and materials, elected school government with real decision-making powers in issues of school policy and practice, improvement of the school environment, more authentic Mexican food at lunch, open campus, improve the role of security guards (Sulu proposal for star high school reform, summary of status at star, proposed solutions, 2004, April 1)

After this meeting with the Sulu community group, Dr. Spock proposed that the composition of the Reform Committee change to include 20 teachers, 8 students, 4 parents or community members, and 3 administrators to “include many voices to represent a variety of our school population (personal communication, 2004, April 8).” A community member stated, “I think the leadership was, with Dr. Spock, I thought it was

pretty good. She really tried hard to get the community involved and I thought it was a good process (C1).”

The Reform Committee operational guidelines adopted April 20, 2004 stated the focus for their work:

The intent of the Reform Committee work is to focus on making educational recommendations that improve student achievement, increase the retention rate and increase the graduation rate (CSC and Reform Committee operational guidelines, 2004, April 20).

The Sulu community group proposed that the Reform Committee operate as an open, democratic process of voting. “Parents, student, teachers, and administrators’ community members could all sit together and start this process. We wanted it to be open, to anyone that wanted to get involved (C2).” However, the new Reform Committee decided that decisions would use consensus, in accordance with CSC bylaws (CSC and Reform Committee operational guidelines, 2004, April 20). “The goal of the Star Reform Committee, which is an Advisory Committee to the Collaborative School Committee, is to make recommendations to the administration at Star for consideration and or implementation that improve student achievement.” At the first Reform Committee meeting on April 27, 2004, the following guidelines articulated the roles and responsibilities of its members:

1. Attend the Reform Committee meetings unless you inform the chair that you will be unable to attend.
2. Work collaboratively with a focus on the goal.



3. Listen to the opinions of others
4. Demonstrate respect toward each committee member
5. Set aside personal agendas.
6. Keep the focus on what is best for all students.
7. Bring issues and questions to the group to be discussed and addressed in a collaborative spirit.
8. All members are serving in an “advisory” capacity.
9. Decision making processes will be discussed at the first meeting of the committee “at large” (Reform committee voting members, 2004, April 27).

At this first, formal meeting, the number of voting members changed for the third time. The voting members of the committee became a group that included 20 teachers, 20 students, 10 parents, 10 community members and 3 administrators, who were approved by the CSC (Star high school, Reform Committee voting members, 2004, April 27). The following table presents how the composition of this committee changed from its initial inception (I) to the final state (III):

| <i>Composition of the Reform Committee</i> |   |         |     |
|--|---|---------|-----|
|  | I | II      | III |
| CSC  |   | 2       | 3   |
| Principal/Administrator                    | 1 | 2       | 3   |
| Teachers                                   | 4 | 10 – 12 | 20  |
| Students                                   | 4 | 8       | 20  |
| Parent/Guardians                           | 4 | 2       | 10  |
| Classified Employee                        | 1 | 1       | 0   |
| Business/Community                         | 1 | 2       | 10  |

The Reform Committee became a 60-member group, making decisions through consensus; each meeting ended with an evaluation of the process. At the first meeting, administrators instructed members of the Reform Committee to put questions or responses on a comment card, "we had a three hour fight about being able to speak at these meetings, having equal representation, equal footing...we had to shift the balance, so there was balance (C2)." Reform members created a vision with goals and strategies to focus the reform efforts of Star High School. Hiring a neutral facilitator to lead the Reform Committee meetings was an effort to assure input from all stakeholders. "There was a steering committee to do lots of planning, so it didn't flop around and kind of grow like top seed, the students were included. There were translators; a lot of thought went into the planning for reform (A1)." The steering committee's task was to create the next meeting agenda and document the "Group Memory," created from the previous meeting notes for perusal by Reform Committee members. The agenda and Group Memory was available to each Reform Committee member as they signed in at each meeting. Stakeholders researched reform models, identified needed areas of change, traveled to conferences for training and reported to the committee, which met twice each month.

*Reform: Phase I - June, 2004 – December, 2004*

On June 8, 2004, the reconstituted Reform Committee held their first meeting to launch the reform of Star High School to become a school of academic excellence. At the June 21, 2004 meeting, the Reform Committee members defined academic excellence:

Belief that all students can learn; the high school experience should help prepare students for success in college, post-secondary, career and life. To help students achieve academic achievement, support would be provided by teachers, administrators, counselors, students, community and families (Star high school Reform Committee, group memory, 2004, August 12).

In August 2004, Reform Committee members met to identify the areas most in need of improvement at Star High School. A brainstorming session revealed identified areas written on chart paper. The group then walked around the library, where the Reform Committee held its meetings, and used dot polling to choose areas in greatest need of improvement. The six that received the most votes included:

- Academic excellence, college preparation, academic preparedness when coming to high school
- Counseling
- Discipline and interventions
- Parental involvement
- Attendance
- Resources (Proposed identified areas in need of improvement & reform, goal areas, 2004, August 17).

These identified areas became subcommittees within the Reform Committee. The subcommittees conducted research in their areas for improvement, and then reported their recommendations to the Reform Committee. One of the interviewees commented on the sub-committees, “sub-groups...I think it harmed...we were taking on big issues, and

maybe what should have happened [is] to not take on all of them at once...we should have taken things slower, it was too ambitious, I believe (C2).”

The Academic Excellence sub-committee developed strategies to reach the goal of academic excellence at Star High School. Strategies included support for students while increasing academic rigor, raising the academic bar, mentoring, lowering class size, looking at schools that have been able to move students from below grade level to high academic levels, student portfolios, baseline data to monitor growth, and scheduling options. One of the target areas of the academic excellence sub-committee was to focus on the needs and issues of ninth grade students. Each stakeholder interviewed for this study expressed that incoming ninth graders did not possess academic readiness for high school. “That’s the most vital year...freshmen year was, is the most vital year of high school. That is a pivotal year...group learning needs to be pushed more so that kids stay in school (S1).” In August 2004, the Reform Committee chose to include students’ academic readiness for high school as an important component of the reform...“We get these kids coming up here from eighth to ninth grade...they can’t read and write to begin with...we have to pay the price for that as a high school. I do think we have to go back and hold the parents responsible (C1).”

The academic excellence subcommittee of the Reform Committee suggested that to improve academic achievement, support systems must be put into place for students, such as mentoring, alternative student schedules, communication and partnerships with parents. The goal was that incoming ninth graders would be proficient in reading and math on the state assessment before entering Star High School. A former student

interviewee (F1) “became a mentor for incoming freshmen” and several senior students wrote a handbook for incoming freshmen, as a service-learning project, which included advice and reflections on the high school experience. Another strategy to improve academic readiness was the formation of ninth grade teams to increase student attendance, student accountability, academic rigor, parental involvement and instruction geared to critical thinking skills. A stakeholder commented that by having students grouped into teams, teachers would be able to better monitor student attendance, regular communication with parents, teachers and students and collect data to monitor student progress. Ninth grade teams included teachers from the Science, English, Math and History departments. Ninth grade teams would help improve student achievement, design classroom instruction with an emphasis on hands-on learning, foster school climate through creation of a sense of community of improvement and parent and school relationships. Interviewees (F1) spoke of a former principal who had predicted, “ninth grade, he saw the need for that social piece, from transitioning from a child to an adult. He thought the ninth grade year was a pivotal year for success in high school.”

During August 2004, members of the Academic Excellence subcommittee received training in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) at the conference in California. AVID is an elective class that “helps prepare students in the academic middle for four year college eligibility ([www.avidonline.org](http://www.avidonline.org)).” AVID was an elective offered for freshmen students as part of the reform effort in fall, 2004.

In August 2004, the Reform Committee decided to accept grant money from the United Way and a neighborhood collaborative to implement a Gaining Early Awareness

and Readiness of Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). One of the assistant principals had applied for this grant to assist Star High School students in preparation for college. This college preparation program brought in outside staff to work with students at Star. Star students that participated in this program would receive elective credit for taking the course.

The Discipline and Interventions sub-committee of the Reform Committee visited a high school in another city and obtained strategies of discipline with dignity and respect, creating a respectful culture, student voice and all stakeholders taking responsibility for student discipline. Members of the subcommittee explored and recommended alternatives to disciplinary actions that would focus on keeping students in school through conflict management and mediation through Restorative Justice (Reform Committee interventions subcommittee, 2004, October 21). None of the other subcommittees had written reports to share with the Reform Committee during this time.

In addition to the work of the Star High School Reform Committee, the principal attended a Mayor's Summit on Latino Achievement in October 2004, with main speaker, Katie Haycock from *The Education Trust*. The mission statement:

The Education Trust works for the high achievement at all levels, pre-kindergarten through college, and forever closing the achievement gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from other youth. Our basic tenet is this – All children will learn at high levels when they are taught to high levels (Mission statement, *The Education Trust*, Retrieved February 15, 2009 from: <http://www.edtrust.org>).

Haycock recommended that school districts and schools expect more, not less from students, teach at high levels and provide support to those who need it and that there should be no excuses...everyone must take responsibility for student learning. Teaching and learning must be highly organized, highly systematic and rigorous. Good teachers and the quality and intensity of the high school curriculum are the biggest predictor of student success in college. A college prep curriculum in high school prepares students for whatever they want to do in life. Students learn more by taking difficult courses than easier ones and struggling students should receive extra help (notes, K. Haycock, presentation, mayor's summit on Latino academic achievement, 2004, October 20).

The message from Katie Haycock, founder of *The Education Trust*, resonated with Dr. Spock. She came from the presentation excited about the possibility of getting some outside assistance with the Star High School reform effort. After sharing this information with the Reform Committee, they decided that representatives from the Star High School Reform Committee would attend *The Education Trust* conference in Washington, D.C.

Six members of the Reform Committee attended *The Education Trust* conference in Washington, D.C. in mid-November 2004. Sessions included presentations by school representatives from around the country that were able to close the achievement gap between Latino and Anglo students. These sessions focused on how to use data in student goal setting, the importance of parent and community support and providing training for staff and building a culture of high expectations for students. Principal conference notes also included the counselor's role in the education of students by having fewer requirements for ninth graders and more requirements for seniors. Another tool

introduced at this conference was *Standards in Practice*, a professional development strategy used to align classroom assignments to standards while increasing rigor.

In December 2004, *The Education Trust* representatives presented data to staff members and Reform Committee members. The presentation given to stakeholders at Star High School asserted that: “Latino and African American 17 year olds do math and reading at the same level as White 13 year olds (power point presentation, the education trust, NAEP, 1999, long term trends summary tables).” They shared their research that schools successful in narrowing achievement gaps have the following characteristics:

- They make no excuses – everybody takes responsibility for student learning
- They do not leave anything about teaching and learning to chance
- High performing schools and districts insist on rigor all the way up the line
- They provide extra help to students who need it
- Good teachers matter more than anything else

In addition to these characteristics, they identified the following practices of high Performing schools and districts:

- Have clear and specific goals for what students should learn in every grade, including the order in which they should learn it;
- Provide teachers with common curriculum assignments
- Assess students every 4-8 weeks to measure progress;
- ACT immediately on the results of those assessments (Power point presentation, the education trust, 2004, December)



The types of courses offered in high schools are also an important in preparing students for college. *The Education Trust* representatives shared that the quality and intensity of high school curriculum as measured through transcript study is the biggest predictor of success in college. Courses that are college preparatory benefit not only top students, but also the students in the bottom 25%. Lower level students need more instruction and support, and the best strategy is to perhaps double or triple the amount of time and assigning the best teachers to the students that need the most help (Power point presentation, the education trust, December 2004).

