

THE EFFECTIVE PRACTICES AND BELIEFS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN HIGH  
ACHIEVING HISPANIC MAJORITY MID-LEVEL SCHOOLS

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by

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ABSTRACT

JOHNNY BRISEÑO

This qualitative phenomenological research study used narrative inquiry to investigate the effective practices and beliefs of 10 Texas principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools. Participant interviews were analyzed using the Creswell (2007) six step method for analyzing phenomenological studies. Findings from this study affirm that passionate principals who are involved, engaged, and lead by example are able to transcend the social and economic barriers that separate them from their students and achieve success. Other findings from this study include the importance of building relationships with the students and recognizing and then meeting their needs. Findings also emphasized the importance of staying engaged and focused in educating all students. The research presented in this study provides school principals and administrators with proven instructional practices that have met the needs of Hispanic students in effective Hispanic majority mid-level schools.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Jocelyn Nicole and her soon-to-be-born brother, Matthew Isaiah. May you find yourself in schools where principals make decisions based on your needs as well as those of your peers.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my nieces and nephews. Do not let obstacles in life keep you from being successful. You can achieve anything that you put your mind to as long as you believe in yourself like I believe in you.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

Regardless of whether immigration flows from Latin America increase, decrease, or remains the same, a great change in the composition of the Hispanic population is underway according to Suro and Passel (2003). Suro and Passel reported that the rise of second generation Hispanics in the U.S. was the result of births and immigration that has already taken place and can now be stated as a demographic fact. Further, these second generation Latinos were U.S. citizens by birth and will be the products of U.S. schools, which means that they will present a different character and have a different impact on the nation than their immigrant parents. Suro and Passel also stated that the majority of the second generation Latinos is overwhelmingly young—nearly two-thirds are under the age of 18 years. According to Suro and Passel, much of what will happen with this generation is yet to be determined. For example, the generation's ultimate educational profile, and therefore economic status, will be determined largely by the course of an educational system that is facing demands for change at almost every level. These authors make one prediction that appears to be safe: Given the number of Hispanic students coming into the United States, the future of the next generation will be a matter of national interest.

### **Background of the Problem**

Hispanic student enrollment in the U.S. almost doubled between 1990 and 2006. These students account for 60% of the total growth in public schools over that period of

time (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008). As Hispanic student enrollment continues to increase in our public schools (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008), state and federal accountability reforms continue to apply pressure on schools to close the achievement gaps of historically low-performing groups of students such as Hispanics (Kim, Zabel, Stiefel, & Schwartz, 2006). This pressure on schools to close the achievement gap is placed on the campus principals, which research has shown to be the most critical position in a school's success and in student achievement (Cotton, 2003).

Even as we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the issue of race has continued to be pervasive in American culture (Kuykendall, 2004). Kuykendall (2004) stated that educators have to assess their own feelings about students who are racially and culturally different from their own race and culture. Even though many educators feel that educating African American and Hispanic children is a major challenge, it does not need to be overwhelming. According to Kuykendall, to meet this challenge there needs to be much more commitment, sensitivity, and understanding of the academic needs, learning style preferences, and abilities of racially diverse students. This will allow a greater number of teachers to adequately plan and implement appropriate strategies for improved achievement in African American and Hispanic communities (Kuykendall, 2004).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has increased the emphasis on schools to improve test scores for minority students in grades three through eight, making middle school a key setting for closing the academic achievement gap that exists between minority students and their white counterparts (Wenglinsky, 2004). Instead of encouraging teachers' efforts, principals now must lead teachers to produce tangible results on ambitious academic standards (Lashway, 2002). This requires principals not to

just be innovative, but to have a different mindset regarding how they approach their role as instructional leaders (Elmore, 1999; Jamemtz, 2002). Fullan (2001) further stated that a school principal's knowledge of effective practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment is necessary to provide guidance for teachers on the day-to-day task of teaching and learning for all students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While there have been some improvements in Hispanic education over the past decade, the data continue to show that Hispanic educational attainment does not match that of non-Hispanics (Kohler & Lazarin, 2007). Kohler and Lazarin further reported that participation in all levels of education continues to be low for Hispanic students while dropout and retention rates are still high. These authors also stated that insufficient financial aid and inadequate access to rigorous courses and educational resources are among the challenges in improving the educational status of Hispanics. In addition, as immigrant and English language learner students become a growing segment of the Latino student population, educational gaps between Hispanics and other students have become increasingly apparent.

Research and policy makers have identified various achievement gaps in the academic progress of U.S. students based on race, class, and language (Levine & Marcus, 2007). With the Hispanic population being the fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States, this group is rapidly changing the face of public schools as it presents a unique set of challenges to public education (AFT, 2004). Regardless of the fact that information on Hispanic students is collected and analyzed in combined form and portrayed as one group, with English language learners as its only disaggregated group,

the Hispanic population is actually quite diverse (AFT, 2004). In fact, the Hispanic population is multiracial, multinational, and diverse in its educational and socioeconomic background. According to the AFT Policy Brief, the lack of disaggregated achievement data, such as race, nationality, immigrant status, socioeconomic status, previous formal levels of education and other variables, does not do an accurate job in presenting a clear picture of the Hispanic population in the United States.

Accommodating the needs of multicultural and multilingual learners is one of the biggest challenges facing today's teachers (Hodges, 2001). While the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students has increased, most teachers report that they have had little or no preparation for working with diverse students, especially English language learners (Carrier, 2005). In addition to the lack of training received by the teachers in dealing with diverse learners, the majority of teachers in diverse school settings are Caucasian, which means that they are attempting to meet the needs of students who do not share the same language, culture, or national origin (Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2001).

The changing demands of an unpredictable world require an educational system capable of delivering world-class learning to all students (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006). To meet this demand, No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2001 with the intention of reforming public education and improving student achievement throughout the United States (Simpson, Lacava, & Graner, 2004). Research by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the National Research Council (NRC), and the Urban Institute, identified challenges that jeopardize Hispanic students' opportunities to excel academically and later in life; These challenges included: (a) disproportionate attendance

at resource poor schools; (b) lack of access to fully qualified teachers; (c) lack of participation in rigorous, college-preparatory coursework; (d) parents with low-household incomes and low levels of formal education; (e) English language learners and English language learners with disabilities with unmet instructional needs; (f) high mobility of students whose families are migrant farm workers; and (g) students who are undocumented and cannot attend college or work legally after attaining a college degree (AFT, 2006).

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

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the beliefs and effective practices of Texas school principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools. For the purposes of this study, mid-level schools are defined as schools that serve 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. In addition, Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably throughout this study. The research questions explored were:

1. In what ways do school principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools account for the socioeconomic status of their students?
2. In what ways do principals of schools with high achieving majority Hispanic students involve parents in the educational process?
3. What principal's actions have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement?
4. What strategies do principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools use to establish a culture of success?
5. What beliefs do principals have that influence their practice with Hispanic students?

**Rationale of the Research**

The Hispanic population has dramatically increased over the last decade (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008). This increase has led to more Hispanic students being enrolled in our public schools. With many Hispanic students not succeeding in our public education system, many school administrators are searching for effective practices that will help them better serve their Hispanic population. Therefore, the rationale for this study was to identify effective practices of school principals in majority Hispanic mid-level schools. The findings of this research might provide school principals and other school leaders with practices that have a direct impact on Hispanic student academic achievement.

**Assumptions**

The following assumptions were made in this study:

1. Information from the Just4kids website and TEA was accurate.
2. The participants answered questions completely and honestly.
3. The research questions were adequately developed to understand the occurrences on these campuses that led to Hispanic students being academically successful.

**Limitations**

This study was limited in the following ways:

1. The study was limited to a purposeful sampling of principals.
2. The study was limited by the beliefs of the individuals interviewed and their willingness to address those beliefs.
3. The study was limited by the principal's knowledge of the programs and activities implemented in the school.

**Delimitations**

This study included the following delimitations.

1. The principal must have been employed in a public high achieving mid-level school in the state of Texas.
2. The principal must have been employed as a principal at the school for a minimum of three years.
3. The school population must have a Hispanic enrollment of at least 51%.
4. The campus must have achieved a rating of Recognized or Exemplary on the state accountability system during the principal's tenure.
5. The rating on the accountability system must have occurred during the previous two years.

**Definitions**

Operational definitions for this study are listed below.

1. First generation student- Born outside of the United States, its territories or possessions. Can be naturalized U.S. citizens, legal immigrants, or undocumented immigrants. May also be referred to as "foreign born" and "immigrants" (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).
2. Second generation student- Born in the United States with at least one foreign born parent. U.S. citizen by birth. Included in "Native born" students (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).
3. Third generation student- Born in the United States with both parents also born in the United States. U.S. citizen by birth. Included in "Native born" students (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).

**Summary**

In Chapter I, the researcher introduced the study. In Chapter II, the literature review includes three major sections. The first section, Hispanic students in U.S. schools, details the characteristics of Hispanic students in public schools, the education of Hispanics, and English language learners. The second section, effective practices of public school principals, details school principal accountability, principals as instructional leaders, closing the achievement gap, and climate and culture. The final section, culturally proficient leadership, details the culturally proficient tool kit, and culturally responsive teaching. In Chapter III, the researcher outlines the design of the study. In Chapter IV an epoche is provided. In Chapters V through XIV, the findings of the principal interviews are provided. In Chapter XV, the analysis of the findings is presented. In Chapter XVI, the summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future studies are presented.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the beliefs and effective practices of Texas school principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools. To gain a full understanding of the school principal's impact on Hispanic student achievement, Chapter II is structured into three sections. The first section includes a review of literature on Hispanic students in U.S. schools. This section also discusses characteristics of Hispanic students in public schools as well as the factors related to the education of Hispanic students. In the second section the researcher discusses the effective practices of public school principals. In this section, school principal accountability, principals as instructional leaders, closing the achievement gap, and culture and climate are also discussed. Finally, in the third section the researcher reviews the literature on culturally proficient leadership.

#### **Hispanic Students in U.S. Schools**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), Hispanic youth are the fastest growing population in American schools and currently make up one-fifth of public school enrollment. Current research indicates that as the number of Hispanic students in American schools increase, the educational struggles of this group become more apparent in the school setting (Crosnoe, 2005). When compared to other groups, Hispanic students fare far worse in academic achievement and standardized testing than their other minority counterparts (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

**Characteristics of Hispanic students in public schools.** Hispanic students are the largest minority population with a documented 10 million represented in the 48 million public school students currently in the U.S. (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). According to Fry and Gonzales (2008), 70% of the 10 million Hispanic students enrolled in public schools spoke a language other than English at home. These researchers also noted that poverty rates among Hispanic groups were significantly higher when compared to their non-Hispanic peers. In addition, Fry and Gonzales found that Hispanic students born in the U.S. are one and a half times more likely to live in poverty. Further, foreign born Hispanics are twice as likely to live in poverty when compared to non-Hispanics.

**Demographics.** The majority (84%) of Hispanic public school students were born in the United States (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). In Texas and California, where the Hispanic populations are most heavily represented, 52% of the student population is Hispanic. Fry and Gonzales reported that most Hispanic students are of Mexican origin (69%) followed by Puerto Rican (9%), Dominican (3%), Salvadoran (3%) and Cuban (2%). Fry and Gonzales (2008) also noted that 30% of non-Hispanic African American students live in a household with both parents compared to 57% of Hispanic students and 69% of non-Hispanic white students. Further, the largest groups of Hispanic students living with both parents were U.S. born students of immigrant parents at 71%. This group was followed by foreign born students at 58% and U.S. born students with native parents at 48% (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).

**Language skills.** In regards to language skills, Fry and Gonzales (2008) reported that seven-in-ten Hispanic students speak a language other than English at home. Additionally, 30% of Hispanic students speak only English at home with 52% having self

reported as having strong English speaking skills. The remaining 18% of students reported speaking English with difficulty. Nearly half (44%) of first-generation students spoke English with difficulty, compared with 20% of second-generation students and 5% of the older generations. In addition, a majority (78%) of Hispanic students lived in households where an older sibling or other member of the family over the age of 13 spoke English very well (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).

*Socioeconomic status.* Hispanic students report higher rates (28%) of poverty than non-Hispanic students (16%) according to Fry and Gonzales (2008). In comparison, 35% of non-Hispanic black students live in poverty and only 11% of non-Hispanic white students live in a poor household. Fry and Gonzales also reported that foreign-born Hispanic students (35%) were more likely than their native-born counterparts (27%) to live in poverty.

In addition, the household income of Hispanic students was \$40,248 compared to non-Hispanic students who reported a median household income of \$60,372. While 59% of non-Hispanic public school students lived in households where the income exceeded \$50,000, only 38% of Hispanics did. Fry and Gonzales (2008) also reported that Hispanic families were more likely to earn an income over \$50,000 the longer they lived in the United States. Further, only 28% of first-generation students lived in a household with an income of more than \$50,000, but this share increased to more than a third (37%) among second-generation students and nearly half (46%) among third and higher-generation students (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).

Fry and Gonzales (2008) reported that educational attainment was directly tied to the likelihood of living in a household with a median income of over \$50,000. They also

reported a direct correlation between the amount of money a Hispanic family earned and their educational achievement. According to Fry and Gonzales, 50% of immigrant Hispanic students lived with a parent who had not graduated from high school. This data also reflected an increase among high school completion rates with second generation (58%) and third generation (84%) families. When reviewing all Hispanic students, 34% had a parent who had not earned a high school diploma. Conversely, fewer than 7% of non-Hispanic students had a parent who had not completed high school.

**The education of Hispanics.** Lack of educational attainment is a major barrier to economic success in the Hispanic community (Jasinski, 2000). Jasinski (2000) emphasized that the concern regarding educational attainment is significant because it is so highly associated with other socioeconomic factors including poverty. In order to explain the low educational attainment of Hispanic students, Jasinski noted two broad categories: (1) sociocultural explanations such as cultural reasoning for the high dropout rates, and (2) socioeconomic explanations such as poverty.

*Sociocultural explanations.* There is much research indicating that the lack of English language acquisition is a strong rationale when determining the causes of poor performance in the school setting for many immigrant newcomers (August & Hakuta, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). In addition, researchers have shown that students with a lack of the English language are often associated with lower GPA's, repeating grade levels, and low graduation rates (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Further, students lacking adequate English language skills were found to be consistent failures of standardized testing, which is highly linked to high school graduation and college admission. These failures,

in turn, are likely to discourage Hispanic students from continuing high school or pursuing post secondary education (Abedi & Lord, 2001; August & Hakuta, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003). When considering all the research regarding low levels of academic English, it becomes obvious that students with low levels of English proficiency will face many obstacles in being successful in U.S. public schools (Carhill, Suarez-Orozco, & Paez, 2008).

Another consideration for the lack of academic success by Hispanic immigrant students may be the parents' inability to assist their children with school-related activities such as homework (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Cruz (2009) stated that immigrant parents are sometimes unable to help their children due to their limited education and also their inability to communicate in English. Further, the lack of successful bilingual programs in our public schools means that there are even fewer schools with strong bilingual support for parents, which ultimately can have a negative impact on student success in schools (Jasinski, 2000).

Many researchers have considered generational status as an indicator for immigrant student school success (Jasinski, 2000). For example, second generation immigrant students do much better in educational attainment than their parents. However, the gains that the second generation immigrant students make relative to their parents are reversed by the third generation immigrant students (Perreira, Harris, & Lee, 2007). Researchers Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found that the longer second generation students live in the United States, the lower their grade point average drops. The correlation between the length of time lived in the United States and the lower grade

point average is attributed to lowered academic motivation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

*Socioeconomic explanations.* The socioeconomic status of the family has an impact on the likelihood of high school graduation and post-secondary education (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). According to the NCES (2002), students who come from families of low income are three times more likely not to finish school than their middle income family counterparts. Families with higher incomes are more likely to have children who complete school because of their ability to provide a home that is educationally supportive (Barton & Coley, 2007). In addition, Barton and Coley (2007) reported that the family and home are crucial to a child's education because the amount of time they spend at home is significantly greater than the time they spend in school. Researchers further stated that if educators are to make gains in closing the achievement gap, there must be a partnership between schools and parents that will help improve a student's home environment (Barton & Coley, 2007; Druian & Butler, 2001).

Many families with limited resources do not plan for future expenses associated with education (Jasinski, 2000). This lack of planning often leads students to believe that college is not an option or not valued in their homes. Further, with the increased demands of financial need in the home, some Hispanic children are forced to quit school in order to work and contribute to the household income. Additionally, children living in low socioeconomic neighborhoods have fewer experiences linking meaningful employment to education, resulting in a view that education is not a valued or a determining factor in post-secondary success (Jasinski, 2000).

The highest level of education obtained by the parent is also an indicator of socioeconomic status (Chapa & Valencia, 1993). Uneducated parents often struggle with helping students with their homework and feel uncomfortable communicating with school officials regarding their child's education. Gandara (1995) demonstrated that a child's educational success has a direct correlation with their parents' academic history. This meant that the higher the level of education obtained by parents, the better the chances that their children will be as successful in school (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

**English language learners.** More than half of the immigrants residing in the U.S. have limited use of the English language (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). However, this information is not an accurate prediction of the English language learner student population in grades K-12 (Zehler, Adger, Coburn, Arteagoitia, Williams, Jacobson, et al., 2008). While many believe that English language learners are immigrants, the reality is that approximately three-fourths of these students are actually second or third generation Hispanics (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005). According to Zehler and colleagues, the American classroom is changing significantly as the English language learner population increases, which will ultimately have an impact on the methodology utilized to teach all students.

As the population of our schools changes, it is imperative that districts and schools are prepared to educate these children effectively (Zehler et al., 2008.) Zehler and colleagues suggested that preparing school staff and communities for these changes ahead of time would be more beneficial than waiting for the change to slowly affect the educational approach of the school.

***ELL school characteristics.*** A report published by the Urban Institute showed that Limited English Proficient students are often concentrated in specific schools and communities rather than affecting all districts equally (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2001). According to the report, elementary LEP students are highly concentrated in specific elementary schools with 70% of LEP students represented in only 10% of the schools. Further, schools with high populations of LEP students are often found in urban areas which compound the issues that these students face as many urban schools struggle with serving low socioeconomic families with a multitude of needs (Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). Cohen and colleagues identified these needs or problems as including large class sizes, significant student diversity, high rates of poverty, and unqualified teachers. Additionally, Cohen and colleagues cited other issues such as higher rates of tardiness and absenteeism and a lack of parent involvement. In response to the significant level of needs facing these campuses, many schools with a high population of LEP students offer remedial programs to assist students in achieving academic success. Additionally, many of these schools specialize in teaching English language learners and implement the most effective programs necessary such as foreign language immersion, bilingual education, ESL, and native language instruction.

***ELL teacher characteristics.*** Cohen and colleagues (2005) reported that teachers in schools with high numbers of LEP students have less academic preparation than teachers in schools that have few or no LEP students even though there is very little difference among new teachers. These researchers also stated that high-performing schools typically have fewer vacancies and the jobs are more coveted due to the ease of the position. Because of these factors, the researchers stated that teachers obtaining

certification through temporary, emergency, or provisional status are more likely to be hired in high risk campuses.

Schools that have a high population of limited English proficient students have more undereducated teachers; however, Cohen and colleagues (2005) found that those schools provide their staff with more opportunities for professional development than teachers at low-LEP schools. The research team also learned that campuses with high populations of LEP students were training all of their staff, even those who were not working directly with the ESL/bilingual population. In addition, the staff members in high-LEP schools tend to reflect the diversity of the students as a more racially and ethnically diverse group of teachers. The pay for working at high-LEP campuses is often higher than other campuses with low ELL student populations due to the increased challenges in securing appropriate staff (Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005).

***ELL principal characteristics.*** According to Cohen and colleagues (2005), principals in high-LEP schools have less education and training than those in other schools. Although the amount of education and training is reported to be lower, the high-LEP principals are more likely to have an advanced degree but have much less experience than principals in low-LEP schools. Also, principals in high-LEP schools tend to be Hispanic, Asian, or female and earn a higher salary for working at a high-LEP school, but tend to be the same age as principals at low-LEP campuses.

**Dual language programs.** Interest in dual language programs has recently increased; however, programs have been in existence for a long time in specific geographical regions (Howard & Christian, 2002). According to Howard and Christian (2002), the long term success of both the ELL and English speaking students who

participate in the dual language program is an appealing attribute when compared to other alternative programs. Howard and Christian stated that the most effective form of developing true bilingual students, cross-cultural awareness, and the most promising educational success is through the two-way immersion method. By the end of 2008, the Texas Two-Way Consortium listed 285 dual language programs in Texas. Considering there were only 10 programs identified ten years earlier, this is a dramatic increase in the implementation of two-way dual language education programs (<http://texastwoway.org>).

*Characteristics.* Dual language programs vary widely in implementation but have some core characteristics (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2005). According to Freeman and colleagues (2005), dual language classrooms should consist of students who speak English integrated with non-English speakers and should be educated together throughout the day while instruction is given in both languages. The goal of the program is for students to become proficient in two languages. The research on these programs reflects that students in dual language programs perform as well or better than students educated in the popular English immersion programs (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

*Potential problems.* Regardless of data that suggests the success of the dual language programs, there are certain factors to consider (Gomez, 2006). In order for effective dual language programs to take place, they must be well implemented with the needed resources and have adequate support from administration and faculty. Gomez (2006) stated that a slew of poorly administrated programs have given bilingual education a bad name and opened the door for critics to oppose the implementation of programs in their schools. Gomez also suggested that some schools have built the program around the

needs of the native English speaker. This is part of the reason that dual language programs have become so popular. However, if such programs succeed in developing these native English speakers into fully proficient bilinguals, the programs may serve to take away the one advantage that English language learners have traditionally had--the distinction of achieving a high level of bilingualism (Valdes, 1997). Further, Gomez (2006) also identified the inability for the creation of the dual language programs due to low numbers of native English speaking children available to place in the program. According to Gomez, without the English speaking counterparts, English language learners are unable to experience a dual language program that can effectively meet their academic needs.

**Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP).** The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model was developed to provide teachers with a well articulated, practical model of sheltered instruction (Short & Echevarria, 1999). The SIOP model has become so popular that it is found in most of the United States and even in some other countries. SIOP is strongly based on teacher preparation and utilizing instructional techniques to increase the background knowledge of English language learners in the classroom (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). In SIOP, instructional methodology and differentiation of delivery are the focus with the overall goal of the model being to provide an enriched experience in the core content classrooms for the English language learner (Short & Echevarria, 1999). Although the SIOP model has become very popular, it is merely a collection of strategies and other approaches to teaching the English language learner, not a new concept. One way to understand the foundation of the model is to consider it as an “umbrella” under which other programs

can successfully operate rather than incorporating additional programs for English language learners (Short & Echevarria, 1999).

***Effective instruction through SIOP.*** According to Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2008), research shows teachers trained in the SIOP methodology provide a more effective instructional model to English language learners. Students who participate in classes with SIOP trained teachers outperform students in non-SIOP trained classrooms. Hansen-Thomas (2008) believed that sheltered instruction was intended to be utilized in classrooms with a mix of ELL and native English speakers or in a homogenous classroom serving only ELL students. Further, these specialized classes could only be taught by an ESL teacher or a content area teacher who has been trained in the sheltered instruction delivery method. Hansen-Thomas also noted that the intention of sheltered instruction is to provide high quality instruction to ELL students by utilizing effective teaching strategies with a high focus on academic language development. Sheltered instruction can be implemented in all content areas but is most commonly used in core subjects such as English, math, science, and social studies as ELL students often need the most assistance in these courses (Hansen-Thomas, 2008).

***Ineffective use of the SIOP model.*** Sheltered Instruction provides useful strategies and techniques for making instruction more understandable for ELLs but, like all teaching strategies, it must be implemented with specific guidelines in place (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). According to Echevarria and colleagues (2006), high quality instruction is an integral part of implementing the SIOP model; without rigorous training and attention to research-based material, it will not be successful. Because over packed curriculum drives lesson plans for teachers operating under our

high-stakes requirements, classrooms without sheltered instruction will result in ELL learners who are constantly lost in an academic language they do not speak (Short, 2002). Conversely, teachers who have a strong foundation in SIOP training and comprehend research-based instructional strategies will have significant success in working with their ELL students (Short & Echevarria, 1999). Like most effective instructional practices, this model results in significant academic gains for ELL students; however, it shouldn't be used as the only factor in educating the ELL student (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).

### **Effective Practices of Public School Principals**

In an effort to identify the traits of effective school principals, the Missouri Professors of Educational Administration (MPEA) conducted an extensive research study (Arnold, Perry, Watson, Minatra, & Swartz, 2006). The results of the study identified effective communication as a core component of the successful principal. The study also noted the importance and need for principals to have a strong public presence in the classroom, the school, as well as the community. Further, the study found that the principal is the key spokesperson for the campus and must consider that all communication shall be positive, enthusiastic, and effective. Additionally, the MPEA study noted that effective principals must set high expectations for the staff and that these expectations should be attainable and supported by the administrative team. The study ultimately found that the school principal must lead by example. Actions, language, and character must reflect the epitome of the ideal employee (Arnold et al., 2006).

**School principal accountability.** Over the last few years, the accountability system has changed its focus and attention to student test scores (Lemke, Hoerandner, &

McMahon, 2006). Public schools across the United States are suddenly being evaluated and held accountable for their test scores by parents, newspapers, ranking websites, and other school stakeholders (Langner & Borris-Schacter 2003; Thomas, Grigsby, Miller, & Scully, 2003). According to Lemke and colleagues (2006), utilizing test scores to hold schools accountable for their areas of weakness is an effective measure for stakeholders to judge whether or not schools are properly utilizing public funds to further their students academically. For schools that are failing, Lemke and colleagues discovered that corrective action plans may include implementing new programs, changing staff assignments, removing staff completely or, in the extreme situation, taking control away from the district and having state level interventions. Because the new accountability measures have significant consequences for schools that fail to succeed, administrators now work more diligently to address their schools' and students' areas of need (Lemke, Hoerandner, & McMahon, 2006) .

The signing of NCLB in 2002 not only established a significant amount of accountability to the local districts, teacher certification requirements, and rigorous curriculum, but it also addressed the important role of the campus principal (Title II, Section 2113 (c)). Principals who once relied on the professionalism of teachers to ensure classroom success no longer had that luxury (McGhee & Nelson, 2005). In order for these principals to run the most efficient campuses, they are now being more proactive in training teachers on the most effective strategies for instructional methodology (McGhee & Nelson, 2005). The changes in principal accountability has led districts to utilize data-driven decision making when evaluating principal performance, which has put an even greater pressure on principals to perform (Jones & Egley, 2006).

**Principals as instructional leaders.** Effective school principals share similar approaches to influencing student success: developing strong teachers and implementing effective organizational procedures (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) have reported that school leadership has a significant impact on student performance. In a meta-analysis of 70 studies on education, Waters et al. found that there were 21 traits of campus leaders that resulted in better performance among the student body. This same study also noted that the correlation between effective leadership and high student success was positive while schools with weak administration exhibited lower rates of student academic achievement. Thus, NCLB has severely impacted the role of the campus principal by increasing the pressure on administration to demand increased rates of student achievement measured by standardized tests (Kelly, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005).

**Closing the achievement gap.** In addition to overall pressure for student improvement, the focus on increasing achievement in historically low achieving groups has gained much attention (Kim, Zabel, Stiefel, & Schwartz, 2006). Further, research has revealed that these low achieving groups enter Kindergarten already significantly behind their peers suggesting that there is more required of schools to close these gaps than the standard K-12 educational practice (Evans, 2005). According to Evans, many students enter school with such great academic inequalities that these students face significant struggles from the beginning. Also, Evans noted that Kindergarten students who demonstrate the greatest academic gap are African American and Hispanic students who are reportedly beginning school a developmental year behind their peers. Achievement gaps in the African American and Hispanic communities are not simply a result of poor

development in pre-school stages. Evans found that these students also experience significant regression during the summer months when they are more likely to spend significant time in front of the television rather than participating in educationally based activities. Evans also stated that African American and Hispanic students were more likely to change schools, resulting in additional setbacks in their educational career.

The 2002 No Child Left Behind Act also required schools to track the academic progress of every student from year to year (Tajelli & Opheim, 2004). Further, Tajelli and Opheim (2004) concluded that the purpose of NCLB was to close the achievement gap between all groups of students. This required schools to improve achievement in all populations which resulted in administrators addressing failing campuses with more intensive solutions (Wong, 2004; Kim et al., 2006). To further add pressure to principals, Tajelli and Opheim (2004) found that student performance was significantly impacted by socioeconomic status. This meant, as Okpala (2002) suggested, that while schools have some impact on a student's success, a key component is completely out of the control of the district: a family's economic condition.

*Instructional strategies.* Quality professional development is key in preparing teachers to provide the most meaningful and substantial educational experience to high risk students (Hirsch, 2005). Utilizing research-based approaches to education logically leads teachers down an already tested path of prior success in lieu of creating new methodology while immediate results are needed (Levine & Marcus, 2007). The rigor and relevance of curriculum is another important aspect of educating high risk students because it provides teachers with tools that allow them to teach rigorous content in a meaningful way that will allow their students to better understand the material being

taught (Barton, 2003; Chatterji, 2006). In addition, the classroom structure has also been under great scrutiny as it is understood that a successful learning environment should have a reasonable class size with teachers having the resources that would allow them to acquire the adequate equipment needed for teaching. The relationship between school and family has also been considered to be a key component in increasing student attendance and parent participation in the education of the student (Barton & Coley, 2007; Chatterji, 2006; RAND Corporation, 2005).

*School resources.* Tajelli and Opheim (2004) reviewed the available resources provided to economically disadvantaged schools. The researchers discovered that there were three areas where funding could considerably improve student achievement on standardized tests. First, teacher characteristics played an important role in student achievement as well as in closing the achievement gap between student populations. Next, teacher salaries and years of teaching experience also contributed to higher rates of student success. Finally, Tajelli and Opheim (2004) found that economically disadvantaged primary schools in Texas spent a great deal of funding on bilingual programs that led to an increase in student achievement. Their study also concluded that spending money on curriculum and instruction had a direct impact on student scores.

*Small learning communities.* Small learning communities are schools within a school that downsize the effect of the massive number of students and teachers within one school campus (Heath, 2005). Heath learned that schools utilizing the small learning communities benefited in three distinct areas: school climate, school attitude, and academic persistence. Effective implementation of small learning communities may

increase standardized tests scores and affect other factors of educational success such as drop-out rates, attendance, and overall academic success (Heath, 2005).

Because of its success, administrators should consider the implementation of small learning communities in schools that have high counts of at-risk students (Azzam, 2007). Small learning communities benefit at-risk students most by providing closer communication between staff and student which allows for more personal contact and less opportunity for students to fall between the cracks (Zvoch, 2006). The support of the smaller learning community is facilitated by the personalized approach allowed by teachers working with a specific group of students in a sheltered environment (Heath, 2005).

Although there are no specific guidelines to define “small” groups, educators consistently agree that students operating in large student bodies are not as successful as those in smaller communities (School Renaissance Institute, 2000). This information is useful to large campuses as it enables them to create their own small schools within a larger campus. Limiting the exposure of students to massive complex organization builds a natural relationship between students and their core group of peers and teachers (Owen, Cooper, & Brown, 2002). The research also concluded that the smaller learning communities provided long lasting relationships between staff and students that personalized the educational experience resulting in students with a more significant support system, unlike students who experience traditional high school in a large student body with much anonymity. Increases in student achievement are consistently tracked in schools that effectively implement smaller learning communities (Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyons, 2000).

Although there are no guarantees when implementing new strategies for student success, the community relationship created by smaller learning communities is important in establishing a sense of family within the school (School Renaissance Institute (SRI), 2000). Further, the report documented that a personalized approach to education leads to a decrease in discipline problems, an increase in student motivation, and an overall increase in student achievement. In addition, building relationships between students and school personnel often results in building increased trust and support from the teachers. This trust leads to increased student performance as students are more likely to take risks, take a more personal interest in their success, and listen to the advice of their teachers. Staying in school is more appealing to a student who values a relationship with school personnel. Additionally, parents are more likely to become involved in schools that build relationships with their children (School Renaissance Institute, 2000).

***Parent involvement.*** Parent involvement is the single most important factor in determining high school completion (Anderson & Minke, 2007). In fact, NCLB documented its importance by stating the important role parents play in participating in their children's academic lives (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). Because increased parental involvement is key to the academic success of students, schools should encourage participation at every given opportunity (VanVoorhis, 2003).

In a report, issued by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) on student drop-out rates, it was reported that only one-fifth of parents are actively involved in their child's education (Azzam, 2007). The author of the report concluded that increasing the relationship between parents and schools should

increase student success by keeping them enrolled in school. Also noted in the report was that parents should communicate regularly with schools and track student progress as much as possible.

Leuchovius (2006) agreed with the findings that involved parents resulted in successful students. As Leuchovius further defined in her *Parent Brief*, involved parents are aware of attendance history, grades, and their child's behavior in school. Further, students who experience a change in their academic success are more likely to be rescued from dropping out when their parents are actively engaged in their school activities, noted Sheldon and Epstein (2005). These authors also agreed that increased communication between school personnel and parents will result in a community approach to solving behavior problems and addressing academic concerns.

Currently, administrators are faced with the task of determining a fast and effective way of building relationships between parents and schools (Deplanty et al., 2007). While there are many reasons that parents stay away from school, the benefits are significant, including increased GPA (Morrison Gutman & Midgley, 2000) and lower dropout rates (Leuchovius, 2006). Unfortunately, ASCD found that over half of the parents of recent student dropouts had never been contacted by the school (Azzam, 2007). Considering our understanding of the value of parent-school relationships, this practice is not acceptable (Leuchovius, 2006). Deplanty et al. (2007) substantiated that while parent participation is essential, it should be enhanced by building a student, parent, and teacher team approach to educating the child.

**Climate and culture.** Administrators frequently do not recognize the differences that exist between school climate and school culture (Gruenert, 2008). Although the two

share similar characteristics, administrators who recognize the difference between the two will benefit from addressing each separately within their building (Gruenert, 2008). According to Gruenert, school climate is thought to represent the attitude of an organization. Further, it is the collective mood or morale of a group of people. Climate is the main leverage point for any culture, which means that if school leaders want to shape a new culture they should start with an assessment of the climate. Gruenert continued by stating that if the culture is ineffective, there are probably climate issues that were missed before they became rooted in culture.

*School climate defined.* Perry's systemic research on school climate and its effect on the learning process developed from organizational research and studies on school effectiveness (Anderson, 1982; Creemers & Reezigt, 1999; Miller & Fredericks, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983). While there is a widely accepted definition of school climate, researchers have agreed that climate denotes a subjective experience in school (Cohen, 2006). Cohen (2006) and Freiberg (1999) suggested that there are ten essential dimensions that color and shape one's subjective experiences in schools:

1. Environmental
2. Structural
3. Safety
4. Teaching and Learning
5. Relationships
6. Sense of School Community
7. Morale
8. Peer Norms

9. School Home-Community Partnerships

10. Learning Community (Cohen, 2006; Freiberg 1999).

***School culture defined.*** School culture is most often defined as the shared beliefs and priorities that exist within a school, including personal and professional expectations, patterns of behavior, and staff stability (Barth, 2004; Phillips & Wagner, 2003; Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2006; Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). Wagner (2000) considers school culture to be a cumulative experience of traditions and celebrations that exist within the school community that lead to a sense of family and team. Richardson (2001) viewed school culture as the combination of individual values and practices that together formed a group expectation. It is seen as the overall regular practice of a campus. Further, school culture is the deeply embedded “personality” of a school and setting. Peterson (2002) refers to school culture as the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the “persona” of the school.

***Summarizing school climate and culture.*** A growing body of research indicates that positive school climate is a critical dimension linked to effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts as well as teaching and learning (Cohen, 2001; Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2001; Rand Corporation, 2004). School climate and school culture are two factors in a school environment that can impede or support learning (Tableman, 2004). Further, if student behavior and academic achievement are to be improved, this generally requires changing school climate and culture (Tableman, 2004). In order for school leaders to improve school culture, the Center for Improving School Culture suggests a four-step process: assess the current culture, analyze the findings, select the areas for improvements, and continue to monitor and adjust as needed

(Wagner, 2004). When a school culture supports the assumption that all students have the capacity to learn and achieve, the staff and students have the freedom to modify previously held philosophies about how students learn (Burke, Baca, Picus, & Jones, 2002). Once a school holds the belief that all students can achieve, a school's principal and teachers can explore alternative strategies to help underachieving students become more successful (Burke, Baca, Picus, & Jones, 2002).

### **Culturally Proficient Leadership**

Multicultural education has been defined by Nieto and Bode (2008) as a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. Multicultural education challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates schools' curriculum and instructional strategies as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Further, multicultural education uses "critical pedagogy as the underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justices" (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 44).

Leaders who accept a commitment to multicultural education today are often referred to as culturally proficient leaders. A culturally proficient leader influences others to make changes in their values, beliefs, and attitudes (Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005). Culturally proficient educational leaders are effective in cross-cultural situations that affect their students, the communities they serve, and the educators and members in their schools (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). Further, Terrell and Lindsey

stated that culturally proficient leaders are committed to educating all students at high levels through knowing and using the students' cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning styles within the selected curricular and instructional context (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009).

**Leadership and diversity.** The change in student population is a considerable challenge for educators not traditionally prepared for educating a diverse student body with a variety of educational needs (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005). All schools must face the challenges of every student population to effectively address the needs of the student and provide them with a consistently high standard of instruction. Madsen and Mabokela (2005) further noted that the responsibility for ensuring that quality experience exists for every student is the responsibility of the campus principal. Principals must change their approach to leadership in response to the changing demands of their campus, addressing the need for research-based instructional practice and providing teachers with the necessary training to educate all students.

**Culturally proficient strategies.** Terrell and Lindsey (2009) created a cultural proficient tool kit that allows an educational leader to lead a personal life and perform professional responsibilities in a culturally proficient manner. The four tools are listed as: (1) guiding principles, (2) a continuum, (3) essential elements, and (4) barriers. Another strategy, culturally responsive teaching, is used to address the variety of learning styles that each student brings to the classroom from their own cultural background (Carrier, 2005).

**Guiding principles.** According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005), guiding principles provide a moral philosophical framework for an educational leader to examine

and understand their own beliefs about education of students from cultural groups different from theirs. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) argued that once educational leaders examine and understand their own beliefs, the guiding principles will help them examine the core values of their school. By examining the core values of their school, school leaders will be able to develop a coherent approach to educating all students in ways that build on who they are as people and as members of a complex society.

*The cultural proficiency continuum.* Terrell and Lindsey (2009) listed six points of the cultural proficiency continuum with a brief description of each as the second cultural proficiency tool. The first three points of the continuum focus on the students and their culture as being problematic while the last three points focus on the educational leader's practice as transformational leadership. The six points of the continuum (cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural precompetence, cultural competence, and cultural proficiency) take the educational leader from a position of viewing students as underperforming to the realization that they (as leaders) are under serving their students and communities.

*The five elements of cultural competence.* Terrell and Lindsey (2009) listed the third cultural proficiency tool as the five essential elements of cultural competence. Terrell and Lindsey posited that the essential elements are the standards for culturally competent values, behaviors, policies, and practices. Further, the essential elements exist at the cultural competence point of the continuum and are used to guide intentional leadership practice. The authors listed the five essential elements as assessing cultural knowledge, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge.

***Overcoming barriers to cultural proficiency.*** Overcoming barriers to cultural proficiency is Terrell and Lindsey's (2009) fourth tool from the cultural proficiency tool kit. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) identified three common barriers and descriptions of behaviors associated with each barrier. According to Terrell and Lindsey (2009), the barriers, when presented in their behaviors or the practices in their schools, existed together in combination, not as isolated events. The three barriers are the following: (a) resistance to change, (b) embedded systems of oppression, and (c) a sense of privilege and entitlement.