*The Education Trust* also recommended strategies for engaging and assisting freshmen and developing leadership and achievement in upper classmen. By establishing homerooms, academies, professional learning communities, staff development and peer coaching, it was hoped that school climate would improve. In addition to these instructional strategies, setting a goal of achieving a 95% attendance rate could greatly improve academic achievement could be greatly improved (Power point presentation, the education trust, December 2004).

*The Education Trust* representatives also recommended that everyone in the school take responsibility for student learning, all classes would be college preparatory and teacher collaboration would be vital to the success of the learning climate. Creating a culture of high expectations, would enable students to grow and excel. It was recommended that a student-centered schedule would meet the educational needs of the individual student and teachers should meet weekly as a team to improve lessons and discuss the learning needs of students while insisting on rigor all the way up the line. In

addition, school counselors should use baseline data in working with students; improve visibility and delivery of services, working closely with students, teachers and parents, by providing support systems, mentoring and alternative student schedules when necessary. (Power point presentations, the education trust, star high school, 2004, December).

The Reform Committee was particularly interested in five critical areas that *The Education Trust* presented for improving achievement in low performing schools:

1. Curriculum and academic goals
2. Staff selection, leadership and capacity building
3. Instructional program, practices and arrangements
4. Monitoring, compilation, analysis and use of data
5. Recognition, intervention & adjustment (Star high school Reform Committee, interim progress report, 2005, January 3).

The committee believed that following the guidance of *The Education Trust* would lead Star High School through a successful reform.

*Reform: Phase II – January 2005 – December 2006*

The Reform Committee contracted with *The Education Trust* in February 2005 in assisting Star High School to create the necessary changes to reform their school into a school of academic excellence. Funding from grant and mill levy monies covered the expenses for the reform efforts along with professional development for staff. The CSC approved the proposed plan to retain the services and expertise of *The Education Trust*. (Reform plan small group faculty feedback, 2005, February 22).

*The Education Trust* conducted staff training and made recommendations on strategies for its reform effort, with planning beginning on January 1 and implementation in May 2005. Grant monies funded Standards in Practice training, master schedule training, counseling training and professional development for staff (Year one-proposed budget for reform at Star high school, 2005, February).

On February 22, 2005, the faculty of Star High School met to discuss the strategies, training and outcomes designed to accomplish the goals of the reform plan. The teaching staff completed surveys to determine support for reform goals and staff members evaluated the strategies proposed for the reform process. Staff input from the surveys indicated strong commitment from the faculty in support of the proposed strategies for reform, with average scores of 4.5 to 5 out of a possible score of five. Goal Four, which addressed the students' academic readiness for high school, included strategies of professional development with feeder schools in developing common goals and using key data to establish best practices and interventions to prepare them for high school. Comments included concerns about student attendance and parental support. Staff overwhelmingly supported hiring of *The Education Trust* for the reform effort, expanding the AVID program and establishing homerooms for students.

Grant money was also awarded to Star High School, along with one of its feeder schools, to assist at risk students who were struggling with poor attendance and low grades. The grant would help provide after school tutoring, Saturday School and mentoring for students, beginning September 2005 and ending June 2006 (United Way/NW collaborative for academic success, 2005, February).

The Star High School Reform Committee proposed a five-year set of outcomes in a document titled *Blueprint for Reform*. The goals included:

1. 100% of all 9<sup>th</sup> graders will graduate from high school within five years;
2. 95% attendance rates will be achieved;
3. 100% of all courses (core and elective) will be college and career Preparatory and or at levels that meet national certification standards (Connected to a professional association and standards);
4. Incoming ninth graders from the schools that feed into Star High will be Proficient in reading and math (state assessment based) upon their Arrival at Star (Star high school blueprint for reform, reform proposal, revised, 2005, April 8).

*The Education Trust* conducted a course analysis from April 19 - 20, 2005 in an effort to identify strategies to improve academic rigor. This analysis resulted in plans for team teaching in academies, changes in the master schedule, strategies to increase the number and provide support for students taking AP classes, counselor training with *The Education Trust*, and textbook purchases that were approved at the June 2, 2005 Reform Committee meeting (Star High School Reform Committee, 2005, June 7). In spring, 2005, *The Education Trust* suggested that incoming ninth grade students should receive instruction from teams of strong teachers that would have common planning time, access to mentors and guidance counselors. They also recommended identifying struggling students so that a plan of support could be in place to help them be successful in high school.

*The Education Trust* also worked with the school on discipline, attendance and instruction by examining attendance by teacher and class period to analyze patterns. They also surveyed students to determine what makes them come to class and surveyed parents to determine what could be done to get students to school on time. It was hoped that this information would give staff direction to decrease absences and tardiness to school. Involving the community and recruiting parent volunteers to call parents when students were tardy or absent and involving police, truancy officers, community leaders in talking about the importance of daily attendance and informing parents about child welfare laws, were intervention strategies used for attendance issues.

*The Education Trust* emphasized that instruction must be every day, every minute, and bell-to-bell and that class time should be used for instruction, practice and feedback, not working on homework. Professional development should have specific guidelines and school wide policies enforced by all staff, as well as, an administrative review of teacher's lesson plans each week would aid in the improvement of instruction (personal communication, 2005, July 14).

In fall, 2005 the counselors of Star High School were trained by *The Education Trust* using the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model. *The Education Trust* continued to analyze courses, examine attendance by teachers and periods, obtain baseline data from feeder middle schools, adjust the master schedule and continue with on-site counselor training. They also worked with staff in Standards in Practice, created teams of teachers in examining lessons and aligned them to the standards. One stakeholder (T1) asserted, "There were a lot of people who were very

resistant to the Standards in Practice.” Another stakeholder (T2) commented, “Standards in Practice...I think that was really excellent.” Teachers began work on Standards in Practice (SIP) on September 26, 2005. Each teacher was a member of two SIP groups, one in their content area and the other in an interdisciplinary group. Each group had at least two trained leaders who would submit the information sheet, recorder notes and initial lesson to the SIP coordinator in the school. Staff met on Monday mornings and Wednesday afternoons for this staff development. Each teacher shared a lesson with their group, and the group evaluated the lesson to see if it taught to the state and district standards, gave it a rubric score and gave the teacher feedback to revise the lesson. Exemplar lessons went into a lesson bank so that teachers could use the lesson as a resource in their content area.

The Reform Committee discussed ways that all school activities could support academic achievement and use strategies to align academic learning from pre-kindergarten to post secondary (Star high school reform committee, 2005, September, 6). Fall of 2005 saw district change in leadership with the hiring of a new superintendent who introduced his plan for all high schools in the Galaxy School District.

The Reform Committee put plans into place to increase parental empowerment and involvement through increasing communication with parents and the community. They also worked on developing a positive school climate that was aligned with student needs, assisted students in feeling welcome, supported teachers through the challenges of the reform effort and fostered partnerships with local businesses (Star high school reform committee, 2005, September 6). Interviewee (A1) shared that “...at that time they made

a big effort to transition eighth graders to high school. They did a lot of shadowing, a lot of school visits, sent kids from the high school to the middle school to visit...there was much more communication.”

The school improvement plan in fall 2005 called for counselors to work with eighth graders at the feeder middle schools by conducting tours, aiding students in course selection, informing them of graduation requirements and developing a four-year plan for students, and meeting with parents on managing high school with their child.

The October 11, 2005 Reform Committee meeting included discussion to increase numbers of students in AP, accelerated and AVID courses and assign a mentor to each ninth grader. Stakeholders (P1) and (Pr1) reported, “Extra students had enrolled in AP courses.” The role of counselors included keeping students in the classroom and monitoring student attendance and retention.

The creation of a document, “The Star Trek Voyage to Academic Success” further defined the plan for improvement of academic achievement and close learning gaps. Goal One addressed closing curricular gaps by making sure that all academic, technical, support and elective departments aligned to state and district content standards. Align Core academic classes to the standards by fall, 2006 and align elective classes by fall, 2007. Goal Two involved developing instructional strategies and management skills that were focused and purposeful to improve student achievement and success by fall, 2007. Goal Three addressed professional development for staff that would result in increased student retention and success. Goal Four involved the use of course placement, retention and performance data to improve success rates with students. This also

included use of data to monitor growth by fall 2006. Goal Five required that all resources of time, labor, materials and finances, would support the focus on student academic attainment, retention and success. The goals each contained benchmarks to assure progress in each of those areas (The star trek voyage to academic success: Improving achievement and closing gaps, 2005, October). Interviewee (T2) shared that teachers were “collaborating, [doing] observations, critiquing, taking what we were already doing and aligning it to the standards...we got to see each other teaching, talk about what we had observed [and] how they could improve (T2).”

At the November 2005 Education Trust Conference, participants shared the necessity of focusing on ninth graders, who were the future of the school. Staff members attending this conference came back determined to assist incoming ninth graders in their transition to the high school setting.

Part of the new superintendent’s plan to improve high schools in the district was to allow schools to design innovative educational practices to meet student needs. The idea was to have groups of students with a team of teachers that had a common focus in the educational preparation of its students. The academy proposals included the name, focus of study, teachers who would be involved, the rationale, description, expected outcomes and implementation timelines. These academy proposals were included in the original reform plan, but supported by the new superintendent, who advocated this in his plan for the district. In December 2005, there were eleven proposals for academies submitted by staff members of Star High School, which would consist of teams of teachers working together with a specific academic focus. Proposals for academies



included a Lacrosse Academy, Cesar Chavez Academy, a College Preparation Program with a Chicano Studies Teacher, an Accelerated Program, A JROTC Academy, and an academy that integrates Science, Math Technology, Language Arts, Social Science and Writing that would provide work-based experiences and internships for students. Also proposed was a Freshmen Academy (Humanities Academy) with a team of teachers working closely together in areas of Literature, Algebra, Geography and Biology. In addition, proposals included a Business Administration Academy, and the counseling department proposed grouping freshmen be into one academy with four social studies, science, math teachers, five English teachers and one counselor. Other proposals included A Legal Studies Academy, A Life Skills Academy, and The Carpe Manana Academy within the Computer Magnet Program. The Freshmen Academy was chosen from the eleven academy proposals to begin in the school year 2006-2007. The ninth grade academy would keep freshmen separate from other grade levels, include mandatory summer school, and offer support classes that would assist them in transitioning to the high school learning environment. The Freshman Academy included a heterogeneous group of students and teachers that would stay together for two years, offering core subjects of literature, algebra, geography and biology (Academy proposal, 2005, December).