**Culturally responsive teaching.** The learning styles of different student populations are shown to be affected by their cultural background (Snowman & Biehler, 2003). In addition, specific approaches to instructional delivery can effectively impact the results of student achievement for these student groups (Curtin, 2006; Lessow-Hurley, 2003). Several strategies have been specifically successful with minority populations, such as hands-on learning activities, the use of visual aids, and cooperative learning experiences (Allison & Rehm, 2007; Carrier, 2005). Utilizing these strategies in the classroom allows for a more meaningful educational experience that benefits all students and encompasses multiple methods of delivery to ensure that students with different educational needs are able to absorb the lesson completely (Carrier, 2005; Curtin, 2006).

### **Summary**

In Chapter II, the researcher reviewed the literature on Hispanic students in U.S. schools, effective practices of public school principals, and culturally proficient leadership. In Chapter III, the researcher outlined the design of the study. In Chapter IV

an epoche is provided. In Chapters V through XIV, the principal interviews are provided. In Chapter XV the analysis of the findings are presented. In Chapter XVI the summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future studies are presented.

## **Chapter III**

### **Design of the Study**

Closing the achievement gap is seen as being important not just for the education system but for our economy, our social stability, and our moral health as a nation (Evans, 2005). As the Hispanic school-age population in the United States continues to grow, it is expected to reach 28 million in the year 2050 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). According to Fry and Gonzales (2008), this growth will be a 166% increase from the 2006 Hispanic school-age population of 11 million. With the Hispanic population increasing at a substantial rate, state and federal accountability reforms are putting pressure on schools to close the achievement gap of such historically low performing groups of students (Kim, Zabel, Stiefel, & Schwartz, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the beliefs and effective practices of Texas school principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools.

### **Research Design**

The research design of this study was qualitative with a phenomenological narrative approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative researchers study happenings in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Creswell also indicated that

to study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. Creswell further wrote in his qualitative definition that the final written report or presentation includes voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and the complex description and interpretation of the problem as it extends the literature or signals a call for action.

**The participants.** The participants in this study were 10 highly effective Texas mid-level school principals. Two of those ten principals chose to be anonymous. The selection of the participants was purposive in order to include the stories of principals who met certain criteria for effectiveness. These criteria for selection included the following: (a) the principals had to be principals on the same campus for a minimum of two full years; (b) the campus where these principals served had to have a majority Hispanic student population, which was defined as having 51% or more Hispanic students enrolled on their campus; and (c) the schools in which these principals served had achieved a state rating of Exemplary or Recognized in the previous two years. The Just4Kids website was utilized for identifying schools with high achieving mid-level schools with a majority 51% Hispanic student enrollment. Once the list of schools was created through the Just4Kids website, the TEA website was then used to provide the schools' ratings for the previous two years.

**The role of researcher.** Creswell (2007) stated that the role of a qualitative researcher is that of being the key instrument. Following Creswell's suggestion, the researcher collected data through examining school documents, observing behavior, and

interviewing participants. Creswell also noted that through the entire qualitative research process, the researcher should keep the focus on learning the meaning that the participants held about the problem or issue. This was the primary role of the researcher.

**Data collection.** For a narrative study, Czarniawska (2004) mentioned three ways to collect data for stories: (a) recording spontaneous incidents of storytelling, (b) eliciting stories through interviews, and (c) asking for stories through such mediums as the internet. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested collecting field texts through a wide array of sources: autobiographies, journals, research field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, stories of families, documents, photographs, and personal-family social artifacts.

Following suggestions by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the researcher collected data by audio recording the interview as well as scripting the answers given by the participants. Each participant was initially contacted by e-mail and phone and later interviewed in person. Each participant was given the research questions that were asked in the face-to-face interview in advance. The e-mails and phone calls were informal and were also the first step in contacting the participants. The phone conversations lasted no more than 15 minutes. The face-to-face interview lasted approximately 45 minutes with an additional 15 minutes where participants were asked for clarification on certain responses given by the participant. The audiotape was later transcribed into field texts. The researcher also wrote notes on the body language of the participant as each answered the interview questions.

**Researcher positionality.** Researcher positionality in this study is based on the work of Banks (1998) and Tilman (2002). Banks developed a theoretical orientation for

understanding research that emphasized a group's race, ethnicity and culture when discussing typology of cross-cultural researchers. According to Banks, this perspective addressed the discussions "about whose knowledge is authentic, who can know what, and who speaks for whom" when considering the "types of knowers within a pluralistic society" (p. 7). Banks noted that when individuals are socialized within "ethnic, racial, and cultural communities they internalize localized values, perspectives, ways of knowing, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge that can differ in significant ways from those of individuals socialized within other microcultures" (p. 7).

Banks referred to four types of *knowers* (researchers): (a) the indigenous-insider, (b) the indigenous-outsider, (c) the external-insider and (d) the external-outsider. Generally, these lines may not be completely distinctive of one another and researchers may be both insiders and outsiders at varying times. Banks noted that insiders and outsiders might refer to race, ethnicity, gender, class and/or religion. Considering this, based on Banks' work, I acknowledge my position in this dissertation research as an *indigenous-insider*. Indigenous-insiders endorse the unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs and knowledge of the "primordial community or culture" (p. 8). This individual is perceived by others and leaders within the community as a legitimate member of the community. Banks noted that this person has a lens and an understanding that promotes the wellbeing of the community (in this case Hispanic community) and enables it to maintain cultural integrity.

Tilman (2002) extended this notion of positionality to develop a culturally sensitive research approach which may often be utilized to gain the cultural standpoints of both the researcher and the research participants to provide a framework for research

design, data collection, and data interpretation. Tillman further stated that there is much value in a culturally sensitive research approach because it not only recognizes race and ethnicity, but positions culture as central to the research process. In addition, Tillman wrote that it is important to note whether or not the researcher has the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate the experiences of the participants being studied under the context of the phenomenon under study. Tillman specifically referred to African Americans in her development of a culturally sensitive research approach, but based on her definition regarding the cultural knowledge needed to accurately interpret and validate experiences and Banks (1998) work on positionality, I have extended this to include Hispanics. To provide my own cultural knowledge of Hispanic students and how they can be academically successful in school, I have included my epoche as Chapter IV. My epoche serves as the lens of indigenous-insider through which I view the many issues and problems that Hispanic students bring with them to school on a daily basis (See Chapter IV).

**Treatment of data.** Creswell (2007) provided a simplified version of the Steven-Colaizzi-Keen method for analyzing phenomenological studies. Creswell (2007) took the Steven-Colaizzi-Keen method discussed by Moustakas (1994) and simplified it into the following six steps. According to Creswell (2007), the first step in analyzing data is to create an epoche (See Chapter IV). This process allows for the readers to better understand the researcher's personal experiences and how they might affect the study. The epoche included in this study included the researcher's personal experiences as a Hispanic student, teacher, and administrator.

Creswell (2007) stated the second step in phenomenological data analysis was developing a list of significant statements. In this study, the list included statements about how the participants felt about the topic. Further, every significant statement in this study was listed and given equal worth. The statements were then analyzed for common themes. Once all themes were identified, repetitive and overlapping statements were deleted. The third step described by Creswell (2007) is to take the significant statements and group them into larger units of information called “meaning units” or themes.

Creswell (2007) included in the fourth and fifth step of phenomenological data analysis a written description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon and “how” the experience happened. In the description of “what,” also referred to as “textural description,” verbatim examples of what happened were given. In the description of “how,” also referred to as “structural description,” the researcher reflected on the setting and context in which the phenomenon took place.

Finally, Creswell (2007) concluded the six step phenomenological data analysis with a composite description that incorporated both textural and structural descriptions. This is the “essence” of the phenomenological study experience.

**Provisions for trustworthiness.** Creswell (2007) considered “validation” to be a process in which the researcher has made an attempt to accurately assess the findings of a qualitative report. Of the eight validation strategies that Creswell and Miller (2000) discussed, the following were utilized:

1. Peer review or debriefing was utilized to provide an external check of the research process. To keep the researcher honest, several peers were utilized.

Their role was to listen to the audio recordings of the interview and to read my interpretation of the interviews. They provided feedback on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of the interview.

2. Clarifying researcher bias was done from the outset of the study. For readers to understand my position and biases, an epoche was created and included in the research project as Chapter IV.
3. Member checks were utilized as participants were solicited to provide their views on the credibility of the findings and interpretations. Once they reviewed the rough drafts, alternative language was used to accommodate the participant's views.

### **Summary**

In Chapter III, the researcher outlined the design of the study. In Chapter IV, an epoche is provided. In Chapters V through XIV, the findings of the principal interviews are provided. In Chapter XV, the analysis of the findings is presented. In Chapter XVI, the summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future studies are presented.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Epoche**

Looking back I think about things that I can and cannot remember in my time as a young kid in such a big family and in such a small town. As I reflect on the things that I recall, one thing that I do know now that I didn't back then is the fact that we were poor. It is amazing to me to think that so many relatives lived with my family throughout my early years with such a limited amount of money and space, but it happened. I will tell my story in the coming paragraphs which will allow the reader of my study to better understand my perspectives and views on Hispanic students' education. I understand that some of my views are limited to my own experiences growing up, but I have had other experiences through working in a big school district with a high population of Hispanic students. Many of the Hispanic students that I have worked with have similar stories as my own with the only difference being that I grew up in a rural town rather than in the inner city.

Before I begin, I want to assure my readers that my parents were very well intended in all their dealings when it came to their children. They loved us and to the best of their ability, gave us all they had. My siblings and I to this day remain very close knit because of the strong family values instilled on us by our parents. We look out for each other and even though the cycle of struggles that my parents went through still runs in my family, we as "one" generation are better understanding of what it will take to ensure that our kids' generation will see better days.

My father is one of nine siblings. Of the nine siblings, only one graduated from high school and it was not my father. He dropped out of high school in the tenth grade and started work in the oil fields during the South Texas oil boom in the 1980's. At the age of 23, he was diagnosed with the most severe type of Diabetes, Type I. He was declared unfit to work and from that day forward he received a check from the government that barely covered his home expenses, much less food.

My mother is also one of nine siblings. Of her nine siblings, five graduated from high school and my mother was not one of them. My mother dropped out of school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at the age of 15. She left her family to marry my father. A year after they were married, they started their own family which would eventually be three boys and three girls. I am the oldest of my brothers and sisters.

Though my parents were married for 25 years, they eventually separated while my two younger sisters still lived with them. The separation of my parents was so much for my sisters to handle that they eventually dropped out of school. Of the six siblings in my family, only two of us graduated from high school. Three of my siblings received their GED though one of them acquired it while in prison. My brother, who is still in prison, is currently serving a 15-year sentence for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. He was sentenced at the age of 19 and is currently 31 years of age. The day he was sentenced to 15 years, his son had just turned one year old.

There are a total of 48 "first" and 40 "second" cousins in my family. The oldest of the cousins is 44 years old with the youngest being a newborn. Of the 28 cousins eligible for graduation, only 13 have done so with 15 having dropped out of school. Only

one cousin has received a college degree of any sort. Five cousins have taken college courses and only one of those five cousins is close to acquiring a college degree.

The previous paragraphs gave an overview of my immediate family. From this point forward I will share my experiences as a child all the way up to the present. The experiences that I am about to share are perceptions of what I recall.

Pearsall, Texas has a population of about 7000 people and is located about 50 miles south of San Antonio. It was the place that I called home for 18 years. Though I lived in the same town for all of my pre-college years, my family lived in many houses and apartments for short periods of time. It was not until I was 13 years of age that we finally had a permanent home to call our own. Of course, having our own home meant that our aunts, uncles, and cousins also had a place to stay in their time of need which ended up being quite often. The small home that belonged to my parents was a three bedroom, one bath home. Its square footage was about 800 square feet. For the majority of the time that I lived in that house before moving on to college, there were a total of 16 people living in the house. My aunt and uncle and their three kids, along with another aunt's three kids, moved in with us almost at the same time my parents made the home purchase. With only three bedrooms and so many people, our small rooms were overcrowded and often we had to wait in line to use the restroom.

My dad received social security checks from the government because of his severe type I diabetic condition. My mom stayed at home to take care of my dad. Though my dad was not allowed to work, our family did seasonal work out in the fields to make ends meet. I remember working the potato, peanut, cucumber, onion, cantaloupe, and watermelon fields. I also remember the day I started working in the farm

fields, which was around the age of 11. It was then that I realized the importance of work and of contributing to my families' needs. Because most of our work in the fields took place during the summer months, my parents were often unable to find work during long stretches of time which meant that there were days with very limited or no food at all.

Looking back, I cannot remember any one person in my family, other than my aunt, putting much emphasis on my schooling and education. Though I was never a problem child in school, I was never really motivated to excel. I did what I had to do to get through to the next grade level. In fact, school was second on my mind behind my family's major focus - food and money. There were times when my siblings and I went without food at home and I remember us being anxious to go to school to eat breakfast and lunch. There were also times when my family did not have running water or electricity in the house. This meant that we were borrowing both from one of our neighbors. I recall having to connect several extension cords together to make one long one. This was then used to transfer electricity from our neighbor's house to our own. The same was done with several water hoses. These were connected to our neighbor's outside faucet and used to fill our bath tub with water and also to flush our toilet. In retrospect, school was not about learning, but rather a place for my siblings and me to get away from the insecurities that existed in our home.

A big event that my siblings and I often talk about even to this day has to do with what took place during the middle of the month, every month. The middle of the month was when my mother received her food stamps. This was probably the happiest time that my siblings and I remember. We knew that whenever my mom received the food stamps we were going to have a lot of food waiting for us at home. This was without fail. By

the time school was out for the day, mother had sandwiches, cereal, sodas, chips, and all kinds of goodies waiting for us at home. It was during those few days, maybe a week, while the food stamps lasted, that we “kids” had absolutely no worry in the world. Of course our food stamps were short lived many times because the day that they came was also the day all of my cousins and aunts would show up. This meant that they got to eat with us and it also meant that my mom was going to the store with them to purchase some groceries for them. This was like clock work in my family and it still stands true with my sisters today. When one of them gets their food stamps, everyone gets their share even if it means that their own family will be without groceries towards the end of the month.

Before entering 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I can remember my cousins and uncles who were always looking to fight---they were everything that I wanted to be. My uncles and cousins had taught me about having great pride in my family name and that family blood was the most important thing in the world. This meant that if someone spoke of Briseño in a negative way, that person had to be dealt with or taken care of in a bad way---no exceptions. My uncles and cousins were always entertained by fights, so much so that I remember my cousin telling me he wanted to see me fight my friend. I recall my cousin taking my friend and me to a wooded area near my apartment at the time. Once there my cousin pressured me to walk up to my friend and punch him in the nose. My friend had no idea what we were doing there, but I did as my cousin told me to do and did not think twice. After punching my friend right in the nose, I remember him bleeding all over himself. I remember feeling horrible about the incident and even feeling sorry for doing so. But I could not turn back what I had done or apologize for doing what I did because

that would have made me look weak in front of my cousin. Thereafter, I can still see my cousin being amused by the entertainment that I had provided him. I recall him telling every one of his friends and his own brothers about how well I could fight and this made me feel good, though I knew I had done wrong.

In reflecting on my older cousins and uncles, I remember them always having alcohol or talking about purchasing alcohol. They were into smoking marijuana and I did not realize that the familiar fragrance I knew all my life was illegal until I was in high school. Several of my cousins and uncles, even to this day, have been in and out of prison. In fact, my cousin who first taught me how to fight died of a drug overdose a few years ago, and another one of my cousins died in an alcohol-related car accident while I was still in high school. I remember my uncles and cousins being the happiest when under the influence yet violent and unpleasant when they were not. Some of their children, who are my younger cousins, have followed in their fathers' footsteps, and as I try to talk to them today about better ways to spend their money, they laugh while acknowledging the truth in what I tell them.

It was not until my 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading class that I came to enjoy school a bit more. I had a teacher, Ms. Stumberg, who took the time to work with me and also get to know me. She took me to San Antonio as a reward for reading the most books in her class. Around this time, my ability to play baseball in the local little league became more widely known by the community. As my name and picture started appearing in the local paper's sports section, I started receiving more attention at school from various teachers. By the time I was entering high school, I was mainly known in the small town as a very

talented baseball player. Because of all the attention that I had been getting with baseball, my focus was not school. My focus was baseball.

Around this time I recall more and more of the things that were taking place in my home. I can remember my parents arguing on a daily basis about money, lack of work, and also of issues that my brothers were starting to have as they entered 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Though our economic status had not changed, many things were getting more complex. My two brothers were getting involved in all the wrong things which included alcohol, drugs, and gangs. My parents' focus was so much on paying bills and providing us with food that they never realized how much trouble my two brothers were creating in school. At one point, I remember my mom being at school on a regular basis to defend my brothers against false accusations made by various teachers. Of course, my mom was so blinded by all the issues taking place at home that she did not realize how far gone her two sons had become. I do remember telling my mother that my two brothers were deep into gangs and that she needed to intervene and keep them away from their friends. She expressed no concern and told me that everything would be all right. A few weeks after our conversation, I remember my brothers and cousins being involved in a huge gang fight that ended with one of my brothers being stabbed in the back and a cousin with a punctured lung.

During this big ordeal with my brothers, I was a sophomore in high school enjoying my time as a basketball player and baseball star. I didn't give much attention to my brothers though I knew that they were up to no good most of the time. As I think about this time period in my life, I cannot remember any teachers or administrator telling me about the importance of being in school. I remember being a good athlete who

attracted a lot of attention from teachers and coaches. I also remember perceiving that teachers were taking care of me a little extra because I was a star baseball player. I remember high school more as being an athlete than being a student. To this day, I can name all of my high school coaches, but not many teachers, only those who took the time to care.

Teachers that cared would often engage me in conversation about things happening in my life. I remember them asking me about baseball and our next baseball game. I would often see them at baseball games lending their support to our team though I felt that they were there for me. By the way, the teachers that I remember between grades 6 and 12 are Mrs. Stumberg, whom I mentioned earlier, Mrs. Urban, who would always expect homework to be done and completed the next day even if we had a baseball game the night before, and Mr. Pugh, our senior class sponsor who gave me a senior shirt because I could not afford to buy my own. Other than those three teachers, I do not recall many others, though I am sure I am forgetting a few good ones. On the other hand, I can tell you about each of my coaches and the things they did for me over my four years in high school. Though coaches had an added incentive in taking care of their athletes, they were always there to talk to, provide advice, and offer assistance when needed. For the most part, I remember my high school coaches as being approachable with any problem that I may have had, even personal ones.

During my junior year in high school I started to receive letters from universities that wanted me to play baseball for them. I “vividly” remember the day Coach Miller came to my high school campus and handed me a letter stating his interest for me to come play at Texas Lutheran University (TLU). Though I had known since being a

freshman that I was going to go off to play baseball at the college level, it was not until that day that I started thinking about what going to college meant. In looking back, I do not recall anyone, including administrators, taking the time to talk to me about going to college. I remember having a conversation with Coach Miller, and he guided me through the process, but other than that, I was on my own. At least, I was on my own until I arrived at TLU. Arriving late to Texas Lutheran, I remember Coach Miller anxiously waiting for me to help me unload my stuff from the car that my cousin had given me. I remember Coach Miller taking the time to show me around the campus so that I knew exactly where I needed to be and when. I recall walking through the college campus and only thinking about the baseball field. I remember feeling that my purpose at TLU was to play baseball and not to earn a degree.

Through my relationship with Coach Miller I soon realized the importance of attaining a college degree. The majority of my life up to that point had been to focus on baseball. In all my thoughts and dreams, I felt that I would be a professional baseball player. As my college baseball career at TLU began, issues with my family continued back home. It was during my sophomore year at Texas Lutheran that a specific event shifted my whole focus on life.

My brothers had both been expelled from school and never completed the ninth grade. Both were creating all kinds of problems not only for my parents, but for the local community as well. Deep into dealing and doing drugs, both of my brothers were lost. There were many efforts by family and friends to talk sense to my brothers, but they were so caught up in their world that they would not listen. Dealing drugs was bringing them good money and that is all that they really cared about. Further, my younger brother,

who was the ring leader of all his friends, had already been in and out of the jail system and did not fear the law. He gave the impression of being invincible. This feeling of his would soon bring his world and our families crashing down.

It was a Friday night and my brothers had gotten a hotel room on the outskirts of town. In the previous months, my brothers had made more and more enemies. On this night, one of those enemies came looking for my brothers at the hotel where they were staying. As this person was walking up he encountered one of my brothers about to walk up to the hotel room. One thing led to another and my younger brother walked out of the hotel room to find the ensuing argument downstairs. My younger brother then grabbed his rifle and shot the guy two times. The guy he shot was approaching my other brother with his knife, and this was his justification for the shooting. My brother's trial came and went, and when it was all said and done he received 15 years in prison. My other brother served a few days' jail time but ultimately did not get charged with any crime.

At this time, I began to assume more responsibility as the oldest sibling. I now felt that I had to literally take care of my family. I started to make more of an effort to communicate with my brothers and sisters. This was also a period of time where much of the attention that would have been given to my three younger sisters was lost. While the oldest of my three sisters graduated from high school, not much attention was given to her. What got her through high school was her ability to play basketball and tennis. For my other two sisters, who were not involved in much and were the only ones left at home shortly after my brother was sentenced to prison, times got hard. My mother and father became more and more aggravated with one another as my mom hit a major period of depression in her life. Finances and the stresses of living a tough life finally gave way

and my family as I had known it soon fell apart as my parents separated after 25 years of marriage.

After graduating from Texas Lutheran, I moved to Houston to be closer to my brother who was imprisoned in Livingston and to coach baseball. Baseball was what everyone who knew me thought I would be involved in for the rest of my life and quite frankly, so did I. I moved to Houston and lived with the family of a friend with whom I had played baseball at TLU. After six months of living with my friend's family, I was able to move into my own apartment. It was not long after I moved into my apartment that my brother, along with two of my sisters, decided to move in with me. With my parents now separated, I took it upon myself to do whatever I could to provide for my siblings. This included taking out personal loans for my youngest sister to earn her high school diploma from home, which she never received. Because I had only received a Kinesiology degree without a teacher certification, my first job in the education world was that of substitute teaching.

After a year and a half of substituting in the Pasadena Independent School District, I was accepted into their Alternative Certification Program. I was then hired as an ESL teacher for grades 6-8. It was then that I started to hear the importance and significance of my ethnicity and the lack of Hispanic teachers in public education. After two years of teaching at the mid-level school, my transfer was accepted to South Houston High School and I became a full time high school teacher while also coaching football and baseball. Towards the end of the first semester, I was asked by our school principal to sit on an interview committee that would be hiring an assistant principal. After the interview process was over, the principal told me that she would like for me to come in

and work in the office as a substitute assistant principal. Not to disappoint her, I did so thinking that I would be bored out of my mind. As it turned out, I absolutely loved the experience of working in the front office. I enjoyed it so much that before long I was on my way to completing my Master's degree in educational mid-management. Just as I was finishing my mid-management degree, an assistant principal position became available to which I applied and was fortunate enough to get. It was during this position as an assistant principal that the word "Hispanic" became more relevant to me than ever before.

I would have never thought when coming out of high school or even graduating from college, how much "race" would impact my life. In the last several years, as I have progressed in my education career, my perception is that race is the first thing that people think of when they see me. Let me explain. As an assistant principal at South Houston High, I was told time and time again about how great it was to have me at the school to serve as a good role model for the young Hispanic youth on campus. A direct quote from teachers that I would frequently hear was "It is great to have a Hispanic leader on campus that can help us reach these students." Looking back, I don't know that I was ever asked to reach Hispanic students. In a weird kind of way, I was asked many times to deal with Hispanic issues rather than to help others understand the issue. Many times I was sent as the messenger/translator to help parents see the school's vantage point on certain academic or discipline policies. Never was I called on from my superiors to discuss the vantage point from a Hispanic point of view. When I would bring up my thoughts on Hispanic perceptions on certain policies, it was disregarded as not a major concern.

While at South Houston, many of my conversations with Hispanic students dealt with them being able to rise above the ignorance of a limited few teachers. I would assure them that I would fight their battles. By validating their concerns, they did not see me as an administrator who cared about them, but rather as a fellow Hispanic person looking out for our people. It is quite interesting to be able to stand back and see both sides of an issue. Furthermore, it is an odd feeling to see how the school system and Hispanic families both try to utilize my position for their personal gains. On one side I have the school using me as a role model of how they feel Hispanics should be; on the other side, I have Hispanic families utilizing my position to try and gain favor. This is where it has been very important for me to be well informed on school issues that come my way. By being well informed, I do not short change anyone; instead I make decisions that I believe are right based on information that I have.

In my six years as a school administrator, I have been very surprised at how many Hispanic students and parents have similar stories to mine. In some fashion, I could always relate to Hispanic families and the issues that were taking place in their lives. In thinking about ways that I could better help Hispanic students be more successful, I started reflecting on my own family. I thought of ways that some of my experiences could have been changed or altered in some way to avoid what ultimately happened. I have come to realize that there is not much that could have been done differently in my past because my family lived the life that they had, one day at a time, never looking past the next utility bill or meal. Our focus as a family was simple, so simple that education was known to be important but never explicitly discussed. I believe that there are principals out there who can make a difference in the lives of Hispanic students whose

story is similar to mine. In this study, by identifying schools where Hispanic students are successful, I hope to identify the effective practices and beliefs of those school principals that could have made a difference in my family's life and will make a difference in the lives of families of the future.

## Chapter V

### Teach the Kids, Teach the Kids, Teach the Kids

I began my conversation with Mr. Carrier by asking him how he came to be in education and how he became a school principal. He gladly shared his story:

I was the first person in my family to graduate from college. When I was in college, I thought that I would be doing something with agriculture. As it turned out, I actually got into education because of my high school agriculture teacher and my mother. I was a agriculture major at SFA, and my mom stayed after me for my teacher certification telling me that I had to have something to fall back on. My agriculture teacher also wanted me in education. His word meant a lot to me as he was my mentor, and to this day is still the most influential male in my life. Between my mother and my agriculture teacher, they got me a teaching position in the district from where I graduated.

After teaching for a year, my mentor started calling me and telling me that I needed to go back to school and get my master's degree in educational leadership. I told him I didn't want to go back to school many times before he finally told me that I had no choice and that I was going back to school!

I said "yes sir." I never thought that I would be going back to school for education. I went to SFA and made connections. Doors started to open. The superintendent at that time was very supportive. People around me were all very supportive as they went over my resume. They were pushing me when I didn't

know what I wanted. Through some other connections and acquaintances and even a few people with whom I went to graduate school, I ended up having a lot of interview opportunities. My first assistant principal position was at Nimitz High School, and that was an experience. Coming from the country, I mean a rural area to a suburban area with inner city issues. That was an educational experience.

So to summarize, I taught for four years at Hardin Jefferson, came over here and was an assistant principal at Nimitz for eight years. This is my third year here at Plummer. It has been a lot of fun. I feel like I have been in my own piece of heaven...the last few years at Nimitz were whew!

### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

The next part of our conversation focused on Mr. Carrier's approach to working with economically disadvantaged students. He began by describing his students:

We have a lot of apartment complex kids. We also have some neighborhood kids; I wouldn't say they were rough neighborhoods, but not the best neighborhoods. It is not the first choice where most families want to live. We have a lot of kids who jump from apartment complex to apartment complex depending on the month's special. We did have a lot of that. Since I have been here though, we have not seen a whole lot of that. I think the kids enjoy going to school here; the parents appreciate how we are working with their kids. We do have kids that walk home because we have a neighborhood right behind our school. We currently have 80 percent of our students classified as low socioeconomically disadvantaged and 56

percent of our student population is Hispanic. Our Hispanic population is the majority by far.

Mr. Carrier discussed relationships and how he deals personally with some of these struggling learners:

Honestly, I see the greatest need educators have is being accepting of whom they (students) are regardless of what their circumstances are. That has been a lesson for me coming from where I came. Even though we were rural, it was pretty affluent. Coming here, everybody is poor. Everybody has struggles, and you know that in the past and over the years, kids would be identified as low socioeconomic students and they receive some benefits; and you help them deal with that as best you can. You focus on the structure; you focus on teaching the kid, forming relationships with kids, and being sincere with them as well.

One thing that I have learned over the years is this: Kids will do anything for you; they will knock down walls for you if you show them that you care. If they truly believe you care about them, they will do anything for you. That is what we have been able to do here. Kids know what is fair, and when structure is provided to them on a consistent basis, they respond in a more positive manner.

As Mr. Carrier spoke about working with struggling students he noted:

There are quite a few kids that I talk to on a regular basis. I don't fuss at them but I do check up on them. They also know that I will be checking on them. What I do is ask them for their progress report, and they know that I am going to ask. I also tell them that I will be pulling up their grades, and if things aren't up to par, I will ask them about it. So with struggling kids, there is no specific program, but

there is effort being made to establish a relationship with those kids so that they know that someone cares. This relationship with many of those kids makes a difference because they know that I will be asking them about their grades. So these kids are now thinking--if I don't get this done, Mr. Carrier will ask me about it. So with that, it gives them the incentive to turn things in and on time.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

As Mr. Carrier finished describing some of the characteristics of his school's student population, he then spoke of the extra-curricular activities and their importance on his campus. He commented:

We have a lot of different clubs and activities including athletics which is the biggest part of the draw. When you are successful with all those things, it makes those programs grow even more. We have been fortunate to have great athletic kids and great coaches, and I think that has been a great deterrent from some of those kids getting into trouble. We have other clubs and activities; for example, we have a school-wide good behavior group (GBG) that in a six weeks if you haven't been in trouble, we have a half day party. Kids just go with it; they untuck their shirt and get out there and dance or do whatever is planned for that afternoon. The stipulations for being a part of the GBG are that you have to stay out of trouble, you have to come to school, and you have to pass all of your classes. For us, those three things are what we are here for; so we get it done. When I first came here, I was not a big fan of that; they had to convert me.

I am not a believer in rewarding kids for what they should do. I am a believer in that I'll reward them when they go above and beyond. So they had to

convert me a little bit from that high school mentality of “This is the real world, and we are trying to prepare you for when you walk across that stage.” And we still are. We are just trying to do it at an earlier age.

We have a lot of different clubs, organizations and activities in which students can take part. In the GBG group, for example, we average around 400 kids. The kids who earn their participation just have a good time, and we leave the doors open so that the kids who did not participate and are sitting in class see what fun they are missing. We hope that this might serve as a deterrent from the decisions that kept them from being invited to participate. In Aldine, there are no reasons for students not to participate. You don’t have to pay for uniforms. You don’t have to pay for transportation. If you live in our attendance zones, and if you can ride a school bus to school, there is a bus that will take you home after practice. It is an expensive deal. With the economy being the way that it is, it could be on the chopping block at some point, but at this point, there are no reasons why a child should not be able to participate other than not making the grades in the classroom.

Another example of a club is our Upstart Club - we started something just for the guys and they are called Trend Setters. There are some strict stipulations for them to join, but even though we impose those strict stipulations, we still help them. I told the sponsors that I would like to see them dressed in shirts and ties or a coat and tie at least once a week. To accommodate those who did not have the dress clothes we went out and worked out a deal with Suit Mart and K & G so that we could get them what they needed.

**Parent Involvement**

I asked Mr. Carrier to discuss how he gets his students' parents involved in his school. He spoke about this at length:

Our parents are always invited to our campus activities. We have an automated phone dialer which calls every kid's parent with information that they need. Also when we had open house, we had folks sign in, and on the sign-in sheet there is a specific place for their e-mail. This is new for us, and I decided on adding this because in our student management system, there's a place for it. Many parents prefer e-mail; for example, in my own situation in my daughter's school, I try to get her teachers to e-mail me. I tell them that this is the best way to let me know what is going on. I think there may be things that we can do through e-mail, but if it's something that we need to discuss, then we will discuss it. E-mail is good for just disseminating information. So if it is a parent night or whatever, a quick e-mail works and serves as a reminder.

We do get a lot of parent support if we explain to them what we need from them. If we ask them, it is amazing the kind of support that we get, but if we just put it out there as an activity that will be taking place, we usually don't get much turnout. If we make an appeal to them, they will come. Last spring we had a parent involvement day. One of the clubs did it and provided a light brunch with a short presentation, and then they went to classrooms. We had so many parents and guardians, somewhere between 400 and 500, show up and we never had that before. The parents just felt so comfortable here. So with that, we accomplished our goal.

We don't want parents to shy away; we need them to be here. Our job is to find ways that we can help them with their children. That is what we are here to do. We always have a tremendous parental influence; all I have to do is ask for it. Hey, can you come and serve on this committee? Can you come and help us with this activity? Can you go to this meeting for me? The majority of the time those parents will do it.

Mr. Carrier continued to discuss how he strives to make parents feel welcomed:

Making parents feel welcome is the key; for example, last week we had a parent and a grandparent come to have lunch with their son and grandson, and they were standing in the cafeteria. With 450 kids there, they were looking to find their child, so I went up to them and asked them if they would like to go out and sit in the back at one of the teacher tables that we have set up for parents. One of the grandparents quickly asked if there was a problem with them standing there. I said, "No ma'am, there is no problem with you standing here, but there are 450 kids here and you're here to see one, and if I can provide you an opportunity to go eat in peace with him, that is what I want to do." That kind of broke the ice. So they went back there where he was eating while the parents and grandparents were watching, and they were just sitting there. So I went over there and asked them if they would like lunch. I told them that I know that it is cafeteria food, but nonetheless it is food. They just thought it was the biggest kind gesture, so I went over and grabbed a couple of lunches for them. The parents and grandparents thought that was the nicest thing, and to me it was just four dollars. In the grand

scheme of things, now I have some support. Now I have those parents thinking that they know a little bit about me, and if nothing else, they are saying, contrary to what you hear, he is a nice guy.

Mr. Carrier commented that in regards to engaging those parents of struggling kids, his school did not have anything in place. He noted:

The parents that are usually engaged in school are normally the ones that have kids who are being successful in school. It is difficult to engage the parents of the struggling kids because those other kids have behavior problems. What we have found is that those parents of the struggling kids are having an equal amount of trouble with the same problems that we see here at school. We try to work with the parents personally.

Our school district is divided into vertical strands. In each vertical strand, they have different parent programs that are geared to that strand's needs. Our strand has a parent literacy program, and it has grown since I've come here. These classes are taught by two teachers during Saturdays. The parents enrolled in these classes are among the biggest supporters of what we do at Plummer. Not only do we provide classes for parents, but we also provide babysitting. If you don't have anyone to take care of your kids at home, that is fine. Bring them here and we will take care of them.

### **Building Student-Teacher Relationships**

Mr. Carrier went on to talk about the importance of teachers building strong caring relationships with their students. He emphasized that strong student-teacher

relationships are the foundation of school success as he talked about his perspective on the topic:

One thing that I do try to do is tell my teachers, especially my new ones, that kids know when you're not being real with them. They know when you care and they know when you are acting like you care. You can't act like you care because kids know when you're not being real. If kids know that you really and truly care for them, they will do wonders for you. Students who know that you really care about them will do anything for you. These kids can be the worst kids in one teacher's class, but in the class where they are cared about, those same students can be the most successful kids in the classroom.

When students are being held accountable, those students most of the time will not make the same choices they might make in the classroom where they are not held accountable. Some teachers make a big difference by holding their students accountable beyond their own classroom walls. It makes all the difference in the world.

### **Instructional Staff**

After talking about strong student-teacher relationships, I asked Mr. Carrier to talk about his instructional staff and how he manages them. Mr. Carrier commented that he communicates with his staff by doing the following:

I am blessed to have one of the best instructional staffs in the district. A lot of them I inherited and, of course, after my first year, I had to issue a pass for many of them. We have a collaborative planning period everyday. Teachers meet once a week during that planning time to discuss instructional issues going on in their

classroom. The extra planning period was one of the things that the district wanted to cut. Most of us principals fought hard to keep that planning period because we feel it makes a big difference. It gets teachers together in a controlled time where not only do newer teachers learn from the more experienced teachers, but also teachers who are having problems in certain areas have a place where they can find some resources from within their teams. Ultimately, it ensures that everyone is on the same page.

I communicate with my staff through my department chairs, AP's, e-mail, and I also have an open door policy. I also send out an e-mail every Monday morning, and this morning message is my weekly message. It's basically my Sunday sermon. Teachers have become accustomed to that message, and if I don't send it out by the end of the day, someone will come in and ask where the message is. Teachers have really enjoyed reading that weekly message. If nothing else, they know what to expect in the coming week.

As Mr. Carrier continued to elaborate on communication, he expressed the importance of visibility. He stated:

I do make a point to visit every teacher's classroom at least once a week. There are days where I do visit every classroom during advisory, and I just put my head in and say hello and keep moving. This is a lot on me to get it done, but teachers really do appreciate it and so do the students. Any chance I get to visit the classroom, I take advantage of it because there are days where we have meetings on top of meetings, and it may be two or three days before they ever see me again. I do try to listen to teachers as much as possible. One of the things that

came up over the last couple of years from the teachers was that they were not seeing me enough. With that I made it a priority to make sure that I was more visible. By responding to their constructive criticism, they appreciate me more. This is my third year as principal, and I'm hoping that some of those meetings that I had to go to in the beginning will go away. As I get more experience in being a principal, I have more say in being able to send an assistant principal.

In addition to what I have stated, I meet with the leadership team once every Wednesday morning. The curriculum team meets once every Thursday so that is all four core plus the AP over that curriculum. That is where we do our cross curricular planning. This communication system has been very effective for us.

As Mr. Carrier discussed instructional programs, he commented that they had many programs available to their school. He said:

The district is always buying things for us, especially with programs for our special education department. We have Core Destination math. For regular Ed kids, we have Plato, Read 180 and all those things which are great. Those things are great, don't get me wrong, but I have always stressed to anyone who will listen to me that we can have the best programs, the latest and the greatest technologies, but nothing in my mind will ever replace an effective teacher. If you don't have an effective teacher, nothing else is going to matter.

For example, I had one teacher who came in just the other day to tell me that the light bulb in her projector had gone out. She was panicking and she didn't know what to do. She really thought that she could not teach without that

projector. When we get to this point, you have to just smile and tell them that it is going to be okay. Teachers sometimes don't realize just how gifted they are because they have come to rely too much on programs when in fact, it is they who make all the difference.

### **Monetary Resources**

I asked Mr. Carrier about his budget and where he preferred to spend discretionary funds. He commented:

The majority of our money is spent on additional personnel. We are fortunate to have a relatively new school, so technology is basically replacing light bulbs and that sort of thing. Most new programs that we are implementing are provided by our district. So I do not have a lot of overhead when it comes to stuff like that.

I invest my money in people. I have five specially funded teachers and two specially funded paraprofessionals. I am bringing in four tutors this year so that they can help with math and science. These tutors will teach the kids who are performing where we want them to perform, and then the regular teachers will do the pullouts of kids who are struggling. This allows teachers to work with those students who need an additional one-on-one intervention and/or focused instruction. That ends up being about five to six students in every class.

The goal for teachers is 90 percent success rate on TAKS. It will always be 90 percent or better as a goal for school and our teachers. This summer we had to have a real conversation, a frank and open discussion on what we thought was working and what wasn't working. One of the things that came out was why we were spending money (\$15,000) on extended day. First, we don't have it, and

secondly it wasn't getting the results that we wanted. So this made us come up with our mantra for this school year which is "Commit to Plummer Excellence." We don't do things for the money; we do things because kids need it. So I asked my teachers, "Where is your commitment?" So that is where we have been, and that's where we are today.