An additional support for incoming freshmen was a “Summer Bridge Program” that provided instruction in English, Math, Science and Social Studies. Incoming ninth graders chosen for the Summer Bridge Program included 100 students who scored unsatisfactory or partially proficient on the eighth grade state assessment test. Staff

members reiterated that incoming ninth graders were not reading at appropriate levels for high school (Star high school, star trek voyage feedback form, 2005, December 9).

Star High School faculty gave feedback on reform strategies in December 2005. Suggestions included, heterogeneous grouping of students, having students with a team of core teachers for two years and common planning time for teachers in lesson unit planning to decrease teacher and subject isolation. Also suggested were strategies of staff peer review, dress code or school uniforms for students, required wearing of ID badges, and consistently enforced interventions for tardiness, absences and disruptive students. (Star high school, star trek voyage feedback form, 2005, December 9).

In December 2005, the Star High School Reform Committee added a timeline to implement reform strategies in the *Blueprint for Reform*. Implementation for the mission and vision for school reform along with the five-year goals and strategies were to take place in three phases:

Phase One: Strengthen all departments by the alignment of core curriculum to assessments, state standards and state assessment content and performance indicators as well as the quality of the instruction delivered to students, based on research and best practices. Include El Alma de la Raza and other culturally relevant curriculum. In addition, Spanish-speaking students will be included in all phases of the reform plan including AVID in Spanish and honors classes in Spanish in all disciplines.

Phase Two: Explore, identify and create academies within a comprehensive high school to establish smaller learning communities (i.e., performing and visual arts,

technology, science/math, international studies with an emphasis on language arts).

Phase Three: Develop a parent participation system at Star to increase active parent involvement to support student achievement (Star high school reform initiative, interim progress report, 2005, December).

On January 6, 2006, the Star High School, Education Trust Reform Cooperative drafted a document under the premise that all students will be academically prepared for college. The partnership with *The Education Trust* would use data to link policy, performance and practice to drive classroom instruction. This process would aid the school in identifying strengths, weaknesses and guide professional development to improve student achievement (Star high school reform committee, 2006, January 17).

The Parent Community sub-committee had its first meeting on January 26, 2006 with two guests from *The Education Trust*. The Parent Community sub-committee developed a mission statement: “To involve parents and community members of Star High School and to support reform efforts that increase student achievement.” The Parent Community sub-committee of the Reform Committee, shared that it planned to build relationships with feeder schools, neighborhood groups, faith-based groups, alumni and local merchants (Star high school reform committee, parent and community action committee, 2006, January 26). In addition, the sub-committee made plans to attend a community night at one of its feeder middle schools

The decision was made at the February 7, 2006 Reform Committee meeting to send four teachers and one administrator to California to visit two high schools that had

similar demographics as Star High School. They observed two California Summer Bridge Programs that were for incoming ninth graders. This structure would be used for the Star High School Summer Bridge Program in June 2006. Members of the group shared their findings at the April 4, 2006 Reform Committee meeting and made the proposal that the Summer Bridge program be called "Summer Enrichment Academy." Targeted were one hundred incoming ninth grade students who were not proficient in reading and math. Each student would receive elective credits for participating in this program with a policy of "no nonsense, no tardiness and tough on no-shows (Star high school reform committee, group memory, 2006, April 4)."

On March 21, 2006, the principal received an email from one of the principal partners from *The Education Trust*:

Teacher attitude at Star High School has shifted 180 degrees in the year the Education Trust has been working with the school. Most teachers are now focused on what they, the school, and the system can do to improve student achievement. The results have been heartening-better attendance, academic support courses for those who need them, and declining discipline referrals. We await this year's state assessment scores for the evidence of student learning that the reforms at Star are working (Robinson, S., personal communication, 2006, March 21).

*The Education Trust* conducted training for twenty-one Star High School teachers in May 2006. Projected enrollment for 2006-2007 was 1100 students and the new master schedule would not allow students to repeat a class that they had failed during the upcoming school year. Students who failed a class would be required to attend summer

school to make up needed credits (Star high school reform committee, group memory, April 4).

The Star High School hosted the US Conference of Mayors on May 2, 2006. Reform Committee members came into the conference and shared the changes happening at the school through the reform efforts and a power point presentation gave an overview of the history and progress made.

The Sulu community group called for a press conference with the Galaxy Public School's leadership at a local church to discuss the future of Star High School on June 20, 2006. A discussion about Star High School and the status of students who currently attend Star High School, students who have dropped out of Star High School or those who have chosen to attend other schools was the main topic of the meeting. (Email correspondence from northwest parents for excellent schools, 2006, May 30). Concerns expressed also included ways to increase student enrollment, raise academic achievement and assure that every student receive a high quality education and graduation from high school (personal communication, 2006, June 7).

The first Summer Enrichment Academy assisted incoming freshmen with academic preparation for high school in June 2006. Student survey results revealed that 89% of students felt that "it helped prepare them for high school and they would recommend the program to next year's incoming freshmen (personal communication, 2006, September 6)." A comment from stakeholder (A1), "I think the summer academy was a really good thing. I think the eighth graders just have a really hard time. Those

eighth graders end up in high school, which they're supposed to be all grown up and know everything, and so the summer academy was outstanding.”

In August 2006 the annual state assessments program revealed an increase in all areas tested for ninth and tenth graders. Ninth graders increased 7% in writing and reading and 6% in math. Tenth graders increased 7% in writing; and 4% in mathematics; however, there was no change in reading. ACT testing for juniors revealed that Star High School had the third highest increase in scores among other district schools, with a 2.22 increase in composite scores (ACT scores as reported by galaxy public schools, 2006, August). Stakeholder's responses included, “Test scores, we had the highest increase of any similar school” (P1).

The Sulu community group called for another press conference on August 19, 2006 at a park in close proximity to Star High School. Group members demanded that Galaxy Public Schools require that the principal and teachers reapply for their jobs, citing that although there was improvement by the students on the state tests, it was not enough and the reform process was too slow in implementation. One former student declared, “our students deserve much better (Local newspaper, dueling demonstrators air views on star high, 2006, August 21).” Neighborhood groups met with the superintendent on Thursday, August 24, 2006 to request a redesign of Star High School to create a premier high school (Local newspaper, parents advocate dramatic changes at Star high, 2006, August 25). )” One stakeholder (C1) commented on this action:

....and we spent a year under Dr. Spock, having all these conferences and meetings. You have these experts come in and then we set up a five-year program.

We were two years into a five year program, state test scores had gone up on an average over eight percent, I think. And then they redesigned, they drop everybody...ok, my question is, we were improving...if you're less than the last two years, we haven't made any progress, we've slipped back, my question is, who gets fired for that? You spend all this money, you came up with a plan, and then you pull everything out...bureaucratic style, because of political pressure.

Another reaction of an interviewee (T1) was:

Do you remember in the park when one of the protesters said, 'our kids can't wait, our kids need help now'...and I'm thinking, if you guys would have been supportive instead of resistant, changes would have happened two years earlier, and we were showing progress, our test scores were showing improvement.

On August 28, 2006, Dr. Spock sent a letter of resignation to the parents, guardians and community, stating that she was stepping down due to health reasons (Letter to parents, guardians and community members, 2006, August 28). The newspaper reporter, continued following the events of the reform process, and wrote about the resignation of Dr. Spock in the city newspaper. Community newspapers published similar articles as well, expressing consternation about the turn of events in the reform process at Star High School. A member of the community organized a party as an expression of gratitude for her work at Star with about one hundred fifty people in attendance (Local newspaper, n.d.).

A former student commented:

Dr. Spock was probably the greatest inspiration we had, but the pressure got too much and then when they removed her - that was a big blow, because she was the heart of the whole Reform Committee. People started losing their own drive.....it felt like kicking our legs out from under us (S1).

The district superintendent requested that Captain Kirk, a respected principal, take over as principal at Star High School in order to continue the reform effort. Stakeholder T1 reported, "I did my research, I asked the community, everyone said that she was a fantastic leader, and she was." Stakeholder S1 commented that:

I didn't agree with that appointment at all. I don't think she had the training to come up and be a high school principal, she was always in her office, never saw her walking around, kids need to see their administrators.

On September 6, 2006, parents, guardians, and community members attended a meeting in the school auditorium to hear a presentation of the reform accomplishments. Those accomplishments included a 12.2% increase in attendance rates in two years, 222 additional enrollments in accelerated, honors and AP classes, 88 students enrolled in AVID, 13 career and technology classes that offer college credit, and the elimination of remedial classes.. In addition, counselors planned to meet with each middle school student to develop a course plan. Accomplishments included the success of the Summer Enrichment Academy, ninety seven fewer reports of safety and discipline incidents, implementation of Restorative Justice and a five hundred percent increase in parental involvement (Power point presentation, star high reform: on the path to excellence, 2006, September 6).



Captain Kirk led a discussion on how to proceed with the reform at the September 13, 2006 Reform Committee meeting. The CSC met with the superintendent on Monday, September 18, 2006 to discuss its role as a governing body and the impact of reform verses redesign. In October, the guidelines of a United Way grant called for a team of consultants to interview stakeholders about the progress of reform efforts. Questions asked of stakeholders were:

1. What was the reform process?
2. What are the perceptions of key stakeholders about Star High School's reform progress to date?
3. What progress has been made toward the Reform Committee's goals (Star high school reform evaluation report, 2006, September 6)?

The survey yielded mixed results on the effectiveness of the reform. Some felt that decision-making and action took too long, and some stakeholders felt there should be a more consistent use of data to determine progress. The consulting firm that collected the data also felt that the district had supported the reform financially, but should have provided more administrative support and leadership. Also stated was that the reform effort was not where it should be after three years and expressed concerns about whether sustainable change could occur with the current leadership and staff (Star high school reform evaluation report, 2006, September).

In fall 2006, the State Department of Education also conducted a site visit, interviewing stakeholders, staff, students and classrooms. They made the following recommendations to improve the education of Star High School students: Building

common planning time into the daily schedule would allow staff members to collaborate with a focus on instruction. Results also indicated that school culture must support the belief that each student has the ability to learn and to be academically successful. Many stakeholders felt that change in school culture was just as important as instructional change. A school-wide culture of trust and respect could unite the school community into a collaborative team and build professional learning communities that meet the learning needs of teachers and students. The staff also indicated that it was vital to build a learning environment that supported school culture, relied on student, family and community support, and supported teachers through professional development and evaluation (Star high school review, major themes, 2006, November 13-17).

On September 27, 2006, the Reform Committee and Captain Kirk met to complete an application for a Beacon reform proposal so that Star High School could continue its reform process. In Beacon Schools, “teachers and principals will work closely together to exceed the expectations of the district plan by establishing coherent and consistent instructional practice that leads to high academic performance for all students (Galaxy Public Schools website, 2009, June, 25).” The guiding principles for becoming a Beacon school, included, choice of working in a Beacon School, working collaboratively with a focus on academic goals, accountability for success, aligning all resources on consistent academic practice, market the academic program, use data to drive instruction, and rigorous evaluation.

Becoming a Beacon School would bring money into the school to continue the work that had already begun. Submitting this proposal to the district would combine

three Galaxy District school buildings on adjacent property to create an Early Childhood Education (ECE) through Grade Twelve Campus with a learning focus on World Languages. The district had already laid the groundwork for this in the master construction plan that was approved by voters in November 2003. One of the buildings would house the Montessori Early Childhood Education, one building would house Kindergarten through eighth grade and the other building would house the high school. The district turned down the Beacon Proposal to create an ECE-12 campus on November 30, 2006.

The Galaxy School District monitored the attendance rate of each high school. Infinite Campus (IC) was the new computer system implemented by the district to record absences and grades. During the period of November 18 to December 14, 2006, Star High School had the lowest percentage of teachers using IC to record attendance and lowest student attendance rate in the Galaxy School District. Perhaps this was an indicator of plans to redesign the school. The redesign of a school refers to the “Superintendent’s decision to overhaul a school’s complete educational and or programmatic structure due to substandard growth in student achievement (Galaxy school district website, 2009, June 25).” On December 20, 2006, the teaching staff received an email, followed by a letter from the superintendent of the school district, announcing the plans to redesign Star High School. The principal would begin the teacher selection process and teachers could apply for their jobs, if they were interested in teaching at Star High School under new policies and procedures.

*Redesign: February 2007 – June 2008*

Families received letters announcing the redesign and the assurance that Star High School would remain open. The superintendent of schools promised that students would receive college preparation, given extra time for tutoring opportunities, offered a rich array of courses, provided with a supportive learning environment, and the school staff would encourage community involvement and respect the diversity in the community.

A stakeholder wrote an article in a local newspaper about the proposal to redesign Star High School. Some of the points made in this article:

A new faculty would be inexperienced and probably lack a basic knowledge of the student population. How would the problems of chronic absenteeism, tardiness, lack of motivation, drug use, teen pregnancy, poverty, etc., be addressed? What can be done to increase parental and individual student responsibility? Do those who seek Star's redesign believe that those problems originate at the school?

They do not! They stem from conditions in the community and in families. Any such reform movement will require a broad-based community effort, time, patience and commitment (N.C. news, what will redesign of star high look like? n.d.).

Over 600 students, parent, business and community members attended community meetings in January 2007. The demographic data from 2005-2006 revealed that 8,234 students lived in the demographic area of Star High School and that 41.89% of those students chose not to attend their neighborhood school.

The community supported the proposed, ECE-12 dual language program as submitted in the Beacon School Proposal; however, the district turned it down. The community hoped that students from around the district would choice back into Star High School. Families in the community wanted a fresh, bold start at Star High, which would offer immediate and transforming reform. By improving school climate and academics, the increased enrollment would provide resources for programs and services to meet the needs of its students. The community wanted high quality teaching and learning, intentional school culture that focused on student achievement, clear and consistent discipline, parent and community engagement, academic support which included a summer bridge program, extended day, Saturday school, tutoring, mentors, teacher accessibility, and college and career planning (Achieve, community presentation, 2007, January 10).

Families received letters on January 12, 2007 to announce the redesign of Star High School. The letter stated that redesign would bring a new faculty committed to strong academic achievement, collaboration and expectations for behavior and academic performance. Parents and the community would be partners in the education of Star High School students. Internships with local business would be encouraged with a safe, student-centered environment that is rigorous and a refusal-to-fail mind set (Superintendent, galaxy public schools, office of the superintendent, 2007, January 12).

The Galaxy Public School District applied to the College Board, a program funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This experimental program, The College Board, implemented in some low achieving high schools in the country, announced the

expansion of its Accelerator schools to include four high schools in the Galaxy School District, with Star High School being one of them on January 23, 2007. The district and stakeholders of Star High School were excited about the implementation of the College Board and becoming one of the EXELerator schools. This project, with a \$16 million investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found early indications that schools receiving this assistance are increasing student aspiration and academic performance. The support from the College Board would use a model designed to prepare students for advanced courses and success in college, especially students of low-income and minority status. The EXCELerator project was to assist in creating a culture of high achievement and expectations in schools with a graduation rate at 69.6% or below. Administering the PSAT/NMSQT would aid in identifying students who may have Advanced Placement potential (Press release, College Board, no.413, 2007, January 23).

Under redesign guidelines, the principal began interviews in February 2007 for teachers who were interested in teaching positions at Star High School for the school year, 2007-2008. The principal conducted over two hundred fifty interviews in the hiring of teaching staff for the school year 2007-2008. The principal searched for people who possessed a passion for teaching, teachers who were willing to examine their own practices and change when necessary, use data to drive instruction, have high expectations, a desire to teach at Star High School and would not tolerate student failure. Stakeholder feedback on the decision to redesign Star High School included, "...from Human Resources said that sometimes there are other reasons for a school to be

redesigned, sometimes it's the political climate of the community (T1)." Another stakeholder commented:

I saw that really change once we went to redesign. I think the redesign piece, was people really deciding that they really wanted to be there, because there were some people who chose not to, and there were people who chose to interview. So, really in essence, we got people who really wanted to be there. There's a difference when you have a school where people really want to be there, because you go in there with a collegial atmosphere, with the idea that we're going to work together (P2).

An article of the city newspaper revealed that of the 68 teachers, 16 teachers chose not to interview, 18 teachers interviewed, but not offered positions and 34 teachers interviewed and hired for the school year 2007-2008. The Superintendent indicated to the press that drastic action had to be necessary to save Star High School. A community member indicated that reform had been in effect for a number of years, that it was not working, and that teachers had resisted change. The hope expressed by the superintendent was that Star would become a flagship high school, led by one of the best principals in the district who, with the staff, shared a common vision, and would result in increased student achievement (Local newspaper, 2007, February 24).

The decision to rehire the 34 teachers was not without controversy, however; some community members criticized this decision, claiming that redesign should not allow the rehiring of any staff. The comment made by Captain Kirk on that assertion, "my feeling was that if I had a known quality, that I really felt had that passion, and had

the criteria that we were looking for, I thought it would be foolish not to hire them (P2).” Each member of the new faculty made a pledge to foster strong academic achievement, collaboration, expectations for behavior and academic performance, with a refusal-to-fail mindset.

The Superintendent emphasized the need to reconsider how schools educate our urban youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the last fifteen years, more than 40,000 students had chosen to opt out of the Galaxy District schools. The parents of 62,250 out of approximately 87, 500 students in the Galaxy Public Schools shopped for schools before making their selection. School choice required that educators embrace new teaching strategies for students. Important to student success was the parent and student commitment, effective teaching and a strong principal. The challenge before the district was to make each school superior to non-district options in order to win students back. The superintendent suggested that schools offer a wider array of educational options, function as partners with clients (students and parents), build capacity and leadership at each school while encouraging innovation. Steps to build a great school system included strong principals who operate as instructional leaders, educators that provide excellent teaching with a common core curriculum. He also advocated that the district offer teachers a wider range of career options, improve the preparation of teachers for the difficult work and allow greater control at the school level in areas of time, selection of staff, filling vacancies, length of the school day and year. In addition, schools should enlist the assistance of the community in raising academic and behavior expectations for all students, monitoring the progress of schools and operating in continuous improvement



and operating in a forthright and transparent manner (Superintendent of galaxy public schools, a vision for a 21<sup>st</sup> century school district, 2007, April 25). In April 2007, a local newspaper called for the closure of Star High School and creation of a new high school. The 2007-2008 school year, began with many new staff members, several of them with the Teach for America Program and the Teacher in Residence Program. Under redesign, reform interventions that were taking place during reform continued even though the Reform Committee no longer met as a group. Interviewee F1 emphasized,

We have a love for the kids in this community. Kids didn't get what they needed, it was for all students; oftentimes politics get in the way of learning. Let something stay in place long enough to come to fruition (F1).

Another interviewee, Pr1 commented:

I think everybody involved in the school wants to see kids succeed. I don't think there's anybody who wants the school to fail. I think the more people you include in changing a climate or culture around kids, that includes the students, parents, the community, administrators and the teachers, I think the more cohesive it's going to be and the more luck you're going to have on the improvement side (Pr1).

The Freshman Academy continued with the freshman housed in one wing of Star High School. Freshmen integrated with other grade level students for electives, during lunch and after school activities as well and school sports. Making connections across the curriculum also continued, with all teachers using reading and writing in their content area. The Summer Bridge Academy was successful in summer 2006, but not continued

in 2007 or 2008. Reform strategies have continued at Star High School with several new staff members. Teachers signed an agreement of “Failure is not an option” for students. The failure is not an option form involved a series of steps that were taken to ensure student success, particularly in the area of attendance and academic achievement. The Freshmen Academy continued, school uniforms were mandated and staff had extensive training in using data to drive instruction as well as department common planning times that allowed for teacher collaboration. The comprehensive high school model continues at this school, even though state assessment scores are lower than in 2006.

### *Conclusion*

Over the course of five years of reform efforts, Star High School experienced many changes in programs, processes and staff. There were innumerable efforts to fix the school, and many experts weighed in with their perspectives and resources. The work began with an outcry from the community and district. One principal, Dr. Spock, took on the challenge to alter the pattern of failure and sought the assistance of *The Education Trust*. The community felt alienated by all of the changes that were happening within the school and they demanded more. The principal who led the initial reform, Dr. Spock, resigned and the superintendent appointed a new principal, Captain Kirk. Two outside entities reviewed the school and the district decided to redesign rather than close the school. Several grants, nine of them, funded all of the changes at Star High School, and they each had their own requirements for the school. One of them brought in the expertise of the College Board and the EXCEerator project through the support of the Gates Foundation. The school year 2007-2008 began with a new principal and staff that

successfully made it through an application process during redesign. Many of the reforms have continued. In all, twelve different educational programs were brought into Star High School during the reform, including SRI, Cognitive Tutor, Interactive Math, Studio English, El Alma, increase of AP, AVID, Restorative Justice, *The Education Trust*, Freshmen Academy, Summer Bridge, and College Board. In addition to the programs, there were 27 different strategies implemented to improve the teaching and learning. These included Bloom's taxonomy, active, constructionist strategies, cooperative learning, use of best practices, peer observations by teachers, pre and post testing of learning units, making connections across the curriculum. In addition, there were continuous assessments to check for understanding, professional development for teachers, adult mentors, bilingual tutoring, Saturday School, lowering of class size, and student portfolios. There were many scheduling changes, lessons to increase critical thinking skills, hands on learning, and changes to the master schedule to increase college preparation curriculum while eliminating low-level and remedial courses. There were also homerooms called Learning Families, creation of professional learning communities, changes in counseling, common planning time for teachers, and surveys given to students and parents to measure effectiveness.