I am not saying that there is no tutoring going on, but I am telling you that it is not mandated. What I am saying to our teachers is that I can't pay you for tutoring your kids. The thing that surprised me that should not have surprised me is that teachers are still doing the tutoring instead of doing what they were being paid to do. The good teachers who care about the kids are spending their own time working with kids to ensure that they are successful. This was what I was hoping for when we scratched extended day simply because I did not have any other choice. I could have freed up \$60,000 for extended day by cutting some personnel, but I've never done that before and I don't want to do that.

### **Challenges**

Mr. Carrier discussed briefly some of the challenges that his campus faces on a regular basis.

There are many challenges that we have to go through even with ESL students in language arts. They struggle and we need to find ways to accommodate their needs, and if it means that you embarrass yourself for the sake of a kid, you do that as long as you communicate to parents what you are doing. Parents will wait for their child a few more minutes until you find their child as long as the child is on campus right.

The struggles that we have in special education are just crazy. To expect those kids to take the test when they have no chance doesn't make any sense. The pitfalls with TAKS are unbelievable. There can be kids taking the wrong test not getting the right accommodations. We constantly have to deal with special education issues. We have to constantly make sure that every "I" is dotted and every "T" is crossed. We do things for kids but some of the stuff that we have to do take so much time away from just working with the kids and helping them to be academically successful. There's way too much paperwork, and it all comes down on our special education teachers. The ones that I have here are the best teachers, and they make things happen through their hard work, commitment, and dedication to students. We are a dysfunctional family at times, but we work with each other.

### **Culture of Success**

I asked Mr. Carrier to elaborate on what school culture meant to him and what his school's culture was all about. Mr. Carrier talked about the importance of his teachers and what they mean to student success:

School culture is one of the most important things that we have here at Plummer Middle School. The principal before me was beloved; I loved the man. When he sat down with me after I got this job, his message was clear about the culture of success that existed here at Plummer. I remember thinking about what my first step would be.

So when I first came in I didn't know what I was going to say, but I knew they were expecting me to say something. So instead of coming in and

implementing change, I decided to do nothing. I told the staff that they were very good at educating kids and that they were good for a reason. I told them that I needed to find for myself what those reasons were and that I would not be implementing change until I better understood the reasons for their success. I told the teachers, “Don’t expect a lot of change, but I do expect you to keep doing what you've all been doing. I am going to give us a year to observe and learn from each other. I want to see you do what you've been doing which has brought this school to be where it is today. I don't expect anyone to do anything less than they have been doing, but we can do more. Please don’t do anything less than you've done in the two years that the school has been in existence. I am going to give myself a year to look at processes and procedures, personnel and everything. I am not going to say a lot, so I am telling you ahead of time, don't expect much.”

So that first year was very difficult for me because I did see a lot of things that needed to be changed. Many of those things were things that just did not work for me. It was very hard to keep my word, but I did keep my word, and I think it was hard for some of the staff as well because a lot of things were not going well. I guess they felt like they weren’t getting the direction that they needed. So it was difficult, but I knew I had to stay the course, and I did. As a result, after the first year I did make the changes that needed to be made. As a result, it made my transition much smoother than it would have been. I have never felt like a maverick having to come in and prove to everyone that I was the principal. I don't have to prove to anyone that I run this school.

### **Teacher-Principal Relationship**

According to Mr. Carrier, many of the things that he has been able to accomplish have been through the trusting teacher-principal relationships that he has with his teachers. He emphasized that teachers should be able to “know you well enough to speak their mind when appropriate.” Here are his words on this topic:

I really enjoy working with my teachers, and the reality of it all is that they are running the school and I am just leading it. We as a staff are very close. We are accountable to each other, and we do not let each other fail. This mentality applies within each department, and then from each department it is applied as a school-wide function. By adopting this school-wide mentality that we will not let each other fail, we have achieved success. We are in this together. The staff makes all the difference in the world, and I have the greatest teachers ever. I also have the greatest parents. Like I said before, we are sometimes much like a dysfunctional family. They all know me very well, and they can read me like a book. They know when I'm going to say something and when I'm not.

My first year here at Plummer, I was fortunate to be able to bring with me a few teachers who knew me. More than that, I had teachers who were able to tell me straight up what they felt on what they saw was taking place in most situations. These teachers were able to pull me aside and say, “hey you're off base on this” or “you're right on track,” and that was good to have people that can be honest with you. And that was one of the reasons I brought them with me besides the fact that they were great teachers.

Kids in general have gone by the wayside of teachers, and my leadership team understands that if we keep teachers motivated, they will keep kids motivated. We do a lot of things to try to do that. I bought a popcorn machine, and some Fridays on the way out, we will hand teachers bags of popcorn. Another example a couple of weeks ago, we had an ice cream social where we bought everyone ice cream. You don't have to spend all kinds of money to get a point across, and I'll tell you this, actions are louder than what your thoughts and words are.

I tell my teachers all the time, "I think you're great; I think you all are doing a great job." Most of the time, it's in one ear and out the other, but sometimes it is just the smallest things that teachers appreciate the most. The year before last for the teacher appreciation dinner, I was out back behind the patio area cooking for teachers. They thought that was the biggest thing. It was something different, and it showed them that I am a real person. I am not bigger than the person I am.

### **Principal's Responsibility**

The responsibility of a principal is one that Mr. Carrier takes seriously. He understands his role in the position that he has as a school principal. Here is what he had to say about his position in the school:

Being a principal is a big responsibility. It is not a throne. It is a responsibility, and the day that it ever becomes a throne, then I need to go. I am not here to claim a throne. I am here to touch kids' lives, and that is a big reason that I aspire to be a superintendent. Obviously, the further away from campus you get, the

more indirect it becomes, but through the opportunity of abilities that you have by being in that position, you will affect more lives. That is the reason I have that goal. If anyone looks at it (principalship) as a status symbol, please... I have the least amount of direct impact than anybody here. I am not in the classroom teaching the students; the teachers are.

My job is to keep everyone in the building safe and to support them. I am to provide leadership and make sure that we are all going in the same direction which is towards our campus goal of 90 percent or higher in all subjects. This may be an oversimplified analysis of the principal because we both know that there are a lot of things and issues that come our way. There is a lot of business that needs to be taken care of. So I am instructional leader, but I understand it holistically. Teachers are the ones that do the job. I could not go in and teach math. At best I could probably teach science because of my agricultural background, but that is it. I am not a subject specific expert; teachers are. I think the problem that many principals have is they try to make something holistic specific, and you can't do that. I get it. I also understand that I don't know everything. I have some individuals that are department chairs, and they are pretty sharp. We work together as a team--not me as a dictator.

### **Hispanic Students**

I asked Mr. Carrier if he had any special programs for Hispanic students. This was his answer:

We don't cater to any one race, but what we do is bring in individuals from various backgrounds in various careers to talk to kids about what they do. This

usually takes place on career day. We bring them in from every cultural background and as many professions as possible. Our students end up seeing individuals who are White, Black, Hispanic, or any other race that are engaged in successful careers.

When I asked Mr. Carrier if Hispanic students should be treated differently than their peers, he commented:

Students of all races should be treated the same absolutely. I am an American. I was born in Beaumont and until I was 20 years old, I had never been outside the state of Texas. People call me an African-American, and I'm proud of who I am. But let's put things in perspective. First, I don't know anything about Africa. Everything that I do know about Africa I learned from a book or from people who taught me outside of formal education. I do know that there are parts of Africa that if I were to visit because of the way I look, I would not be accepted. So you call me an African-American; I consider myself to be an American. Anyone else who is here, I look at them the same way that I look at myself.

### **Student Example**

I asked Mr. Carrier to share a story of a Hispanic student that he had known and to discuss how he impacted that student's life. After considering several names, Mr. Carrier offered this story:

A student that comes to mind was a freshman when I first met him. He wasn't a bad kid, not necessarily from the low socioeconomic level, but certainly from a broken home. The mom raised this kid by herself. The situation was a lot like my own where my mom raised my brother and me by herself. That is not to say a

thing about my dad; I miss him. I loved him. My mom would not let us say a bad word about him. But the fact is that my dad was not in my life the way I try to be in my daughter's life.

This particular kid took a liking to me for whatever reason. And the way it turned out, I took a liking to him as well. He kind of became my kid; he would come and do stuff for me. I had a landscaping business, and he would come to work with me before I was married and had my own kids. Every time he got himself into trouble, he would come find me and see if I could help him get out of trouble. And this kid, even if I tried to get rid of him, I would not have been able to.

He graduated from high school and made the decision to join the service. When I got the invitation to his graduation party, I felt like I needed to make it a point to be there. I had a meeting that night, so I called him and told him that I had another meeting but that I would be there late. When I got there, the mom was in tears when she saw me. The mother hugged me, and that had not happened to me before. I had been with this kid to many different places, so this was different in that I had never gotten that reaction from her. He had always been around my environment, but I had never been around his environment or his family and friends. I would always pick him up, and I always make sure that he was dropped off safely.

So his mom went into his room and brought out a bulletin board. On this bulletin board were all these pictures. These pictures were from “little bitty” to high school. In the middle of this bulletin board was a picture that I don't

remember taking. It was a picture of him and me. At that moment I quickly realized that you just don't know the kind of effect that you have on kids. It was a very special moment because it reminded me of the relationship that I have with my mentor to this day. It was a very special day. I have other similar situations that have happened to me where I have built strong relationships with students, but that one in particular has stuck with me. That student is now in the military, and he keeps in touch by sending his status and what he's doing. When he comes to town, he always comes by and visits. It is pretty special.

### **Generalization from Personal Experience**

After Mr. Carrier finished telling his story about the student he had impacted, unknowingly, I asked him to generalize that relationship into something from which other educators might learn. He said:

The thing to generalize from this relationship is that relationships take time to build. It takes sincerity. If you are not sincere with kids they will know it and you're wasting your time. You have to hire the right teachers.

There are two things that I need to know when I hire somebody. Do you see yourself as a parent to kids that don't belong to you for eight hours a day, five days a week, and 178 instructional days a year? I don't care how smart you are or how much experience you have, I want to know that you are teachable and are willing to come and learn with us, not from us. We are all still learning together. But if you think that you are going to come in here as a know-it-all, you will not be very successful. You can either be a vital part of our growing or you can be a cancer that is going to take a lot of time for me to cut. All I have to do is sign my

name and recommend you for hire. But I have to have a mountain of documentation to get rid of you. I do want to know that you know the subject and all that. But does it matter if they have 20 years experience? No.

I will take the first-year teacher over a 20-year teacher any day because the probability of my having to deprogram and reprogram a 20-year teacher is not likely. A first-year teacher I can mold into what I think they need to be. And hopefully, 20 years from now, they will be able to look back and name every kid in the classroom as I can. If teachers don't find themselves studying more than they did when they were in school, they are not progressing like they should. Are teachers willing to do what it takes to start forming relationships with kids? Are teachers going to allow me to help them? If they are not going to listen to me, and if they are not going to allow me to help, then what can I do?

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing my conversation with Mr. Carrier, I asked him to give other administrators some advice on closing the achievement gap. Mr. Carrier believes it can be done as he stated in the following:

To close the achievement gap is to teach kids. Teach kids; teach kids; teach kids. At the beginning of each year, we look at the data from the year before. And one of the goals for this campus is to close the achievement gap. Specifically, we strive to close the gap within three percentage points of each subgroup.

This past year we did not meet our 90 percent goal, but I noticed an important aspect in our scores. We accomplished being within three percent in scoring in every subgroup on every test. So we asked ourselves how we did it.

We are teaching the kids. That is what we are doing. We don't target specific groups, but rather individual students. Teach the kids; forget about their circumstances, acknowledge deficiencies on whether or not they can learn this way or that way, acknowledge those things and address those things, but at the end of the day, teach the kids. Teach them; if you teach them they will be fine. Teach the kids the subject, and they will take care of the test later. On any day, kids can come in and have a bad night and not do well on tests. If you teach the kids right, it won't matter if they have those bad nights because they will know the material well. As long as you teach the concept, teach the objective, and teach the strategies, they will be fine.

Teach the kids; teach the kids; teach the kids. That is the biggest thing. Everyone wants to come up with the big idea on closing this gap or in addressing this group. Treat kids like kids, have clear expectations and articulate those expectations. Enforce those expectations consistently and they will perform, but they must know that you care about them.

The big difference that I see between old school and new school is that the expectations for students have changed somewhat. We used to have to know the multiplication facts; now they have a calculator. Now we're more concerned about their knowing how to operate calculators than actually knowing their facts. There are many things from the past that some consider to be wrong, but when you compare the old generation to the new generation, they are not as smart as we were. We were able to understand the objective and concepts much more than today's students. Can we get to the point where we ask kids to get the basics

down before we ask them to be abstract? I understand that we need to get to the higher levels of Bloom's, but they have to get to the basics first. You have to climb. You start to climb from a sound foundation--that is the bottom line.

## Chapter VI

### Get the Right Match

The name in this chapter is fictional as the principal chose to be anonymous. I began my conversation with Mr. Lewis by asking him how he came to be in education and how he became a school principal. He gladly shared his story:

I started in fourth grade. I went to a two-room school house in rural Wisconsin. We had four grades in one room. The teacher made me her assistant, and from that time on, I knew that I wanted to teach. When I graduated from high school, I went to a teaching college in Wisconsin, moved down here, and I have been in education for a total of 31 years.

In February of 2001, I received a call, and the caller asked if I were interested in the principal position that was open. I said I was interested, but at that time, I did not know that the offer was at Utopia. During my first week on the job, I had 52 parents out in the front office; I had helicopters flying around, and the news media was out in front of the building. All this was going on, and I had “NO HELP FROM ANYONE!” Nobody told me the real reason why the other principal had to leave. Obviously it was news worthy.

So I started building my little empire, but not alone by any means. Though I started in 2001, my first official year as principal was in the 2001-2002 school year

**Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I then asked Mr. Lewis to provide some insight into his students and their background. He offered the following:

If you drive down Heights Boulevard, you will see apartments that range in cost from one to five million dollars. That is not where my students come from. That is where a lot of my Anglo students come from who are in the gifted and talented program.

My neighborhood students who consist of my LEP students typically live in apartments with two to three families. The majority of my students are Hispanic. I don't speak Spanish, but it is not an issue because most of my Hispanic students are third and fourth generation Hispanic. This means that most of my parents speak English. It is not a bad situation. In regard to my LEP students, most of them come from Mexico. I really don't have a South or Central American population. Most of my students come to the United States around fourth grade. This is good because most students will have at least a couple of years in our elementary feeder schools before they come to middle school. This year is an exception. I have eight students who are new to the United States and who are in seventh grade, so it is a little different.

Mr. Lewis spoke of a couple of programs that they started at his school to better engage their students and parents.

We have started a new program here with special education. We allow our students to check out lap tops. At the end of the year, they bring them back, and we make sure they are clean before they are checked out to other students. Some

parents check out a second set of text books; I'm not really supposed to do that because, if they don't bring them back, I have to pay for them. But I believe the program is worth the \$50.00.

We have a major initiative in which we go to the sixth grade students' homes. We call it a Walk for Success, which is a part of Project Graduation. We started this a few weeks ago, and our goal is to visit every sixth grader's home. When we get there, we talk about the value of school and its significance in the student's future. We do our visits on consecutive Fridays and Saturdays. When we miss parents at their home, we have them come to the school for a conference with their child's dean or myself. Our goal in our home visits is to involve parents in the education of their child as much as possible because not everything can be learned at school.

Mr. Lewis discussed the support that his school offers for their struggling learners:

We provide our students who are new to our country with an additional support class. Because we are required to have only four semesters of physical education as opposed the six semesters that were required in the past, we bring our struggling students from there to provide them with an additional support class. My mindset is this: I realize they don't have to take the TAKS test while they are in seventh grade or eighth grade. This means that their scores do not count against our school. Knowing that, I look for the best way that I can prepare them for high school. This benefits the students because they are already over age as well.

Mr. Lewis took a few moments to discuss how they better serve their English language learners:

I have an excellent ESL teacher. This really does provide us with some latitude in putting students in her class because she gets results. After communicating with parents on what is best for their students, they frequently ask me to get their children in an extra ESL class. The ESL class is designed to be all English--a total immersion. I tell parents that this goes against the philosophy behind how to learn a second language, but that's what these parents want. So with four students, that is what we are doing.

Our other struggling English learners who have been in the United States for a couple of years, they are getting science twice. They get it once in English and once in Spanish. We have the teachers work together to ensure that the planning is clear and concise. I want teachers to know that the kids are hearing the same thing twice and in two different languages.

We also have the dual language program. There are books describing our program and how we go about transitioning students. We are a part of the ISA (International Spanish Academy) and have partnered with Spain and the embassy. Students from our program go from our campus to Reagan High School. After they graduate, they can get up to four years of college free in Spain. I assign our dual language teachers to help with some of the extra classes. We currently have 24 students in sixth grade, 23 students in seventh grade, and 21 students in eighth grade.

It is also important to note that many of our dual language students are also in the gifted and talented program. This makes building a master schedule very tedious as we try to make sure the students can have both dual language and GT classes. Currently, 75.4 percent of our students are economically disadvantaged.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

I asked Mr. Lewis to discuss his views on extra-curricular activities as well as to give an overview of clubs and organizations that he has in place for his students:

In general, schools pound away at the core subjects all day long and then beat students to death (not literally) with the content after which they have them take something home. My question is, “When and at what time do you get to be a child, and at what time can you just go out and do intramural sports after school?”

We started an after school program which typically would have been considered tutorial; however, we call it the Enrichment Zone because not only do we want students to learn new math principles, we also want to sharpen their existing math skills. Students participate in this program one day a week. On Tuesdays, students get to play, but on Mondays they go to math tutorial. Then on Wednesday, they attend the language arts tutorial. That is our students’ weekly schedule. Monday and Wednesday are our work days, but on Tuesday we get to do fun things such as kickball. Our focus is on what strategies are best for students and also what practices will get the most out of every student.

Enrichment Zone has really helped with our economically disadvantaged students. That is our greatest problem along with students being over age. It

seems as though economically disadvantaged, over aged, and being of minority descent are correlated. To help with over-aged students, we have created a math class specifically for them. This has been successful because kids in there have the same mind set and are not embarrassed about being older than the rest of the kids in the classroom. In addition to the Enrichment Zone, we have a guitar class, origami, karate, band, book clubs, etc.

Mr. Lewis spoke of the importance that teachers play in making extra-curricular activities effective for engaging students:

In order for extra-curricular activities and programs to work, you must have teachers who buy into it. I meet with teachers and tell them what I am looking for, and they tell me what they need in order to make that happen. For their work after school, they get paid \$25.00 an hour. Teachers will also tell me that they have too many students to complete a project during the day time. This is great for me because I want them to teach the lessons in a completely different way than they teach during the day. So I monitor and make sure that teachers are utilizing different techniques than they normally do.

### **Parent Involvement**

After our conversation on extra-curricular activities, Mr. Lewis discussed his relationship with parents and his approach toward getting them involved in the educational process:

I am very approachable. It also helps that many parents have known me since the first time I was here at Utopia. I have an open-door policy which translates to my having two or three people in here at one time. It doesn't bother me to have

people in and out of my office. For office staff, I try to employ people who are very patient and kind. I won't let anyone walk all over us, but we are professional and polite when working with our parents.

So far this year, my parents have raised about \$600,000 to change the front of the building. We were here on Saturday. We had a work crew made up of parents who come from various backgrounds. This is a priority for me. Parents have to find a way to give something back to the school. So that you better understand, let me give you some history.

I have 1,382 students presently, and out of that, 523 are zoned to Utopia. The rest are all on transfers. If parents want me to agree that this is where their child should attend school because they think their child will get a better education here than at their neighborhood school, or because they feel that their child will be treated better here, then they have to give something back. I don't care if it is only one hour for the whole school year and you do it in the library, I want to see their faces here in the building. Parents have really bought into it.

Communication is important when it concerns getting parents involved. We recently started a web project called e-blast. Anybody can do it. I send a message from the web, and it immediately reaches them. This year, we are all going to become Twitters so that they can get their messages on the phone. Communication is of utmost importance. As long as I am communicating with parents, and they know what is going on in their child's education, things run very smoothly for us.

Mr. Lewis took a few minutes to discuss parent education classes and family nights. Here is what he had to say:

We have offered several types of parent education classes such as ESL, computer training, etc. However, parents do not attend these as much as we would like primarily because they have more options at the elementary schools. There are numerous opportunities offered to them at the elementary and feeder campuses and they do attend those more often because those schools are within walking distance of their homes. When they come here, besides being further away, the students don't always want their parents to be here at the same time.

We do, however offer family nights. We set up a big screen behind the school and enjoy a movie. One of our parents knew a senior at the University of Houston who needed to do a project, and he developed a plan to offer the family nights. I provide the popcorn. Families bring their blankets, lay them on our little hill out there, and we just sit there and watch movies. We do this as a way of involving our families.

Something we are doing this week is another example of how we are engaging parents. This week we will have Math and Science Night. Math will be in the cafeteria, and Science will be in the gymnasium. We set up experiments behind the school where students blow up different things, but they have to come with a parent or guardian. These family activities are heavily attended. It will be packed.

In the spring, we will offer them separately, and those are by invitation only. They will be offered for students who are on the bubble. At that point, I

will want parents to get involved a little more. A few years ago, the math department started conducting home visits for targeted students once a month for the purpose of giving parents math tips so that they can help their students. Our target students are ones that we know will get over the hump with additional help. This has been so successful with our math department that the science and other departments are seeing the value of this project. Now, they are also making home visits.

I asked Mr. Lewis if he included parents in the creation of their campus improvement plan. He stated the following:

We do our best to include parents in the campus improvement plan. Our process in developing a campus plan starts with our faculty. We start with a basic campus improvement plan. After it is completed, the faculty members vote on it. If it is what we want, we take it to the Site Based Decision Making Committee which has a parent representative. We do keep our parents informed whether or not they are on the SBDMC. We put our Campus Improvement Plan proposal on our portal and we e-blast it to promote parent input.

When I first came here, students were required to wear blue jeans and a navy blue or white Utopia shirt. Some of the parents came to me and requested that they at least have gray, and so we added gray. During one of our school improvement meetings, we talked about things of that nature (dress code). Parents suggested that we would get a higher attendance rate if we changed the rules prohibiting students from wearing jackets at school. It gets cool in the building, and kids enjoy wearing hooded sweatshirts. So we changed the rule,

and students get to wear hooded sweatshirts. If parents have suggestions that make sense, we are willing to take those suggestions and implement them.

### **Instructional Staff**

After our conversation on parental involvement, I asked Mr. Lewis to elaborate on instructional strategies as well as his instructional staff. He began with the following:

Instructional strategies have to come from me first. I always meet at the beginning of the year with the entire faculty and explain the goals for the year. We develop our goals during the summer.

During the summer, I send an e-mail to all my staff and tell them which week we are going to plan what we will be doing in the coming school year. Many teachers will e-mail me and say they will not be able to come to the meeting, but many of the teachers do attend. When we meet, we are able to complete the plan within one week.

When our campus goals have been identified, I inform the administrative staff because I do not want them to be the last ones to hear what we are planning. Also, while reporting to the deans, we review the goals together to better fine tune them. After the administrative staff is satisfied with the plan, I report it to the faculty. Faculty members hear it from me, but they know that the plan came from a group of their peers.

Mr. Lewis offered an example of decisions that are made during the summer meeting which identify the campus goals:

We decided during the summer to increase the number of teachers who observe other teachers. There are many best practices going on in this building that need

to be viewed by other teachers. Teachers should be able to see one another teach so that they can learn from each other. We decided that once each month, teachers will be able to observe other teachers sometime during the day. They will visit and spend the day with other teachers in the building whether it is in their discipline or not.

They will observe other techniques being used in the building outside of their room. In addition to instructional advantages, teachers will see their students in other settings. For example, if I am a science teacher on a team, and I am having trouble with Johnny, but he is not having any trouble in other classes, I want to see what other teachers are doing to keep him engaged so that I don't continue having the same problem in my class. The practice of visiting other classrooms is designed to help with student discipline as well as morale.

Our conversation then turned to Mr. Lewis's expectations for his staff as well as how he monitors their effectiveness in the classroom. He offered the following:

I monitor the effectiveness through the value added money and the reports that we get with value added. Through this, we can see whether or not teachers are making a difference. Teachers automatically know whether or not they need to do something to avoid being placed on a growth plan. If teachers are not adding value to the students in the classrooms, we need to examine their strategies. The first time we meet with teachers regarding the lack of value being added to students is a conversation. If no improvement occurs, they are placed on a growth plan.

Regarding monitoring teachers, the deans do the classroom visitation. In time, we expect to see growth. During these visits, we look at the level of questioning. We know that the tests are progressively more rigorous, so teachers cannot start with level one questioning. Of course, if they are introducing a concept, that is understandable, but after that, they need to get to the abstract level and to questions that reflect level II and level III.

Teachers have to mirror the TAKS test in their line of questioning. We want to avoid having students open the test booklet and feel inferior because they cannot answer the questions on the test. Throughout my life, I have had those feelings many times. I don't like that feeling, and I don't want our students to feel that way. I want them to open up the test booklet and say "I know this."

### **Staff Development**

Mr. Lewis transitioned our conversation from instructional strategies to his campus-wide staff development meetings that take place every Friday:

We have staff development every Friday. Because we have early dismissal, we are able to take advantage of Friday afternoons to develop our staff concerning the latest instructional strategies. I really think that our Friday staff development sessions have improved our school over the last five years. We have had some quality staff instruction development. Sometimes teachers develop their own product, and they will share it with the rest of the staff. These Friday meetings really put the spotlight on our students and on good teaching, or what you would consider good student learning. My Dean of Instruction runs the Friday meetings.

I am not involved in that because I am usually occupied with parents, meetings, or other administration activities.

### **Monetary Resources**

I asked Mr. Lewis about his budget and where he prefers to spend his discretionary funds. This is how he answered:

I manage approximately three to eight million dollars a year. It includes stimulus money, grants, and any other monies that we receive. First, we hire our core teachers and make sure that every team has the five that they need. From there we ensure that we have enough electives in place such as fine arts, because fine arts are important. Those courses are what kept me in school--not sports. We build our master schedule, and the master schedule will tell us if we will need additional support this year.

For example, this year we had 120 more sixth-grade students than we thought we would. After looking at the numbers, I went to the faculty and asked their team to vote on where they believe we should spend any extra money that we have. Each team received one vote. I cannot listen to everyone, but I do want to hear from them. So, each team had one vote and they came back and said that the money needed to be spent in sixth grade because that grade had the largest number of students. Well, I already knew that; I had already put it down on the portal, but I wanted to make sure that I heard it from them. That just reinforces my decision. It helps me to know if I am on the right track.

Right now the leadership team drives everything here--not the SBDMC. I run everything through the leadership team. They volunteer to come in at 7:30 on

Tuesday morning, and we meet until 8:30. We go over everything that will be happening in the coming week and anything else that we need to discuss. Right now we are getting \$324,000 that we didn't expect.

After taking out the money that needs to be subtracted, I give the faculty the final figure, and they tell me where they want the money spent. They voted overwhelmingly that we needed to have the auditorium painted. We just installed new seats and new lighting, and it needs to be painted. They wanted the rest of the money to go towards the purchase of Promethean boards. Everyone wants one of those instead of a smart board. I thought everyone wanted an Elmo, so I went to the committee and I directed my Dean of Instruction to do a needs assessment to see how many Elmos we needed. As a result, they said they didn't want Elmos; they wanted the Promethean Boards. That is fine with me; they get what they want. However, I am holding them accountable to students being successful on TAKS.

If I don't get the scores that I want, I can be very direct. I seem mild mannered right now, but I can be very direct. At the end of the year, if a teacher is not performing at expectation, we have a conversation. In that conversation, we talk about whether or not this school is the right place for them, or if they need to find a school that is a better match. If you stay, you will have some serious work to do. We have about 10 percent teacher turnover every year.

### **Culture of Success**

I asked Mr. Lewis about his school's culture and to elaborate on the ways he is able to continue to maintain a culture of success. He answered:

We maintain our school's culture by going back every year and focusing on our creed. This is our goal, and this is where we started. We always start with history. You have to know our history to appreciate how far we have come. I had one Dean of Instruction who was just as gung-ho as I am, but she went way too fast. The next one went way too slow, but the one that we have now is just right. She is the right match, and everyone is really happy. The history of the school is very important. It is also important to know what the school looked like in the past, so we take pictures. We have pictures that were taken a few years ago. When the parents came in and saw them, they said the heck with HISD. If the district is never going to do anything about these bathrooms, we will do it ourselves. So they came in, and together we knocked down all the old walls. We took everything out including the sinks and toilets. The city came in, and we asked that they not stop us even though we didn't have any permits, and they agreed. We tiled the boys' restroom so that it doesn't smell like a boys' restroom. We installed air fresheners that activate every few minutes. Everything that we replaced was old and smelled pretty bad. The kids loved the renovation. We want all of our students to take pride in our school, and we are making improvements one step at a time.

Everyone's culture plays into the way he or she learns. Because culture plays into the way students learn, I try to select people for teams who realize that there are differences in learning styles. Those teachers who realize the differences in learning styles are better able to adapt to those learning styles. Besides the influence of culture, there are students who are auditory, tactile, or

visual like me. Like many of our students, when I am going to learn something new, I need a teacher who can explain it to me well or one who can provide a clear picture of what I need to know.

I try to employ teachers who teach to various learning styles, but it doesn't always happen. Many times, it is two weeks before school starts, and I don't have a math teacher, so I am forced to hire someone who is breathing. It is always my hope that we will be able to develop them into a good math teachers. When I have teachers who are not up to par, I try to provide those students with an enrichment class that will better suit their learning needs. I give students what they need but then follow up with enrichment opportunities.

For example, it came to me that I have a group of students whose needs were not being met. My African-American dean came to me and told me that she knew what this group needed. She told me that I couldn't give them what they needed because I was too white. I asked, "What do you mean?" She told me that I just didn't understand; this is just part of their culture. She took this group of students and has been working with them after school. What she has done has changed the mentality of these young men. They have learned table manners. We have taken them out to eat so that they know what it is like to get dressed up and go out to have a nice meal. This is the exact thing that many of our low SES Hispanic students lack as well.

Mr. Lewis admitted that there are many stereotypes that need to be overcome. He gave the following example:

We have many stereotypes that we need to overcome. For example, I do something special for some of our girls. We have found that the families who come straight from Mexico have the mindset that the girls do not need to finish school. To try to change that mindset, we provide them with a preventive class that allows them to talk about sex and self-esteem. By better informing them of the options that they have, it is our hope that they will break their own families' stereotype and graduate from school.

### **Personal Experience**

I asked Mr. Lewis to share a personal experience with Hispanic students. After thinking for a moment, he offered the following:

I was a white farm boy from a small town in Wisconsin who moved to the big city of Houston, Texas, and ended up on the east side. My first teaching assignment was at a school called Edison Middle School. Edison is 100 percent Hispanic. This was 26 years ago.

When I went to the school, I learned that there were plans to tear the old school building down. At that point, there were no plans to do anything to improve the old school because, in the middle of building the new one, the district lost the contractor who went bankrupt. There was a six foot fence around this building with barbed wire at the top. I remember thinking, "What in the heck did I get myself into?" When you interview with UISD, they don't tell you where you will be teaching; they hire you and then place you. The very first day that I went to the campus, there was a shooting. It was a gang-related incident between

what were called the “Wetbacks” and the “Chicanos.” I didn’t know the difference because everyone looked the same.

I was just blown away and totally culture shocked. But I was young and had very little experience outside of my community where I went to my university and where the only people that didn’t look like me were people that they brought in from the outside such as Nigeria or the foreign exchange students. So here I was at this school, and I had a choice of staying there or going to an alternate school that was all black. The recruiter was friends with the principal, and he said you will really like this campus. It is up and coming. So I stayed with HISD.

I loved my experience at Edison. I loved teaching math, and there were a lot of “ah ha” moments. I took students who hadn’t even been to the Summit where the Rockets played even though it was only a few miles away from our school. Though it was close, the students had never been that far out. They hadn’t even been to the Galleria. So every weekend I took students to various places so that they could have those experiences. It was amazing to see the things the students were able to overcome. While teaching there, I had a group of students who participated in UIL Number Sense.

We went to the district meet and did very well. We were accused of cheating because there was no way an all-Hispanic team could beat the White team. That was an “ah ha” moment for me! All the judges were White, and they were accusing me of having fed them the answers. That was ridiculous since I had to be in the other room. I was in the gymnasium with everyone else. I

remember thinking about the prejudices that they must have felt...it was unbelievable!

I have really embraced the Hispanic community; the only non-Hispanic friends that I have are here at school. Everybody else in my running circle is Hispanic. When I went to Edison, I just immersed myself from Quinceaneras to Day-of-the-Dead to other events. Being involved in these activities made a big difference to the kids because they saw someone who was interested in what they had to say and what they had to offer.

The only thing that I still battle today is the mindset that girls do not have to finish school. I still don't understand that, and that is something that I may never understand. All I can do is lend support when I can and show them what they can do, and also keep them informed and to build their self-esteem. They have to realize that they don't have to have a partner; they don't have to have a boyfriend; they don't have to have a man in their lives to be complete. Many of them think that they have to find love by the time they are 18, and we just have to remind them of their options.

### **Generalization from Personal Experience**

From his personal experience, Mr. Lewis generalized the following:

If you get the right teacher, your students will be successful. You have to find that right match. Some of my students here have parents that I taught at Edison. Many of them will come by and say that, if it weren't for me, they would not have made it through school. For many of my former students, I was the right match.

You have to have the right person in place for students to be able to reach their full academic potential.

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing our conversation, I asked Mr. Lewis to provide some insight into how he believes schools can close the achievement gap between Hispanic students and their counterparts.

Times have changed tremendously from my first days of teaching. Now, the thing that makes the most difference in a students' lives is their economic status. I don't care what color you are because it really makes no difference. If you don't have any money, you are expected to go out and bring in some money to help the family. It is not about being Hispanic. I have lost kids of all races--White, Black, Hispanic, etc. Those who we have lost had to do with their socioeconomic needs.

There was a time when education was the focus. The economy was good and parents were working. Over the last two years, the economy has taken a dive, and you can see where attendance is not as good as it once was. Students have to stay home and take care of younger siblings just as it was in the old days because mom now has to go out and work. Mom can no longer just stay at home, or maybe there is no dad in the picture, so the older siblings have to step in. So now we are going back, but it is a sign of economics, not necessarily culture.

I see the statistics for the U.S. and the statistics show a huge gap between Hispanic students and their White counterparts. We have gaps, but the gaps here are language related. If you do not have a good grasp of the English language and the state of Texas says you have been here long enough so that you have to take

the TAKS test or the Stanford, of course there are going to be gaps. This is the equivalent of my going to Japan and taking a test in Japanese. All I would be able to do is sit there and bubble in the answers.

Here at Utopia, if you look at students who have been in the U.S. schools from first grade to the present, you will find that there is a very little gap between the two. The problem comes when they group all Hispanics together as one. This is not a true picture of how they perform. Also, migrant workers who are Hispanic go for two months at a time to different schools; and when they come here and take the test here, their scores count against the school or district, and that is not really fair.

My best friend was a teacher aide of mine many years ago, and now he is a teacher at Marshall Middle School. That school is all Hispanic and African American. His TAKS scores for just neighborhood kids were higher than the gifted and talented kids. Because our school is typically ahead of his, he will come by and visit. The last time he was here, I gave him what we had been working on in social studies because that is what he teaches. He took all the vocabulary words that I gave him, and he put them to a rap song because that is what his students would relate to best. It is amusing to see his kids sitting there taking the test because they are thinking about the song that they made up. All their heads are bobbing up and down. That is how he relates the content to his students. My teachers are “old school,” and they just don’t do that. So it depends on getting the right teachers to close that achievement gap. Get the right match. It

is all about getting the right match, and if you get it, I don't care what color you are. You will be able to relate to your students.

## Chapter VII

### To Be the Teacher that I Never Had

I began my conversation with Mr. Woods by asking him how he came to be in education and how he became a school principal. He gladly shared his story:

I knew in fifth grade I wanted to be a teacher. When I was in fifth grade, I was an attendance issue. I skipped school quite a bit. I would get dressed as if I were going to school. We had a neighborhood school which was within walking distance. My brother who was two grades ahead of me in school would get on the bus so he could go to his school. I would appear to be going to my school, but I would skip school and go to the home of the babysitter who took care of us. The thing that I remember about fifth grade was that no one missed me when I was absent for a couple of days. Teachers would tell me that it was no problem, and we would pick up where we left off.

I moved to a different city not far away, but different, to live with my father. There were different rules, expectations, and regulations. At that time, I also got into athletics. Athletics made all the difference in my life. As I progressed in athletics through high school, I soon started getting scholarship offers. Recruiters would ask me if I knew what I wanted to major in when I got to college. The first thing that came to mind was education. When they would ask me why I wanted to be a teacher, I would tell them that I always wanted to be the teacher that I never had.

So I finished my schooling at college and completed all my courses in education. I completed the student teaching and loved it. I thought that teaching and coaching would be all that I would do. But before long, I went back to school to work on my master's degree. My motivation to earn a masters degree was to become a principal after I had taught for about twenty years.

The opportunity arose for me to be an assistant principal much sooner than I ever intended or anticipated. I completed one year of administration and fell in love with it. I saw the great impact that I could have from the administrative office. In my class, I had been able to impact only those who were in my classes, but as an administrator, students would come up to me and ask me about things that were going on, and I always knew that I could really make a difference with those kids. As an assistant principal I was able to build relationships with all kids on the campus, not just the ones in my class. If I wanted to pull Johnny out of class and talk with him about what I saw him doing yesterday down the street I could do that.

So in administration, my desire was to positively affect kids across the campus. My career then took off, and I went through the protocol of being an assistant principal at a middle school for two years and an assistant principal at a high school for five years. Then the opportunity presented itself for me to come to Sellers as a principal. This is now my sixth year as principal at Sellers.

### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I then asked Mr. Woods to provide some insight regarding his students and their backgrounds. He offered the following:

We have close to 900 kids here, and most of them are neighborhood kids. We have around 40 kids who receive transportation to our building. Garland ISD consists of three communities--Garland, Rowlett, and Sachse. The kids who live in those area communities come to us because ours is the closest school. The majority of our kids walk to school or are dropped off by their parents.

Our students are right at 72% to 73% economically disadvantaged. We take the kids as they are. My assistant principals, front office staff, teachers, and I all work together to make sure that the kids are well taken care of. For example, when we have a dance and we make \$500 off of it, we will keep that \$500 in an envelope. If José comes in one day and doesn't have much money, we will use that fund to buy Jose's lunch. So then we go through the process of talking to Jose to determine the reason he doesn't have lunch money. We ask if he has turned in his free and reduced lunch form, etc.

Kids will usually tell us that their parents haven't filled out the form for whatever reasons. At that point we get with food services, take some of the money we have set aside and pay for their lunches. We take care of it that way. We make sure the kids eat every day. If they have their basic needs met, then they will be much more engaged in class.

Sometimes a kid comes to me needing something, and sometimes I do get manipulated, but when we give them the money to meet their needs, we are doing the right thing. As long as we are doing the right thing on our end, we feel better about that. Sometimes we get into some issues with some kids, but that is a part of a system like ours. Food services allow students to charge one time without

any penalties. When things such as this come up, I check records and see that there have been previous issues with lunch money. I then contact mom or dad to find out what is going on. Meanwhile I will provide money through their lunch account so that they can eat. It is rarely the case that I give the kids money in their hands. So if kids need money, I make sure that they are using it to eat. This program has really helped us.

Mr. Woods talked about some unique things that they have developed at Sellers to better meet the needs of his student population.