Tremendous change occurred to the programming, personnel and structure of this school and yet a representation of the data leads one to question the impact. The following data display shows the changes over the three stages of reform concerning demographic, ethnicity, state assessment scores, ACT scores and the number of AP courses offered at Star High School.

*School Achievement and Demographic Data:*

| Demographics<br>Principal: | 2003-2004<br>Dr. Spock | 2005-2006<br>Dr. Spock | 2007-2008<br>Captain Kirk |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Student Population         | #1525                  | #1230                  | #1080                     |
| Average Daily Attendance   | 75.70%                 | 77.50%                 | 75.10%                    |
| Free and Reduced Lunch     | 64.30%                 | 79.60%                 | 86.40%                    |
| English Language Learners  | 18.00%                 | 30.20%                 | 16.20%                    |
| Special Education Services | 12.00%                 | 15.10%                 | 18.10%                    |
| Gifted/Talented            | 17.90%                 | 10.70%                 | 10.60%                    |
| Graduation Rate            | 77.60%                 | 49.50%                 | 60.50%                    |

Star High School State Assessment Scores

|   |        |     |     |
|---|--------|-----|-----|
| Ninth Grade Reading: Scoring at Proficient or Above | 24.00% | 27% | 25% |
| Tenth Grade Reading: Scoring at Proficient or Above | 30.00% | 31% | 21% |
| Ninth Grade Writing: Scoring at Proficient or Above | 15%    | 18% | 10% |
| Tenth Grade Writing: Scoring at Proficient or Above | 22%    | 19% | 13% |
| Ninth Grade Math: Scoring at Proficient or Above    | 4%     | 9%  | 5%  |
| Tenth Grade Math: Scoring at Proficient or Above    | 2%     | 6%  | 6%  |

|   |    |    |    |
|---|----|----|----|
| Number of AP (Advanced Placement)<br>Course Offerings | 13 | 10 | 20 |
|---|----|----|----|

| Star High School Eleventh Grade ACT Scores |      |      |      |
|--|------|------|------|
| Reading:                                   | 15.9 | 15.7 | 15   |
| Writing:                                   | 14.2 | 14   | 13.5 |
| Math:                                      | 15.9 | 15.6 | 15.3 |

| Star High School: Ethnicity |        |        |        |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Hispanic                    | 83.60% | 86.50% | 88.51% |
| White                       | 10.70% | 7.60%  | 6.21%  |
| Black                       | 2.40%  | 3.40%  | 3.24%  |
| Native American             | 2.60%  | 1.70%  | 1.11%  |
| Asian                       | 0.07%  | 0.07%  | 0.93%  |

The data of the state assessment scores show that in the school year 2005 – 2006, there was improvement in almost all areas with the exception of tenth grade writing. Although not statistically significant, the data shows strong effort to teachers and students toward improved academic skills. School year 2007 – 2008 shows that scores were lower in all categories, including a drop of ten points in tenth grade writing. The percentage of free and reduced lunch has increased 22 % from the 2003 - 2004 to 2007 – 2008 school years and the school enrollment has dropped by four hundred forty five students. With the test scores showing improvement during 2005 – 2006, it is interesting to note that the percentage of English Language Learners was much higher than in 2003-2004 or 2007-2008 and even with a large number of ELA students, higher test scores were attained. Notable also was that AP test scores were higher in 2005-2006 with lower numbers of AP courses offered.

All of the events and actions to promote the reform of high school had very little impact on the overall results of the school. The investigation into the perceptions of the stakeholders revealed barriers to the achievement of successful outcomes from the reform efforts.

### *Perceptions of Stakeholders*

The perceptions of stakeholders revealed their overall impression of the impact of the changes that took place at Star High School. The researcher conducted ten interviews to obtain the perceptions of the stakeholders regarding areas of reform cited in the researcher literature: leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture. The researcher also asked the interviewees about lessons learned, positive outcomes and obstacles to the reform process at Star High School. Interviewees were actively involved in the Reform Committee. The obtaining of perceptions of stakeholders took place through a convenient, purposeful sampling of members who participated in the reform during various stages of the reform process. Ten interviews participants for this study included:

#### *Interview Code:*

---

|    |               |  |
|----|---------------|--|
| P1 | Administrator | Hispanic, middle-aged female                                 |
| P2 | Administrator | Hispanic, middle-aged female                                 |
| T1 | Teacher       | Anglo, middle-aged female – Not hired after redesign         |
| T2 | Teacher       | Hispanic, middle-aged Female - Hired to teach after redesign |
| S1 | Student       | Hispanic, male – former student - Reform Committee Member    |

|     |           |   |
|-----|-----------|---|
| F1  | Family    | One Anglo, female student – Member of the Reform Committee<br>One Anglo, male, middle-aged parent -Member of Master Plan for the renovation of the school Building<br>One Anglo, female, middle-aged parent who was a Member of the Collaborative School Committee and Reform Committee |
| Pr1 | Parent    | Anglo, female, middle-aged – Member of the Reform Committee and PTA President   |
| C1  | Community | Anglo, middle-aged male – owned several Businesses Member of the Collaborative School Committee, Reform Committee, Coach  |
| C2  | Community | Hispanic, male, former student – Representative of The Sulu community Group, Reform Committee Member  |
| A1  | Alumnus   | Anglo, middle-aged female – Member of the CSC, Reform Committee, Alumni Association   |

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The interviewee's responses were organized by the questions and begin with a table that identifies the frequency of responses.

*The Interview Questions*

1. What were your perceptions about leadership during the reform efforts at Star High School?
2. What were your perceptions about students' academic readiness for high school?

3. What were your perceptions about instruction, instructional strategies and teaching and learning at Star High School?
4. What were your perceptions about school culture at Star High School?
5. What were the lessons learned from the reform process at Star High School?
6. What were the positive outcomes of the reform process at Star High School?
7. What were the obstacles to the reform process at Star High School?

*Leadership Results*

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| 10/10 | All stakeholders spoke of the importance of leadership |
| 5/10  | Vying for power and control                            |
| 4/10  | Politics of the district and community                 |
| 2/10  | Star HS is the most politically active HS in the city  |
| 1/10  | The leader establishes the climate of the school       |

All stakeholders spoke to the importance of leadership in guiding and supporting reform. A theme of concern for power and control emerged when asked about the effectiveness of leadership on this reform. The researcher literature review reported that high school reform needed strong leadership, a leader who could draw all stakeholders together for the common purpose of educational improvement for students. Because of the chaos of the school when this leader was appointed, her first task was to calm the school down; “number one in my leadership role was to create a school where kids could learn and teachers could teach (P1).”

Findings from five out of the ten interviewees (P1, P2, T1, A1, and C2) indicated that the vying for power and control was the number one theme in leadership. “My



perception of leadership, it was them versus the parents and the students (C2).” One interviewee shared that the leader establishes the climate of the school, “I believe they set the tone (T1).” Four out of ten interviewees said that the politics (P1, P2, T1, and F1) of the district and the community influenced leadership. Two stakeholders (P1, P2) asserted, “Star High School is the most politically active high school in the city (P1).” The high school principal needed to balance their role as an instructional leader and a manager, as well as addressing the political aspects with the community. The principal, Dr. Spock articulated a need to have control over outside forces that want to come into the building, “other groups wanted the school/property – I could not allow a group of anybody to come in and take over (P1).” One of the community members noted the impact of the struggle for power. The neutral facilitator, hired by the Reform Committee to facilitate the Reform Committee meetings was to make sure that all voices could speak, but interviewee C2 commented:

It lacked leadership, the reform, because of pushback and the neutral facilitator, wasn’t neutral any more. The principal would meet with the facilitator and they would do the agendas – so the structure of it could have improved. Leadership should have been accountable to the structure that was laid out (C2).

The other concern by stakeholders (P1, T1, P2, and F1) was the role of the district in the reform process. One of the stakeholders (P1) felt that district support of the leadership withdrew without communication, and the family (F1) asserted that the district would not listen. One of the principals (P2) felt that downtown gave as much support as they could and one of the teachers (T1) felt that the district lied to the Reform

Committee. All of the comments about leadership indicate that there was little sense of a cohesive community. There were comments that blamed other stakeholders for the problems that leadership encountered. There was evidence of vying for power and control and it seemed that stakeholders became territorial, which hindered the collaboration needed for effective school reform. For the reform effort to be successful, all stakeholders needed to be accountable for their role in the process. It was difficult to determine the difference between district decisions and decisions made at the school level. It appears that some decisions were district level decisions but this was not adequately communicated to the school.

All stakeholders spoke of the importance of leadership during the reform of a school. Stakeholders all wanted the same thing: improved academic achievement for students so that they were prepared for college or post secondary opportunities. Both leaders of Star High School were strong and capable and came with a great deal of expertise. The reform committee became a 60-member group, all of whom were leaders. The vying for power and control along with the politics, undermined and derailed the effectiveness of the reform.

*Students' Academic Readiness for High School: Results*

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| 10/10 | Incoming freshmen are woefully unprepared for academics in high school  |
| 7/10  | Spoke of the importance of creating collaborative learning communities – common planning time for teachers – vertical alignment of curriculum |
| 4/10  | Teacher influence on student learning   |
| 2/10  | Importance of family expectations   |

1/10 Student accountability

All stakeholders (P1, P2, T1, T2, S1, Pr1, F1, C1, C2, A1) the principals, teachers, students, family, community groups and alumnus indicated that incoming ninth grader at Star High School were woefully unprepared to succeed academically in high school. Stakeholder C1 declared, “when eighth graders are reading on a third grade level or have math skills as the fourth grade level, we are losing these kids long before they get to high school.” Stakeholders’ spoke of the need for interventions of incoming students through all stages of the reform. The ninth grade academy was the first intervention put into place during the reform. Another intervention was the Summer Bridge Academy in the summer, 2006 to prepare incoming ninth graders for the expectations of high school. Captain Kirk (P2) indicated, “what appalled me was how kids were going in – freshman kids going in the then high school taking such tremendous responsibility for them. They only taught them - freshmen, before they took the state assessment test, for what - six months?” The family (F1) spoke of a previous principal that felt freshmen would be more successful if housed alone at the elementary school on an adjacent campus to Star High School, so that students could take advantage of the elective offerings, clubs and activities, but have the academic time in a location away from the large setting of high school. One interviewee (C2) suggested that some students are not at appropriate instructional levels, in elementary school or middle school and when students enter high school “...it’s too late to catch it here at high school.” Curriculum must be aligned from kindergarten all the way up to develop an effective feeder system.

Two respondents (Pr1, A1) spoke of the importance of family influence to have expectations for their child in the high school setting, making sure the student goes to school every day, making sure the student is doing homework. One interviewee (S1) mentioned the importance of the student taking responsibility for learning, and four interviewees (P1, T1, S1, C2) spoke of the teacher influence on student learning. Suggested was that the most experienced teachers work with the ninth graders and loop with them to the next grade level. Following students at each grade level would allow for greater continuity of learning and relationships building with each student. Those teachers would have knowledge of where each student stands on learning, and allow for more accurate measuring of academic growth.

Seven interviewees (S1, T1, T2, P1, A1, P2, and F1) stressed the importance of building professional learning communities with staff and students, collaborating, having common planning time and vertical alignment, which would allow curriculum to flow from one level to the next. Strengthening the curriculum by having knowledge of previous instruction at each grade level would enable teachers in planning a focused curriculum. There was a sense of a cohesive community around providing resources for incoming students and ensuring academic coherence. In addition, alignment of curriculum at all grade levels, the importance of family support, and creating a small learning community for ninth graders would help them be successful in high school.

All stakeholders interviewed reported that incoming ninth graders were woefully unprepared for academics in high school. *The Education Trust* worked with Star High

School to set up an academic structure to assist incoming ninth graders in receiving the guidance needed to do the hard work necessary for successful academic achievement. The creation of the Freshman Academy and the Summer Bridge Academy were efforts to improve students' academic preparation for high school. Many of the comments in response to this question attributed the low academic achievement of students to issues beyond the control of those who worked within the high school. Blame for the poor performance of Star High School fell on the shoulders of parents, elementary and middle schools and the students themselves.

*Instruction, Instructional Strategies, Teaching and Learning: Results*

- 10/10 Star HS needed to boost the expectations and attendance
- 3/10 Importance of literacy when coming to high school
- 3/10 Students who would not do the work
- 2/10 More AP – more rigorous learning
- 1/10 Family structure

It takes a village to raise a child and the same is true in schooling. When the reform of Star High School began, stakeholders felt that counseling and instruction were areas in need of improvement. Star High School contracted with *The Education Trust* to guide the process of improving instruction. They assisted with counselor training, suggested that a common planning time allowed teachers to “dialogue, collaborate, and conduct peer observations (T2).” Interviewee C1 spoke of one of his students that did not have a textbook in advanced calculus:

One of my senior students who's number three in his class, one of the best runners in the nation, and this kid excels in everything he does...doesn't like his advanced calculus class. I go 'why'...and he says, well, I don't understand the teacher and we don't have a book, and if I had a book, I could teach myself."

Improving instruction, instructional strategies, teaching and learning began with the training of teachers in AVID in student preparation for college. All ten stakeholders responded that Star High School needed to boost the expectations for students, but their responses indicated a wide range of strategies to achieve that goal. Three stakeholders (P2, T2, C1) spoke of the importance of literacy for students when coming into the high school and one of the administrators (P2) advocated that perhaps some students would need to spend two years in skill building before becoming a sophomore student. Three stakeholders (A1, T2, and T1) also commented on Standards in Practice. "I think that was really excellent," (A1) and (T2) felt that "we were collaborating, doing some observations, then we'd come back together and critique." Two interviewees (Pr1, C1) stressed the need for more AP (Advanced Placement) classes to push rigorous learning. One interviewee (C1) commented, "We don't have expectations on these kids, these kids are not stupid and you put them in these classes. If you demand things from them, they will give you back what you demand." Ideas submitted by interviewees included project-based learning, hands-on learning, connected learning, individualized instruction, study skills, and use of best practices to improve the teaching and learning at Star High School.

Stakeholders also felt the environment for learning needed to improve. All ten interviewees spoke of the need to “boost the expectations of this school in the classroom and for attendance.” The family interviewed (F1) advocated:

A structure in the home where kids get up, the expectation is that you get up, and get out of the house. There has to be a family culture that supports kids. That’s where the responsibility part comes in, everybody has to be responsible.

Frustrations expressed by three of the stakeholders (S1, Pr1, C1) were the students who would sit there (in class) “wouldn’t do work - talk amongst each other (S1)” and students who would sleep in class (Pr1). Interviewees expressed frustration with students who were lazy, possessed a lack of work ethic, no discipline and a lack of respect (C1).

All stakeholders indicated that it was necessary to boost the academic expectations of Star High School students. Interviewees spoke of the importance of attendance and the expectation of coming to school to learn and the importance of curriculum alignment. The interviewees also identified some consistent needs for improved instruction like textbooks, schedules and family support and noted a variety of teaching strategies.

The implementation of 12 academic programs during the reform, with 27 strategies to improve instruction resulted in a staff that was overwhelmed with a fractured academic program. There was a lack of consistency and cohesion with the implementation of so many programs and strategies. Resources obtained through grant monies, helped pay for reform costs; however, each of the grants had requirements that needed to be met. The demands of the grants further fractured the academic program.

The reliance on external experts rather than reforming internally, led to less engagement by staff.

*School Culture: Results*

10/10 Impact of politics

4/10 Negative impact of one community group

4/10 Importance of respect and trust

3/10 Student engagement affects climate

3/10 Racism

1/10 Importance of communication

All ten interviewees spoke of the impact of politics on the climate and culture during the reform of Star High School. Star High School was located in a very politically active part of the city; there were strong community groups that exerted a great deal of pressure on the community. Some interviewees commented on the negative role of the Sulu community group (P1, T1, F1), and one interviewee felt that this group had their own agenda (Pr1). Another interviewee felt that this group's involvement was necessary for reform to give a voice to undocumented students (T2).

Stakeholders T1, T2, and C1 mentioned racism. Both teachers interviewed brought up racism in their conversations, and the community member who is also a coach (C1) felt there was institutionalized racism: "I honestly believe there is major institutionalized racism in inner city schools, but I'm not sure how you fight that." Teacher (T1) stated: "the teachers who were affiliated with Sulu were, just sort of accusatory that we were trying to leave brown people out." Teacher (T2) spoke of the



students in inner city schools: “there are other factors, we have gangs, we have racism, and we have all things in play. Some things have gotten better, but some things haven’t changed.”

Four interviewees (F1, C1, Pr1, and P2) reported on the importance of respect and trust which influence the climate and culture of a school. Three interviewees (Pr1, A1, and P1) also commented on how engagement affected the climate of a school. The family F1) reported, “When she [Dr. Spock] came in as a leader, the students felt like they could trust her.” One of the teachers (T2) commented on Dr. Spock’s leadership, “I trusted her totally.” The student (S1) felt that Dr. Spock was “the heart of the whole Reform Committee,” and the alumnus (A1) felt “the leadership was outstanding.” Even with representation of the different stakeholders on the Reform Committee, C2 reported feelings of alienation:

We didn’t know how to make it work the way we wanted it to work, because even when I was a student here, I would hear on the intercom that teachers were going to meet, and have their own meetings around reform, and it was very frustrating, because you know the teachers just had a meeting, so they were already prepared. It was a clique of teachers, it wasn’t all of them being represented, it was a clique, they knew what the agenda was, so they would go to these meetings, decided what they wanted to get out of it; it didn’t allow the people to really talk about the problems and get to the solutions (C2)

Both principals who served at Star High School resigned due to health reasons. There appeared to be a lot of “finger pointing” by the different stakeholders, even though

all agreed that they wanted to see the students succeed. All ten interviewees felt that politics affected the climate and culture of Star High School. Four interviewees spoke of the importance of respect and trust in the climate of a school. There did not appear to be climate of respect and trust during the reform efforts and there was a need for open communication at Star High School. One of the stakeholders spoke of the importance of communication and learning how to work with others, “communication is a two way street, and it wasn’t like that at the reform (C2).”

### *Positive Outcomes of the Reform*

All stakeholders were able to identify positive aspects of the reform process.

Principal (P1) reported:

I knew our reform was a fabulous plan, we were implementing it, was ‘state of the art.’ teachers who hadn’t been excited in a long time were excited, it was starting to grow, it was starting to be contagious. Kids were starting to get involved (P1).

One of the parents shared that, “Maybe a positive outcome of the redesign was that there is new administration, there is new hope, that there is new support from downtown (Pr1).” Dr. Spock also shared, “Those test scores – we had the highest increase of any similar school (P1).” Captain Kirk spoke of the process of reform:

I think positive outcomes are people working positively, collaboratively, teachers really seeing the literacy piece and how it affected the work they were doing.

People started looking at data, in terms of driving instruction – we were able to add the instrumental music, add another language – Chinese. I think those two, I believe in the arts and I really believe in languages, foreign languages, and when

we cut those, I think we are making tremendous mistakes with our kids. It's the whole child – teaching the whole child (P2).”

Another positive aspect that was articulated was that the “faculty and staff at Star cared a lot about the students and were willing to work well beyond any required effort to help develop the reform, to help kids achieve, help what was going on to be better, total commitment (A1).” A parent added, “A new accountability is coming out of the redesign (Pr1).” A community interviewee felt that the “redesign had to happen; the teachers [had to] recommit to the school and to prepare Star students for college (C2).” The lessons learned also included the importance of strong leadership; even with the change in leadership, both of these principals were very capable, experienced leaders.

The stakeholders reported that the positive outcomes centered on the contents of the plan itself and the fact that there was representation and caring from all of the stakeholders. In other words, the pieces were there but the execution was problematic.

#### *Obstacles to the Reform*

Three stakeholders (P2, T2, and A1) felt that an obstacle to reform was the negative effect of the media coverage. Allowing the media to come into Star High School was a controversial issue. The researcher was not able to pinpoint whether the district or the principal (P1) allowed a reporter to come into the school during the reform process. The school received a great deal of criticism from the reporter at that time. Stakeholders (P2, T2, and A1) felt that the articles that were written and printed in the city newspaper, added to the school's already bad reputation, which has possibly had a negative impact upon student enrollment.

A stakeholder (S1) felt that the reform committee members should have had more commitment to attend every meeting and there should have been equal numbers in each stakeholder group (S1). The family spoke: “One of the problems itself, was this difference in philosophy from reform to redesign (F1). Another interviewee (A1) commented, “Probably the biggest obstacle was the redesign (A1).” One of the principals commented on how unprofessional some of the staff was during the process of redesign (P2). Some stakeholders (A1, T1, and P1) felt that downtown (district) had already made decisions about the future of Star High School, but had not been upfront with them. Two others felt that another obstacle to reform, were the groups that wanted control and or sabotage the reform efforts for their own purposes (T1, P1).

Most of the obstacles articulated pointed to things outside of the school’s locus of control. Another example was students who were not academically prepared when they came into high school (P1, P2, and C1). Incoming ninth graders were also unprepared socially (P2) and in a stage of “transitioning from a child to an adult (F1).” The lack of articulation from middle to high school was identified as problematic: “we have to communicate with the middle school and the middle school has to communicate with the high school, because there has to be that continuity for kids (P2, C2).” One stakeholder (P2) felt that ninth graders should be close to a high school, obtain services, participate in clubs, sports, activities, music, but because of maturity and transition issues, housed alone. Two stakeholders (T2, Pr1) felt that ninth graders were too immature and should remain with the middle school, and some stakeholders (T1, S1, A1) felt that the ninth

grade academy was the best way to help students be successful. Of the ten stakeholders interviewed, each one indicated that incoming freshmen were unprepared for high school.