We recently developed a unique thing. Just like Bible chapters and verses, we have developed rule 7-17. The seven hours they are with us are the ones that we can control. We cannot control the 17 hours they are not with us. But while they are with us they get to eat, they are warm, they are safe, and all their needs are met. In addition to all of that, we reach them academically.

Parents sometimes call me and tell me that they can't get their child to go to school. I stop what I'm doing and go to get them. When it is raining and students do not qualify for transportation, they can call me, and I will go and get them. When it is cold outside, I have someone here earlier than usual to ensure that kids are not sitting outside in the cold. I open up the school at 7 a.m. even though our classes do not start until 8:50. I understand that parents have to go to work. With that said, I do what I can so that kids are not left outside in the cold while parents are making the tough decision to get to work on time at the expense of their kids sitting out in the cold weather.

Some parents do not have computers at home or Internet access. We often open up the library after school or on Saturdays so that parents can come in and use the computers.

Mr. Woods described some of the programs that they have in place to help students with services such as hearing, eye vision, and dental.

We have mobile dentists. They came in last week, and about 100 kids participated. They provided examinations, teeth cleaning, and oral hygiene awareness for our kids. We also have programs in place that provide free hearing exams.

Some kids are struggling in class because they need eye glasses. But when you talk about eye glasses, you are talking about \$400-\$500 that these kids do not have. If you are a parent of this student and you have four other kids at home, you can't be expected to come up with the money for the glasses. It is not reasonable. So we provide free vision testing for our students and get them eye glasses when they need them.

At the end of last year, there was a new immunization that seventh graders needed. We had a free clinic here for sixth graders who were soon to be seventh graders. We offered it to them for five dollars as opposed to their having to pay their physician or the local clinic \$25. We contacted all the parents so that they could get their kids the shots for five dollars.

Our goal here is simple. We try to make Sellers a one-stop shop. While they are here with us for seven hours, we will do our best to get their needs met.

You have to be realistic and realize that, for many of these kids, we are the only stable adults that they see.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

After explaining ways through which he meets the needs of his students, Mr. Woods spoke about the Saturday school.

For science, math, reading, and social studies, we have Saturday school. On any given Saturday, we could have 500 kids here. Where other campuses may have transportation issues, we do not because kids live so close by. This really helps us because kids can walk to school. Students spend a lot of time here, and they feel like they own the school. We have no graffiti because kids take care of this campus.

I worked as an assistant principal at a Naaman Forrest High School, and the majority of the Hispanic students were bussed there. These students never felt like they were a part of that campus because they didn't live in that area. We saw graffiti, fights, and unrest because most of those students had to get up one hour earlier to get on a bus and go to a campus that they felt they had no ownership in. Though it was a very nice building, they felt no ownership in it; therefore, they didn't respect it. So that is one difference that I have seen between that campus and this campus. Students have ownership here; therefore, they respect and take care of it much more.

Mr. Woods mentioned the types of extra-curricular activities his school offers his students.

For seventh and eighth grade boys and girls we have football, volleyball, basketball, and track. In the spring, we have an intramural soccer league where kids devise their own teams. The kids play after school. It is indoor soccer. The soccer ball is softer and the nets are set up under the goals. A lot of the kids who are awesome soccer players do not do anything else. I personally wish that they would offer soccer at the middle school level, but they don't. It is only offered at the high school. Many of our kids play independent league soccer. So soccer is one of those things that we offer specifically for our population.

Mr. Woods mentioned the importance of knowing their students and engaging them to participate in various activities. He mentioned something his school does very well:

One thing that is very peculiar to our campus is that we know our kids. We are constantly talking to kids and engaging them in things that we know will be of interest to them. We go up to the kids and ask them, “Why aren’t you in basketball?” or “Why aren’t you in volleyball?” We expect our coaches to encourage some of our kids who have never been in sports to see if they can get them to try out. Some of those kids do try out, and it ends up being the formalities that keep them from participating.

To facilitate student involvement in sports, we have doctors who come here on a Saturday so that students can get their physical; or we set up appointments with the Care Now clinics so that they can get their physicals through them. The fee is about ten dollars. By doing this, we eliminate all the excuses as to why they are not doing anything. Some of our kids do not have

insurance; some of our kids do not have a physician. We eliminate excuses by setting up programs that take care of those issues.

### **Parent Involvement**

I asked Mr. Woods to discuss ways in which he engages his students' parents.

He offered the following:

We communicate with parents in various ways. We have a callout system. It goes from text to voice. We type our messages into the system, and from there, we can direct them to go from English to Spanish. Anytime that we send letters home, they are sent in two languages--English and Spanish.

It is interesting that many of our Spanish speaking parents do not read Spanish. Because of that, our callout system has really helped us. So now we send a letter in addition to a callout which ensures that our message reaches all of our parents. We send information home as needed, and teachers send out information on a regular basis that pertains to their area. We send out school-wide information about such things as immunizations, report cards or other events that affect the entire school.

We are very conscious of the types of things that we do. When we have parent informational nights, we decide what food we will serve. We had a parent informational night last week, and the presentations were like a round robin. The information was on our new rail system and how to manage and maneuver around town. We had DART representatives here. We also talked about the online grade book. We talked about how parents could set up their students account via their computer. We talked about the lunch account monitor and how to deposit money

into it. We talked about what kids were eating in school, etc. So the food that we offered for this parent informational night was more geared towards our Hispanic culture. The food included fajitas, burritos, rice, and beans. This was better than offering spaghetti, lasagna, and other types of food which are not typically included in the Hispanic culture. These are some subtle things that we do that really make our parents feel more at home when they come to our school.

Mr. Woods then discussed the importance of asking parents what their thoughts were on various issues. He shared various ways in which he communicates with his parents.

To identify parents' needs we do our best to ask them. When we see parents, we ask them for feedback on things that we are doing. We ask them to tell us what they would change in our school. One thing that I am proud of is that we are willing to take criticism. We ask the questions and are willing to listen to the answers even if it is an answer that we don't like.

When we conduct our surveys, we send the forms home or we do them online through Survey Monkey. Some of the things that people request are unrealistic, but when we find common themes, we act on them. From one of the surveys, we learned that our Spanish speaking parents were getting the letters in Spanish, but they still couldn't read them. And even though the kids translated the letters for them, they were telling the parents what they wanted to tell them, not what the letter actually said. So the callout system has really helped us when it comes to these types of situations.

We also meet and greet parents in the parking lot. We are always talking to them. When I'm talking to a Spanish-speaking parent, I ask the kids to translate for me. I know enough Spanish to know if a kid is not telling them what I want them to say. I understand enough to know what people are saying; I don't know enough to respond. So it is very helpful to at least understand them.

### **Instructional Staff**

After talking at length about parental involvement, I asked Mr. Woods to discuss his instructional staff and how he manages them. He stated the following:

Our grade levels meet the first and third Wednesdays of each month and the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at eight a.m., we meet as departments. At these meetings, we talk about what is relevant and what is needed. When we have staff development days, we spend a lot of time looking at the data, doing item analysis, critiquing ourselves, etc. I have learned quite a bit from the Margaret Kilgo training. We focus our attention on aligning the curriculum and asking the right questions.

Our teachers and administrators work very hard on this campus. Our work ethic is never in question; however, I believe that we sometimes work on or focus on the wrong thing. For example, we may spend a lot of energy on things that are not on the TAKS test, thinking that it is. Our classroom instruction is something that we are constantly reviewing. Something that has been extremely valuable to me was a course that I took on communication. From the principles I learned in that course, I design my Monday memos.

Every Monday, I send out a memo that has my thoughts about things that are happening. By sharing my thoughts in that way, it is not a faculty meeting, and I don't have people saying, "Oh my gosh. He is up there talking again." It is just my thoughts. Here is what I thought about last week, and here is what I am thinking about this week. Sometimes I will include a quote, a poem, or just something for them to think about. So the Monday memo has been a great communication tool for me to share my vision and direction for this campus. When I first came here, teachers were thinking that our school vision was mine as opposed to ours. I had no buy-in from the staff. So the question became, "How do I get teachers to buy in?" The Monday memo has been instrumental in getting the buy-in that I needed.

Mr. Woods then explained the importance of having his staff advocate for him when he is not present.

Another thing that has helped me over the years has been having my secretary or front office staff advocate for me. I ask them to advocate for me by dealing with students in their presence. I am always very respectful and careful not to give too much information about the situation; but handling situations in front of my secretary gives her an understanding of how I operate. So instead of bringing students back here in my office and shutting everyone out, I make the way I deal with students visible to others.

Sometimes parents will come out of my office and say that Mr. Woods said this or that, and the office staff will say, "Well, I know Mr. Woods, and I think what he was saying to you is this." The same goes with teachers who send

students to me. When a referral comes to me, I handle it and then I go back and talk to the teacher about how and why I handled it in the way that I did. I also tell them some things that I think they could have done differently. I am totally supportive of my teachers. I tell my teachers at staff meetings that regardless of whose side I end up on, I am always going to be on the side of the right.

Sometimes that is in the teacher's favor and sometimes it is not. We all make mistakes, and we have to be able to pull each other's coat tails and correct each other when we are wrong.

Mr. Woods then spoke at length about his hiring process. He explained the following:

In my six years, knock on wood, I have never had to put anyone on a growth plan. We spend a lot of time on our selection process; we don't hire just anyone. We tell our applicants what is expected of them up front. I tell individuals that on paper they may be a great applicant, but that they may not be the right fit for our campus because of what we expect from our teachers. I ask any teacher who applies for a job on our campus this question: "Are you willing to work on Saturdays, and I'm talking about without pay?" This is to benefit the kids and our building. Some applicants may say, "Heck no," and I will thank them for being truthful as I now know not to hire them. I always tell them that I appreciate their time and wish them luck.

Most applicants go through a screening process and a series of interviews. Fortunately for me, I spent a year and a half as an HR person at the district level. I've gone through several interviewing techniques like the Gallup polling and

things of that nature. Bringing that back to the campus level helps me do interviews. The previous administration used to do panel interviews. Though I realize that teachers will spend more time with these individuals than me personally, in most cases teachers don't know what we need. They are looking at what they like.

Mr. Woods briefly discussed programs that facilitate teacher instruction and authentic assessments.

To facilitate teacher instruction, we have three programs. We use Study Island for reading. We use Measuring Up for math. For science and math, we also have E-path. In addition to those computer programs, we are in the process of obtaining Smart Boards for all our classrooms. The basic thing on instruction is that the district requires our teachers to have a minimum of eight grades every grading cycle. On our campus, I require a minimum of 10 grades. Teachers may drop one, but here is the caveat. One of the grades has to be authentic assessment. What is authentic assessment? Kids can do a rap, write a poem, sing a song; it doesn't matter as long as they are showing that they know the work. If I sit here and tell you what happened in the Mavericks game last night, you would know that is authentic assessment. I know what happened, and I put it in my own words. Derek had 50 points and so-and-so missed so many free throws that it caused the games to go into overtime. That is authentic assessment.

I asked Mr. Woods how he goes about monitoring his teachers. He detailed the following process:

Each administrator has different departments. For example, I do fine arts, social studies and reading. Another assistant principal does math and science and ESL. Another does PE, English, athletics and special education. So we all have our special departments. We try to stay on top of them with classroom walk-throughs. We interact with our departments quite a bit. Students are accustomed to seeing us in the classroom. Personally I set my goal to make 15 walk-throughs a day. I may not document them, but I am present and visible. Visibility is important to me.

When I walk into a classroom, teachers do not stop for me. I don't want them to stop. I want them to keep doing what they are doing. I want them to know that I am here to support them. At times, I pop in just to let them know that I'm in the neighborhood. For example, I have a math teacher who is extremely good. When I walk into her classroom, if the kids turn around and look at me she will say, "Don't act like you've never seen him before." And she keeps her class going.

I have to be honest with you. We rarely have faculty meetings. We have staff development at the beginning of the year, and that is probably the most talking that I do the entire year. When we do call a faculty meeting, the teachers know that it must be something serious. Most of my communication with my staff is done through grade level or department meetings. At these meetings, we will talk about expectations and updated data on recent assessments.

**Monetary Resources**

I asked Mr. Woods about his budget and where he spends his discretionary funds.

He commented:

We spend our discretionary money on meeting the needs of our students. We have 400 kids attending Saturday school. We make sure that teachers have funds that will allow them to feed students when they are coming in on Saturdays. During the last few Saturdays, we have utilized discretionary funds to purchase snacks for students such as donuts or pizza. A few days ago, a teacher wanted to keep her kids after school, and she wanted to buy them pizza. She said she was going to buy them pizza out of her own pocket. I asked her how much the pizza would cost, and she said about \$27. I told her not to spend her money. I told her that I would find some money for her. So the discretionary funds are used for that type of thing.

Tutoring after school raises a two-fold question. With AVID, those kids have college tutors that come in on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We have an AVID budget which pays for that and for those tutors. As far as teachers staying beyond their contracted time, we have three things going. One is that they may want the hours for DATE grant, and they will cash out at the end of the year. The second is the stimulus package which is allowing us to pay for them to stay after school through that fund. And the third funds are from our basic budget from which we allot a certain amount for extra duties. And those are the three ways that we pay our teachers for working extra. We do not have Title I tutors in our secondary

schools. Although we qualify for Title I, we do not claim Title I; we only claimed it for the stimulus.

### **Culture of Success**

I asked Mr. Woods to elaborate on his school's culture of success. He stated the following:

Many kids have had their parents and grandparents attend this campus. Garland High School just graduated their 100<sup>th</sup> class. So there is a lot of pride when kids sit and reflect on the fact that their great-grandparents (in some cases) went to Garland High School. Those kids want to come to Sellers to get to Garland High School. There is definitely a lot of tradition there.

Our culture of success begins with our teachers' commitment to do what it takes for students to be successful. When students are not getting their work done during the school day, we have teachers staying after school during their own time to provide extra tutoring. On Monday through Thursday from four to six o'clock, if students are struggling in any of the core areas, their teachers will be available to help them get caught up. This is done every week.

The interesting thing about this is that our teachers do not get paid to stay from four to six. It is just something that they do. We do this because this is what needs to be done to meet the needs of our kids. How do we give the kids high expectations and hold them to those expectations? We don't do this for the money, we do this to make a difference, and our teachers walk the talk by staying here until six o'clock without getting paid.

Mr. Woods then discussed the name change of Sellers Middle School to

**Sellers University:**

To create a culture of success, one of the first things that I did when I became the principal of Sellers was to change our name. We became Sellers University. We did that so that kids could put university in their vocabulary and so that the students would talk and think about it. At best, “university” was a word that they did not use before and that they didn’t understand. After we became Sellers University, we started marketing it through Seller’s University t-shirts, sweatshirts, etc. I would sometimes stop a kid running down the hallway and ask him, “What does your shirt say?” They would respond, “Seller’s University.” Then I would tell him to act like a university student.

Then we went beyond that and created a mission statement. We recite the mission statement over the intercom everyday. We pay kids if they can recite the mission statement every day. If they do, we give them a dollar. So kids know it, and they are expected to know it. They hear it all the time. Reciting the mission statement is the ticket out for students who come to Saturday school. So the kids know it; they hear it.

During the first day of school, we had our student orientation, and we talked about student expectations. We asked if anybody here knew the mission statement. One kid came to the front of the crowd, and it was a kid who is always in trouble. I did not expect it. I told the kid that, if he could recite the mission statement right here and now, I would give him \$20. He ripped it off, and I gave him \$20. Out of all the kids, I would have never expected him. But he did it.

We always talk about the mission statement. And the mission statement is at best “cheesy.” But we went through the mission statement, and it took us four months to develop the exact wording that we wanted. It had to be something that we could live and breathe every day. So the mission statement simply says:

**In order to create an environment that is conducive for learning, Sellers University is a community that sets high expectations of decorum, integrity, and challenging academics, as well as fair and equitable treatment so our students are prepared for the endless possibilities.**

I can't promise you that if you go to Sellers, you will end up getting a \$100,000 job. I can't promise that, but I can promise that you will be treated fairly here. You will have challenging academics, and you will be taught integrity as well as character.

Our goal for next year is to use the UPS slogan: UPS Universal Problem Solver—What has Sellers done for you! So we are already thinking about next year. We pick slogans that kids can pick up on.

One thing that we have specifically for Hispanic kids is intramural soccer. That is something that they really need. Kids who are not normally involved in school activities are involved in our soccer program. The winners of the intramural league get to have a banner with their team's name hung in the gym each year. So it is a legacy. But even the kids who normally don't play soccer, they get caught up in it, and they begin to recruit each other.

Mr. Woods continued on the topic of culture by elaborating on his staff's cultural sensitivity.

Speaking about being culturally sensitive, we had Michael Wynn come in August. He came in and talked to our staff about the empowerment of African-American males. I was rather hesitant to bring him in. Okay, here I am, African-American male, one of my assistant principals is also African-American, and I wondered how the staff would accept this. When he came in, he talked about how this works with any kid. So that is kind of our take. What is best for kids?

I know that there are some cultural differences. We acknowledge, celebrate, and embrace that. But you have to ask, what does it take to be a good citizen? If I am Black, Hispanic, White, or whatever, I need to be compliant in class, I need to follow the dress code, I need to be able to speak to someone and tell them my thoughts, and I need to be respectful. Even if we disagree, I don't have to fight with you. And I don't have to say, oh it is because...or, I hear this quite a bit... or, it is because I am Mexican. My assistant principal, God bless him, has been a great assistant principal. He has come up with this phrase to address the statement "...because I am Mexican." His response to that is, "Your comment is inappropriate; therefore I will not respond."

In addressing "...because I am Mexican," I usually try to be creative and say, I did not know that you were Mexican. I thought you were Honduran, El Salvadorian, etc. But my assistant doesn't even go there. In truth, I tell the kids that it is their behavior that I am trying to address. It is an easy bail out for the kids to blame it on their race. That is one of the biggest challenges that I face because the kids are not communicating that fact when they get home. The kids will go home and say, "Mom, this happened at school today and Mr. Woods let

the Black kids get away with it.” So the parent, being an advocate for their child, will come up here blazing mad saying, “He said you did this.” I will ask the parents if they have ever seen me do anything like that, and they will say, “No.” I then proceed to tell them that their child is in trouble and that he or she is trying to get out of it. And while you and I are arguing, he is over there laughing. But the real issue is that he didn’t do his homework and was laughing in class while he was blowing bubbles. Let’s talk about that.

### **Personal Experience**

I asked Mr. Woods if he would share a personal experience that has enhanced his understanding of the Hispanic culture. He offered the following:

A personal experience that has had the greatest impact in my understanding the Hispanic culture involves my wife. She is Panamanian. I understand that doesn't mean that I know it all, but I do have a greater understanding of the Latino culture. So when kids come in here and say that I don't understand, I tell them that I think I do. My mother-in-law has come and stayed with us for an extended period of time. So I sit down and talk with her. I also spend time with my brothers-in-law. That gives me more insight into the things that they have experienced. Those conversations have given me a better understanding. I still don't understand the culture completely, but it gives me better acceptance of it. That helps me out, and I get to transfer that into work.

When I am talking to a young Hispanic man who is making poor choices, such as the young man that was here earlier, I can ask him questions such as “Do you speak two languages?” If the answer is “Yes,” I ask, “ Do you understand

what a great ability that is? I wish I could. But now, what are you doing with your gift? Are you getting into trouble?” Just as in the African-American culture, I know there is a strong connection between males and their mothers in the Hispanic culture.

Because of the relationship between Hispanic males and their mothers, I can always utilize that to get a point across. “Do you love your mom?” Their answer is yes.” Love is an action verb. Are you acting like you love your mom?” And then they begin reflecting on the question, and at that point I ask them, “What is your mom asking of you? Bring home good grades, be under control etc? But you are not making your mom happy are you?” Understanding the relationship between young Hispanic males and their moms has helped me quite a bit. I don't know if that kinship exists in other communities the way it does in the Hispanic and African-American community.

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing my conversation with Mr. Woods, I asked him to give other administrators some advice on closing the achievement gap. He stated the following:

I wish I could write a book about that, honestly, and I know this may sound a little cliché-ish. Expectations. Expectations. Expectations. Here is what I mean. If I look at a European, Middle Eastern, African-American, or Hispanic face, my expectations have to be the same for all. It is possible that one of them is not going to pass the tests because their mom does not speak English. It goes back to expectations. What do you expect the kids to do, and what are you doing to meet those expectations? Are you a kinder, gentler person? Are you more patient?

Are you more available and accessible? Are you staying longer and coming in earlier because you understand the dynamics of your students' lives? Do you truly understand our students? Because students have to take care of their little brothers and sisters, I (as an understanding teacher) am not going to give students after school detention because I know they have responsibilities. But I also know that, if your mom is at home in the morning, you can come in earlier or you can come in on Saturday to get some work done.

This is my personal soapbox. I think every kid needs an IEP. Every kid learns differently. Everyone has his or her own story. Some will sit here and say all your marbles fit in this box. There are some marbles that won't fit. We cannot leave those kids behind and simply say that my tutorial times are here and I am not flexible. We have to work around it. There are so many circumstances that are beyond a kid's control. But we are holding the kid accountable for it. Because my math teacher wants me and my science teacher wants me, what do I do? We have to take the kid out of the decision-making process. If it is Tuesday, then you go to science. We have to help kids out. There is so much pressure put on kids, and kids are going through a lot of stuff.

Mr. Woods shared a few stories about how students impact not only his life but the atmosphere of his entire school.

We had a kid that committed suicide last year. That is unbelievable; I didn't see it coming. The kid was very well-adjusted. He had just moved here from St. Louis. I talked to him and his step-dad. I thought things were good. It is just that I did not see it coming. I frequently saw and spoke to that student in the hallway. And

he committed suicide. When I found out I asked, “Why? Did he leave a note? Was he being bullied at school?” It made us stop and reflect on our practices. It just reminds us that we are dealing with so many variables, and kids are dealing with issues at home that we do not know about.

We had a young lady last week whose father is 37 years old, and he passed away. So she came back up to school. All of a sudden, we were talking to people and they were asking if we knew her dad died. I didn't. I know the girl, and I know the family. I went to talk to her and said that I did not know that her dad passed away and that I was so sorry. When talking with her, because it had just happened, I asked her why she was not at home with her family. She said, “I am with my family. People up here care about me.” What a powerful statement. Her family is going through a lot. There are five children in the house. She is the third one to be at Sellers; there are two younger ones. But the two older ones already have children. So there are seven people in the house, and the only person that was working passed away. So we are faced with the dilemma. Our school rallied and purchased a gift card to feed the family for an entire week. We also had representatives at the funeral.

We had another young lady who got sick with the swine flu. She was in the hospital, and I found out about it. Students in her class created a card for her. Students came to me and asked when I was going to go see her and if I could deliver the card. I told them that I would be driving to the hospital on Friday night and that I would be glad to take her their card. When I walked into the girl's hospital room, the mom approached me. She asked me why I was there. I

told her that she is one of our students and that we take care of family. The doctors there asked me to put on the mask and the gloves. I didn't. I just hugged the girl and as I did, I told her that I hoped that she didn't get the germs that I have. The mom was making sure that I sanitized myself so that I didn't get sick. To me, I wasn't worried at all; I view that student as if she were my own daughter.

Mr. Woods closed our conversation by stating the following:

I do appreciate that I'm able to share my story. It is just our little school on the hill. Everybody here is family. I just wish that every school worked the way our school works. We still have our issues and concerns. We are by no means perfect, but the majority of the time, we are doing what's right for kids. The best thing about doing right by kids is that they know it.

Before I ever suspend a student, the last question I ask him or her is, "Was I fair with you?" And kids say, "Yeah, you were fair." The student who was in here earlier today is going to an alternative school for 25 days. I asked him, "Have I been there for you?" He said, "Yes" in front of his mom. Tell your mom that I have been there for you. At that point the mom told me while she was shaking my hand, "I am sorry for what he has done." I reminded her that we all make mistakes. I did not want to send him to an alternative school. But he had run his course of being disruptive on campus, and after many discussions and warnings from me, his time was up. It was kind of like the idle threat, and I needed to follow through on it. In the end, we are doing what is best for the child.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Failure is Not an Option

I began my conversation with Mrs. Malone by asking her how she came to be in education and how she became a school principal. She gladly shared her story:

As a child and even now as an adult I have always loved sports. I was one of those kids that enjoyed hanging out at school. So, in the ninth grade I decided I wanted to teach and coach. During my senior year in high school, I earned a four year basketball scholarship to Southern Arkansas University. I earned a Bachelors of Science with a major in Physical Education and minor in Health. Upon graduating I began my teaching and coaching career and shortly thereafter was encouraged by a vice principal and mentor at my school to begin my master's degree program, which I completed in a year and a half at Texas Women's University. After only two years in the classroom, upon the resignation of our counselor, I was offered the opportunity to serve as the counselor for the remainder of that school year. The following year I was offered a vice principal's position in another district. This was the beginning of 21 years as a campus vice principal in six different districts serving on an alternative high school campus, comprehensive high school, a career academy high school, and three different middle schools.

Working for 16 different principals, I learned a lot about what I didn't and did want to do if I ever became a principal. Out of all these schools, this building, Lamar Middle School, won my heart and that was about 18 years ago. Four years ago I was given the opportunity to be principal of Lamar. I've put everything I've got into this school and community

### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I asked Mrs. Malone to describe some of her student's characteristics and to discuss ways that she meets the needs of her economically disadvantaged students.

In the 19 years that I have worked in IISD, the face of Lamar has changed greatly; from approximately 15 %economically disadvantaged and 89% Caucasian to 76% economically disadvantaged and 26% Caucasian.

One of the best decisions that our district made in the early 90's was to implement a district and campus uniform policy. This policy allows students to choose from two colors of pants and 5 colors of the same style of shirt. Students come to school each day dressed very similar. The uniform eliminates students walking in and visually appearing economically disadvantaged and this also eliminates behavioral issues brought on by the way students dress, such as gang affiliations. All students walk into school each day dressed for success which provides for an environment of high expectations for all students, including minority and economically disadvantaged.

Lamar teachers, paraprofessional, and administrators have high expectations academically and behaviorally for all students. The use of technology allows for frequent data analysis, to the point of almost daily student

progress reports. Monitoring student progress closely keeps students from falling behind and failing. We provide daily tutoring before and after school. Our teachers and vice principals have on a daily basis about 200 students that stay for after school tutoring Monday through Thursday until 5:00 PM and on Friday evenings until 6:30 -7:00 PM. Lamar is also a 21<sup>st</sup> Century campus with an enrichment program that provides classes for students Monday through Friday two hours each afternoon. Vice Principals also schedule one weekend a six weeks for students that are severely struggling an opportunity to catch up and get some special attention for several hours on a Saturday morning.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

As Mrs. Malone completed her thoughts on how they serve their students, I asked her to share her thoughts on extra-curricular activities and the role they play in student academic success.

Research indicates that extra-curricular activities are highly important in engaging students in school. Most people when they think of extra-curricular they think “sports”. The extra-curricular program that I focus on with students in their first year in middle school is music. Students that get involved in music programs have a much higher success rate on college entrance exams. Additionally, they have more success academically in math, science and foreign languages. Middle school is the first time a student truly has an opportunity to get involved in music programs.

So based upon that research all 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are expected to select one of three elective music courses offered. Students chose from a full year of

choir, band, or orchestra. If I can get them in a full year program and give them an opportunity to connect with a group they just might fall in love with music.

Hopefully, I can get them hooked that first year in middle school.

Lamar has a current enrollment of 1215 students with approximately 465 students in our band program alone. That's larger than all three of the 5A comprehensive high school band programs in Irving ISD. Lamar has another 230 students enrolled in the Choir and Orchestra programs. That is right at 60% of our current enrollment actively involved in music programs. This involvement will impact student academic performance, social group, and behavior. Because all of our music programs participate in UIL activities there is another adult in the building holding students accountable for grades and behavior. Most parents work and don't check grades very often, therefore students participating in extra-curricular activities have teachers outside of the core classes checking on their progress on a regular basis. Throughout the year these students also have many opportunities to perform for their parents and family members. Students and parents feel a sense of pride and ownership in their involvement and success. It just makes everyone feel good!

Lamar's athletic program has almost 400 students participating in football, volleyball, soccer, basketball, and track. Although our sixth graders can't participate in athletics, we have a karate program, Kickstart, which gives the students the opportunity to travel and compete against other schools in the metroplex. We also hold belt ceremonies twice each year. Our sixth graders love the karate program. Other extra-curricular activities that students have the

opportunity to participate in include Student Council, National Junior Honor Society, Spanish Club, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and publications. We also have community service electives in which students get to help out in various parts of the building. We have students working in the main receptionist's office, counselor's office, and the library. We also have students in our life skills class working with students that have Down syndrome. This special elective class teaches them about character, responsibility, and service. We have approximately 50% of our students that make the A/B honor roll. Having so many on the A/B honor roll builds pride on our campus and in the community. Many of the A/B honor roll students are inducted into the National Junior Honor Society each year which includes a criterion of character and responsibility.

### **Parent Involvement**

I then asked Mrs. Malone to discuss ways in which she engages her parents and gets them involved in the education of their children. Mrs. Malone offered various ways in which they successfully communicate with their parents.

Failure is not an option at Lamar Middle School. Lamar's teachers, staff, and even secretaries are going to do everything it takes to ensure that our students are academically successful. Our assistant principals have a list of kids, 20 - 30, who are at the bottom of each grade level. They mentor those students by staying in close contact with them weekly, providing tutoring, in the evenings after school, calling parents and scheduling parent conferences regularly.

For example, the eighth grade vice principal and I are responsible for eighth grade class. In October I begin scheduling one-on-one parent conferences

with the child, parent and myself. With over 400 eighth grade students and understanding that it is impossible to meet with all 400, I begin with students that have not been successful for multiple years on the state TAKS tests. As of February of this year I have personally sat down with over 190 students and their parents to discuss their academic future, study habits at home and work habits at school. We do not allow parents not to come to this meeting and get involved with the school. It is an expectation! We can get parents involved in school if we make the effort and that's what we have done at Lamar.

My counselors also meet with parents on a regular basis. Our School Board has invested and committed to integrating technology in the entire district curriculum; therefore, the entire district's high school students have their own laptop computer. Most of the homes in our community have now invested in internet access and for those families that cannot afford home internet; the district provides wireless service on all K-12 campuses. Students then can sit on the outside of all of the district campuses and access the internet. The district also provides students and parents with student grade access and teacher assignment and curriculum access through the internet with programs such as Parent Connection, Student Connection, and Blackboard. Any of our parents can log into the internet and access these programs for up-to-date grades, assignments, instructional power points, on-line textbooks, video taught lessons for tutoring assistance, etc. Our campus provides yearly parent trainings for these programs during September and October of each year.

Another district funded technology communication program that is provided to students and parents is TeleParent. This program allows teachers, campus administrators, and district staff to send to students and parents recorded telephone messages to multiple phone numbers within the same family. With TeleParent, we are able to notify parents of projects that are due, important dates, and also if their child is not paying attention in class. All the teacher has to do is click it and it sends the message. This system has really facilitated our communication with parents. Between Blackboard, e-mail, Student Connection, Parent Connection, and Teleparent there is no reason not to have well informed parents. Although we have many parents that do not speak English, Teleparent allows us to send the message to the parent in their home language. Lamar staff does not allow language communication to be an issue for good parent relations and expectations for student success.

I don't speak Spanish and probably 50% of my Hispanic kids' parents only speak Spanish. You can talk to any of my Hispanic parents and they will tell you that we find a way to communicate with each other for the success of their child. I will pull in my secretary, another paraprofessional, or a Spanish speaking teacher or administrator; we sit down in a conference and allow for open communication with the parent. We want to answer parent questions and provide them with supporting information and guidance to help their child be academically successful. Caring about their kid's success academically and behaviorally is most important, not that I can't speak their language. It's that I

care about their child's success and that I want to include them in their child's education.

Lamar staff schedules regularly family night activities. For example, we have math and science family nights where we invite parents to come up and participate in math and science activities. This year our motto is "Turn up the Heat to Exemplary in 2010." It is our motto because we missed being Exemplary by approximately 23 students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade science only. This year we know that in order to be Exemplary, we have to "Turn up the Heat" academically and with all-around expectations.

Lamar's family activity nights are well attended. We have about 300 parents who participate each night that we open our doors to invite parents in to these activities.

We have a parent-teacher association that is highly active. We have parents that serve on the campus improvement committee. This past year we had 1015 parent members in the Lamar PTA. This is unheard of being that I only had 1165 students enrolled at the time. Typical enrollment for PTA membership on a middle school campus the size of Lamar is between 100 and 300 members, that is why we believe we have the best parent and community support ever in South Irving.

### **Instructional Staff**

After talking about parental involvement, I asked Mrs. Malone to discuss her hiring process. She stated the following:

Lamar has several campus interview teams that spend not only hours but days interviewing candidates for the open positions at Lamar. We may interview 20 different candidates for one open position before “we” make a decision. The teacher “we” hire not only has to be highly qualified in their subject area but most importantly loves kiddos and can build life changing relationships with students. It is whether or not you love kids enough to not allow students to fail academically or behaviorally. One of the other important characteristics of a new hire for Lamar staff is whether or not this person will fit in with our campus culture.

One question that we ask of ourselves and to the possible new hire is, “Are you a teacher that I want my own child to have and if you’re not then you’re not in the right building.” I want the best. I want them to care and love kids more than anything else in the world. I want teachers to teach every kid as if that child were their own.

Mrs. Malone continued addressing the Instructional Staff topic by explaining her procedures for communicating with her staff and expectations that she has for them.

We communicate with our teachers through faculty, campus leadership, and department meetings. We hold faculty meetings once a month, CLT meetings twice a month, and department meetings once a month. Every administrator attends the department and CLT meetings. It is an expectation that 100% of the faculty attends each faculty meeting. Teachers and staff at Lamar understand my high expectations for professionalism.

In regards to communication, I expect teachers to answer e-mails within 24 hours, therefore I do the same. I do my best to answer any email from a teacher the day the teacher sent it to me. I want teachers to feel that I am available and always willing to listen and respond to their needs. My door is always open and I don't care what I am doing, if a teacher needs to talk they are welcome to come in.

After discussing communication strategies, Mrs. Malone elaborated on activities that her teachers do that allow them to learn from each other.

We expect all teachers at Lamar to complete three "learning walks" by December of each year. A learning walk is where they have to go into a classroom and spend 45 minutes observing a teacher. I give them a form and I expect them to fill it out and turn it in to me so that I know that I've got 100% of my staff completing them. The last two questions on the form ask teachers to document what they observed that they want to take to help make their instruction better, and what conversations they might have with the teacher they observed that might help them become a better teacher.

These learning walks have had quite an impact on our staff. For example, we had a math teacher that was just amazed that our band instructor has 120 students in his classroom during one period of the day. She was amazed that he was teaching students to play 13 different instruments and reading music at the same time. She learned about classroom management, differentiated instructional strategies, integration of math and science vocabulary in band, plus other positive learning comments. Statements like this are common and it is what we expect to

hear. As administrators we see lots of good teaching. We see things that are just mind boggling but in most schools teachers don't have an opportunity to see these amazing lessons because they are locked behind their doors doing their "own" thing. The only way teachers are going to get better is if they go out and see others teach. With that in mind, we make "Learning Walks" a priority.

Four years ago I also implemented "Subject Area Professional Learning Communities". Our master schedule is aligned so that most teachers have academic team-time. Most middle schools in the state align their master schedule so that a team of academic core teachers are assigned to a similar group of students. Teachers then have the same conference period for cross curriculum planning and instruction. Lamar has two and three academic teams per grade level because of the size of our campus. I not only align the master schedule for academic team time, but I align subject area conference time across the academic teams. This allows for example all the math teachers in the seventh grade to meet together during the same conference period each day as well as meet with their academic team. These subject area PLC teams are expected to meet twice a week to work to share assessments, power points, hand outs, and instructional strategies. While they look at assessment scores they can discuss why some teachers are doing better in some areas as well as give each other ideas on areas of weakness that they might have. A little healthy competition among teachers and teams raises the level of instruction and enthusiasm for students and teachers.

I'm holding teachers accountable to PLC meetings during one conference period and the other conference period is their team time. They are expected to

meet within their academic team time three days a week. This time is used to discuss cross curricular curriculum and instructional strategies, share new vocabulary, plan homework, projects, and testing schedules, and schedule and hold parent conferences of students that are struggling to find success. Our assistant principals attend the team meetings to ensure that teachers stay focused on student achievement, and that they do not become gripe sessions for unhappy teachers. Subject Area PLC's are to meet twice a week. Assistant principals also attend the subject area PLC. The assistant principal, team leader, or subject area PLC lead teacher will turn in their meeting minutes and note to me each month. Because these meeting are a priority, I review the minutes and ask questions as needed.

### **Monetary Resources**

As Mrs. Malone finished addressing the instructional staff topic, I asked her to discuss where she chose to spend her discretionary funds. She commented:

The majority of my discretionary money (Title 1) is spent on people. I've hired three extra math teachers as well as a couple of paraprofessionals. I also use a small amount on a paraprofessional to assist in the library due to a high rate of books that are checked out. The remainder of the money I use to pay teachers that stay from 4:00 PM-6:00PM to work individually with small groups of students. I have approximately 400 kids that stay after school each day for enrichment activities or tutoring.

## **Culture of Success**

I asked Mrs. Malone to elaborate on the culture of success that permeates throughout this school. Mrs. Malone spoke about the strong ties the local community has to her school.

My family has lived in South Irving near Lamar and I have worked in this school and on one other campus in this district for the last 20 years. Lamar as a school has not changed, but the people who live in the neighborhood homes have changed. There are still generations and generations of students that have parents and grandparents that attended Lamar. What's really cool for me is that I spent 12 years as an assistant principal in this building and today I have 15 teachers and staff members that I have hired that were my students when they were 12 years old as a student at Lamar. That is what I call ownership.

The majority of our staff has strong ties to this school. For example, I have had in our school a mother (paraprofessional), daughter (math teacher), and eighth grader student who are from the same family. Although that is only one example, many of Lamar's staff have either gone through this school, have or had their children attend Lamar, or have other personal connections to Lamar. There is a lot of ownership and pride on this campus because of all these special ties. Everyone here wants this school to be the best and because of that everyone works hard to make sure that we are first or the number one middle school in Irving, and of course one of the best schools in the state and nation. When any

other campus in Irving gets close to catching us academically everyone, including the students, pulls together and we Turn Up the Heat.

Our students are actively engaged in all aspects of the culture of Lamar. I can have all 400 sixth graders in the cafeteria and I can ask them which middle school beat us last month by .2% in attendance and they will tell you “Austin Middle School”. We talk about those things with our students quite often. We also talk to them about the pride they should feel in being a Lamar Lion and a part of our Recognized school. Our students are well informed and as a result of that they take great pride in having the best attendance and the lowest failure rate in the district. Our failure rate last six weeks was 4.9% with 1210 kids, how can you beat that? You can't.

Our culture of success begins with our high expectations. This culture of high expectations is something that we developed in the early 90s; now we have now gone 13 of 14 years as a campus that has been a Recognized Campus by the state. Each generation of students that comes through Lamar understand the success that has taken place before them and they want to have that same recognition. Students know that they are expected to be successful.

### **Personal Experience**

I asked Mrs. Malone to share a personal experience with Hispanic students. She offered the following:

Twenty years ago I moved and bought a house two miles from this school. Most principals drive in from another city to be a principal at their school. I live in our school's neighborhood. Our students see me everywhere. I shop at the same

grocery store. I play at the same YMCA. I eat at the same restaurants. I use the same cleaners and gas stations. I'm always running into our students' parents when I am out and about. Because I have embedded myself and family in this community, the Hispanic population believes in me and trusts me with their children.

Before I met with you I was meeting with nine of my eighth graders upstairs. I asked them to tell me one thing they would have me do differently at Lamar. What do they want me to change? Not one of those students that I met with could tell me a thing that they would want us to change. I then asked why they couldn't think of something that they wanted us to change and they said, "Well, Lamar is strict but we like it that way because we know what's expected of us." Students, like adults, like to know what's expected of them. If they know what you want them to do they will rise to the expectation. When you leave them in the dark, they flounder in the uncertainty.

We believe that better informed students make successful students, so we really do our best to clearly communicate everything that we can. Not only do we clearly communicate expectations, we are also consistent in applying rules and procedures. For example, in our hallways we have highway lines. You walk on the right side of the road just like you drive on the right side of the road. This keeps hall traffic moving smoothly and cuts down on bullying that might occur during passing periods. It may seem like a small thing but with 1210 kids in a building that was built for 850 our hallways are full of students during passing periods.

Our campus also has a Zeros Aren't Permitted (ZAP) policy. We do our best not to let kids chose failure. When students chose not to do an assignment, they get a "ZAP". The teachers make them stay after school that afternoon or the next and require them to complete the assignment. We call the parent and let them know that their student will be staying after school to complete the work. During the after school session, if the student sits there and chooses to do nothing, the vice principals get involved, calls the parent, sets up a conference and then requires the student to come to a tutoring detention with the vice principal. If that doesn't work we keep the student until seven o'clock on Friday night and/or have the student come to a morning of four hours on a Saturday session. If at that point the student is still not doing any work, we get the parent to come up here and sit with us and help us get the work that we need done.

It is my Hispanic parents that drive my high expectations for our Hispanic students. They love them more than anything in the world. Their child may be struggling behaviorally, academically, and they may be dealing with issues at home but they love their kids. The majority of our Hispanic parents haven't graduated from high school and many of them probably didn't make it out of middle school. To add to their problems, a large percentage of them are in this country illegally. Most of my Hispanic parents do labor jobs of some type and they express the deep desire that they want their children to graduate from school and have more than what they have. You can just see it in their eyes. I have had many of them cry and just say to me, "All I want is for him/her to graduate." "I don't want him/her to have to work like I do." "I want him/her to have more than

I ever did.” When parents tell me things like that, how could I ever let that parent down by not doing everything that I can to ensure that their kids are successful?

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing our conversation, I asked Mrs. Malone to give other administrators some advice on closing the achievement gap. Mrs. Malone advised the following:

Everywhere you hear and read about the achievement gap growing with our children in school, but at Lamar we are closing the gap. I think the reason ours is continuing to close is because of our campus culture and staff dedication to student success. We just don't give up on a child! We continue to find ways in which we can integrate across all content areas and most importantly including the elective teachers to authentically engage students in their learning. Where electives connect with vocabulary from math and science and reading and English teachers are having students to read and write about math and science. Every teacher has bought into this philosophy and the results are that the students are now making important connections with their learning. I feel that this is one of the keys for success with our Hispanic students. To close the achievement gap you must be willing to truly do “whatever it takes”. For us, we just don't give up on any student. Failure is not an option. You have to believe it, you can't just say it, you have to be dedicated enough to live it through everything you do at school with students. I want every teacher in this building to teach and to love students the way they would want an adult to treat, care, teach, and LOVE their own kids. If teachers can't do this, then that teacher will not be a teacher at Lamar. It is

unfortunate that there are a lot of teachers that just don't like kids; as administrators it is our job to get them out of the classroom.

Many teachers believe that by giving a student a zero or allowing a student to not do their best work, thereby failing the student, they are teaching the student responsibility. "Responsibility" is not a Texas TEKS that you teach by giving a zero. We teach responsibility by holding students accountable, requiring work to be completed at the best of their ability. It is the teachers' responsibility to ensure mastery of the Texas TEKS. The only way that can be mastered is by ensuring that students do their class work. In teaching the curriculum and having high expectations in the classroom while also showing students how much you love them and care for them, they are eventually going to learn responsibility.

In my opinion, the most important component in education starts and ends with the relationships that we as educators should be building with students. As an example, we have students that hate math, but I have an eighth grade math teacher that every student loves. These students may hate math, but by loving the teacher they may eventually find a love for math, but for now the students will work hard and learn the material because of the teacher. It is amazing how students perform for her. The key to reaching students truly lies with the teacher and the relationships that they have with students.

## **Chapter IX**

### **Good Fences Make Good Neighbors**

I began my conversation with Mr. Rutkowski by asking him to share how he came to be in education and how he became a school principal. He gladly shared his story:

This is my 32<sup>nd</sup> year in education and my 22<sup>nd</sup> year at Jourdanton Junior High. I coached and taught for 10 years, and I made the switch over to administration and I haven't looked back. It has been a great experience. Principalship is game day everyday. You have to be ready for anything and everything, and you can't afford to have an unsuccessful day.

#### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I asked Mr. Rutkowski to describe the characteristics of his student population. He offered the following:

Our population has changed in my 22 years. We are predominantly Hispanic as 69 percent of our school population is Hispanic. Our economically disadvantaged count is also around 69 percent. I would like to say that we have local kids, but our mobility rate has not increased like most schools have. I do not know exactly what our mobility rate is, but we have many parents who choose to come to Jourdanton. We have open enrollment, and we have had that for the last two years. So we have several students who come to us from other areas of our

county. We are about 68 to 69 percent Hispanic, and the rest are Caucasian. We do have two Africa-American and three Asian students.

We don't have standardized dress but we have a very strict dress code. Our point of view as administrators is that everybody in Jourdanton Junior High is poor--not just our Hispanic students. We have a good mixture of students who are identified as economically disadvantaged, and that subgroup does as well as our White and Hispanic groups do when we take our TAKS test. Our economically disadvantaged students do have a more difficult time in school because of their home life. They don't have the support and structure at home that our more affluent students do.

Most of our Hispanic students are second and third generation students. I have very few Hispanic students who come to me directly from another country. This year I have one young man from Mexico; he is the first one to come from Mexico in a long time. He came here not speaking or understanding much English. He has a lot of peer support, but a lot of our Hispanic kids do not speak Spanish. But when they buddy him up with someone from a traditional home, they learn to speak it and understand it. Like me, I can understand Polish, but my wife can write it and speak it because her grandparents lived in her home, but I cannot. So I have very few Hispanic students who can speak Spanish fluently. I guess it is dying off in our area.

Mr. Rutkowski commented on ways they identify the needs of their students as well as the programs that they have in place to assist them. He stated the following:

Our community is close enough, and our teachers spend a lot of time talking to our students. About seven years ago, we talked about building relationships with students. As a campus, we understand that once you build those positive relationships with students, many good outcomes will result because of those relationships. We have also found that establishing strong relationships with students usually translates to great relationships with parents. Parents feel more welcomed here. I wouldn't say they feel totally welcomed because some of them don't like to come see the principal. But we try to work on building relationships with students and parents to ensure that if they need something, they will come to us.

This year we are a part of a grant program. It's called a Grant Right Now, and it is a co-op with Pleasanton, Poteet, and Tilden. We have a counselor on campus now who works with our elementary and junior high students and one who works with our high school students. That program has been something new that we haven't had before. My counselor does a good job working with the kids. She meets with the kids two or three times a week during their advisory period. We have MHMR which works closely with us, and we have another group that works with us too. We have some outside help on meeting the various needs of our students.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

As Mr. Rutkowski finished describing the various ways that they serve and meet the needs of their students, he then spoke of the extra-curricular activities on his campus and their role in student success.

We encourage everyone to get involved in something. We have a high enrollment in volleyball and football. We probably have around 65 percent of girls and boys in seventh and eighth grade who try out. When it comes to basketball, there is more running, so participation drops down to 30 percent tryouts. We have many kids involved in Science Club and the History Club. It costs one dollar to join, and the kids go on field trips, to the movies and other places. Our school competes in UIL academics, and that begins in January. We encourage all the kids to get involved in something like that. We probably have 30 to 40 percent of the kids from each grade level involved in UIL.

I am pleased with the level of participation in extra-curricular activities from our students. We are not having a hard time filling the teams. Our school usually has enough for two teams in each grade level while other schools have only enough for one team. Sometimes this causes a problem, but it is a good problem to have.

Mr. Rutkowski mentioned a problem that his school struggles with as well as his solution to the problem.

Homework is always an issue. We really have to work on kids to do their homework. We established an advisory committee where the kids go to their homeroom and get help for 45 minutes. Kids know we will not tolerate their not doing their homework. We have after-school tutorials, and if they choose not to go, they have to attend Zero Hall to get their homework done. So they have a choice to do their homework, go to tutorial, or go to Zero Hall. Formerly, we had only Zero Hall, but we had rather not punish them. We had rather change the

behavior than punish the behavior. We have 50 to 60 percent of our students electing to attend after school tutorials rather than Zero Hall. That shows us that they are making good decisions.

### **Parent Involvement**

I asked Mr. Rutkowski to discuss how he was able to get his parents engaged and involved in their students' education. He spoke at length on the topic:

We don't have a lot of parent involvement, but we have a lot of parent support. I guess this is because we build a trust with them. If I send out a letter and the kids don't get it home, I just call the parents and ask for permission to keep the kid for TAKS tutorials. As a faculty, we protect the trust that parents have in us, and we will not do anything to damage that trust with the community. I do not allow our teachers to have free days where students are not learning or being productive.

The taxpayers do not pay us to have free days; they expect us to work every day.

We don't have a lot of parent involvement, but when I call a parent, it is very rare that they tell me "No." I had many of these parents a generation or two ago, so they know me. We really don't have parent conflicts--maybe two or three a year at the most and sometimes none. It's a great place, and we have worked on keeping it that way.

We always try to make sure we have diverse parent representation; however, I don't know how important that is in accomplishing things of substance. When it comes down to decisions, most of the parents look at me and they ask, "Well, what's good for kids?" "You guys are doing a great job. Your school is recognized year after year, and my child is happy." It might be different

in schools that are so big and out of touch with their community, but what is different in Jourdanton is that the school is the most important and prideful thing in the community. I always tell teachers that what you say in school will be repeated. You can count on it. You have to make sure, because parents and the community are listening to what is happening at the school. They want this school to represent them. There is a lot of pride in what we do.

Relationships are so important when it comes to a school's success. Relationships are much more important than anyone's skin color. If I am a Hispanic parent and I know that you care about my kid, you are meeting his/her needs, and you are willing to address any concerns that I have as a parent, the rest does not matter.

I don't look at our students as Hispanic or Anglo. I don't see them that way; I just see them as kids. For me, it happened about seven years ago when I went to Capturing Kids Hearts, and that was a rekindling. I came back home and recreated that atmosphere for my teachers, and we learned the importance of first impressions and the importance of relationships and respect. I did a survey with them, and in the survey, I asked teachers to tell me the most important thing they needed from administration. They listed many things, and the number one thing that they wanted from administration was respect. Pretty interesting! So then we did the same thing with kids. We asked them to choose what was most important to them, and it was also respect. So now we do a pledge of respect to remind everyone about its importance. Our kids have been hearing the pledge of respect for the last seven or eight years.

**Instructional Staff**

After our discussion on parental involvement, I asked Mr. Rutkowski to discuss his expectations as well as his process of managing and communicating with his instructional staff. He elaborated on the following:

We do at least one book study per year. The one that helped me to get this whole thing started was the book, *Who Moved my Cheese?* We put a full day into that book, and from that point, my staff understood the importance of change. If you aren't willing to change and if what you are doing is not working, then why do it. This all became really clear to us about seven years ago. We were Recognized, Recognized, and then the next year we were Acceptable. This was my mistake because that was the year we first had social studies, and I did not put enough emphasis into that subject. After that year, the transition from TAAS to TAKS took place, and we received the rating of Recognized. We have been rated as a Recognized school ever since. Maybe this year we will be exemplary.

At the beginning of the year, we disaggregate data, and we pick it apart. We look at what works well and what doesn't. The teachers here write their own campus plan. The math team writes its own plans, and the other core subject teams write theirs. It doesn't come from me. I just read it and ask questions about it. We benchmark. We are benchmarking today on objective 4 for math, and we are benchmarking tomorrow for writing. I have trained my teachers very well in how to disaggregate the data.

They know how to look at each question and analyze what students were thinking when they answered questions. We have taught them how to look for the

distracters and how to analyze the questions. We always make it available to teachers so they can see it too. My vice principal is really good at it too. We break down the science test to see which questions will be asked each year in every objective. Analyzing our data is not very difficult because we have only 100 students.

Mr. Rutkowski spent a few moments addressing the importance and significance of having a staff that is willing to change the way they operate. The willingness of teachers to change their ways has made all the difference to student success.

My vice principal and I meet with every teacher every Monday. We schedule a 10 to 15 minute conference. The first thing they tell us is something good about their class. They share with us their student concerns as we review the hard copy of their grade book. We look at who is not doing their work or why so many kids are failing a particular assignment. I think it just makes them more accountable. This year I had one of the best in-service meetings because I asked a hard question that other principals do not ask. My question was this: "All of you know that you have some assignments that you give every year, and when you give those assignments, you know there will be a high percentage of students who don't pass. Why are you giving those assignments even though you know beforehand that it will result in a poor turnout. Either you have to change something on that assignment or quit giving that assignment."

The teacher who had the highest failure rate changed things, and now she is right along with everybody else. She cut her failing rate by 60 percent. Finally someone just had to ask the hard question. When you ask the staff why they are

giving that assignment and they don't know the reason, it is my job to question and advocate for the kids. So we have tried to stop doing things that are not successful and look at things differently. You have to ask the hard questions. You could have heard a pin drop. Then they were required to write several things that they are going to do differently. When we look at a teacher's grades or projects and we see the average grade of 55, we have to talk about that. We meet every week. We don't have long faculty meetings. If we have a faculty meeting, we are going to brag about something great happening or something very, very important. Otherwise I like to meet one on one. Because we are a small academic team, I can meet with all the sixth grade team members from 12:30 until 2:00. And I can meet with the seventh grade team on A days and the eighth grade team on B days. If I need a team meeting I do that; otherwise, I do it individually. Mr. Rutkowski elaborated on his hiring practices as well as what qualities he looks for in hiring teachers.

When it comes to hiring, I hire teachers who want to work. My teachers know that my expectation is for them to work hard every day that they are here. If they don't want to work, they won't be here for more than a year. When hiring new teachers, we look for a good work ethic that will contribute to the group. If I am looking for a seventh grade math teacher, I will have my two other math teachers meet with that person, and I will have the seventh grade team meet with that person as well. Not only do they need to convince me they can do the job, but they need to fit in with that team and our group because we have only 21 teachers, and we don't want to hire one who doesn't fit.

When interviewing teachers, I ask them about their relationships with students. I ask them about classroom management. I also ask them to describe what I will see when I walk into their classroom. They have to tell me how they deal with parents. The bottom line is that I can't be successful unless they are, and they can't be successful unless the kids are. Who are we going to take care of? We are going to take care of the kids because that is going to give them success and me success. They have to know that our kids are our first priority. At some campuses they may not abide by this philosophy, but at this school, every decision is made in the best interest of our students. If it's not good for kids, then why are we doing it? That took a while for people to understand. Decisions are much simpler when you can answer this question: How is it going to help kids? If it helps, then we do it; if it doesn't, then we find other solutions to the problem.

A great thing about my teaching staff is that they never leave. I have always said, if I get a teacher with a pair of kids, they will stay here forever. The way our campuses are set up, it is very convenient for teachers with school-aged children. Both our elementary and high school are within walking distance. We pay more now than we used to but still not as much as San Antonio. I have to say that we do a good job of creating an environment that people want to be a part of especially on our campus. We like to have a theme every year and they enjoy that. To be honest, teachers can't wait to have our first in-service each year because they are anxious to see what our theme is going to be. Having themes has made our campus much more fun.

This year our theme is fences. Good fences make good neighbors. If you have ever been a rancher or a farmer, you know you hate it when your neighbors' cattle go onto your place, but if you both work on your fences together things are good. Good fences make good neighbors. We don't want kids falling through the fences. The book that we used for this year's theme was *Falling through the Cracks*.

### **Monetary Resources**

I asked Mr. Rutkowski about his budget and where he preferred to spend discretionary funds. He answered:

I use discretionary funds on people and technology. This year I added an extra math person to help us with students who are weak in math. That extra math person is also my RTI person. With some of the stimulus funds that we received, we are buying some Promethean boards. We are getting those set up. We have purchased 10 boards, and that means that I will have 10 happy teachers. One thing about spending money is that we want it to be spent well. When deciding which teachers will get the ten boards, we looked at the teachers who we knew would use them in class. Those boards will make a difference only if they are used appropriately.

### **Culture of Success**

After briefly discussing monetary resources, I asked Mr. Rutkowski to elaborate on his school's culture of success. Mr. Rutkowski spoke of Jourdanton Pride and its meaning to the campus.

I think they take pride in being successful. The first thing the kids learn when they come to Jourdanton Junior High is we have a Jourdanton cry. I yell out “Jourdanton cry” and they yell out “Gotta have it”. That’s the first thing we teach the fifth graders at sixth grade orientation. We try to teach them that pride, and with that pride you do things right, not only when people are looking, but when people are not looking as well.

We are really enthusiastic about Jourdanton pride. As a matter of fact, Jourdanton Pride is painted on our gym floor. I think it is very important. If we are going to do it, we are going to do it well. I guess it comes from having a faculty that is very driven to be successful. We have been to academic UIL camps for years and years. If we are going to do it, we are going to win, and that’s what we tell students on the TAKS test. We want to be successful, and not only that, we also want to be commended.

This year I challenged our students and told them that we are going to be the first school in our area to be Exemplary by having a 100 percent passing rate. When AYP came out about seven years ago and it stated that everyone had to have 100 percent by 2003, people laughed, but now we are there. We have had 100 percent in writing two years in a row, we have had 100 percent in social studies, we have had 100 percent in eighth grade reading before, and we have had a number of 95 percent and 97 percent scores. All of sudden there is a belief that we can do it. All my staff believes that, my parents and students do too. If you aren’t getting what you need, we will find a time to make sure we make it happen,

either during the day or after school, but we will make sure that students get what they need.

I asked Mr. Rutkowski to specify special programs or things that make his school so successful. He commented:

It's my teacher's commitment. My teachers will give up every one of their conference periods to work with kids. We also have bus runs for the kids who have to stay for TAKS tutorials. We take away every excuse for why Johnny or Mary can't stay. We spoil our parents here as well because kids can ride the bus to school even if they live only two blocks away. This also helps with attendance.

We provide transportation for our students in everything that they do. If we want them to stay or if they need to stay for extra help, that is not a problem because we have a late bus to take them home. Having transportation makes my job much easier because all I have to say to parents is that I need their child to stay. The parents say "Okay, if you can get them home to me then you can have them." Having bus transportation is a real advantage.

We had a big thing on Quantum Learning. When you watch teachers ask a question and the kid doesn't answer, some teachers answer the question or they call on someone else. I tell my teachers they have to let the kids struggle a little bit. No kid here at Jourdanton Junior High can say "I don't know". They can't use those words. They can use "I need more information." or "I don't understand," to which the teacher will probably ask, "What part of the problem do you not understand?" We have tried to increase the wait time and for the teachers to change the way they talk to kids and how we instruct kids. We use new chants.

I hate when a teacher leaves me because all that training goes away. Fortunately I have a lot of teachers that have been with me for all 22 years, and some won't go work anywhere else. They are all ingrained in what we do. When someone new comes on they tell them that this is the way we do it here at Jourdanton. I always want those new people to tell me what they like and what we can improve on. I've been here 22 years, and I can be part of the problem. I always need fresh eyes to look at things, and I ask my new staff for their views or opinions on things that we do here. I want their perspective from their experiences in different schools. New teachers always say to me that they never had to work as hard as we do here. We do what we have to do. Remember *Who Move My Cheese*. We have the cheese on a string, and we are moving it in the direction that we need to go.

I asked Mr. Rutkowski if students of all races should be treated the same. He answered:

All students should be treated with respect. I don't know about treated the same because they all have their individual needs that have to be handled differently. They all need to be treated respectfully, and we should have high expectations for all of them. It doesn't matter if they are not behaving or if they are in a resource class.

### **Personal Experience**

I asked Mr. Rutkowski to share his personal experiences with Hispanic students as well as a student example of a Hispanic student who turned out to be a success. He gladly shared:

I have had many Hispanic friends throughout my life, and I see everyone just as I see myself. I just see them as regular people. My own children bring Hispanic friends over to our house. They have been to our weddings, and we have been to their weddings. I just see people as people, students as students, regardless of race.

An example of a Hispanic student who turned out to be a true success has to be one named Luz. She attended Jourdanton Junior High as did her whole family. Now she is a Spanish teacher for us. It doesn't get better for me than having a former student choose the profession that took care of them growing up. Luz is a great example for other students on our campus to follow.

I see former students all the time. They come by and visit. To me it shows that I succeeded in building those relationships that we talk about. Those students don't have to come back and visit with me, but they do, and that means a great deal to me and our staff who have been here as long as I have. I have kids who I haven't seen for 20 years and they ask me, "Do you remember me?" They tell me what company they work for. I think that, even though they were not the nicest kid in school, they know that I gave them respect, and they come back and say they are sorry that they had acted like a jerk. It is that respect and relationship piece and having high expectations for all students that is important. All students can learn. You hear people say that, but it is different to incorporate it.

Together, the teachers and I look at all students and their grades, and we ask what we are going to do to work with them and make them successful. I don't think any kid should fall in the cracks in my small school. When I don't get a 100

percent on the TAKS test, I am not happy. We make a big deal about 100 percent. For us, it starts with the principal and the expectation that all kids can pass. When I first came here, I probably had two or three Hispanic teachers; now 50 percent of my teachers are Hispanic. In fact my special education teacher was also one of my students. Now she frequently comes to my office. She tells me that she feels awkward in my office because she never came in here when she was a student. Even though I still see her as a kid, she is now all grown up. Being here this long has been nice.

When the parents come who are my former students, it really helps me because there is a level of trust already in play. Because I have been here for a long time, they trust me with their children and they know we are going to work for their best interest. They tell their kids that I will not tolerate their not doing their work. They are not surprised.

Students here also know that I don't tolerate misbehavior. In Jourdanton they demand good behavior in the classroom, and on top of that they have a strict dress code. I don't think that we can be tough enough. We get beat up on dress code some, but not so much as on behavior. Sometimes the kids don't want to come here because it is strict, but that is what is expected. I was only asked one question on my interview for principal when I went before the school board. They asked me if I could be mean. At the time I didn't know why I got the job, but I soon learned. I was hired because of a special kid in resource who had previously attacked the principal. I was hired to deal with him. They wanted someone to come in and deal with that student so urgently that I was interviewed

at 2 o'clock and hired by 6:30. Though it was not funny then, I smile about it now.

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing our conversation, I asked Mr. Rutkowski to offer some advice on ways other principals could close their achievement gap. He shared this story.

Many year ago, I called a faculty meeting and told my staff that, if our Anglos were performing at the level that our Hispanic students were at the time, the community would be breaking down our doors to get us. Because the majority of our students are Hispanic, it so happens that their parents shy away from seeing us. Our Hispanic families aren't breaking down our doors, and they should have been. In order to close the gap, we had to do more, and we have to also provide more opportunities for all students to be successful. We can't have that gap anymore. When I came here 22 years ago, I told my teachers that I expected them to do more re-teaching and re-testing. Everyone told me that I was lowering the standards.

Based on my own experience, I was the worst junior high student there was. I did not want to do the work. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work; it was because I was lazy. I don't allow kids to be lazy in the way that I was. So that is why I do not allow students to have zeroes. I push and push and push. When we re-teach and re-test everybody, should we consider that the lowering of standards? Heck no, if it's important for them to know math and you don't make them know it, they just get beat up all along. We are focused on re-teach and re-test, not

allowing zeros, and making them do their work. That's a hard job for me because it takes 50 percent of my time, but it makes a difference.

### **Last Thought**

As our conversation came to a close, Mr. Rutkowski offered one last thought on his school's success in science.

I really did a number on my science teachers two years ago. Science has been one of the areas on TAKS that has really caught our attention. We received our test results after the first TAKS test, and I disaggregated the data and presented it to the whole staff. In my presentation to them, I gave them the projected rating for each subject. Reading was at exemplary, math was at recognized, and science would be trailing with only a 61 percent passing rate. After my presentation, I told them that I did not have a solution.

At that time we were going through Quantum Learning, and I went to all the in-service meetings with the teachers. I wanted to be there. I wanted them to see that it's important for me to be there. All the presenters would acknowledge my presence by stating that they were not accustomed to having principals attending with their teachers. As I was sitting there, I was thinking about science during the Quantum Learning discussion. I was participating, and I decided to change up everything that was in science and turn it upside down and see what happens. It has been like that ever since.

I went back to my staff and told them that, if we continue doing what we've done, at best we will have 61 percent. I can't live with that, and they couldn't either. So all I did was make them more accountable. We teach

everything by objectives here, and we teach objectives 1 through 5, and we benchmark it. The difference is that some people who benchmark don't do anything with the results, and there are kids who don't understand it. We start working with those kids in September for those objectives. I have labs set up in which my eighth grade science teacher doesn't even teach the objectives in the lab. It made my sixth and seventh grade teachers more accountable for the TAKS scores too. The bottom line was that everybody becomes a part of the pie.

So we teach objective 5 separately in 12 weeks, and that's a long time. Then we teach objectives 1 through 4. My eighth grade science teacher is responsible for teaching objectives 1 through 5 during the first six weeks. After that, we go back, tune up, and start fixing things. We are now at 88%, which is huge. This would not have happened if my teachers were not willing to change. We moved everyone's "cheese" and received a big payoff for doing so.

## **Chapter X**

### **High Expectations for All Kids**

I began my conversation with Mr. Booth by asking him how he came to be in education and how he became a school principal. He gladly shared his story:

I have been in education for 23 years. I started after I retired from the military. I put in 24 years in the military. Part of my stay in the military was instructing individuals on how to do certain things. I enjoyed that aspect of it. When I got out of the military, I decided that I was going to go into education. At that time, I still didn't know what in education I wanted to do. Then, as my educational process unfolded, we had to do some in-school teaching, and I fell in love with special education. I started my career in special education. This is my ninth year as principal here.

### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I asked Mr. Booth to describe his students' characteristics and his approach to working with economically disadvantaged students. Mr. Booth began by describing the type of students on campus as well as the means he used to meet their basic need for breakfast and lunch.

Most of my kids are neighborhood kids. They come and go. I may have them for two years, and then they disappear for six months and come back again. These kids do not have families who work out in the fields; they are not migrant students. Instead, their parents move due to certain circumstances, but they

always end up back here in Natalia. When a kid withdraws from my school, I tell my office staff to keep that record because I know they will be back. Most of my kids are here because of family. They grew up here or have grandparents in the area.

Seventy-eight percent of our students are on free and reduced lunch. Sometimes our students' pride gets in the way of common sense. They are embarrassed, and they don't go through the cafeteria lines to get their free food. In addressing their needs, we make sure that those kids take advantage of the free breakfast and lunch. So instead of leaving it up to them as to whether or not they go through line, I insist that all of our students go through it.

When I mandated that all kids eat breakfast in our cafeteria, some parents objected to that. My response to them has been that we don't make them eat; they just have to go through the line, and if they have already had breakfast at home or if they do not want the breakfast, they can put it on the free table. Then other kids will take advantage of the free table. So we put enough food out there so that everybody can have an opportunity. So the kids won't feel that they are the only ones going through the line. Everyone goes through the line, and that way we don't know who has a free or reduced meal. It is a little different for lunch. We tried to get free lunch, but for some reason, we were not able to do that. I don't know why we did not qualify, but everyone is getting a free breakfast. Everyone goes through the line for lunch, but not everyone has to pick up a lunch.

Mr. Booth mentioned ways that his school works to meet the social needs of students on his campus.

We have a school counselor. Every year we do a twelve-step program on success for students. We talk about bullying, money problems, sibling problems and divorced parents. We talk about all those things, and we do it in an open environment. We do it in a horseshoe so everyone gets a chance to speak. We try to let them know that it is a serious process; therefore, there is no horse play. We realize the importance of going through that process. Kids are going to say something funny, crazy, or off color and not stay on the subject area. But we know that there are some issues that kids want to talk about. So we have been fortunate in that most of the kids here take an active role, and we are able to make some progress.

At the beginning of the year, I require our teachers to participate in a bus tour of the district. We do that in case we have new teachers, or just to get teachers to refocus on their responsibility to teach students. The best thing about this is that some of the things teachers see help them realize that our kids come to school with a whole lot of different baggage. If you go down the street, you may see a half million dollar home, and if you go another direction, you may see a house and wonder how it is still standing. Those conditions are evident within my school district. We do not cater to one part of the population; we do our best to educate them all.

The majority of my teachers come from San Antonio, and the majority of my teachers have been here for approximately seven years. We have many teachers from San Antonio, and I would like to believe that it is because of me and Ms. Valdez, my assistant principal. We open up the campus and let them

know that we don't run the campus; they run the campus. I am just here to facilitate what they need. There is cost for that; my kids must be learning. They have that relationship with me as long as my kids are producing. If my kids don't produce then I have to stand in and provide more directives to them which takes away some of that freedom. They like that freedom, so they work hard to keep the freedom.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

I asked Mr. Booth to discuss extra-curricular activities that they offer. He spoke of the interest his campus and community have for extra-curricular activities. He also mentioned his reading program and how he has increased the reading rate of students through incentives.

We have football and basketball, and we have volleyball for girls. At the high school level, we have baseball as well. We have a lot of community involvement. We have NYO (Natalia Youth Organization) that handles the baseball, and tackle football that we have offered for the last two years. We have basketball and volleyball for the little kids all the way up. So there is a lot of interest in the extra-curricular activities inside and outside of school. I would like to expand it, but it depends upon our having the teacher willing to give up that kind of time to be here that late.

We also have an AVID club, a geography club, and we are trying to get a science and math club right now. For a long time, we have been trying to get a reading club. We have certain students who like to read, and we have others that don't like to read. They think it's a chore, not a pleasure. There are some that

absolutely love to read. We give away laptops for AR points based on the number of points you earn. Last year, we gave away 14, and we were disappointed that we didn't have more kids who earned a laptop. This year's budget concerns me because those kids saw all the activities last year, and we have a lot of kids reading at a higher rate this year. I don't know how I am going to find the money to support it, but we will get them. Reading is so important, and when you think about it, no teacher is worried about those kids who read a lot. They will do well on the reading TAKS and the writing TAKS. We may worry a little about math and science, but for the reading and writing TAKS, those kids will breeze through that because they have a good foundation.

### **Parent Involvement**

I asked Mr. Booth to elaborate on ways he engages his students' parents as well as how he gets them involved in their students' education. He spoke of the importance of involving parents and the struggles that his school has when it comes to parent involvement. He offered the following:

We have a PTO, but the parents don't participate regularly. I try not to be super critical. We would love for the parents to be involved, but we have many parents who live in single family homes. Or if both parents are close by, they both may be working. We try to accommodate our working parents by scheduling our meetings later so that they can get off of work and attend our meetings, but it seldom works. Often I will have my staff here waiting for parents who do not show up. We kind of get it from both sides of the fence. It hasn't been as successful as it needs to be, especially this year, but we continue to try to build on

what we have for future years. Without parental involvement, our school system is going to suffer. There are high expectations in place for teachers and school administrators, and without the much needed parental support, those high expectations that we have will be difficult to maintain.

For the last four years, we were fortunate to have a group of kids who truly believed in education and truly respected me and my staff. You have to turn the tides with the kids. You have to be honest with them. They have to know how important they are. They have to know that, if they don't perform, we won't be here. The bottom line is, if you want us here, then you need to perform. If you don't want us here, then continue doing what you are doing, and I guarantee they will find someone else to do what we are doing. I am fortunate that kids really care about us, and they pull it together. We went from an unsuccessful school to a recognized school, and for the last couple of years, we have been exemplary.

This year really frightens me. I have one group of kids who are dedicated to academic excellence, and I have two groups who are something that eighth graders are not. They are skimming on top of the water, and they don't sink their feet into anything. They are extremely capable, but I just don't see the level of commitment that I've seen in the past years. It's pretty frightening from our perspective. I tell the kids that being a Blue-Ribbon school is a lifetime achievement; because in each one of their lifetimes, this may happen only once. Some people go through a lifetime and never achieve what these students could have achieved.

What I want them to do is take their achievements as a starting block. Instead of building on what they have accomplished, most of them took it as an ending block. They have relaxed, and now they are sitting back with their feet up on the desk taking a deep breath. I spend a lot of my time telling them that this is where the work begins. I tell them that they have only completed the preliminaries, and the hard work is still ahead. We are a very successful school, and if they want to stay at the top, they have to work much harder. Even after my conversations with our students, I still haven't seen that commitment from my kids that I need, and it has been disheartening and a little disappointing.

Mr. Booth gave an example of how he deals with parents who are unhappy with his teachers or parents who try to blame teachers for students' lack of success.

Sometimes parents will come in and blame the teachers based on the information that kids take home. But when they come into my office and we sit down and talk, the parents look at me and say, "Okay Mr. Booth, what is the problem?" I then turn to the kid and tell them that their mom wants to know the problem. Parents would then look at me and say that they brought their kids in so that I could tell them the problem. I will tell them that I don't have a problem; he has a problem, so it is now time for him to explain to us, you and me, why he isn't successful. Once I make that shift, parents are taken aback, and we both turn and look at the kid. Then they both start looking at me again, and I tell them that I don't have the answers. I am not sitting in the class, and I'm not doing the instruction. Sometimes, when you put that back on the kid and they have to explain to me and their mom what the problem is, they try to put it off on the

teacher; and I will say that it is fine. I then tell the mom that this is what I am going to do this afternoon. I will have a conference with the child and the teacher, and I'm going to tell the teacher what the student is saying.

At the end of the day, I bring the student and teacher together and say to the teacher the following: "What I understand is that you are not providing the extra effort that this kid needs to be successful. He has asked for help several times and for whatever reason, you are not in a position to help him, and that is the reason he is failing, So I need to know what we can do. Sometimes the teachers say they don't know what he is talking about. They say they have done about all they can to try to keep the student for tutoring. My teachers understand that, if I put stuff on their plate, I am not there to criticize or to chop their heads off. They realize that I want dialogue, and if a kid is not up to speed, I want them to elaborate on the reason he is not up to speed. These conferences with the student, the teacher, and the principal have been pretty successful so far, especially because the teachers trust me. Teachers realize that the firing squad is not coming, and that all I want from them is honest feedback.

For the most part, the community truly understands how successful this campus really is. We send out invitations for their part to be involved in the various on-campus committees. We often put the parents who complain the most on one of the teams. We say to them that we hear what they're saying, and we like their ideas. Therefore, we'd like for them to come and be a part of our team. Though they never show up, I tell them that I am going to go ahead and put their name on the committee because I really want them to be part of what is going on.

I tell them that I like their enthusiasm and energy. In spite of all my praise, they don't show up. There just isn't a magic bullet for that, and I wish I could find one because I could then sell it to all the area schools.

The apathy of kids today is a little concerning. When I was growing up, I had to work for what I got. I am talking about the time that I was in junior high. I worked for what I got, and didn't get what I didn't deserve. Kids don't work for anything today. Everything is given to them. For example, we are giving away iPods and Fiesta Texas tickets, but that doesn't motivate them to come to school because they already have those things. Our students have I-Phones, and if they don't, their phones are a lot better than what I could give them. During open house, which brings my best participation, I told the parents that we are in the same boat when it comes to our own children. We love our kids to death, and we will give them anything in the world, but I also realize that that is our problem. We are giving our kids too much, and when we give our kids too much, they don't appreciate what they have.

I then ask parents to raise their cell phones. I ask them, "How many of you have cell phones that are better than your kids' phones. I ask them to keep their hands up. I think we had two parents keep their phones up. Basically, all the kids have expensive phones that they didn't earn and do not need. I just have this little cheap phone, and if it rings I am lucky. But these kids have everything-- different colors and all kinds of stuff. We are creating a society of kids in which everything is given to them. They don't know the ethics of hard work, and everybody gets a trophy whether they win first place or not. It doesn't matter how

hard you work or how well you do. Well, I say it does matter. Students need to show commitment, zeal, and drive to be the best that they can be. When you negate that, then you have kids thinking that all they have to do is show up; they are going to get a trophy anyway. I do not believe that is how it should be.

### **Instructional Staff**

After talking at length about parental involvement, I asked Mr. Booth to describe his staff as well as how he prefers to communicate with them. He stated the following:

In describing my staff, I would say that they are committed. There are many schools that they pass by in order to get to here. Many of them come from San Antonio to where we are now. Besides driving further, they are also giving up money. I definitely say that they are committed. I think they like where they are teaching, and they like their fellow teachers. The camaraderie that is here has that small-town, small-school atmosphere. They know all the kids by name, so they don't have to check the grade book to see if kids are absent; they automatically know. Being small definitely has its advantages. We do preach family atmosphere, and we all look out for one another. If teachers need someone to step in while someone goes out to the restroom or someplace, they offer to do that for them. Many things never come into my office, and I know things happen, because sometimes I'll ask a teacher, "What are you doing out here; where is your class?" They may tell me that someone is covering their class. So that is one example of the way we take care of each other here.

I communicate with my teachers through team meetings. We also go to each curriculum meeting once a week, and in addition, I leave it up to them. If

they have some concerns, they are more than welcome to visit with me at their convenience. For the most part, teachers communicate with me via e-mail or they can just drop in and talk. Sometimes they catch me in the middle of trying to eat, but they know that they can come in and talk to me as long as they don't mind my listening while I chew.

Mr. Booth took a moment to discuss his expectations for staff development and ways he plans to save money in future staff development projects.

In regard to staff development, that has been left up to each individual's desire based on what they would like to do or something in which they would like to enhance their particular skills. When there is an area of concern or something new that I want them to be up to speed on, then I will send them to obtain that information. I am a little bit harder this year on staff development because we are actively involved in AVID. Next month, we are getting together with all the AVID campuses around the San Antonio area. They are all coming to our campus. We are going to see what kind of resources they have and what kind of training they provide and see how we can infuse ourselves into that process. Our hope is to have one of those trainings presentations here on our campus. By doing so, it will allow us access into all the other AVID trainings which you know is a great way to start saving money. In addition to saving money, it will provide more training opportunities for our campus. From now on, I plan to have all my staff developments through AVID. I probably won't do any from outside. Every now and then, I may send somebody to region 20, but outside of that, our trainings will be done through AVID.

Mr. Booth mentioned a couple of items which he considers to be important factors in the success of his school. He stated:

We are fortunate that we are able to give each one of our teachers two periods off. By giving teachers two periods off, it takes some creative scheduling to get all the kids in the appropriate classes. Though our class sizes increased, it did not matter to our teachers because they prefer a much larger class and two periods off rather than small classes and only one period off. A good thing about this schedule is that we are able to have all our content teachers off during the same period for planning purposes.

For the other off period, they are in grade level blocks where each grade level is off at the same time. During grade level off periods, all students in that grade have to be scheduled into electives or classes such as PE, band, art, or something like that. Sometimes those classes spike up in numbers, but my teachers embrace that so that they can have those common planning periods. Those common planning periods have made it more convenient for teachers who can talk about different things that they want to do. They also get to do their vertical teaming. Each grade level can help out the next. In vertical team meetings, they often orchestrate the curriculum by making sure it is aligned and in sync with the overall school goal of content mastery.