Having the lowest daily attendance in the district indicated disengagement and a “societal problem (F1).” Another stakeholder felt “The biggest obstacle was getting parent input and involvement (Pr1),” and (C1) advocated, “Holding parent’s responsible.” Three stakeholders (F1, Pr1, and C1) felt an obstacle to the reform was the lack of family support and engagement by students, while one of the parents suggested getting “parents on board have good quality teachers, good curriculum and stop the social promotion (Pr1).”

Teachers also blamed other teachers by citing a lack of collaboration among staff. There were “teachers that don’t want to conform (T2),” which may have led to the redesign of Star High School. Teaching and learning needed to improve at Star High School. Stakeholders agreed that Star High School needed to change the way it was doing business in educating its students.

Dr. Spock (P1) learned that “I should have asked for more help, gotten more teachers involved, taken better care of myself because I almost died, should have made myself and my family a priority, and paid more attention to my intuition.” Of the Sulu community group, Dr. Spock surmised, “their interests in getting rid of some teachers were so strong...it overrode their interest in reform, they didn’t even want to reform it – they wanted to shut it down (P1).”

Captain Kirk struggled with the staff because “No matter what I did, I would have never been totally accepted because I was looked at as the person who fired those teachers (P2).”

There was also stakeholder frustration with the district. One of the principals (P1) did not feel supported by the district once the new superintendent came into power. Stakeholders were also frustrated because the district did not allow the reform “to play out. If the change isn’t immediate, and then let’s change it again, they don’t give enough process time (F1).” One of the community members expressed:

I don’t know if we’ve learned any yet, it’s a wait and see. We talk about responsibility, we talk about raising the bar, but we haven’t implemented it yet. I think if we’ve learned anything, and once again the district, neighborhood meetings, you bring consultants in, that make a truckload of money, to talk about what do we want in a high school. We want our kids to succeed, we want our kids to have college level classes, of course we want all that. Do we get a report, we get some consensus, or something that we’re going to do? NO, we’ve got to have more meetings, still nothing’s changed. I’m tired of talk, this is a business, our goal is to produce a product that can make it in the real world, and into college (C1).

### *Conclusion*

Strong, positive leadership is crucial to the success of any organization. Both leaders that came into Star High School fulfilled the job that they were called to do. Dr. Spock brought the “can do attitude” and the energy required to not only calm a school

down, but was able to work with stakeholders in creating a concrete plan of how to better educate their students. Captain Kirk brought her own strengths into Star High School, a vision of creating an ECE through high school campus with a focus on world languages. She encouraged the high school staff to be concerned about the whole child, not just the content of the subject matter. She also had the immense task of interviewing 250 teaching candidates to staff Star High School for the following year. Communication between the school and the district seemed to be a major issue in the reform process.

Politics and community groups had an impact on this school's reform. The lack of academic preparedness of ninth grade students coming into high school negatively affected the academic program. Families must play a vital role in their child's education by setting a structure of expectations that the student's job is to build self-discipline and a work ethic by being in school every day and learning.

The finger pointing by vested stakeholders did not help this school in improving the education of its students. There was blame even within the stakeholder groups. It appears that some of the blame was due to external factors, such as the lack of preparedness of students coming to the high school. When students are going to college and having to pay for classes without getting credit, when there is a school culture of apathy, lack of engagement by students, staff and stakeholders, change in the way a school is doing business must happen. The district needed to support the reform, not only in money, but also in guidance. Reform must be transparent and open to all stakeholders; commitment and communication cannot be overstated.

Through this study, the researcher hoped that she would learn about the effectiveness of the events and changes utilized during this urban high school's five year effort in school reform. Instead, this study took on a life of its own through the perceptions of stakeholders. These findings revealed that themes of power and control, lack of focus, blame and the politics of reform emerged from the perceptions of stakeholders. These emerging themes interacted and interfered with the positive development of the reform strategies found in the literature review (leadership, students' academic readiness for high school, instruction and school culture). Chapter 5 reports the overall findings of this study.



## Chapter Five: Findings of the Study

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the events and perspectives of stakeholders to the reform at Star High School in an effort to provide school reformers with an authentic story of potential pitfalls and success. Vail and Knowles (2002) investigated urban high schools that were successful in “raising test scores, narrowing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates and restoring the faith of parents and community members in public education (Vail and Knowles, 2002, p. 1).” Studies like Vail’s and Knowles’ (2002) as cited in Reed-Williams (2007), report that there are examples of successful high school reform. Most of these studies are retroactive and investigate success once already demonstrated. What can we learn from the processes of high school reform in an effort that has not met the standard of being successful? What are the perceptions of stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members and alumni) as they reflect on the reform process? These questions guided the development of this study to document the reform efforts and perceptions of stakeholders at one urban high school in the midst of school reform efforts. The findings are less about the events or processes, and more about the interpersonal elements that emerged and negatively influenced the potential for reform.

## *Discussion*

This study investigated what happens to a school during the process of reform. Reform is the systemic change that results in performance-based accountability. The analysis of the events and perceptions of stakeholders of the reform at Star High School demonstrate that it does not meet the standard of reform. The events of the reform at Star High School were a series of interventions implemented to improve the school that did not result in systemic change. The perceptions of stakeholders revealed a common desire to see positive change, but the lack of ownership and presence of a cohesive path prevented systemic change from happening. This story of the attempt of reform at Star High School revealed a struggle for power and control that impaired the leaders' ability to develop a cohesive and focused path toward reform. This lack of focus led to the adoption of a multiplicity of programs and instructional strategies. Finally, the lack of leadership and ownership allowed the passion for this reform to dissolve into blame and political battles.

### *A Struggle for Power and Control*

Most of the stakeholders at Star High School wanted the same thing, improved academic achievement for students so that they were prepared for college and beyond, but the struggle for power and control undermined the reform effort. The blurred lines of authority affected the effectiveness of this reform effort. The Reform Committee had sixty members, including administrators, students, teachers, parents and community members, and all of them had their own ideas as leaders. What were the roles of the community, the district, the parents, students and staff? School leaders need to identify

the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder involved in reform efforts as a means for the effective coordination of the work. Once the structure is established, the leader must monitor these guidelines to ensure the accountability of members to work toward the vision and goals. The leader must also work with the district leadership to define roles and responsibilities. When Dr. Spock was the principal during the pre-reform and reform, she relied on the support of the district. However, when the new superintendent came in fall 2005, Dr. Spock felt that the district withdrew its communication and support. School based leaders should clearly define their expectations of the leadership and support needed from the district.

Heightened pressure that came from political influences and the media dramatically impacted the tensions of power and control within this reform effort. Early in the reform process, the tension surfaced between the Sulu community group and the principal, especially with the selection of committee members. The principal and the Sulu community group wanted the Reform Committee to be different entities. The principal saw it as an advisory board that operated under CSC bylaws and district policies and procedures. The Sulu community group wanted the Reform Committee to be a separate entity, that had power and operated independently of the CSC. The principal's design of an advisory board became the reality, and the principal never directly addressed or acknowledged the issues behind this difference of philosophy. The work of this committee appeared to have a negative impact on the reform process. When the Reform Committee created sub-committees to research the top six areas of improvement and make recommendations, the divisions within the group were exacerbated. In addition,

the steering committee, a selective part of the Reform Committee, met on a consistent basis to plan the agendas for the next meeting. The Sulu community group did not have representation on the steering committee and felt left out of the process.

R. Tirozzi (Owings et al, 2003) contends that the role of principal has changed to that of an instructional leader; however, the vying of control between the school, community and district hindered the progress of this school's efforts toward reform. Rather than keeping the focus on improving instruction for students, various stakeholders pushed for control of the reform effort. The stakeholders blamed each other for the failure of its students and the result was a fractured community. Perhaps a different leadership style could have averted some of the dissension that came about because of the mistrust between stakeholders. The involvement of stakeholders is not enough to build cooperation and teamwork. Without clear and closely monitored roles and responsibilities, polarization and competing interests permeated the attempts toward reform.

Resource management also presented issues with power and control for the reform effort at Star High School. Star High School was able to obtain sizeable grant monies from various sources to aid in reform. There were nine grants obtained by Star High School, some of them from the district and some from outside sources. Each of the obtained grants had fulfillment requirements, which further fractured the reform effort and created issues with control. Overall, the events of reform did not matter; not *The Education Trust*, not AVID, the issues of power and control permeated the reform and contaminated the effectiveness of any reform effort.

### *Lack of Focus*

As a result of the struggle for power and control, twelve different academic programs were added to Star High School during the years of the reform efforts included in this study. Those interventions included Scholastic Reading Inventory, Cognitive Tutor, Interactive Math, Studio English, Silent Sustained Reading, Conflict Resolution, Service Learning, Community Service, El Alma, and increase in Advanced Placement course offerings, Advancement Via Individual Determination, Restorative Justice, *The Education Trust*, Standards in Practice, Freshmen Academy, Summer Bridge Academy, and College Board Accelerator Schools. Reform programs that have continued were the addition of AP offerings, AVID, Restorative Justice, the Freshmen Academy and the College Board EXELerator Schools. In addition to these programs, twenty-seven instructional strategies to improve classroom instruction became part of the expectations for teachers. These strategies included Bloom's Taxonomy, active and constructionist strategies, cooperative learning, and use of best practice. Teachers participated in peer observations, pre and post testing, connections across the curriculum, and use continuous assessments. There was also reading and writing across the curriculum, professional development, adult mentors, bilingual tutoring, and Saturday school. Class size was lowered, student portfolios and alternative scheduling. Teaching methods used critical thinking skills and hands-on learning. There were changes in the master schedule and course offerings characterized by adding college preparation courses and eliminating low-level and remedial courses. This multiplicity of programs made it difficult, if not impossible for staff to implement and get maximum results. This lack of focus

compromised the continuity of learning for students. It was also difficult for the staff to keep up with the changing strategies. The school seemed to implement anything that had demonstrated success with improving student achievement, and there was also a strong reliance on external experts. The implementation of so many new programs was overwhelming to the staff and led to a fractured academic program. The lack of consistency and cohesion led to a feeling of powerlessness in raising academic expectations.

The only area of consistency in stakeholder responses was the need to address the issue of students' academic readiness for high school for incoming ninth graders. The Ninth Grade Academy created small learning communities to give students personalized attention and build relationships. It included articulation and communication with elementary and middle schoolteachers to assist counselors and teaching staff with meeting student's educational needs. The potential for this reform action to persist is due to widespread support and its "laser-like" focus. It is an action that resulted from taking responsibility for something that had been a part of the politics of blame at Star High School. Rather than blaming the elementary and middle schools, Star was taking action to make the change.

#### *Blame and the Politics of Reform*

Decades of failing students created a culture of apathy and non-engagement in this community. Hertzog et al (1996) as cited in Capstick, describes potential dropouts as students with excessive absences, low grades, difficulty in adjusting to high school and a lack of connectedness; this describes many of the students at Star High School. *The*

*Education Trust* recommended providing support for students while increasing rigor to prepare students academically. Stakeholders assigned blame to other stakeholders (teachers blamed families, families blamed other families and teachers, teachers and families blamed students, and so on) for the failure of the education of students at Star High School. All energies of the Reform Committee should have gone into supporting the leadership in providing a cohesive focus on high expectations and quality instruction rather than blaming others for the problems. The acceptance of grant monies and hiring external experts to reform Star High School gave control away to others contributing to increased feelings of powerlessness, division, and pain.

The interview process with stakeholders for this study, revealed a deep level of pain and emotion regarding Star High School and its students. As soon as the tape recording began, the words and emotions flowed out of the stakeholders - there was anger, frustration, sadness and tears. Many people cared deeply about Star High School.

The personal nature and politics of the reform severely affected the culture of the school. Stakeholders blamed each other for the lack of academic success of Star High School students, which created a negative, emotionally painful reform experience for stakeholders. Student achievement data revealed that the investment of time, resources, commitment and hard work done during the reform effort was for naught.

### *Conclusion*

Did this one, urban comprehensive high school, need to change the way it was doing business in educating its students? There is no dispute to the fact that Star High School needed to change. The current job market requires a greater knowledge base and

technical skill level, than Star High School was giving its students. This study demonstrated that change did happen, but are this school's students better off today than they were before five years of reform efforts? What can we learn from the attempts with reform at Star High School?

This study revealed the complexity of enacting school reform. The leadership of Star High School sought to involve the entire community in participating with the reform process. This was an admirable goal, but the minimal checks and balances (Reform Committee neutral facilitator and recorder) put into place to monitor this involvement resulted in increasing the divisions rather than building collaborative engagement. Not only does the leadership need to manage the collaboration at the school level, but the leadership must also manage the relations with the district and the media. Changes in leadership at the district level created a climate of distrust and abandonment, but efforts to create trust with the new administration were not documented. All stakeholders conveyed that they had the best interests of students in mind and wanted a better education for students at Star High School during the reform process, but they were not able to actualize these good intentions due to the lack of systemic reform. The reform events and changes became isolated interventions rather than a cohesive framework characterized by a clear focus with accountability through roles and responsibilities of the involved stakeholders. Without this cohesive structure it was difficult to establish and maintain trust.

Perhaps the changes that took place and the strategies used to make change, will provide future reformers some insights for their own reform efforts.



### *Recommendations to School Reformers*

Leaders who are embarking on reforming high schools need to realize the complexity of the task. School reform does not happen through the adoption of new programs. It requires that a leader to be able to analyze the entire system from its community to the district, to the needs of the students, to the skills of its teachers, to the quality of its programs, etc. This analysis should engage stakeholders and result in focused actions that address systemic issues. As the Star High School reform effort demonstrates, the inclusion of stakeholders can be disastrous if roles, responsibilities and lines of authority are not clearly defined and monitored. The communication skills of listening to different perspectives could have perhaps avoided the polarization among stakeholders at Star. Communication skills are also essential to make sure that there is district support and to build support from the external community.

A valuable lesson learned from this study was that effective leadership is vital to the success of any organization. Leadership sets the tone for the climate and culture of an organization, and that culture greatly influences engagement. Articulation and continuity of learning need to take place from kindergarten, through high school and into college. Students are not able to make the learning connections unless they are reinforced all the way through each level of learning. All stakeholders, especially students and their parents, need to see transparency in the way the high school does business and take responsibility for the education of their child.

One of the most important lessons learned from this reform effort was the need for constant communication and collaboration to improvement of educational growth and

success of students. Internal improvements will be more effective than those brought in by external entities because of the “buy in” from stakeholders. There were too many academic programs added in a short period of time, which created a lack of focus. All stakeholders spoke of the lack of students’ academic readiness of incoming ninth graders during the reform efforts at Star High School. Perhaps if all energies had focused on that one facet of reform, the efforts would have been more effective. It takes time to accomplish goals and see results; programs and strategies need time to take root and start having an impact on student learning and growth. Using data on a consistent basis would aid in monitoring of student growth. Keeping a laser like focus on the vision would have helped keep the reform much simpler and direct. All stakeholders need to be single-minded about the goals, have clear expectations, consistency and patience to let the interventions “play out” when implementing reform.

#### *Limitations*

This study was limited to one urban, comprehensive high school and the finding cannot be generalized to other settings. The researcher’s role as a music teacher at Star High School was a limitation in this study, as well, due to unintended biases.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research*

Will high schools in the United States of America once again lead the world in the field of education? The area of high school reform abounds with researchable questions. The reform efforts at Star High School are ongoing, and it would be valuable to research the next phases of reform at this school. Will students of Star High School graduate with skills to succeed in college and post secondary opportunities? Will Star High School be

one of the district's premier high schools in 2019? Will the reform and redesign have a lasting impact on this high school? Will the physical renovation of the building, along with reform improve educational opportunities for its students? What will happen at Star High School as the demographics continue to change?

Star High School is a microcosm of urban high schools all around our country. There is a need for research to help us answer the following questions about urban high schools. How do we as educator's foster work ethic? How do we promote hope? How do we foster student engagement?

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

1. What were your perceptions about leadership during the reform efforts at Star High School?
2. What were your perceptions about the ninth grade transition from grade eight to grade nine during the reform efforts at Star High School?
3. What were your perceptions about instruction, instructional strategies and teaching/learning at Star High School?
4. What were your perceptions about school culture at Star High School?
5. What were the lessons learned from the reform process at Star High School?
6. What were the positive outcomes of the reform process at Star High School?
7. What were the obstacles to the reform process at Star High School?

## Appendix B

### Star High School Blueprint for Reform

#### **I. Mission and Vision for the Star High School Reform:**

To attain high levels of academic performance and proficiency for all students at Star; and  
To achieve high graduation rates and improved attendance rates at Star; and  
To prepare all Star\_High Students for college and post-secondary education options;

#### **II. Specific Five-Year Goals and Strategies:**

##### **A. Goals:**

**Proposed Goals to be accomplished in five years (2005-2009)**

**Star High School will utilize research-based best practices, data-driven instruction, and continuous student assessment to obtain our goals.**

1. *100% of all 9<sup>th</sup> graders will graduate from high school within five years;*
2. *95% attendance rates will be achieved;*
3. *100% of all courses (core and elective) will be college and career preparatory and/or at levels that meet national certification standards (connected to a professional association and standards); and*
4. *Incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders from the schools that feed into Star High School will be proficient in reading and math (CSAP based) upon their arrival at Star.*

##### **B. Strategies:**

**Proposed Strategies to Accomplish Goals**

1. Align curriculum with the State standards and with the CSAP to ensure critical thinking and use standards-based assessments.
2. Adjust the master schedule to ensure that all students are offered challenging and rigorous classes with qualified teachers, and to eliminate classes that do not meet national, state and district standards. Content is critical and should drive the master schedule. Low achieving students will have equal access to the most experienced teachers.
3. Identify and utilize key data to analyze Star (District, Principals, Departments, Teachers)
4. All students will be tested to establish an academic baseline from which their needs, progress and achievement can be evaluated. (The purpose of this baseline from which their needs, progress and achievement can be evaluated. (The purpose of this baseline is not for remediation but to raise their academic progress.)
5. Evaluate students, classes and departments every three to four weeks. Review student progress based on the aligned standards and utilize data, actual work, etc. in the evaluation process.
6. Utilize end of course exams to ensure all students are becoming proficient in the curriculum.
7. Focus on Professional Development: help teachers improve their skills to assess whether, for example, the assignment is rigorous enough or whether it is a standards based assignment. Create professional development for teacher planning, standards-based execution of lesson plans, structure of the classroom, rituals, routines and rigorous coursework and assessments. Professional development offered to counseling staff in areas relative to career, academic, personal and social counseling.
8. Utilize the "Transforming Counseling" program to align the counseling department with the stated goals.
9. Communicate with and educate parents on rigor, high expectations and a college/post secondary focus for all students at Star.
10. Establish and maintain an environment of mutual respect among students, adults and the community. Provide consistent and frequent communication about school-wide discipline plan and interventions.

#### **Phases of Implementation:**

**Phase One:** Strengthen all departments by the alignment of core curriculum to assessments, state standards and CSAP content as well as the quality of the instruction delivered to students, based on research and best practices. Include El Alma de la Raza and other culturally relevant curriculum. In addition, Spanish-speaking students will be included in all phases of the reform plan including AVID in Spanish and honors classes in Spanish in all disciplines.

**Phase Two:** Explore, identify and create academies within a comprehensive high school to establish smaller learning communities (i.e. Performing and Visual Arts, Technology, Science/Math, International Studies with an emphasis on language arts.

**Phase Three:** Develop a parent involvement system at Star to increase active parent involvement to support student achievement.

Reform Proposal Revised 4-8-05

## Appendix C

### Definitions

Academic Excellence: “Academic Excellence means maintaining rigor and high expectations that address all learning styles and academic levels while engaging and challenging all students to use their minds creatively and critically and respecting the diversity among us all. (Star High School Reform Subcommittee, fall, 2004).

Academic Preparedness for High School: Proficiency of academic skills of students in reading, writing and math needed to succeed in learning high school curriculum.

Blueprint for Reform: The guiding document created in 2004 by the Star High School Reform Committee. This document contained the mission, vision, goals, strategies and timeline for the improvement of academic performance for Star High School students (revised on April 8, 2005).

Collaborative School Committee (CSC): Committee that includes the school principal, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members that focuses on the School Improvement plan. It also acts as the School Improvement and Accountability Council (SIAC) in the school. The CSC establishes relationships with the parents and community, participates in the principal selection process and evaluations.

Consensus: a decision or outcome that everyone understand and can at least live with because they believe important interests and or needs are being met, and that everyone agrees not to undermine or sabotage (Galaxy Public Schools Revitalization Initiative, n.d.).

Culture: “The beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which characterize a school (Phillips, 1993, p. 1).” Retrieved July 25, 2009 from: <http://www.schoolculture.net>.

Engagement: A willingness and curiosity to learn something new and a commitment to the learning task and the organization.

Improvement: “Improvement is change with direction, sustained over time, that moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don’t” (Elmore, 2004).

Instruction: Knowledge or skills imparted to others through teaching and learning.

Leadership: A leader has a vision for the future, is able to persuade people to get on board with the vision and inspires them to overcome obstacles to make it a reality (Kotter, 1996).

Redesign: School classification based on substandard student achievement or substandard growth in student achievement as identified in federal or state accountability systems. All teaching faculty in schools under redesign must reapply for their jobs.

Reform: Systemic change that results in performance-based accountability (Elmore, 2004).

School Culture: “A set of norms and values that focus everyone’s attention on what is most important and motivate them to work hard toward a common purpose (Jerald, C.D. (2006, December). School culture: The hidden curriculum. The center for comprehensive school reform and improvement. Retrieved July 22, 2009 from: [www.centerforcsri.org](http://www.centerforcsri.org)).