Another thing that has helped us quite a bit on TAKS is the fact that we require everyone to teach material for the next TAKS test whether it is their subject or not. For example, whatever subject is going to be tested next is taught for a whole week before the testing day. If it is math, my math person who is in

charge of eighth grade gives teachers what he wants kids to refocus on. Those kids who have problems with their social studies teacher will be sent to the math class to switch kids with the ones who are doing fine. That has worked well, and it has kept our scores up. It has required extra energy from the kids because they do get tired. When they are tired, argumentative, or start losing their focus, we tell them that they will not be as argumentative when they get their TAKS scores back, because in eighth grade, if they don't pass, they are not going to ninth grade.

### **Monetary Resources**

I asked Mr. Booth to discuss where he prefers to spend his monetary resources.

He stated:

We spend a lot of money on technology. We just upgraded most of our computer labs, and we are trying to get a laptop cart with at least 25 laptops on it. Our hope is to get a laptop cart in every classroom. Two years ago, we got one for every language arts teacher, and now everyone else wants one. Because teachers really want this, we are trying to pool our funds to make it happen. Sometimes every campus in the district pools their money, and we accumulate \$35,000. This is not extra money; it is a fund that we all put together for a campus to use. We alternate years, and next year it will be my turn for those funds.

We have after-school tutoring for all students. For the last five years, I have had mandatory after school tutorials for all kids who failed a core subject. This is not an option, and if they don't show up the first time, I go get them. From that point on, I place them in the classroom, and they have to stay there unless they become a discipline problem. If that is the case, then I call the parents and

they are required to have a conference with me and the conversation goes something like this: "If you are resigned to the fact that your child is going to be retained, then he/she no longer has to come to tutorials. Now if you want your child to be promoted he/she needs to come to tutorials. However, I am not going to go and get him/her any more. I am not going to fight with him/her because it has become a behavior problem, and I am not going to sacrifice 15 students for one. I am not going to do that." Most of the time, parents have a little conversation with their child, or they put the responsibility on me and ask me to take the paddle and spank him/her. I tell them that I am not going to do that even though legally I still can. I really don't relish the paddle. Usually we come to a consensus, and students come to tutorials with a much better attitude after our parent-student-principal conference.

### **Culture of Success**

After addressing where he spends his discretionary funds, Mr. Booth elaborated on his school's culture of success.

School culture is very important not only for me but for the staff. I think that, if we didn't have the family atmosphere, and if they couldn't trust my assistant principal or me, we would have a different rating. My administrative staff and I are here to facilitate their learning and to change some aspects of their teaching to keep them an active member of my staff. I have high expectations, and if you are not producing because you don't have the skills, it is incumbent on me to get you those skills, and I'm going to invest the time, energy, and effort to have someone teach you those skills. However, once I have taught you those skills, and if you're

still not producing, then you're not going to work for me. I am patient with teachers who grow and grow properly, but I am not patient with teachers who have had the opportunities for growth who stay stagnant.

The culture has had its ups and downs since I have taken over as principal. When I got here, I had a lot of key individuals in key spots who were coaches. I don't have anything against coaches, but their loyalty and mentality was directed to athletics. I tell them all to look at their paycheck and ask what part of it they want to save. If you have to give up one, are you going to give up your coaching for the \$2500 or \$3000 that you make? Then by all means you can save that, but you can't work for me. Therefore, the \$36,000 or whatever that you make from teaching is no longer going to be on there. So are you able to live on \$3000? Some of them make that transition; some of them don't, so I had to weed some of those individuals out. It wasn't that they weren't good coaches, but I don't hire coaches, I hire teachers.

When we get kids into the cafeteria, we explain school culture to them. We see the pride in their eyes, but I don't see the pride pushing them to a higher level of expectations or educational excellence. I just don't see their accomplishment as a blue-ribbon school, and I don't see being academically successful for the last three years as a motivating factor for them to stay where they are. I think a lot of them are complacent and sit back and say, "We have arrived," but I keep telling them that they haven't made it yet. I tell them that they have finished only their warm-up lap; now it is time for the race. That is the most difficult part for me right now. For the last three years, we had that carrot out

there, and we kept saying to students, you need to get here and they got there.

There was a lot of hard work, dedication and motivation to get to where we are today and now our problem is how we can sustain that.

I asked Mr. Booth if students of all races should be treated the same. He responded:

Students of all races should absolutely be treated the same. Sometimes I get opportunities to talk about education, and I am not a big proponent of education today. When I say I am not a big proponent of education, I am not a big proponent of fairness in education. My sense of vacation is to ride around the state of Texas looking at different schools, and my wife says that this is no vacation. I tell her that going out and visiting other schools is fun for me. I see schools with swimming pools, two gyms, and the entrance to their school is better than my entire school. Schools have nice track and fields, tennis courts, and many educational opportunities for their kids. I cannot see how this is being fair.

I see kids with laptops at other campuses which the schools have given them. Everybody has one, and there is no equity when those schools are compared to mine. All of these kids still have to compete for the same slots in college. They still have to compete for the same jobs. They take the same test that we do. Their test is no more difficult than the ones that we take, and yet they expect me to have the same results as all of the elite schools. It is just not fair, and I don't care what they say. I say that until the state changes how they distribute funds to schools, it is never going to be fair. Families, organizations, and communities should not be allowed to put more money into education unless

they give it to the state, and the state distributes it to everybody equally. Until money is distributed evenly, you will have a system that is not fair to the students in our public schools.

### **Personal Experience**

I asked Mr. Booth to share his personal experience with Hispanic students. He offered the following:

My experience with Hispanic students has been no different from other minorities, especially Blacks. I can walk that path because I have lived that path. What I hate is for the state to pigeonhole certain students. They will do this by saying you poor Hispanic kids or you poor Black kids, you need special treatment and you need to be categorized as Hispanic or Black kids who are achieving or not achieving.

I say as an administrator, I don't look at students by the color of their skin; my expectations are high for each of them regardless of race. Now I understand that some of them have a different situation. The starting line that some kids have is further back. Some students have more active parents in their lives. They may have opportunities to read to someone, or they have access to private tutoring or computers. The starting line is staggered, but who cares because they all have to learn the same thing.

Kids who are Hispanic or African-American should be given equal access to everything, and they should be expected to learn just like everybody else.

When we say, "Oh the system is not fair; therefore, you don't have to achieve a higher grade or as high a grade as this other kid," then we are setting up kids for

failure. There are no food stamps on campus. They are all expected to learn, and I don't care where they come from.

I tell them that, if you don't come from a one million or a half million dollar home, it is much more important for you to get what you can when you are here. If you ever aspire to be in one of those homes, the work starts now. Those kids already living in those homes are going to be living there. Their parents have already made it for them and, unless the parents kick them out of the house or disown them for something, they are already there. So if you want to get there, you need to get an education because no one is going to give you a house like that.

### **Student Example**

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked Mr. Booth to give an example of a Hispanic student who he considered to be a true success. After thinking for a minute, he offered the following:

I have so many examples of kids who have been a true success. I had some problems with a parent and one kid a few years back when I started Spanish classes for our students. The parent came in and asked, "Why are you making my kid learn Spanish? Do you speak Spanish?" I said, "No ma'am, I don't speak Spanish, but it is an absolutely gorgeous language, and I absolutely love it. I wish I could speak it, but my tongue is anti-Spanish. It won't roll like it is supposed to."

I told her that, if I were to see someone butchering my culture the way the Hispanic culture is being butchered, I would be offended. I love your culture, I

love your food, and I love everything about it, and it is yours. The Black culture is a little bit diluted, and as far as the roots going back, they get a little fuzzy. We know where the Hispanic culture came from, and we know and have seen how it grows. I told her, “I apologize if I offended you, but for us to throw it away, and I say ‘us’ because my wife is Hispanic, that is criminal. Therefore I expect your children to learn Spanish whether you teach it to them or I have them learn it here at school. I want you to just stop and think about what you are saying. Is your culture not important to you? Are economic opportunities no longer important for your child?” She asked, “What do you mean?” I said, “Ma’am you see that I-35 corridor? There are so much more opportunities for individuals who can speak both languages. So why are you deciding that Spanish is not important for this child?”

I guess that she saw my sincerity. This kid had been here for awhile, and he graduated last year. He also got a Hispanic scholarship. Here they were in my office so quick to dismiss their language; yet in the end, they reaped the benefits of being Hispanic. I tell parents all the time that there are many scholarship opportunities for Hispanic students. Many times, kids don't get them because they can't speak Spanish or they can't write it.

When I was a principal at the elementary school, the first thing that I started was a Spanish class. I took a paraprofessional and assigned her to teach Spanish. At the time, it was just a class that we rotated kids through, but now I think they have expanded it and it is a mandatory class. I have mandatory

Spanish here for grades six, seven, and eight. Spanish for our kids has been a very rewarding thing.

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

After talking about his personal experiences with Hispanic students as well as his student example, I asked Mr. Booth to give advice to other principals on how to close the achievement gap. He stated:

In order to close the achievement gap as administrators or teachers, we need to say one thing. All kids can learn; we expect all kids to learn, and they all need to be treated the same. As we are providing educational opportunities to them, we need to hold their feet to the fire. Now, we can back off on some of them for a while because they haven't become accustomed to the heat, but get their behinds up there so that they get used to the heat, because the temperature is not going down. If anything, it is going to rise up. So we need to stop making excuses for them for being failures, or I guarantee they are going to start using the same excuses to maintain their status quo. I say you need to get their behind in there and fight for them to learn every bit of information possible. Don't be making excuses for kids; they have enough for themselves.

Mr. Booth also addressed the underlying issues with the achievement gap and the need for equity in funding while also setting obvious student expectations through testing.

I also think there is an inequity in funding issue. Without everyone having the same opportunities to be successful in life, we are going to continue to have this problem. I understand how it came about, and I understand the need for it, but I

think that the need has outlived its usefulness or purpose. If we truly trust in educators today, and we are doing the best with what we have, then I think at some point in time, we need to give them (educators) the resources to continue dealing with what we have. The state of Texas and other states need to get off that political bandwagon that they are on.

Also, if the state wants to test kids in academics, they should do so with grades three through twelve in all four core subjects. In addition, there should not be a break between grade levels. Teach them all and test them all in every grade level starting in third grade. The state also needs to adopt a textbook for each core area that everyone in the state is going to use. It will be a lot easier to write the TEKS and curriculum for everybody. If the state is so confident in what they think the kids need to learn, then they should decide on one book rather than five book options so that the same thing from the same book will be taught. By making a decision on a textbook, students will know what is expected of them from the state. Students will rise to that expectation. In fact, whatever your expectations are for kids, they will live up to them, for better or worse. Kids need to struggle in all that they learn to truly be successful in reaching their true potential. If they don't struggle, if there is no sweat equity involved, even if they are successful in their task, they will never value it because they weren't invested in it.

## **Chapter XI**

### **Relationships Matter**

The name in this chapter is fictional as the principal chose to me anonymous. I began my conversation with Ms. River by asking her how she came to be in education and how she became a school principal. She gladly shared this story:

I've been in education now 28 years. Most of my career I have spent at the elementary level. I have been at the middle school level for the last four years. I became a principal because I saw the impact that they have on teachers. When I was teaching in Laredo, I had a really bad principal. She caused a lot of damage, and school morale was horrible. At that point, I thought school administration would be something that I would enjoy doing. So after about fifteen years of teaching, I got my mid-management certificate. I taught elementary grades three through five. At every school where I have taught, they have been economically disadvantaged or Title schools.

#### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

In the next part of our conversation, I asked Ms. River to describe her student population characteristics as well as her approach in dealing with those characteristics.

She commented:

I have a huge mix of kids. I have a very affluent neighborhood across the street and next door. Of course, that affluent neighborhood brings us only a small

percentage of our students. We have a lot of apartment kids. Our student turnover rate on this campus is about 40 percent, and a lot of that is attributed to our students who live in area apartments. A total of 58 percent of our students are considered economically disadvantaged.

Most of our economically disadvantaged students live with one parent or one guardian. We also have many students who are staying with someone who has been given parental status through powers of attorney. Our family liaison works with these students and families. If kids don't have the right clothes, they come in here, and they give us what they are wearing and we let them have the uniform. If we find out that a student is in need of something, our family liaison will try to fill that need. Also, we have an Optimist Club that provides glasses to needy students. If teachers see that a student may have vision problems, they notify our nurse, and we go from there.

For our students who qualify, we have free breakfast and lunch. We also have a family liaison. When we became a Title I school two years ago, we were given the position of a family liaison. I was able to work with the family liaison at my previous school because we were a Title I campus. My family liaison is invaluable. She gets to know our families and their needs. Once she identifies family needs, she works to have them met. She will personally invite to workshops certain parents who she knows will benefit them. As needed, she will do home visits, provide services, and offer resources for families in need. She is always fundraising so that she has resources for all our disadvantaged youth. She has been most invaluable with our monolingual Spanish speaking parents because

they tend to be uncomfortable coming up to the school. She has also been very good about getting with them and meeting them at home when needed. We call any student who is economically disadvantaged a 360 child because there are concerns about them other than academics. When I was getting my doctorate, I drove to College Station with a high school principal, and we talked about these kids who don't have that connection with school except through fine arts or athletics. I soon came to realize how important those activities are to our students.

Many of our economically disadvantaged students participate in either fine arts or athletics. We try to have some extra instruments available to students who can't afford them. We provide transportation for students who stay after school for athletics, tutoring, or any extra-curricular activity. We utilize Title I funds to pay for this transportation. Though our after school tutoring is optional, when we need to have the student here, we call the parent and say that we would really like them to come. This usually gets us the permission to keep their child for tutoring.

Last year we missed being Recognized or Exemplary by three students in one group population. Because of that, we felt that we needed to focus our attention on a select group of students for after school tutoring. By being selective and making sure that our students with the most needs are being serviced, we feel that we will be Recognized if not Exemplary in the coming years.

**Parent Involvement**

I asked Ms. River to discuss parental involvement in her school. Ms. River explained parental involvement and its importance to students' academic success this way:

Parental involvement is very important in a student's education. We have a very strong PTA. Through our PTA, I am always encouraging parents to come on campus. For example, we just had a blue ribbon celebration on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. We cooked burgers and hotdogs, and we served almost 900 people. It was in the evening, and our auditorium was so full that we only had standing room available. We had the orchestra here to perform for our parents. People were saying that they had never seen this kind of turnout before. The reason there were so many parents here was that we had been telling them over and over about this event. Our entire campus was involved in the process of putting this event together. We had the art kids make decorations for the cafeteria. The cafeteria executive director in charge of food services came out and facilitated the dinner, and I paid to have the cafeteria ladies out here serving the food. Our teachers came out and served as escorts. We all wore our blue ribbon t-shirts and, as it turned out, it was a phenomenal evening.

Our family liaison does a monthly nutrition class with parents. This year I asked her to provide more technology training. Many of the things that we do and much of the information that we have on students can be accessed online by parents. As useful as that information is, it doesn't do our parents any good if they don't know how to access it. Through our family liaison, many of our

parents have access to Internet service. Our family liaison has computers that parents can use to access The Internet. This coming Thursday, she is having a technology training session for parents. She has scheduled our campus and district computer techs to come out and teach the class. In this class, they will discuss Internet safety, online programs for students, and our online programs that give them information about their kids. In addition, I present a little section on cyber bullying. Our goal is to have parents learn how to set up and use a computer.

We notify our parents of upcoming trainings through letters that we send, or the district will generate an automated phone call. In some instances, we send out mass e-mail messages. Whenever we want our parents to receive the information, I do my best to send the message out at least three ways: letter, e-mail, and phone call. This usually gets us great results.

Customer service is extremely important to us. Our front office staff members always greet parents with a welcoming smile. We have three ladies who work in the front office area who are bilingual which facilitates our communication with parents who walk in on a daily basis. I preach to my front office staff all the time about the importance of customer service with a smile. It makes a world of difference when dealing with parents. The bottom line is that I want the parents and the students to feel welcome. Occasionally I have walked into a school and felt like I was interrupting them. I don't like that feeling. I want parents to come in and feel welcomed. We are here for them. We always offer them coffee, water, or soda.

**Instructional Staff**

After discussing parental involvement, I asked Ms. River to elaborate on how she manages her instructional staff. She offered the following:

When I first came here, there was very little communication. In my career, I have found that 97 percent of problems come from lack of communication. To facilitate my communication with my instructional staff, I started meeting with my leadership team once a week, and that includes the counselors, family liaison, special education campus coordinator, my academic dean, and my assistant principals. We meet every week without fail.

Then, because I value my teachers' time, I did away with faculty meetings that were being held every Wednesday. I schedule our faculty meetings once a month. Our faculty meetings are on the first Wednesday of the month, department meetings are on the second Wednesday, campus committees meet on the third Wednesday and on the fourth Wednesday, and the teachers get together and disaggregate data. Last year, on Tuesdays, I alternated meeting with team leaders and department chairs. Then a few teachers came to me and told me that they thought we were meeting too much. They asked if we could move our meetings to once a month, and I told them that, if they thought it would be better, then we would meet only once a month. It has been like that ever since.

I heard Schmoker speak and, shortly after, I developed something similar to what he was talking about. *Data Now* is the sheet that I developed, and I have asked teachers to pair up with their similar subject matter and grade level colleagues. They are to meet twice every six weeks, and I want them to identify

an objective that the kids are struggling with. I then want them to tell me the reason that kids are struggling with that objective. I also want them to talk about things they use that will help students.

I think teaching is too isolated, so I identified opportunities for teachers to collaborate with one another and share solid teaching strategies. Once teachers design their strategies, they create a goal and a common assessment that they will use to measure whether or not they have accomplished their goal. I have to remind teachers that I don't want it to be extra work. I want it to fit right in with their scope and sequence. I tell them to use a test they already have and to pinpoint those questions that target the specific objective that they are working on. The most important part in the process is the reflection piece. After they get their results, they compare them with each other; and if one did incredibly better than the other, then they can talk about it. I want dialogue. What did you do that I didn't do? I want them to collaborate with one another as much as possible.

In meeting the needs of her students, Ms. River hires additional teachers where they are needed most. She recently did this in math to lower the class sizes. She explained the following:

We do all different kinds of things to meet our students' needs academically. To begin with, I hired two people for small group reading and math. They do what we call our math and reading workshop. These two ladies get the kids who haven't passed the TAKS test. They have very small groups, and I have told the counselors that I don't want more than fourteen students in their class.

I also hired an extra math teacher for eighth grade. I have adjusted the schedule so that we could have four eighth grade classes. Because they have to pass the test, their class sizes are small, and for a couple of periods, each teacher has a blocked class for 90 minutes. I just felt that math classes needed to be small, and some of our kids needed more time to go in-depth. Now with our financial situation, I don't know if I can continue that. For now, small math classes are a priority for our campus.

The district develops benchmarks that the whole district gives, and they are done throughout the school year in all subjects. We get those results back, and we can review how we have done compared with other schools. We also take that data and break it down by ethnicity, economically disadvantaged, or whatever we choose. The new teachers have meetings once each month to review their data. I have found that new teachers in a big group will not ask questions. They don't want to risk looking stupid, so they stay quiet.

Ms. River talked about how she meets the needs of her new teachers as well as how she deals with teachers who are not producing student academic growth.

The district also has monthly new teacher training. I don't have any new teachers this year, which is really unusual. Besides the monthly meetings within the campus and the district for new teachers, I also allow them to have a couple of days in which they can go and visit other classrooms or other schools. I initiate this with them once I know what their need is, and I identify a teacher who is an expert in that area of need.

I have had to really document some teachers, and some teachers are no longer with us. When teachers are not producing the results that our kids deserve, I do not hesitate to put them on a growth plan. When teachers go on a growth plan, we have the conversation about trust and work ethics. I've really tried to build trust so teachers know that I'm not out to get them. I want them to know that I am here to help in any way that I can. When teachers are successful, students are successful. Through the whole growth plan process, I like to work collaboratively with them. I don't like to say to them, "Here it is, and this is what I want you to do; so go do it." I have found that, if we work together and dialogue about the issues, then we get better results in the end.

As we are talking right now, I'm developing a conversation in my mind that I plan to have with a math teacher who has been here for a long time. She has a high failure rate. She's a good teacher, but it is getting out of hand with kids who are not being successful in her class. It is not an easy conversation to have, but for the sake of students, those conversations are necessary.

I then asked Ms. River how she prefers to communicate with her staff. She stated:

I prefer to meet with my teachers face to face on things that matter. For the majority of the procedural information that I need to pass along, I typically send them an e-mail instead of wasting their time in a formal meeting. Much of the information that I send to my teachers goes through department chairs and team leaders depending on the topic. There are various ways to communicate with the staff, and I am usually pretty good about utilizing them all.

One thing that I like to do personally is to take the pulse of the school. During November and April, teachers usually go through a rough period because of the incoming holiday or testing season. To measure the pulse of my campus, I personally go to every team during their meetings and touch base with them. If we find that morale is low for whatever reasons, we do our best to provide some activity that will reduce their stress a bit.

The principal who was here before me was chosen to open a new school, and her leadership style was totally different from mine. She gave a lot of in-services, and she presented a lot of information. I prefer collaboration and the development of relationships. When I first came here, she took me on a tour of the school, and when we passed by kids, she never greeted them. She did not interact with anyone. I remember thinking how odd it would be for me to be that way. At my previous school, the kids knew me and would come give me hugs. Here at this school, kids were looking at me with a facial expression of, “Who are you lady, and why are you telling me what to do?” If that was tough on me, it was definitely much tougher on teachers.

During my first few meetings with the department chairs, they just sat there. I wanted input, and instead, I received nothing. Teachers were expressionless and did not talk at all. It was like pulling teeth, because they didn't trust me at that point. I decided that year that my goal was going to be to develop trust and better communication within the staff and the campus administration. We have come a long way, and I have alienated a couple of people because I don't do things their way. It is unfortunate that I have alienated a few people

along the way, because they are not accustomed to the way I run things. It really doesn't matter to me, because I want trust, I want collaboration, and I want relationships. By putting those three things together, I think the climate of the school has really changed.

### **Programs of Success**

Ms. River spoke about their National Blue Ribbon award and how much that has meant to her campus. Ms. River discussed student presentations that she gives as well as how she coaches her teachers to investigate ways in which they can help students learn.

Our campus is very proud of our National Blue Ribbon award. During the TAKS presentation that I give, I show students how we compare with other schools. In a power point, I review our achievements and restate our campus goals so that they know what our goals are. Whenever a new student enrolls in our school, I introduce myself and tell them that this is the best school they will ever attend. As a matter of fact, I tell that to students all the time. Just the other day, I overheard a conversation between two kids. One of them was withdrawing, and his friend said, "Oh, man, it's too bad you have to leave." The other kid responded by saying that he didn't like this school anyway, to which his friend said, "What do you mean? This is the best school you're ever going to have." I found it interesting that the student was repeating what I tell them all the time.

We have an AVID program that targets students who wouldn't typically go to college, but who have the ability. As it turns out, the majority of those students are Hispanic. When it comes to Hispanic students being successful, I don't think you need to be aware of their background as much as you need to be

aware of concerns that come along with the student. You need to get to know your kids and their specific needs. When I first got here, teachers weren't allowed to check out their students' cumulative folders. Coming from an elementary school, I believe that you don't know what these kids need if you have not checked to see where they are coming from. I had an in-service to show teachers how to read the cumulative folder. Students are all different with different needs, and it is important to look at all of their information when making decisions regarding their education.

### **Monetary Resources**

I then asked Ms. River about her budget and where she prefers to spend any discretionary funds. She commented:

We spend a lot of our money on technology. With our stimulus money, we purchased smart boards for all of our math teachers. We also have wireless Internet on campus along with many laptops. In our science wing, we have computers for all of our students. In my view, technology has to be a part of our every day instruction. I want teachers to use the Internet in as many effective ways as possible.

I had the opportunity to hear Tony Wagner speak on the global achievement gap, and that has inspired me to focus on turning our students into problem solvers. To start with, students must learn to utilize the Internet as a tool and to be able to distinguish between good and bad resources. In my efforts, I have tried to show teachers little clips of where we are going with technology so that they are aware of what is to come. Currently, I am looking for a way to

incorporate cell phones into the classroom. I know that many schools are fighting cell phones, but they are here to stay, and we need to use those cell phones as tools rather than punishment. I am really excited about the possibility of cell phones in the classroom. One thing that is frustrating to me is that students who go to the computer lab sometimes find that the computers are not functioning. All of our teachers post their lesson plans online so that they can pull up one another's lessons plans to see what is going on in other classrooms.

### **Culture of Success**

I asked Ms. River to elaborate on her school's culture of success. She spoke of relationships and their value in reaching students.

Our campus mission is to promote a collaborative, trusting environment. Trust is huge, and I have talked to teachers about that relationship piece which students need to have in order to be successful. At NASSP last year, I heard a controversial speaker share his story. The speaker had been one of those struggling kids who hated school. He had spent time in jail, but eventually, he turned his life around, and now he talks to teachers and principals about working with unmotivated kids. According to him, it is all about the relationships.

When I first came here, there was a great deal of controversy. It was the students against teachers and the teachers against the administration. Now I tell everyone including students that I have an open-door policy. I make sure that kids know that I will not disrespect them, and in turn, I do not want them to be disrespect me. I have found that, if you treat students with respect, and we're talking about even the hard core ones, they will respond to you in a positive

manner. As long as they know you are being real with them, they will be real with you. When students know that you are not talking down to them, they will perform beautifully for you.

When I first came here, all I did for those last months of school was to observe teachers. I did not implement any changes. A problem area for us at that time was math. So the following year, after getting to know many of our teachers through observations, I moved an English teacher to a math position. I moved him because he was really good at building relationships with students. I had never seen him teach math, but because of his skill in building relationships, I knew that he would do an excellent job for us in the math department. That has proven to be a wise move as he has been phenomenal in teaching our students math.

### **Personal Experience**

I asked Ms. River to share her personal experiences with Hispanic students. After a short pause, she offered the following.

Most of my teaching experience has been in South Texas where many of our students came straight from Mexico. When I was teaching, our Hispanic population at the school was at 98 percent. Everything around our campus was written in Spanish. I remember visiting the teachers' lounge and listening to everyone speak strictly in Spanish. This was where I learned quite a bit of the Spanish language. Students were always testing me, and they quickly learned that I knew what they were saying. I recall students saying horrible things about new teachers who did not understand Spanish. I found that students who attend border

schools can basically get by without knowing English. There was no incentive for students to learn English. As you move away from the border schools, there is much more incentive for the same type of students to learn English, and because of that incentive, students progress towards English at a much faster pace.

I found when working with students in South Texas that their reading comprehension was lower than their math skills. I often had to explain things in simple terms, and a lot of it was because of their lack of experience. In South Texas, Lake Casa Blanca is the only body of water they have ever seen, and when I described an ocean, they had trouble understanding it. I don't think that lack of understanding was a Hispanic issue as much as it was an economic background issue. I believe that many of the problems that students have can be traced to their economic status. I believe that economic status is so important that we look at that first when reviewing our data and creating our target groups.

### **Student Example**

I then asked Ms. River to share an example of a Hispanic student who she worked with that was a success. She shared the following:

I had this student who had a very troubled home life. At one point, he and his brothers were all charged with a felony aggravated assault charge. The two brothers were taken from the mother. This little boy had to go off for a year, and the mother asked if I would grant school choice for him to come here. When he was released from lock-up, he came here for two years. He was emotionally disturbed and had many social issues. This student had seen his brother bury cats alive and kill many other animals.

We worked with him, and I placed him with a team that I knew would meet his needs. It was really hard because some of the team members were saying he shouldn't be here. Not only should he not be here, but he was influencing other kids in a bad way. While there were teachers who complained, others on the team acknowledged that he was making progress and doing well in some areas. I would often ask teachers whom I trusted if they thought he belonged here, and they would tell me he did. In their view, we were doing what was best for him. So he was here through eighth grade without ever going to an alternative setting. We were able to work with him, and we understood his circumstances. Working with this student just goes to show that we can make a difference in students' lives if we keep things in perspective. If we are to make a difference, we need to educate students one at a time. You cannot try to do it all at once; you have to take them one at a time, and in the end, you will see the impact you have made in students' individual lives.

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing my conversation with Ms. River, I asked her to give other administrators some advice on closing the achievement gap. She offered the following:

I think administrators need to first take into account their teachers and their ability to build relationships. I have found that the teachers who create strong relationships with their students have a higher rate of success in teaching their students. In this school, I believe the best thing that I ever did was to put those teachers in the right places with the right kids. So the first thing is for administrators to make sure that they are hiring teachers who care about students.

The second part of closing the gap is to engage kids through extra-curricular activities such as sports and fine arts. Kids will have much more pride in their school when they are engaged in something that they like. That is what has happened here that has allowed us to close our achievement gap. It was a matter of pride. Students here know that we care about them. Many of our students are engaged in extra-curricular activities, and that means that they are in contact with a teacher or coach who is monitoring their grades and behavior.

Just before our TAKS test, I tell my students that they have worked hard all year, and now is their time to show up and shine. I tell them that they don't need to be nervous. I think some of the problems with testing have to do with things other than a student's knowledge of the content. I have students who have told me that they rushed through a test after seeing someone finish before they were finished. They rushed through the test because they did not want to be the last ones. As principals, we can correct this problem by placing students in appropriate test settings. When creating TAKS testing schedules, principals should consider students' needs as well as the placement of students with teachers whom students respect. By taking time to create a good testing schedule, students will perform better, which makes the extra time spent on scheduling worth the while.

## **Chapter XII**

### **Educate Students as if They are Your Own**

I began my conversation with Mrs. Munoz by asking how she came to be in education and how she became a school principal. She shared the following:

I have been in education for 26 years, and all of that time I have spent here in Weslaco ISD. When I started my career, I was an elementary teacher. I did that for 10 years. After that, I was an instructional facilitator for the district for five years before becoming a middle school principal. I have been a middle school principal for 10 years and counting.

#### **Leadership**

After briefly stating her principal experience, Mrs. Munoz talked at length about leadership and its impact on getting things done. She offered the following:

There have not been many changes in my time here other than principals and superintendent changes. The demographics of kids have not changed. We have been very fortunate since 1995 to have great leadership in the superintendent's position. It starts from the top, and we have had great leadership for the last decade. We have unconditional support from our superintendent, which makes all the difference.

I think that our school district is very advanced compared to other school districts. We are very fortunate to have a wonderful superintendent who meets with us on a weekly basis and makes it a point to visit our campuses once a week.

Our superintendent really sets the tone for visibility. He always tells his principals that, if the superintendent makes it a point to visit every campus and their classrooms, then principals better be visiting their own classrooms. There are no excuses for not visiting classrooms. He never wants to hear that we are not visible, and he doesn't care for excuses when it comes to lack of visibility by his administrative team. I think that, because we as principals are very visible in our schools, our entire district is successful. It is all about leadership.

Mrs. Munoz went on to discuss the importance of having the right teachers in the classroom. She noted that, if teachers are not getting the job done, then it is up to the principals to fix the problem. She continued:

Another important statement that comes from our superintendent is something that I believe and share with my teachers as well. When I walk into a classroom and I am observing my teachers, the first question that I ask myself is whether or not I would want my son or daughter in this class. If the answer is "yes" then I know I have a good teacher. If the answer is "no" then I know that I need to do something about it.

The doing something about it means I have to do what I have to do to fix the problem or get rid of the teacher. You have to treat each girl and boy as if they were your own. Unfortunately, there are many teachers who slip through the cracks, and they just get shuffled around. This is not acceptable to me. A principal needs to be the bad guy and not renew the contract. Somebody has to do the work and do the documentation. So, our basic philosophy here is that we

want teachers in all of our classrooms who would be good enough for our own children.

I have a concern with coaches who teach an academic subject but who are paid an athletic stipend for coaching a sport. Many coaches don't believe that I support them. Here is the reason. I believe that, if you are a full-time coach, then it is okay for you to be off campus at track meets and football games, etc. I don't mind. But if you are a math, science, English, or reading teacher, then it is not okay for you to take days off for sports. You are too important to miss instructional days. If math pays more of your salary, then math takes precedence over coaching. If you are a full-time PE coach, I don't mind that you are not on campus. I value athletics and what it does for students, but that doesn't mean that coaches get to do what they want because they coach.

An important thing about our superintendent is that he backs us up when it is time to non-renew somebody for not getting the job done. And that is a good thing because there would be no point in doing all the paperwork and documentation if you were not going to be supported by your leadership. In this district, it doesn't matter who you know. If you are not good for kids, you are not good for this district. Our superintendent tells us time and time again that we are the school principals, and we are in charge. We are in control of what happens at our schools, and if we need support, he is there to back us up. I will back you up in any decision that you make. However he will also tell us that, if a decision goes bad, we must take full responsibility for it. At the point where the decision goes wrong, we are on our own.

### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I asked Mrs. Munoz to discuss how she manages to meet the needs of her students who are economically disadvantaged. She offered the following:

I have been a principal in two different middle schools, and both schools are at two different ends of the economic status spectrum. This is one of the reasons that I love working on this campus which is tougher because of the many obstacles that our students have. My vision is to change the way the community views our school.

There is a big difference between the other middle school and this one. At the other campus, students come from the homes of parents who are doctors, lawyers, and prominent city officials. Most of those students live in houses that are around golf courses or gated communities. That area is much more affluent. That is the campus where everyone wants to go because it has more to offer. When they moved me to this campus, I felt as though I was being moved to a ghetto. My thoughts were that they were moving me with all those gangster kids who were into a lot of drugs. I must admit that at first, I was very hesitant.

When I arrived here, I quickly realized that these kids were just kids, ordinary kids. The drugs and problems that I had heard of in this school were no different from the ones that were in the other school. The big difference was that in this school, things were more publicized whereas in the other school, they were covered up because the parents were able to sweep things under the rug through their connections. Parents at the other school knew board members. They knew the right people and how to take care of their problem. Over there, parents were

in denial and couldn't believe that it was their child involved in drugs or whatever.

As a matter of fact, I just talked to a friend of mine who has a daughter over at that other middle school, and she was telling me that she was not aware of the raves that were going on. Raves are all night parties where students often get themselves into trouble with alcohol or drugs. Well, this mom was telling me that her daughter goes to these raves but that she doesn't do anything that would get her in trouble. I expressed my concerns to my friend and questioned her decision to allow her daughter to go to these raves whether or not she is doing anything. I told her that our kids should not be put in situations where they might be influenced to make the wrong decision.

Mrs. Munoz shared her philosophy that students are able to achieve anything they set their minds to if they believe in themselves. She stated:

A kid is a kid. Though students who come from less affluent areas have more obstacles, they can still achieve the many things that students from affluent neighborhoods can achieve. Yes, some of our students have parents in jail, some don't have fathers at home, some live with grandparents, and some are passed along from grandparent to uncle to aunt. But my philosophy, and I believe this to be true, is that children can accomplish anything to they set their minds to.

Everything that I have on my walls, as you can see, deals with my philosophy that in order for students to achieve their dreams, they must first believe that it is possible.

I have the word “believe” posted all over my office for this reason. I truly believe that all kids can learn. I truly believe that these kids can do anything that they put their minds to. Yes, many of them have difficult obstacles to overcome, but those obstacles should not be used as an excuse for academic failure. I tell my teachers all the time that we may be the only positive influences that these kids have.

After sharing her philosophy on student achievement, Mrs. Munoz talked about her students and the satisfaction that she gets from their success.

Because our school has more negative publicity in our community than the other middle school, I spend much of my time defending our students. They have difficult lives, and I do whatever I can to bring them the resources that they need to be successful. In the end, most of our students just need someone to believe in them. With all the parents with whom I talk, there isn't a one who doesn't care about their child. They all care about their kids. They are sending us their best. They all care for them in their own way. Some of our parents never had a positive role model, and if they never had a positive role model, how can they be expected to be one for their child? We try to educate our parents about being involved in their children's education. We work with them and reassure them that we believe in their child and that together we can make a difference in their child's life.

I get great satisfaction from seeing kids be successful. People think that administrators make a lot of money, but if you take into account all the extra things that we have to do from an hourly perspective, we don't make much money at all. As a matter of fact, I think that we are getting the short end of the stick.

Anyway, we are not here to make money. We are here to make a difference in the lives of kids whom we serve. There's no greater reward for me than when kids comes up to me and tell me that they have passed TAKS. I always congratulate them and assure them that I always believed that they would make it. A good thing that we do for our kids is our incentive program. We do a lot of incentives. We celebrate achievements often, and that goes back to our superintendent who supports us in that area. As an example, our superintendent just gave us money so that we could buy Christmas gifts for each of our kids. He gave us nine dollars per student which is quite a bit of money when you consider that he did this district wide.

### **Instructional Staff**

As we started our conversation on instructional staff, Mrs. Munoz commented on her administrative staff and how it was when they first started at this school. She stated the following:

I would like for you to meet my administrative staff because we work as a team. I cannot take any credit myself. All of us work on this. We have wonderful rapport with one another. Together, we laugh, vent, and most importantly, we bounce ideas off each other. We also trust one another. When we meet about confidential things, we know that they will remain confidential. I have noted that in some schools, there is no trust between principals and assistant principals, but here, we don't worry about that. We do have that trust factor.

I have been with this administrative team for five years. One of my assistant principals worked with me at the other school for one year. The other

assistant principal I work with is a curriculum specialist, and I have known him for a very long time. When I was assigned to this campus, I was allowed to bring one person, so I brought that person. And then I hired a great facilitator. So when I came here, I was able to bring my secretary and my front office staff, and that made all the difference in transitioning from one school to the next.

At first it was difficult for teachers because we came in as a unit. Change is hard for teachers, and they did not like our coming into their domain. The teachers here didn't know us and didn't trust us. So our first conversation with teachers was about getting past the nonsense of us being their administrators. Whether they liked it or not, we are here, and we have a job to do. That was the message during our first meeting with the staff. I also reminded them that we had district employee transfer request forms for those who did not wish to remain on this campus, and that they were more than welcome to apply. However, we assured them that, while they are here, we will work together as a team.

Regardless of how they felt about us, I told them that they would respect us. We have a job to do and a vision to implement. And pretty soon, we all jelled together. And the ones who did not want to be here left at the end of the year. When those teachers left, it gave us an opportunity to hire people whom we wanted, and that worked out for the best. We look for people who are go-getters and for people who believe that all students can learn. We want people who believe that all students--special education, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students--can be successful in the classroom. We stay away from teachers who look at the kids and start with low expectations.

After talking at length about her administrative staff and what qualities she looks for in teachers, Mrs. Munoz described her school's schedule and her vision for the campus.

We have grade levels six, seven, and eight, and we have three teams. This was a change from the other school where there were no teams. A true middle school is based on teams. We had the team concept at Central, but many times they didn't do it because of scheduling. I thought that was pretty sad because the schedule should not dictate what is best for kids. If something is best for kids, then we make it work. At first, a lot of teachers were upset because we had reading and math blocked, and science and social studies only had 45 minutes. And this was understandable because 45 minutes is not enough time for teachers to present a good lesson. With block scheduling in mind, we got together and brainstormed. Teachers wanted to see their students every day, and we wanted teams. Teachers also wanted a department planning time, so we worked it out and made it happen.

Our schedule now has in it a planning period for each department every day of the week. In addition to that, they also meet in teams once a week after school. During these team meetings, they schedule parent conferences, call parents, or discuss students who they share. Each administrator is assigned a different area, and we are all responsible for different aspects of each department. The department planning time has worked really well for us. Each of our administrators meets with his or her department on a weekly basis. During these meetings, we discuss different things in regards to curriculum release tests, benchmarks, and other assessment data.

Mrs. Munoz then talked about ways they disaggregate data and what they do with students who are identified as needing additional help.

We have a computer system that allows our teachers to get to know their kids.

This computer system breaks down each class for teachers with all the vital information that they need to know about their students. This directly impacts student achievement, because teachers know each of their students and their areas of concern; and by knowing that, they are better prepared to serve them. This software breaks down past student testing information as well all relevant background information. Background information includes economic status, special programs, etc. Teachers need to know the demographics of their kids, and this system allows them to have that information in a very understandable format.

Once we have identified student needs, we offer those students additional tutoring in extended day. We have extended day every day. Each day of the week pertains to a different subject. We have it all scheduled so that students and parents know when and what tutoring is taking place. We also provide a late bus for those kids who do not have transportation. We do not waste any time in starting our extended day. We start at the end of September. I have never understood why schools start extended day later in the year when they already know which kids need the help. Of course, this all goes back to getting the support from our administrative personnel. They make sure that our funding for extended day is in place so that we can start it at our convenience.

Just recently, Dr. Rivera provided us with two accelerated tutors. These tutors are to help us with those troubled kids. Every school in our district has

accelerated tutors. So we have accelerated tutors, extended day, Saturday school, and interventions that we provide throughout the day. Every Saturday, there is an administrator on duty. We rotate our duty every two weeks. Right now, we have science camps going on. We also provide social studies camps which will be taking place in January. We also have a Read 180 computer lab running for language arts.

We have two teachers addressing the needs of all our LEP students. They specifically target those LEP students who have failed TAKS for the last two years. These kids who failed TAKS do not get all their electives. If they have failed TAKS and are at high risk of failing, they still get the reading block, but we take away one elective. During that elective, they have a class that addresses their specific needs and which will provide them a better opportunity to be successful.

Mrs. Munoz mentioned that they provide snacks for their students during their after school programs and that they give students many incentives to participate in their extended day and Saturday school. Here are her words:

For our after school program, we provide snacks and drinks such as Little Debbie's and Capri Suns. It is not a big meal, but something that will get them through tutoring until they get home for dinner. Anytime we have students outside of school hours, we feed them. On Saturdays, we provide students with pizza and breakfast. For breakfast, we provide them with sausage and biscuit along with Capri Suns. In addition, for coming to Saturday tutorials, students get a five dollar moviegoer card. This is used at the local theater. We use state comp ed. money to purchase these incentives.

The tough part in purchasing these incentives is that we have to project how many students we will have in attendance throughout each Saturday of the year. We have to know ahead of time so that we can allot the appropriate amount of funds. We are currently facing a problem that is a good problem to have. We have more than the anticipated number of students attending Saturday school. So because we are limited in our funds, we have decided to transition from the movie passes to pizza parties. Parents are very supportive of our Saturday school, and it helps that we have buses to go pick students up and drop them off. Parents will often call and say that the bus did not pick up their child, and in those instances, we send a bus back to get them.

Mrs. Munoz went on to discuss how she communicates and manages her teachers and staff. She stated:

Our system includes the principal, assistant principal, and facilitators. Then we have department heads and team leaders. We do have faculty meetings, but they are scheduled ahead of time so that teachers can make appropriate arrangements. Last year, we scheduled faculty meetings, and when something important came up, that caused a lot of problems for teachers because they were unable to make last minute arrangements to attend. This year, we did away with that and decided to make sure that all our faculty meetings were scheduled in advance so that there are no excuses. I try to stay away from faculty meetings because there's so much going on after school. We have extended day, athletics, clubs, and other organizations that meet after school; so I stay away from unnecessary faculty

meetings. Now we have everything scheduled, and when I have a faculty meeting scheduled, the sponsors and coaches know to cancel the practice.

Teachers know that I have an open-door policy, and they come in here and talk to me about different things that they are thinking about. I feel that I am very approachable. Some teachers choose not to come to me, but that is because they choose not to do so. In addition to my open-door policy, teachers can contact me via e-mail or by phone. It doesn't matter to me. I am here to ensure that they have what they need in order to make our students successful.

During the next part of our conversation, Mrs. Munoz elaborated on how she communicates with new teachers and especially those teachers who she has placed on growth plans.

Sometimes I call teachers into my office to talk to them about various things taking place in our school. I do this to get a feel for what the campus mood is. In addition, every six weeks, I bring in my teachers who are struggling, and we have a conversation. Most of my struggling teachers already know that they are walking a thin line and that they may not have their contract renewed at the end of the year. This is true for the new teachers as well as the ones I have placed on professional growth plans. I have already talked with those teachers, so they have been told that there is a very good chance that, if they don't shape up and improve in the specific areas that I have addressed with them, they will not be back next year. Even though these teachers are in trouble, I am still there to help them, and I am very much engaged in the process and hopeful that they will get better and

improve their performance. I do tell them up front that I am not here to get them. I am here to help. We are all on the same team.

I meet with my struggling teachers at least once each six weeks. By meeting with them every six weeks, they know well in advance what I need from them in order for them to be back next school year. I also have the support of our superintendent which makes it much easier to follow through on things that I tell my teachers and which are on their growth plans. If they are in the classroom hurting kids and not progressing, then I don't want them.

An example of a teacher who I did not renew happened to be a theater arts teacher. He was upset about not being renewed. I found him sleeping during class among many other issues. Because I had worked with him and had given him many opportunities to be successful, I was through with him. He was working through the alternative education program, and someone came by to speak with to me. I told his guidance counselor that I was not going to renew the teacher's contract. I also told his counselor that it was up to her to decide whether or not she would keep the teacher in the program. I further stated to the counselor that, if she decided to keep the teacher knowing what I had told her, then shame on her because it is not on my conscience, it is on hers. I did what was best for kids. Now the question was whether or not she was going to do what was best for kids. The lady then looked at me disapprovingly. But all I did was state the truth. The biggest issue that I have with all of this is that this teacher may end up in another district hurting other kids simply because no one stepped up to the plate and did what they needed to do to make sure that he wasn't in the classroom.

Some of the teachers don't have their hearts in education. If their hearts are not in it, then they don't belong, especially if they are hurting kids. I hold teachers accountable as I hold myself accountable. If I have a teacher who is not successful but they are trying, then I am responsible for teaching him/her what they need to know to be successful in the classroom. I need to provide them with training or send them to Region I for staff development that will assist them in becoming better teachers. I need to go into the classroom and assist them as much as I can through observations and constructive criticism.

I have to do a lot of work before I decide on whether or not to renew a teacher's contract. I put myself out there. I am not expecting them to just figure everything out on their own. I put not only myself but my entire administrative staff behind them. If at that point they don't progress, then we need to move on. There are many cases in which teachers respond to the assistance and advice we give them, and they are still with us today. That is our goal with every teacher who we put on a growth plan. The bottom line is that we want to make everyone successful. Some teachers struggle during that first year and need that support to get them through.

### **Parent Involvement**

I asked Mrs. Munoz to elaborate on how she communicates with her students' parents as well as the services they provide for parents in order to assist their students. She offered the following:

For parent communication, we send fliers, e-mails, and postings on the Internet.

The district does have a system that calls out to every parent. The district utilizes

that system primarily for emergencies such as hurricanes, swine flu updates, and other important information.

We employ a social worker who provides services to parents. Formerly, we had a parent involvement position, but when we had to reduce spending, that position went away. What we have now is a social worker. All middle schools in our district have a social worker. The social worker goes out and makes sure the kids have uniforms, glasses, and the basic necessities at home. If students do not have the essentials, she tries to find the resources to get those essentials to them. Recently, she gave a lot of clothes to a student whose brother and mother were burned to death in a fire accident. As it turned out, it was arson. The boyfriend of an older sister set the house on fire after she broke up with him. He used to live there and, when the mother kicked him out, he got mad and burned the house. The mother was able to save the little boy who is an elementary student, but she died of smoke inhalation.

Our social worker is funded through campus funds, and she is a school employee. She is an awesome person. She also works with families who have kids who are emotionally disturbed. For example, we have students who cut classes, and she makes sure that someone is keeping up with them. She also makes sure that those kids who do not have Medicaid or Medicare are provided health and social services as needed. She is basically a resource for families. She is also the lady that who gets our parents involved. She keeps them informed and engages them when we have activities coming up. For example, all those

pumpkins that are outside were done by parents, and our social worker was the one who organized all of it.

### **Extra-curricular Activities**

As Mrs. Munoz finished describing some of the services that her social workers provide for their students, I asked her to discuss the importance of extra-curricular activities on her campus. She stated:

We encourage extra-curricular activities because we understand that it is important for students to get engaged in some sort of after school activity. We have student council, National Junior Honor Society, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, theater arts and UIL just to name a few organizations. In addition to those organizations, we have band, athletics, and choir.

We also have a library club, and they get to do all kinds of activities with our excellent librarian. One example of things we did was to work with kids to create a t-shirt that says, WE ARE WILD ABOUT READING. This is based on the movie *Where the Wild Things Are*. We gave all the students in the library club the book, and we read it to them every day simply because many of them still have limited English. After we finished reading the book, we took those kids to see the movie. All of the students enjoyed seeing it on the screen.

Another book our librarian bought and read to students was *New Moon*. For this book study, we had 45 kids and 10 teachers, and after the book they went to the movie. We went to the first showings, but we did it Oscar Style. For this event, we had a caterer come in and set up our library with a bunch of snacks. We had nachos, guacamole, Swedish meatballs, little sandwiches and that type of

snacks for them. What was neat about this is that some of these kids had never experienced that type of thing. I had to explain what a Swedish meatball is made of. Students weren't familiar with it because they're accustomed to the rice and beans.

The kids absolutely enjoyed the experience. They also had to dress up in a shirt and tie. Many of the kids had never had Sizzlers. It was a pretty neat experience for them. It was amazing how at first they weren't trying the new food because they didn't really know what it was, but after they tried it, they asked if they could go back for seconds. So the library club creates an opportunity to expose students to something they would not normally have. Our other organizations do similar things that expose them to experiences outside of school.

Our National Junior Honor Society club is currently engaged in a Toys-for-Tots drive. They are going to have a fundraising basketball game against the marines. Their job is to do something good for someone else, and this is what they chose for their good cause. Basically, we have over 160 kids in clubs and organizations, and we make the most of those clubs by providing experiences for kids that they normally wouldn't have.

Most of our kids who are not engaged in these clubs are the ones who are involved in sports. Many of our kids who are low socioeconomic choose to participate in athletics. So we feel pretty confident that the majority of our kids are engaged in something that is meaningful and productive. Our coaches engage kids all the time, and we look for them to participate in athletics so that we can ensure that we have someone checking in on them and their grades on a consistent

basis. The big problem that we have right now is that, when football season is over, those kids' grades drop. But we are very good at recruiting kids because we know that keeping them involved in something in which they are interested, we save many of them.

### **Monetary Resources**

I asked Mrs. Munoz about her budget and where she prefers to spend her discretionary funds. She stated:

Money for technology is available. We try to stay hi-tech by providing labs, smart boards, etc. Now we are trying to get movie maker. Our librarian is working with her kids in that endeavor. We are utilizing GT funds for that. I spend any extra money that we have on TAKS teachers. The TAKS teacher is a certified teacher. We want to hire teachers who want to become administrators. Most of our TAKS teachers leave us to become assistant principals. This position allows future administrators to shine.

When choosing the TAKS teachers, we look at resumes, and we observe them as much as possible. The majority of teachers who we are looking to hire are teachers who we already know because we have worked with them in the past. I look for someone who has high integrity, who is a team player, someone who is not out there for themselves, and a person who has high initiative and a willingness to be successful. Above all, the teacher must believe in and care about kids. Through the application process, the administrative team reviews applicants very well. And in the end, we pick two awesome teachers who become

our extra set of eyes. These teachers also establish great relationships with kids. They know how to teach kids and reach them at all levels.

We had one TAKS teacher who would drive kids into a frenzy. He was dynamic, and when he played basketball with the kids at a student-faculty game, he would do the roll out on the gym floor and kids would go crazy. He would then tell students that they could do anything they wanted to do in life, and the kids would go crazy. It was awesome to see. He would run around and give high fives; he even motivated me. He is now an assistant principal at the high school. This year, we did not get a TAKS teacher due to lack of funds, but Dr. Rivera did give us a science teacher. Whenever we need additional personnel, Dr. Rivera does all that he can to get us that help. All we need to do is justify our position, show him the data to support it, and he will make it happen.

### **Culture of Success**

I asked Mrs. Munoz to discuss her school's culture of success and how it has changed since she came there. Mrs. Munoz talked about her administrative team being proactive in keeping her staff and students engaged in class through incentives.

The culture has changed since I took over. We are much more proactive. We spoil our teachers with different things whether it is gifts, food, or other little things. We cater breakfast at the beginning of the year and also during the workday around Christmas. Some Wednesdays, we provide them with lunch. Today we are organizing their jackets that we will give them for the holidays. We give teachers all the resources they need for students to be successful in their classroom. In the beginning of the year, every teacher gets 200 dollars to spend

on their classroom. New teachers get 300 dollars. They can also use that money to buy incentives for the kids.

We provide the kids with snacks that they like. Also, every department has a jean day. If kids want to wear jeans, they pay 2 dollars. All the money that is collected goes toward buying more incentives. We do over exaggerate the incentives for kids. We believe that it helps them stay engaged and focused in the classroom. We just awarded incentives for perfect attendance. We gave out cupcakes and raffled a DVD player, IPOD, and one Nintendo DS. And for the next two days, all the honor roll students are going to be taken to Peter Piper Pizza. We celebrate often and try to do a variety of things. We are having a competition for the upcoming Mock TAKS testing. The competition is between grade levels. Whoever scores the highest in each of the four core tests will get to wear whatever they want for one week. It will be a week of free dress for students and staff. This is an incentive that does not cost me anything but will result in students being more engaged in the process.

I believe that the culture is getting better because we hear comments about how we often spoil both teachers and students. For Thanksgiving, we provided the staff with a dinner. This was not a pot luck dinner. We provided everything for them. All the teachers had to do was show up and eat. The dinner was made possible through donations, and what was not donated, we purchased. Every month, we have a social for a different department. We also recognize our teachers through teacher of the week, month, and year recognition awards.

We do not have an attendance problem. Our attendance clerk is tall and beautiful and, yet, scary. She has long black hair, and when she gives you this stare, you quickly want to do what she is asking you to do. Seriously, she does an excellent job of making sure kids are getting to school. She does not play around. She means strictly business and because of that, we are usually at 98 percent in attendance rate. This also speaks volumes to our culture. Kids want to be here. We treat kids the right way. Every month we get a letter from our superintendent that is specific to our attendance. The report includes all schools; and off to the side, he writes each school a little note. He always sends encouraging notes. If a response is needed to one of his notes, he will write “response needed.” He always compliments us on our attendance rate.

### **Student Example**

I asked Mrs. Munoz to share a story of a Hispanic student who she has worked with that she would consider a true success. She gladly shared:

Peter--he has to be my success story. When I was a facilitator, he had just graduated from high school. He came to my office wearing his letterman jacket looking for work. He wanted to be a high school tutor while he attended college. He was a great baseball player. I hired him as a high school tutor. At that time he was single, 18 years old, and in college. I was a facilitator at Central. As the years went by, he helped me as a high school tutor during the regular school year, and also as a summer school tutor. After I became a principal, I still hired him as a tutor. As the years went by, he had a girlfriend and was maturing more and more. His pace for getting out of college was slow because he was working and

going to school at the same time. Then I came here, and we got involved in the Gear Up program. I then needed Gear Up tutors.

After being here, Peter called me and told me that he wanted to work with me. I told him that he could be a Gear Up tutor for me. My Gear Up counselor also knew Peter, and it was a good move. He was here as a Gear Up tutor through eighth grade, and then he had to follow the group to the high school. Shortly thereafter, he contacted me and told me that he was going to be graduating from college soon and that he would be looking for a teaching job. I told him that I didn't have one currently, but would keep him in mind.

As it turned out, we hired a teacher who appeared to be fantastic in science, but she did not work out. I was at mid year and in need of a science teacher. I quickly thought of Peter, so I contacted our HR director. Peter had all his certifications, so he was hired as my seventh grade science teacher. I was so excited about that, I ended up going to his wedding. While at the wedding, his parents kept thanking me for always being there for Peter. They felt that, since I gave him opportunities as a high school and Gear Up tutor, and now as a teacher, I had something to do with his success. His wife is also a teacher. That is a true success story for me. Now he has become one of our best teachers.

### **Generalization for Student Example**

After sharing her student success story, I asked Mrs. Munoz to generalize that story for other principals. She stated:

It is great to see these kids get through school and graduate. It is interesting to note that many kids I have known are now teachers, police officers, and in other leadership positions. It is neat when you see that!

One piece of advice is that administrators need to know their kids. It does not matter what race they are. It only matters what each student's needs are and what you do as an administrator to meet those needs. Understand what their deficiencies are. Find out the reasons for their not being successful in class. Often, you will find that it has nothing to do with academics. Get to know them. The problems may be emotional, social, or family related. Once you know what the problem is, then work from there. Meet with the students and let them know that you believe in them. Personalize them. Know who they are. When they walk into your room or office, acknowledge them and their style. They will remember you for it. What does it matter if I am spending 24 hours at work and the kids do not know that I exist?

Use your resources to provide support for all students who need the help. Whether it is a social worker, counselor, other administrator, or outside agency, utilize them. When kids are not being successful in class, they need to be called in and talked to. Bring them in with your counselor and talk to them. Explain to them what their scores mean and what they can do to bring them up. Tell them what you will do to help them become more successful.

When students are failing, they are called into our counselor's office, and they are given a contract to sign that tells them what they need to do to bring their scores up. Right now your average is a 60 and you need an 80 to end up at a

70...those are the types of conversations that we need to have with kids. So after reviewing the data with the kids and explaining to them what you are seeing through their scores, they have time to tell you what is taking place in their lives that is hindering their academic progress and what is going on in their lives.

Sometimes the kids will say that the teacher doesn't like me or that I don't like the teacher. At that point, you bring in the teacher and you have discussions about what is taking place in the classroom. If there is a conflict in personalities, we make the switch in schedules. The point in all this is that you have to know the kids in order to help them out. How can you address a problem if you don't know what the problem is? You have to take the time to know the kids. You must have good rapport with kids. I preach this to everyone all the time. Kids have to know that they can trust us and that they can come to us with whatever is bothering them. They need to know that we are here for them.

I get onto kids all the time, but I make it clear to them that I am not angry with them, but rather it is their behavior that I take issue with. Most of the time kids understand that. I tell them, "Understand, I like you; it is the behavior that I am not happy with." I clarify this time and time again because kids don't need another person who does not like them. They also need to know that I will never give up on them and that I believe that they can be good. That is what I tell my administrative staff, and that is how they are. Don't ever give up on your kids and believe in them. Use your resources, get to know them, and help them in whatever way they need help in. Kids will respond and meet your expectations when you show them that you care. Gain their trust, let them know you care, and

they will do anything for you. Kids are smart enough to know whether or not you are sincere. Kids will do anything to please. If you truly care for your students, they will work their hearts out for you.

### **Close the Achievement Gap**

After discussing her school's culture of success, I asked Mrs. Munoz to offer some advice to principals on closing the achievement gap. She offered the following:

The reason that we are closing the achievement gap here is that we understand the student. As administrators and teachers, you have to understand the students and where they are coming from. You have to understand the obstacles they face and be able to find solutions for getting around those obstacles. I can have the smartest teacher around, someone who graduated from Harvard who is very book smart, but if he or she doesn't understand how to relate to kids, it won't really matter because building relationships with kids is the most important thing. I believe that it is very important that we understand our students' culture. We need to understand how students are and how they think.

A large part of the reason that this district is successful is because of all the resources that we have. We have tried many things, and through trial and error, we now know what works and what doesn't work. TEA will come up with new laws that don't make any sense. They have never been here and they don't understand what it is like here in the trenches. Only during elections do they come down and walk the streets of the barrios. They will tell us that they understand us, but they don't understand. Come and work with these students and sit with them to see what we have to work with on a daily basis. The majority of

my staff is Hispanic. I have a few Anglo teachers, and they are very good because they believe in the children. If you believe and care about children, your race does not matter. Having that belief that all student can succeed is crucial. Trials and errors have helped us learn and expand on successes. It all starts at the top. We have great support.

Weslaco has been a great school district for quite some time. Dr. Rivera was Weslaco High principal for 17 years before taking the top spot. He knows the needs of our kids and is familiar with our area culture. That has made all the difference. When you understand something, you can better address it. The district is not afraid to take risks. For example, the stimulus funds and what we are doing with them is a big risk. It is putting our trust in the teachers who we have, but it is a good risk. If our administration sees the need, then they will make sure that the need is met. They also listen to principals and what we have to say.

Dr. Rivera also has the superintendent's advisory committee made up of a group of teachers. They meet every month. He wants to know what is going on in this district straight from the teachers' mouth. He wants to know what is working and what we need to do to improve. That is the reason we are so successful. That is why we get the programs to work, because we make it work. We don't just try new fads. If there is a program that is the latest fad, and it doesn't work for our kids, we don't go after it. We focus on the things that we know will work and help our kids.

One of our middle schools was in stage one; now they are out of it. TEA came by and introduced them to the Marie Carbo reading program. I am very good friends with the principal, and he told me about the program and that it worked for them. It brought their math scores up. Why reinvent the wheel? So we tried it. We have set up Read 180 the same way. I saw that it worked for their campus, and I don't see any reason why it will not work for ours. Therefore, we do it the same way. We are not afraid to share with each other. I will never be the type who says that I will not do something because it was not my idea. I am not proud about that. If it works and it helps kids, let's go for it.

We have some teachers who have graduated from our high school and come back as teachers. Dr. Rivera supports that as well. He is always looking for those who were good students and those who can be role models for the next generation. Dr. Rivera always wants to give back to the community. We just had a bus driver who received his teaching degree and will now be teaching in our schools. That is great. Those are great examples for kids to follow

### **Chapter XIII**

#### **No Distractions. No Excuses. Just Results!**

Mr. McDonough was principal at Resaca Middle School for the previous three and half years. He is currently the principal at the ninth grade center in the same district, but not at Resaca. I began my conversation with Mr. McDonough by asking him how he came to be in education and how he became a school principal. He gladly shared his story:

I was actually a coach for many years. At the end of my coaching career I was the head varsity basketball and varsity receivers football coach at Brownsville Porter here in Brownsville. Though I had been a coach for most of my career, I always wanted to go into administration. I worked for a couple of principals who I really enjoyed working for, and I would sometimes help them out in the front office when they were shorthanded. They would also use me for duties and different administrative things which were what got me interested in educational administration. I started working on my Masters and when I finished it, I made the jump. I still had a lot of coaching in me but being in administration was something for which I felt I was ready and needed to do. I became assistant principal at the high school and then after doing that for a number of years, I became principal at Resaca. I was principal at Resaca middle school for three and a half years. I am certified in Special Education, PE, and Secondary Reading. The vast majority of my teaching was a split schedule of PE and Content Mastery.

**Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I asked Mr. McDonough to provide some insight on how his school has been able to meet the needs of their economically disadvantaged students. He commented:

At Resaca Middle School, 96 percent of our student population is Hispanic and about 80 percent of the total population is considered economically disadvantaged. As the principal, it was extremely important for me to bring awareness to our teachers regarding our students. My conversation with teachers usually revolved around expectations that they might have for students outside of school. In particular, homework was a big issue for some teachers to grasp. I would often tell teachers that many of our students do not have a nice desk, lamp, or parents who would be willing or able to help their students in homework. Sometimes these kids go home to some difficult situations, and I would remind teachers of how important it is for them to empathize with our kids.

I was very fortunate that Resaca had a lot of teachers who were from within the community. Because of that, they understood the many needs our students came to school with. The staff at Resaca is a veteran staff that has been together for a very long time. In my three years there, I had very little turnover. In fact, I only lost two teachers, one retired and the other was a coach who moved to a better paying position.

**Extra-curricular Activities**

In the next part of our conversation, I asked Mr. McDonough to share his thoughts regarding extra-curricular activities and the impact they have on student academics. He stated his opinion and elaborated on various things that they offer their students.

Extra-curricular activities are important to me, and that is what I push for the most. I want students involved in something, and I don't care if it is football, band, chess, etc. If we can hook students into any activity that is outside of school hours, then we have a better chance of getting them to be successful in the regular classroom. We had some great athletic programs at Resaca, and that helped in getting kids to come out and play. The important thing about most extra-curricular activities is that students have to be passing in order to participate. This meant that sponsors or coaches had to follow up on all their students to make sure they were being successful and passing all their classes.

Resaca has a great chess program. Our art teacher opens up his room every day during lunch for students to come in and play chess. For students interested in playing chess, we would let them cut the lunch line so that they could get to the art room to play. Having little things in place like getting kids to the front of the lunch line to get to the art room really makes a difference in getting kids involved in something.

Most of our extra-curricular programs are recruited by administrators, coaches, and faculty. Sometime during the spring, we go down to the elementary schools and speak to kids about the various programs that we offer. Program sponsors will go with us to the elementary school and put on a little show for the kids with the hopes of hooking them. There are also specific days that we bring the kids over from our feeder schools to our campus so that they can see things first hand. When they come for their visit, we always have coaches and players

ready to speak to them and answer any questions that they might have. During that visit, we do our best to get them hooked and enrolled into something.

Resaca is always open until six o'clock. At six o'clock, we have a bus that takes students who are involved in any after school activity home. Having transportation available is a good thing because we have so many kids involved in something whether it is tutorials, clubs, or sports. When kids stay that late, we always have snacks for them, and it isn't something that comes out of my budget. The snacks that we give students are paid through our cafeteria funds. Many principals don't realize that, if you go to your cafeteria manager and ask them for snacks, they will fix you a snack and not charge you a dime. Of course, the snack is nothing major; it is only a little peanut butter and jelly sandwich and graham crackers and milk, but it is something to put in their stomachs until they get home for dinner.

### **Parent Involvement**

After speaking at length about extra-curricular activities, we shifted our conversation towards parent involvement. Here is what Mr. McDonough had to offer on getting parents involved in their children's education:

Parent involvement is a struggle especially at the secondary level. Parents are very involved in their children's education at the elementary level, but at the middle school, parents are involved significantly less. To involve parents, we have a district-wide parent involvement coordinator who helps engage parents quite a bit. We have two parent fairs that are required by the district--one in the fall and one in the spring.

We draw in parents to the parent fair with performances by some of our student clubs and organizations. Performances that we have are from the band, cheerleaders, or something like that to help motivate parents to attend. Once parents are here, we offer them information via break-out sessions on parenting skills, understanding credits and grades, as well as basic overviews of the different programs that we offer for students. In addition to having the performances for parents to see, we always feed them. When you have your food, our students and parents always show up.

We have phones in every classroom, so we push teachers to establish contact with parents as much as possible. Whenever problems come up, the first thing that I ask teachers is whether or not they have contacted the student's parents. I do not accept excuses from teachers about not being able to get a hold of a parent. Involving parents is the best way to get the majority of our student problems solved, and we should do everything that we can to include them in things that pertain to their children.

The vast majority of the parents are very supportive when it comes to having their kids stay after school. One of the things that we do as administrators is that we get a list from teachers of students who were not coming to tutorials like they were supposed to. We divide those numbers evenly, and we get on the phone and contact parents. After we established contact with parents, 90 percent or more of those students were sitting in tutorials the following day. Parents are always willing to do what they can to help their kid's be successful in school. All we need to do is keep them informed and explain to them why we need their kids

in tutorials. Sometimes it is as simple as telling them that their son/daughter is not going to pass if they don't stay after school to get caught up. The big selling point for parents besides kids getting caught up on school work is the fact that we have the late bus and we provide them with snacks. At that point, there is no excuse for not allowing their kids to stay for additional help.

### **Instructional Staff**

I then asked Mr. McDonough to elaborate on how he managed instruction on his campus. He spoke about his communication with staff and interventions that they have in place to meet the needs of their students:

In communicating with teachers, I am a firm believer in department meetings. Department meetings are more personal, and the information shared at those meetings is much more geared to their concerns than the information shared at faculty meetings. Also, I am big on visibility. I am visible in the hallway as much as possible. If I am on campus, I make every effort and take every opportunity to walk the hallways and say hello to teachers and students. If I am on campus, I will usually make four out of five class exchanges. Many times when I am out in the hallways, teachers stop me and they will say, "Hey, I am having trouble with this kid" or "I can't get this parent," and problems such as that. I address their concerns right there and then. I feel that it is an easy way to communicate with teachers.

The most difficult part about visibility is making it a priority. As much as I am out there being visible, it is not easy. Sometimes I have a line of students, parents, and other visitors waiting to see me, and if I were to allow it, I would

never leave my office. What I have found is that most office visitors are fine in waiting for five minutes while I walk the hallways. I also go out at every lunch time. I did it as an assistant principal and even now as a principal. A lot of principals don't do lunch duty, but I believe in doing lunch duty because that is a time kids get to know me. Also, doing lunch duty is another great opportunity to be visible, and the more visible the principal, the fewer problems a campus will usually have.

I really feel that our success at Resaca is because of the veteran teachers who work here. Resaca has always been a very successful school. When I first got to Resaca, the TAKS passing rate in all subjects was in the 80's. When I arrived, we had a good jump in scores, but it was not that I did anything special. All I did was tighten up the discipline and give the veteran teachers the resources they needed to better teach their students.

From an academic standpoint, I focus much of my administrative team's attention on bubble kids. I make sure that we identify the kids who need the most help. I was and have always been very big on target students. While sharing my list with my teachers, they will tell me if they agree or disagree with my list. Sometimes there is a kid that I don't see as a target student, but because they work with students on a daily basis, they are better informed on who needs to be on the target list. Teachers will let me know which students had a good day of testing but who should be a target kid regardless. Sometime students would just blow off a test, and I had them as target students when they were just not giving the benchmark any effort. The important part of reviewing the benchmark data with

our teachers is that we are communicating and getting on the same page. We would finalize our target list together and proceed from there.

In regards to instructional interventions, we implement many of them during our after school and tutoring programs. I spend more money on tutoring than anyone else in the district. At one point, I was outspending other campuses on tutoring so much that I was called in to explain myself to the superintendent. I told the superintendent that I was spending the money tutoring, but that I expected our students to be successful in return. I don't mind spending the money as long as we are going to make kids successful, and most teachers know my high expectations for their tutoring classes. Teachers really enjoy tutoring students after school because the students who they are working with need that small group instruction. These students could not be successful during the class, so we meet their needs after school.

In order to get students ready for the TAKS test, we have many activities in place. We do pull out students who are on our target list. Some of our teachers volunteer their conference time to help with tutoring. Though this may sound insignificant, but having teachers give up their conference time at the secondary level is unheard of. Most of the time, secondary teachers are very protective of their conference and lunch times. Teachers giving up their conference and lunch time is much more common at the elementary level.

Three weeks before the science TAKS, we have two science teachers who give up their conference period. As a result, our overall passing percentage was well into the 80's. I believe that teachers who truly believe in educating students

will show you their dedication through their actions. Many of our teachers here at Resaca did just that; they showed their commitment to student academic success by giving up their conference and lunch times.

### **Culture of Success**

After discussing instruction with Mr. McDonough, we spoke at length about Resaca's culture of success. He shared the following:

Our students have a lot of pride in our school and much of that comes from the competition that we have with a middle school that is on the other side of our parking lot. The other middle school, Los Cuates, is also a very strong performing school, and the principal there is a really good friend of mine. To get our students motivated, we often have competition in just about everything. Our competition was called the battle of the parking lot. When we played each other in football or we were taking any type of major assessment, we would announce the battle of the parking lot to all of our students. I would go around each classroom and tell the students that the Los Cuates principal called me and said they were going to blow us away on the reading benchmark or football game. This motivated our students to no end, and it really got them engaged. There was no way they were going to lose the battle of the parking lot.

Resaca is an older school, and I will tell you that it is a great place for students because their needs are met. Year in and year out, they score incredibly well on TAKS. We often have visitors come to our building, and the first comment that they make has to do with the building itself. It is an old building, and when I first got here, the hallways were constructed with paneling from the

70's. Over the few years that I was there, we were able to redo the hallway paneling and replace it with stucco; however, when you walk into the classrooms, the walls are still that old school paneling. It was always interesting to see visitors come to our campus expecting to see this modernized building. Their assumption was that, because we had awesome scores, we probably had great facilities. It just goes to show that it doesn't make a difference if you have a nice shiny building or not, the bottom line is good teachers. At Resaca, we have great teachers who take pride in ensuring that all their students are academically successful.

Resaca is a great school, and I left there kicking and screaming. Like I stated earlier, if you were in the building, you would see that it is old and run down, but it shows you that it doesn't matter. When it rained, all the teachers at Resaca had buckets in their classroom that they would put out in the areas where the roof leaked. What is amazing is that teachers will put out the mop buckets while teaching their class. They don't allow those types of things to be distractions. They always continued teaching. I also remember having power outages. Lights would go out, and as I am going room to room, every teacher would still be teaching with their whole class engaged in the lesson. Even though the lights were out for 30 minutes, teachers would not allow it to be a distraction. It was plain and simple. No distractions. No excuses. Just results!

### **Personal Experience**

I asked Mr. McDonough to share his personal experience with working with Hispanic students. He stated:

I have worked within majority Hispanic schools my whole career. I moved here right after college. I am from Boston, and when I got here, I didn't speak a word of Spanish. I am pretty fluent now, and I think anyone can learn it if they spend the time studying and working at it. By speaking the language, it has given me a big advantage because I don't have anyone translate for me during parent conferences. I think it is important because there is no middle man when communicating with parents. They speak to me directly, and that means a lot to the parents.

Though it is not required, it is something that I look for when I have teachers applying for jobs. I want teachers to be bilingual because I want them to be able to talk to parents directly. I think that it shows parents that we are doing what we can to establish open lines of communication where language is not a barrier. When parents come in and hear me speak Spanish, they are pleased. I think that it shows them that I am embracing their language. I often tell my teachers to look at where we live. Spanish is a part of this area and community, so understanding the language only stands to benefit us by being able to better communicate with parents. This is not Austin Westlake; we are on the U.S./Mexico border, and we are going to get kids who not only do not speak English, but who are economically disadvantaged as well. Our students are battling language, poverty, and many other social issues. With all that in mind, this is who we serve. Let's not make any excuses and let's do what we need to do, and that is to educate any student who comes through our doors.

**Student Example**

After discussing his personal experiences with Hispanic students, I asked Mr. McDonough to share a story of a Hispanic student that he considers to be a success. He shared:

An example of a Hispanic student who has been a success is a current eighth grader. I was her principal in grades six and seven at Resaca. Her dad was my head custodian at Resaca, and he is now my head custodian here at this school. His daughter was just awarded the Jack Kent Cooke scholarship. This scholarship is very difficult to attain. What the Jack Kent Cooke foundation does is identify 50 kids, only 50 kids across the country to award this scholarship to, and she is one who received it. They have to be low socioeconomic, they are looking for Hispanic or African-American students, and they are looking for first-time college in their families. They go through an application process, and now that she was selected, she basically has a scholarship that will cover her college tuition and expenses that financial aid will not cover.

Of course this student is the cream of the crop. She is very smart and ranked number one in her class. What is most impressive is that her mom and dad do not speak a word of English. This is relevant because here we have a student ranked one in her current class despite the language barrier that has made it difficult for her parents to provide the assistance in homework that she might need. The important thing in that situation is that her parents make education a priority and find her the resources that she needs to be successful.

My son is in class with her, and they are taking pre-AP classes. As he struggles in mathematics, he comes to me, and together we battle through the homework. I often think about my custodian's daughter and wonder how it is that she gets through the work. Here I am with a master's degree, my wife is a teacher, and we struggle to help our kid. Imagine how it is for my custodian as he is fighting through the same issues with language being a huge barrier. I always tell my son that, if she can do it, then there is no excuse for you, pal.

### **Generalizing from Student Example**

I then asked Mr. McDonough what he could generalize from his student example.

He offered the following:

Generalizing from this story, I can tell you that regardless of how much English a parent understands, if they make education a priority, then their kids will be successful in school. We have a couple of Korean kids at Resaca who are academically off the charts, and I believe it is because their parents expect nothing less than excellence on their report cards. I think having high expectations for students is the key. The majority of our staff comes from this area, and they know that kids here can be successful. Therefore, their expectations for our students are pretty high. They don't allow the many obstacles to be excuses for failure. The expectation is that students will come to school and learn. So when I am looking to hire a teacher, I am always looking for someone who is able to connect with our kids. That positive connection will make all the difference in the world to the students as well as to the staff.

## **Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing our conversation, I asked Mr. McDonough to give some advice to other principals on how to close the achievement gap. After a short pause, he stated:

I think that a big part of closing the achievement gap the way we did at Resaca was by having teachers who understand the culture and language needs of the students whom we served. I had a few teachers at Resaca who were Anglo and didn't speak any Spanish. Speaking Spanish was not a requirement for my teachers, but I did expect them to empathize with the students in their classrooms. They needed to know that, just because non-English speaking students were sitting in their class not responding to anything, it did not mean that they were learning disabled. Teachers need to understand that ELL students are grasping as much knowledge as they can and translating every word to try to make sense of it all.

To meet the needs of many of our ESL students, we got our ESL teachers a list of TAKS-related vocabulary words for the core subjects. By taking those key words and introducing them to the ESL students, they were better able to make sense of them when those words were discussed in the core subject classrooms. Many of our ESL students benefited from this because they were not completely lost as they might have been had the ESL teacher not reviewed those key words with them.

To close the achievement gap, you have to understand where your students are coming from. You have to know your students. At Resaca, most of our teachers understood the culture of our students. In fact, most teachers who are

there have lived here in town or in the Valley for many years. Because they are locals, they have pretty much embraced the culture. By understanding our students and identifying with their needs, our teachers were better able to meet those needs.

To close the achievement gap, you have to show students that they are able to be successful regardless of the obstacles that they face. You have to show them that they can make it through school if they work at it. For example, I started this program called “principal for a day.” For this program, I would bring in different individuals from the community to be a principal for an entire day. I made a point to always get someone who our students could relate to. One time, I had a friend of mine who had come over from Mexico and is now an engineer to be the principal for a day. He is the vice president of a company. This has a big impact on our students because they can see someone who looks like them, talks like them, and can relate with them. Another time, I brought in a Hispanic eye doctor. I always try to go toward Hispanic math and science. While I have those “principals for a day” on campus, I would take them into the science classes to share their stories and struggles if they had any.

Many times, students were inspired because they had proof right in front of their classroom that, if they worked hard at school, they too could be successful. Principal for a day had the biggest impact on our ESL students. At one point, our ESL teacher realized that one of her ex-students whom she had taught many years ago is now a teacher in the district. We had him come in one day and talk to the students. He told them that he was like them and that he was

sitting where they were not too long ago. He went on to tell the students that he didn't understand the English language at the time, but with a lot of hard work, he was able to make it through. His message was loud and clear to our ESL students. If you really apply yourself, you can be successful. Look at me, I am now a teacher, a professional, and if I can do it, each of you can most definitely do the same.

## **Chapter XIV**

### **Students First**

I began my conversation with Mr. Ibarra by asking him how he came to be in education and how he became a school principal. He gladly shared his story:

I have been in education for 21 years. My areas of certification are English language arts and Social Studies. Before coming here as school principal, I was an assistant principal at Nimitz High School. This is my third year as principal at Grantham Academy. I originally entered the school administrative field because I realized the need for teacher support. As a teacher, I was not supported, and that was something that motivated me to become a school administrator. Though my original intent to be an administrator was to provide teachers with much needed support, I quickly adjusted my priority to students first and teachers second.

I am a proud product of Aldine ISD. I have the privilege to work in the neighborhood where I grew up. This is my community, and I feel total responsibility for educating our students. The reason that we are so successful here is that we work hard and make sure that everything we do is student-centered.

### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

I asked Mr. Ibarra to describe his student population and how he met the needs of his students. He stated:

Our student characteristics are 83 percent Hispanic and 83 percent economically disadvantaged. Because we have such a high rate of economically disadvantaged students, we utilize Title I funds to better meet the needs of all our students. Our Title I funds are spent on additional personnel and technology. By hiring additional teachers, our class loads are minimized to a level that is much more manageable. This allows our teachers to better build relationships with those hard-to-reach students.

Technology facilitates teacher instruction when working with English language learners. Because language is a barrier with ELL students, our technology department purchased big screen televisions that are used as monitors for our computers. Through these televisions, we are able to show students pictures, videos, and graphic organizers so that they can better understand and grasp the objective being taught.

I believe that much of our success here at Grantham comes from being a magnet school for engineering. By design, our teachers are able to enrich and enhance their curriculum by tying concepts across various subjects. The way our curriculum is enriched and enhanced is through many “hands on” activities that are put in place for students to experience. Our school scheduling allows enough time for all of these activities to take place, which is a good thing for both students and teachers.

The secret to our overall success comes from the fact that we teach all of our students based on their individual needs. My decisions are all targeted to impact student achievement. Though I welcome input from anyone, I am

constantly reminding my staff that decisions will always be made in the best interests of students that we serve.

To provide assistance for struggling learners, we have found great success in tutoring programs that are optional for some students and mandatory for others. In addition to our after school tutoring program, we have Saturday school which begins during the month of January. Between all the instruction during the regular school day and the tutoring programs, we do a very good job of making sure that all of our students are given a true opportunity to be successful in school.

Mr. Ibarra commented on the important role that extra-curricular activities play in keeping students engaged in school:

Extra-curricular activities play a vital role in keeping many of our students engaged in school. Our district provides extra-curricular activities to students at no cost to the parents. We do not allow money to be an excuse for students not being involved in something. By not charging parents a dime, we have a high number of students involved in some sort of extra-curricular activity.

### **Parent Involvement**

I asked Mr. Ibarra to elaborate on his school's parental involvement. He stated that it is a struggle to get parents involved, but that he continues to work at finding ways to better engage them. Here are his comments:

Parent involvement has been a big challenge for our school. No matter how much effort we put into engaging the parents of our struggling learners, the turnout is usually low. Part of the problem with our lack of parent involvement comes from the fact that many of our parents work two or more jobs in order for them to

support their families. The lack of parent participation is not due to a lack of interest in their child's education, but rather the fact that they do not have opportunity to get off from work.

Another point for parents being less and less involved in school could be attributed to the language barrier that exists. Though we make every effort to ensure that all communications that are sent to parents are in their native language, they still feel intimidated by the school. In addition to parents working several jobs and the language barrier, many students are not living with their parents, but instead are being raised by their grandparents.

To identify programs that will benefit parents, we utilize surveys. In these surveys, parents often identify the need for them to be trained on how to deal with struggling students. Some request trainings on gangs and gang awareness. Even though we offer parent programs that they request, they are rarely well attended. Regardless of the fact that parents just don't get involved, I still offer them the opportunity to come in and learn more about working with their children.

Programs that we have in place for parental involvement include Visa volunteers and informative sessions. To increase attendance to our informative sessions, we vary the times in which they are held. We do this to better accommodate the working schedules of our students' parents. The best way for us to have good attendance at parent meetings is by involving students. For example, extra-curricular activities often bring in the most parents. Because parents often get involved with their children's extra-curricular activity, I often

stress to my coaches and sponsors that numbers in participation are much more important than wins in a season.

Despite the challenges of engaging parents, we still do our best to welcome all of them. We believe that we can provide students with great opportunities as well as teach them what they need to know; however, parents must still do their part. The formula that we have come up with for student success is “thirds.” The student is accountable for a third, the school is accountable for a third, and the parents are responsible for the last third of the students’ education. Everyone plays a part in the success and/or failure of Grantham’s students. By dividing the responsibility into the three major stakeholders--students, parents, and school--the accountability falls on everyone.

### **Instructional Staff**

After discussing parental involvement, I asked Mr. Ibarra to share his method for communicating and managing his instructional staff. He offered:

I meet with my leadership team every Friday. During the Friday meetings, I provide the agenda and lead the discussions which usually pertain to classroom instruction. After meeting with my leadership team, I send an e-mail to the rest of the staff members to inform them of what we discussed. I am a strong advocate of leading with transparency. By keeping all staff members well informed, initiatives that promote student achievement are better implemented.

In addition to communicating with my staff through my leadership team, I utilize teacher planning periods as a mode of communication. During planning periods, I have teachers in small groups and we can engage in discussions that are

relevant to them. If teachers do not feel comfortable sharing information with me during their planning time, they are always welcome to come by my office to discuss any concerns that they might have. I do my best to be straightforward in all my communications with my staff.

I care deeply about this school and its students. I am not about the accolades that come with having a successful school. What I am about is the teamwork that goes into educating all students and ensuring that all of my staff members are recognized for their students' academic achievements. At the end of the day, we don't do anything special in meeting the needs of all our students. We analyze our data, identify the needs based on that data, and implement interventions that will meet the needs of the students who were identified within the data.

To monitor teacher instruction, I created a schedule for all of our administrators who allow them to visit every teacher's classroom throughout the year. By having different administrators visit each teacher, there is an opportunity for constructive criticism from different points of view. We have two different types of walk-throughs that we conduct. The first type of walk-through is the traditional PDAS walk-through that is student centered. These walk-throughs are five to ten minutes long and provide the teacher with information on what the students were doing as they were teaching their lesson. The second type of walk-through is one that looks at the teachers' instructional delivery. This walk-through provides teacher feedback on the effectiveness of their lesson delivery. This walk-through is much shorter as it lasts only three to five minutes.

Data analysis is what drives teacher instruction at Grantham Academy.

We believe that data analysis is the only true way to meet the needs of all students. Through the use of a program called TRIAD, data are analyzed from all types of assessment sources. Before the year begins, TAKS data are used as the first source of data. Once the year starts, we gather data from three weeks tests as well as six weeks tests. The most beneficial data come from the data that are gathered from TAKS release or benchmark tests. As these data are reviewed and analyzed, instructional strategies and interventions are put in place to meet the identified needs of their students. We required that every teacher have an action plan on how they will meet the needs of their students. These action plans are submitted to their appraiser and also filed in a master file. Whenever my assistant principals or I have concerns about any of our teachers, we go to this master file and gather information that we need. The master file includes teacher walk-throughs, action plans, and other teacher instruction related information.

### **Monetary Resources**

I asked Mr. Ibarra about his discretionary funds and where these are spent. He stated:

When given the choice, I allocate discretionary funds into personnel. This is based on my teachers' need to have smaller more manageable classes. In addition to hiring additional teachers, I will spend money on hiring TAKS tutors. Both of these positions have a direct impact on student academic achievement because both positions work closely with students. Our TAKS tutors do an excellent job in educating our struggling students because they are able to provide targeted

instruction to groups of five or six students. I will also spend money on teacher resources, student supplies, and professional development as it relates to student achievement.

### **Culture of Success**

Our conversation continued to the topic of school culture. Mr. Ibarra noted the importance of school culture on his campus. He offered the following:

School culture and climate play a key role in a school's success. Much of our success here can be credited to our school culture. Grantham Academy has been a successful school for many years. Students, parents, and the community all know that we do a good job of educating all of our students. Because Grantham has a long standing reputation for being a successful school, this provides our campus with parent support that may have not existed had the school not had a strong academic track record. For many students, the mindset that we have a great school provides them with all the motivation they need to do well in their classes.

Our culture of success can also be proved by our student attendance rate. Our student attendance rate at Grantham Academy hovers around 96 percent. Though this is great, the campus goal is 97 percent. Either way, our students come to school on a regular basis. We educate our kids while also treating them with respect. They know that we care about them, and that makes all the difference in their wanting to come to school every day.

**Student Example**

I asked Mr. Ibarra to share a success story of a student who he has worked with during his years in education. He gladly shared:

When I was teaching AP psychology, I took a young man under my wing. This student was from a single parent home and right from the beginning, I knew that there was something special about this student. After he graduated from high school, I lost contact with him. Many years after the student's graduation, I received a letter from him telling me that he was now a Clinical Psychiatrist. The letter went on to say that much of his success as a student was attributed to my being a teacher who deeply cared about him as a student. The student wrote "All because of you, I have the title of Doctor."

This student is one of many who have written to me over the years to thank me for taking the time to care about them. I believe that students want teachers and administrators who are genuine in the way they interact with students. The best teachers in the world are those who build relationships with their students. All the latest technology and staff development cannot replace the influence and power of a teacher who truly cares. If you want to make a difference in the life of a student, take the time to show them that you care.

**Close the Achievement Gap**

In closing our conversation, I asked Mr. Ibarra to give some advice to other principals on how to close the achievement gap. He stated:

To close the achievement gap between Hispanic students and their non-Hispanic peers, we have to teach the students. Every student comes to us with needs, and

those needs must be addressed in order for them to be successful. It is not about race, but rather about the approach that schools take in dealing with the many issues that students bring with them to our classes. The key to meeting the needs of all students is to build relationships. We have to get to know the students, and by getting to know them, we will find important information that will allow us to better serve them.

Closing the achievement gap also takes collaborative leadership. This is important because it includes all school leaders in the decision-making process. Leadership should focus on providing the right opportunities for all students to be successful. When teachers hold themselves accountable, the job of the administrator is much easier because he is able to focus on the structure of the plan. If the teachers are not holding themselves accountable, it is imperative that the administrators step in and make them accountable. Many times, students do not have a choice in which teachers they will have, but we as the principals have a choice in who we hire as their teachers. We have to hire the right teachers because if we don't, the achievement gap will only widen.

## Chapter XV

### Narrative Analysis

The purpose of this study was to analyze the beliefs and effective practices of school principals in high achieving Hispanic majority mid-level schools. This study gave voice to the beliefs and effective practices of 10 principals who have been successful at mid-level schools. Findings are reported by research questions.

#### Research Question 1

Research Question 1 investigated the ways school principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools account for the socioeconomic status of their students. Emergent themes included meeting the basic needs of their students, building relationships, having high expectations, providing additional support, engaging students through extra-curricular activities, and being aware of students served.

**Meeting basic needs.** All of the principals emphasized the importance of schools meeting the basic needs of their students. This included providing necessities to students such as food, shelter, structure, and clothing. For example, Mr. Booth mandated that all his students pick up their free breakfast every morning while Mr. Woods stated that his staff made certain that his students ate every day. Of the ten principals, five of them commented on their community partnerships that provided their students with health services such as physicals, immunizations, dental, vision and hearing at little to no cost. In regards to clothing and shelter, Ms. River elaborated on her school's family liaison

who ensured that students had the basic necessities at home. When students did not have those necessities at home, this family liaison located resources to assist the family, which ultimately had a direct impact on their children's education. Mrs. Munoz spoke of her counselor taking the active role on working with students and their families to ensure that students' basic needs were met.

**Building relationships.** Building relationships with students was also an emergent theme of principals accounting for the socioeconomic status of their students. Every principal in this study spoke at length about the important role of relationships. Mr. Carrier stated, "If kids truly believe you care about them, they will do anything for you." Mr. Lewis reiterated the relationship theme when he mentioned, "If you have the right teachers, your students will be successful."

Mr. Woods noted that many of the students' teachers were the only stable adults in their life. In the case of Mrs. Munoz and Mrs. Malone, both believed that teachers and administrators must educate their students like they would want their own children to be educated. Further, Mr. Rutkowski's staff understood that once they build positive relationships with their students, good things would come from those relationships. Ms. River believed that positive relationships between students and staff were the foundation from which students could excel academically. Mr. McDonough hired teachers based on their ability to connect with his students, while Mr. Ibarra emphasized that the key to meeting the needs of all students began with building relationships. All of the principals in this study believed that relationships were at the core of their success.

**Having high expectations.** Another emergent theme of principals accounting for the socioeconomic status of their students was having high expectations. These

principals believed that students would rise to the level of expectations that were set before them. For students to be successful, Mr. Carrier stated the following, “Treat kids like kids, have clear expectations and articulate those expectations. Enforce those expectations consistently and they will perform to those expectations.” For Mr. Woods, it was all about expectations. He stated, “Regardless of race, expectations must be the same for all students...What do you expect the kids to do and what are you doing to meet those expectations?” These same sentiments were also reiterated by Mr. Booth who said that his expectations were high for each of his students regardless of their race or skin color.

Mrs. Malone was clear on her high expectations for all students, not just minority or economically disadvantaged students. She stated, “The job of a teacher is to teach the curriculum and have high expectations for their students in the classroom while also showing them that they care and love them; through this, they will eventually learn responsibility.” Mr. Rutkowski had similar thoughts as he mentioned that treating kids with respect while having high expectations has been a key for his school’s success. Mr. McDonough also stated the importance of high expectations and noted, “Most of our staff comes from this area so they know and believe that their students can be successful.” As noted in each of the above statements, principals in this study viewed high expectations, regardless of the students’ color or race, as being a key factor in student academic success.

**Providing additional support.** An emergent theme of principals accounting for the socioeconomic status of their students was providing additional support to meet the needs of students. Principals in this study all commented on the importance of their after

school tutoring programs. For many students, principals noted that their after school tutoring programs were successful with students because it addressed the needs of a targeted group of students. Mr. Carrier's after school tutoring program did not pay teachers, yet their program was as successful as when they were paying them. According to Mr. Carrier, teachers had shown their commitment to student success by continuing the program after not having the funding to pay for it.

Mr. Lewis spoke of his after school program called "Enrichment Zone." This tutoring program went beyond struggling learners because it targeted all levels of student achievement. If a student was good in math, they were still enrolled in this program so that their skills were sharpened. For students struggling, Enrichment Zone provided them with many hands-on activities that allowed them to better grasp difficult concepts. A different subject on different days was a common component of tutoring programs. By specifying days of the week for each subject, students did not have to decide which tutoring session to attend.

The majority of the principals also offered transportation and snacks for students who stayed late for after school tutoring. By having transportation and a snack, many principals reported that parents were much more willing to allow their children to stay in school later than usual. Principals noted that they are well aware of obstacles that keep students from being able to attend after school tutorials. With that said, it is up to the principals to eliminate the obstacles by being proactive in addressing those obstacles such as offering transportation and snacks.

**Engaging in extra-curricular activities.** Engaging students in extra-curricular activities was also an emergent theme of principals accounting for the socioeconomic

status of their students. Mr. Carrier mentioned that his campus has been fortunate to have a good athletic program. The success of his athletic program has inspired many students to get involved in sports. Mr. Carrier stated that athletics has served as a deterrent from trouble for many of his students.

Extra-curricular activities are so important that Mr. Woods expected his coaches to encourage students who had never been in sports to try out for the teams. Mr. Woods stated, “We are constantly talking to kids and engaging them in things that we know would be of interest to them... We do not allow formalities like money or physicals to get in the way of students participating in extra-curricular activities.” Mr. Woods further emphasized that they eliminate obstacles that keep students from getting involved by setting up programs that take care of those mentioned formalities.

Mrs. Malone pointed out that research has shown students who get involved in music programs have a much higher success rate on college entrance exams. Additionally, they have more success academically on math and science. Based on this research, Mrs. Malone requires that every sixth grade student be enrolled in a full year of music. All sixth graders must choose from a full year of choir, band, or orchestra. By requiring a full year of music for all sixth graders, Mrs. Malone has accomplished her goal of getting kids hooked on music. Her current band program has 480 students, which is larger than their 5A comprehensive band programs at their high schools.

In addition to athletics and band, all principals discussed clubs and organizations that they have on their campuses. For principals, clubs and organizations are about students being involved in something. Principals spoke of the importance of providing opportunities for students to experience things that they wouldn't normally experience.

For example, Mr. Carrier's campus has a club called Trend Setters. There are strict stipulations in place for students to become Trend Setters; however, Mr. Carrier provides his support for those students. One stipulation for Trend Setters is that they be dressed in a shirt and tie or coat and tie at least once a week. To accommodate those students who did not have the appropriate attire, Mr. Carrier worked out a deal with K&G so that students could get what they needed.

Every principal stated that they understood the importance of extra-curricular activities and the role they play in keeping students engaged in school. Each of them commented that it does not matter what students get involved in as long as they get involved in something. Mr. McDonough summarized it best, "If we can hook students into any activity that is outside of school hours, then we have a better chance of getting them to be successful in the regular classroom."

**Being aware of students served.** Awareness of students served on their campus was an emergent theme of principals accounting for the socioeconomic status of their students. In educating students, seven of the ten principals stated the importance of educators understanding the circumstances and obstacles that students faced in their daily lives. Mr. Ibarra stated, "Every student comes to us with needs and those needs must be addressed in order for them to be successful. It is not about race, but rather about the approach that schools take in dealing with the many issues that students bring with them to class. We have to get to know the students and by getting to know them we will find important information that will allow us to better serve them."

Mr. Carrier saw the biggest need for educating students being as simple as accepting who they are regardless of race. With all the struggles that students have, it is

the educators' job to help them deal with those struggles as best they can. The priority is to provide all its students with structure, good teaching, strong positive relationships, and sincerity. Mr. Woods was in agreement with Mr. Carrier as he has focused on things that were under his control. For example, Mr. Woods ensured that students under his care were fed, sheltered, and had all their campus needs met. Mr. Woods stressed the fact that he could not control what took place outside of his school, but while the students are on his campus, he does what it takes to meet their various needs while also meeting the high demands of educating each of them.

Mr. McDonough expected his teachers to understand that students go home to difficult situations. Because of those various issues, Mr. McDonough often reminded teachers of the importance for them to be empathetic with the students they serve. Mr. Booth understood that students have a different charge or different starting points. Though the starting line is further back for some students, they are still expected to come to school and learn just like everybody else. Mr. Booth summarized it best by stating:

When we say, oh the system is not fair, and so therefore you don't have to achieve a higher grade or as high grade as this other kid then we are setting kids up for failure. There are no food stamps on-campus. They are all expected to learn and, though we understand where students are coming from and their obstacles, they must all still learn the same thing.

## **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 investigated the way school principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools involved parents in the educational process. Emergent themes

included communicating with purpose, establishing a welcoming environment, providing engaging activities, and appreciating family dynamics.

**Communicating with purpose.** Communicating with purpose was an emergent theme of principals involving parents in the educational process of their children. Seven of the ten principals noted that effective communication was vital to the establishment of parent support on school initiatives. For example, Mr. Carrier noted that he had gotten the most support from his students parents when he took the time and explained to them what the school needed from them. Mr. Carrier further commented that anytime they made an appeal to parents for support in any initiative, as long as he took the time to explain what was taking place, he always received the parents support.

For Mr. Lewis, communication is most crucial when getting parents involved. He stated, “To me it doesn’t get more important than communication. As long as I have communicated with them and they know what is going on in their child’s education, things have run very smoothly for us.” Mr. Woods has done his best to communicate with parents as often as he can. While parents wait for students to be picked up from school, Mr. Woods has taken advantage of that down time and established communication with those parents. According to Mr. Woods, having made himself available for parents to share their thoughts has been very helpful to both him and his parents.

Mrs. Malone and Mr. McDonough have both relied on their students’ parents to keep students on track and focused in school. These principals have established contact with the majority of their parents before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester. Mrs. Malone commented that she had already met with over 100 parents and planned to meet with the

rest of them by the end of the first semester. Mrs. Malone's purpose for meeting with all her parents has been to better inform and include them in their child's education. Her belief has always been that parents have wanted to be involved in their children's school but are rarely invited to do so. Mr. McDonough has wasted little time in having contacted parents on his list. He has utilized parent communication as a way to increase the attendance for their after school tutoring program. Mr. McDonough emphasized, "After we established contact with parents, 90% or more of those students were sitting in tutorials the following day. Parents have always been willing to do what they can to help their kid's be successful in school. All we need to do is keep them informed and explain to them why we need their kids in tutorials."

In regards to communication, most principals echoed the following statement made by Mrs. Malone. She stated:

I don't speak Spanish and probably 50% of my Hispanic kids' parents only speak Spanish. You can talk to any of my Hispanic parents and they will tell you that we communicate clearly. I will pull in my secretary or whoever and we sit down and they have an opportunity to ask me questions and I give them everything I can and they know I care about their kid. Caring about their kids is most important, not that I don't speak their language. It's that I care about their child's success and that I want to include them in their child's success. That's what's important to that family.

**Establishing a welcoming environment.** Another emergent theme of principals involving parents in their child's educational process was that of establishing a welcoming environment. Six of the ten principals elaborated on their schools'

welcoming environment. Principals noted that having a welcoming environment allowed them to have more support from their parents. Mr. Carrier shared a story where he offered to buy lunch for some grandparents that were there to visit their grandson. When Mr. Carrier first approached the grandparents, they were defensive about his questions that regarded their presence in the cafeteria. After a few moments of conversation, Mr. Carrier bought them lunch and the grandparents thought it was the kindest gesture. With that small gesture, Mr. Carrier now has two individuals who, regardless what is said out in the community, will support him and the work of the school.

Mr. Lewis discussed how he has always been very approachable. He has hired only kind people to work in his front office. With his open door policy, he has always had parents and community members coming in and out of his office. Mr. Lewis stated that he and his staff have always been professional and polite when working with parents and because of that, he has gotten the good support that he gets from them. Ms. River has the same approach as Mr. Lewis. When parents come to their front office, they are greeted with a welcoming smile. Parents are also offered coffee, soda, or water. According to Ms. River, it has made the world of difference when dealing with parents. Ms. River mentioned that she has walked into schools where she has felt that she was interrupting the front office staff. That was a horrible feeling for her and she does not want that type of atmosphere in her school.

Mr. Woods' belief in welcoming parents to his campus has meant attention to details. One of the key things that Mr. Woods and his staff have done is to pay much closer attention to the food that they serve during parent nights. For example, at a recent parent informational night, Mr. Woods' campus served food that was catered to the

Hispanic culture. The food included fajitas, beans, burritos, and rice instead of spaghetti, lasagna and other types of food that are unrelated to the Hispanic culture. By catering to their Hispanic parents, their hope has been that parents felt more welcomed and at home. When parents feel more welcomed and at home while at school, they are more likely to come back next time they are invited.

Mrs. Malone has a very active parent-teacher association. Their campus enrollment is 1165 and their PTA membership is 1015. Mrs. Malone stated that much of this can be attributed to their welcoming environment. Their campus goes above and beyond to involve parents in school activities. It has always been Mrs. Malone's belief that there is no excuse for a lack of parental involvement.

**Providing engaging activities.** Providing engaging activities was also an emergent theme of principals involving parents in the educational process. All ten principals alluded to the fact that they have parent activities that are campus or district initiatives. In order to have these initiatives or events well attended, principals spoke of the challenge in having activities that would engage or interest parents. Six of the ten principals made it a point that they have done whatever they can to draw parents into their schools. Principals mentioned athletics, band or choir performances, or club presentations as ways they have lured parents to attend school functions. Mr. Carrier noted that when they have parent nights, their campus provides babysitting. He stated that their goal is to eliminate any excuse a parent may have for not getting involved in their child's education.

Principals noted that providing incentives for students to attend school functions with their parents has greatly increased parental involvement. For example, Mrs. Malone

stated that all of her students have a thermometer. For every math or science activity that their parents participate in, their thermometer goes up. When their parents have participated in five activities, the top blows off and the students gets a free day pass. Mr. Lewis has family nights for math and science activities. During the science lessons, teachers will blow things up in lab experiments. According to Mr. Lewis, these family nights have always been heavily attended.

According to principals in this study, another factor that has increased student and parent attendance to school functions has been the simple act of feeding them. At their blue ribbon celebration, Ms. River reported that they served burgers and hotdogs to almost 900 people. Mr. McDonough also noted that they feed their parents during any school function. He stated, “When you have food, students and parents will always show up.” Besides providing food, Mr. Ibarra noted that he varies the times in which the school functions will take place. Mr. Ibarra has always varied his parent activity schedule to better accommodate the parents’ working schedule.

**Appreciating the family dynamics.** An emergent theme for school principals that involve parents in the educational process of their children was the appreciation of the family dynamics. Six of the ten principals acknowledged the fact that they do struggle to get parents to attend school functions. Several principals indicated that they understand the struggles that parents have and because of that understanding they don’t give up on parents. Mr. Carrier stated many of the parents who do not get involved in the education of their child are the same ones who have the same issues as we do at their home. For those situations, Mr. Carrier and his staff have made efforts to work with those parents personally rather than in a large group setting.

Mr. Rutkowski mentioned that his campus has very little parent involvement, but plenty of parent support. What he has found is that parents in his community trust what he and his staff are doing with regards to educating their children. For Mr. Booth, the lack of parental involvement can be attributed to single family homes. To better accommodate those families, Mr. Booth scheduled meetings for a later time, but that rarely had an effect. He stated that they would not give up on parents because without parents involved in their children's education, schools will suffer. Mr. Ibarra reiterated this same philosophy about the importance of parent involvement:

Parent involvement has been a big challenge for our school. No matter how much effort we put into engaging our parents of struggling learners, the turnout is usually low. Part of the problem with our lack of parent involvement comes from the fact that many of our parents work two or more jobs in order for them to support their families. The lack of parent participation is not because of lack of interest in their child's education, but rather the fact that they do not have time to get off from work.

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 investigated the principal's actions that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement. Emergent themes included communicating effectively, being visible, staying focused on goals, relating to students, and scheduling.

**Communicating effectively.** Communicating effectively was an emergent theme of the actions of the principals that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement. All ten principals in this study noted that communicating effectively with their staff was vital to their school's success. Principals in this study stated that they

communicated with their staff at least once a week regarding instructional strategies and practices that were taking place in their classrooms. For example, Mr. Rutkowski and his vice principal have conferences with their teachers every Monday. At these conferences, teachers are expected to discuss the good things taking place in their classroom, students that are struggling, and instructional strategies. Mr. Rutkowski stated that his purpose for having these meetings was to hold teachers accountable.

The majority of principals, nine of ten, reported that their preference in communicating with their staff was through department meetings. They noted that the small group setting as well as the ability to have a more focused agenda made department meetings ideal for discussing instruction-related issues. For example, Mr. McDonough stated, "I am a firm believer in department meetings. Department meetings are more personal and the information shared at those meetings is much more geared to their concerns than the information shared at faculty meetings." Mr. Ibarra also noted the significance of meeting with teachers in small group settings as an effective mode of communication because the conversation is often more relevant to the teachers and administrators involved.

Two principals specifically mentioned Monday memos as an effective tool for communication. The Monday memo has information about the coming week as well as any thoughts that the principal has to offer for his staff. Mr. Carrier mentioned that his staff has come to expect the Monday memo and every time he has forgotten to send it out, a staff member will stop by his office and ask him for it. Mr. Woods has also utilized the Monday memo as an effective tool for communication. In his Monday memo, Mr. Woods shares his thoughts on the previous week as well as his expectations

for the coming week. Mr. Woods also stated, “Sometimes I will include a quote, a poem, or just something for them to think about. So the Monday memo has been a great communication tool for me to share my vision and direction for this campus.”

Of the ten principals, only two reported having faculty meetings on a regular basis. The general consensus for not having faculty meetings was that principals valued their teachers’ tutoring time. For the two principals who have faculty meetings, the expectation has been that 100% of the staff will attend. Those meetings are calendared ahead of time so that sponsors, coaches, and teachers can either push back their student activities or cancel them for that day. Principals stated the reasons for having faculty meetings as emergencies or trainings. It is important to note that the eight principals who do not have regular faculty meetings do meet with their staff on a weekly basis during department or grade level meetings.

**Being visible.** Being visible was an emergent theme regarding actions of the principals that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement. Four of the ten principals stated the importance of their visibility on their campuses. Principals noted that their visibility on campus has been highly appreciated by teachers and staff. Mr. Carrier mentioned that over the last couple of years, his teachers and staff told him that he was not visible enough. Having been told of his lack of visibility, Mr. Carrier has made it a priority to be more visible. Every opportunity that Mr. Carrier has, he can be found visiting classrooms.

In regards to visibility, Mr. Woods stated, “Visibility is a big thing for me. Students are used to seeing us in the classroom. They are used to seeing me. Personally I

set my goal to make 15 walk-throughs a day. I may not document them but I am present and visible.” Mr. McDonough’s thoughts were similar. He stated:

I am big on visibility. I am visible in the hallway as much as I possibly can. If I am on campus, I will make every effort not to miss an opportunity to walk the hallways and say hello to teachers and students. If I am on campus, I will usually make four out of five class exchanges. Many times that I am out in the hallways teachers will stop me and say hey I am having trouble with this kid or I can’t get this parent and stuff like that and so I address their concerns right there and then. I feel that that is an easy way to communicate with teachers.

For Mrs. Munoz, visibility was not only something that she did; it was also an expectation from her superintendent. She stated:

Our superintendent really sets the tone for visibility. He always tells his principals that if the superintendent makes it a point to visit every campus and their classrooms, then principals better be visiting their own classrooms. There are no excuses for not visiting classrooms. He never wants to hear that we are not visible and doesn’t care for excuses when it comes to lack of visibility by his administrative team. I think that because we as principals are very visible in our schools, our entire district is successful. It is all about leadership.

**Staying focused on campus goals.** Staying focused on campus goals was an emergent theme which described the actions of the principals that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement. Eight of the ten principals noted the importance of keeping their staff focused on their campus goals of educating all students. Principals stated most of their communication as being directed towards keeping everyone on the

same page. Mrs. River noted that in her career, 97% of problems have come from lack of communication. To keep everyone focused and on track with campus initiatives, Ms. River meets with her leadership team once a week.

Mr. Carrier stated that his primary job as principal was to keep everyone in his building safe and to support them. Further, he has to provide leadership that ensures all students and staff are headed in the right direction which is the campus goal of 90% or higher on all TAKS subjects. Mr. Carrier commented that they did not meet their campus goal of 90% on all core subjects this past year, but they did meet their second goal. They accomplished being within 3 percentage points in scoring for every subgroup on every test. According to Mr. Carrier, this was a big accomplishment because the scores showed that his staff was focused on teaching all students rather than target groups.

Mr. Woods mentioned that his staff worked very hard on educating all students they serve. He stated:

Our work ethic is never in question; however, I believe that sometimes we work or focus on the wrong thing. For example, we may spend a lot of energy on things that are not on the TAKS test thinking that it is. Our classroom instruction is something that we are constantly reviewing. In order to ensure that we are all focused on the right things, I came up with the Monday Memo. The Monday Memo has been an extremely valuable tool of communication that has kept our campus personnel on the same page.

Seven of the ten principals commented on the importance of identifying student needs through disaggregating various assessment data. During planning periods, principals noted that they meet with their departments, teams, or teachers individually to

discuss instructional strategies that will meet the needs of their students. Principals have found data driven meetings to be very effective in identifying student needs and interventions. For example, Mr. McDonough stated:

I have always been very big on target students. After each benchmark, I meet with each teacher and review the data and identify the target students that I think they should focus in on. While sharing my list with my teachers, they will tell me if they agree or disagree with my list. Teachers will let me know which students had a good day of testing but should be a target kid regardless. Sometimes students would just blow off a test and I had them as target students when they were just not giving the benchmark any effort. The big part of reviewing the benchmark data with our teachers is that we are communicating and getting on the same page.

**Building relationships with students.** Relating to students was an emergent theme of the actions of the principals that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement. Nine of the ten principals noted the most important thing that principals, teachers, and staff could do to directly impact student achievement was to build positive relationships with them. According to Mr. Carrier, students needed to know that their teachers cared about them. When students know that a teacher truly cared about them, those students would do anything for that teacher. Mr. Carrier gave the example of students who were behaving badly in one class, but then were great students in another. The difference was not the classes but the teachers teaching those classes. He emphasized that teachers who cared about students and held them accountable made all the difference in the world regarding teaching.

Teachers need to understand the students that they serve and they must be willing to build relationships. Because of this, four of the ten principals noted their practice in hiring teachers as being a key to student achievement. The four principals focused on hiring teachers who realized that students have various learning styles. In addition, they looked for teachers who best fit the culture of their campuses. Two principals stated that they wanted teachers who would be good enough to teach their own children. If they were not good enough to teach their own children, then they were not good enough to work on their campus. If they did not love working with kids, they would not be hired. Mrs. Munoz stated:

When I walk into a classroom and I am observing my teachers, the first question that I ask myself is whether or not I would want my son or daughter in this class. If the answer is “yes”, then I know I have a good teacher. If the answer is “no”, then I know that I need to do something about it. The doing something about it means I have to do what I have to do to fix the problem or get rid of the teacher. You have to treat each girl and boy as if they were your own. Unfortunately there are a lot of teachers who slip through the cracks and they just get shuffled around. This is not acceptable to me. A principal needs to be the bad guy and not renew the contract. Somebody has to do the work and do the documentation. So, our basic philosophy here is that we want teachers in all of our classrooms that would be good enough for our own children.

Principals all acknowledged the importance of advocating for students. Everyone on campus must know that students are the priority. Several principals described their leadership style as being student-centered. Their entire decision making process has been

based on what is best for students. This is seen through the actions and decisions that are made on their behalf. If something is not good for students then it should not be taking place on campus. This included teachers. When teachers are not doing their job, it is up to principals to step in and correct the problem.

**Scheduling.** Scheduling was also an emergent theme of the actions of the principals that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement. Five of ten principals referred to scheduling as an important aspect to student academic achievement. The five principals allotted time during the day for teachers to meet with one another and discuss instructional issues. A few of the campuses had an extra planning period built into the schedule which allowed principals to have in-depth conversation with teachers and staff about instructions and interventions for struggling students.

Two principals noted that their teachers were not having the opportunity to visit each others classrooms. By having a conference and a planning period, the principals were able to create a schedule that allowed teachers to go and observe their peers. By having teachers observe each other, teachers had their awareness of campus happenings elevated. Teachers were able to see best practices from teachers in the same building. Not only did teachers observe one another, they were able to see their students in different settings. This helped with discipline as Mr. Lewis stated, “If I am a science teacher on a team and I am having heck with Juan or Johnny but he's not having any trouble in other classes, I want see what they are doing to keep him engaged so that I don't continue having the same problem in mine.”

Principals in general understood the significance that scheduling has played on their campus. They understood and valued a teacher's time, but at the same time they all

stated the importance of collaboration. Because collaboration was valued by these principals, they each scheduled times throughout the week for teachers, staff, and administrators to get together and reflect on their students and teaching practices. For example, Ms. River stated that she considered teaching “too isolated so I came up with opportunities for teachers to collaborate with one another and share solid teaching strategies.” Her goal is for teachers to collaborate with one another as much as possible.

#### **Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 investigated strategies that principals of high achieving schools utilized to establish a culture of success. Emergent themes included knowing school history, committing to success, supporting teachers, and embracing student cultures.

**Knowing school history.** An emergent theme of strategies that principals utilized to establish a culture of success was that of the principal knowing school history. Nine of ten principals acknowledged their school’s culture as important. Principals mentioned that their schools had a strong history of success. Mr. Lewis commented that he has started every school year with students by sharing with them the school’s history. Mr. Lewis further stated that knowing the history of a school is important because it allowed students to see how far they have come. When Mr. Carrier became principal at this school, he understood how successful they had been. Having known the school’s history and its success, Mr. Carrier did not implement major changes during his first year as principal. He expected his teachers to continue doing what they had been doing and his job for that first year was to observe.

Mr. Woods and Mrs. Malone both stated that their schools were full of tradition. By having campuses that are full of tradition and well respected within the community, both principals were able to capitalize on the implementation of various cultural initiatives. For example, Mr. Woods wanted to establish their school's tradition into a culture of success. In order for students to think about their years beyond Sellers Middle School, Mr. Woods changed their school name to Sellers University. With the new name, students were now expected to act more like university students. The name change also made students start hearing the word "university" which was something unfamiliar to them. Mrs. Malone stated that there were generations and generations of students, parents, and grandparents that attended Lamar. Because the school had been there for so long, Mrs. Malone understood the significance of the strong ties that existed between her middle school and the community. By knowing her school's history and all the pride that came with it, she has been able to unite students and motivate them to excel above other area middle schools.

None knew their school better than Mr. Rutkowski. He has been principal in his building for the last 22 years. Mr. Rutkowski noted that many of his students' parents were his students at one point in his career. This has facilitated communication between him, parents, and the community. For Mr. McDonough, students on his campus love competition. By knowing his campus, Mr. McDonough utilized competition as a way to engage students. The motivating force behind their competition has been and continues to be the middle school that is located on the other side of their parking lot. Students on Mr. McDonough's campus have worked hard not to be out done by their competition and that has proven to be all the motivation that they have needed to be successful.

**Committing to success.** An emergent theme of strategies that principals utilized to establish a culture of success was principals committing to success. Eight of the ten principals elaborated on the high expectations that their staff has for their students. Principals also stated that commitment from their teachers played a big role in students meeting the campus expectation of academic success. For example, Mr. Woods acknowledged that his teachers' commitment to student success has allowed them to be considered a successful school. Commitment to Mr. Woods was not something that teachers expressed in words, but rather was demonstrated through their actions. Monday through Thursday, from four to six, teachers were on campus tutoring students. Though this may seem normal, it was quite interesting to find that his teachers did not get paid for tutoring. It was the teacher's drive for student success that motivated his teachers to stay.

Mrs. Malone noted that her culture of success also began with high expectations. She explained that their school has achieved the rating of Recognized for the last 13 of 14 years. The generations of kids that come through her doors are made aware of the history of success that has endured and most students want to be a part of that success. From the day that students are enrolled on her campus, they understand that they are expected to be successful in the classroom.

Mr. Rutkowski and Mr. Booth both stated that their teachers are committed to the success of their students. With high expectations at both schools, principals noted that their teachers would give up conference periods and eat their lunch while they tutored students. For Mr. Rutkowski, commitment to success has translated into no wasted time while school is in session. He stated that his campus did not allow free days. Students are expected to learn and be productive every single school day of the year. Mr.

Rutkowski commented that the taxpayers did not pay them for free days, but rather for them to work hard every day.

At Mr. McDonough's school, teachers took great pride in ensuring their students were academically successful. Their commitment to students' success was evident in the story that Mr. McDonough shared:

If you were to see the building (Resaca), it is old and rundown, but it shows you that it doesn't matter. When it rained, all the teachers at Resaca had buckets in their classroom that they would put out in the areas where the roof would leak. What is amazing is that teachers will put out the mop buckets while teaching their class. They don't allow those types of things to be distractions. They always continued teaching. I also remember having power outages. Lights would go out and as I am going room to room, every teacher would still be teaching with their whole class engaged in the lesson. Even though the lights were out for 30 minutes teachers would not allow it to be a distraction.

**Motivating teachers.** Motivating teachers was an emergent theme of strategies that principals utilized to establish a culture of success. Motivating teachers was something principals all noted. Mr. Carrier stated that his leadership team understood, "if we keep teachers motivated, they will keep students motivated." Principals commented on various ways they keep their teachers motivated and engaged in teaching students. The most common and effective way this was done was by acknowledging their hard work. Beyond everyday praise, a few principals offered teachers snacks on Fridays as they left for the day. On other days, principals took the time to personally cook or serve their teachers lunch. The importance of motivating and supporting teachers could be

summarized in the words of Mr. Rutkowski. He stated that he, as a principal, could not be successful unless his teachers were successful. Because of that, he ensured that teachers have all the resources and support that they need to effectively teach their students.

**Embracing student cultures.** Another emergent theme of strategies that principals utilized to establish a culture of success was principals embracing student cultures. Three of the ten principals shared their stories in ways that they have handled perceived student cultural issues. Each of them mentioned that they must first understand the issue before moving forward to resolve it. For example, Mr. Lewis stated that there were some issues with some of his African American students. When he was made aware of the issues, he discussed them with his administrative team. One of his team members told him that she would have to handle the issue because he was “too white” to understand. She was right; she was able to address those issues and changed the whole mindset of those students. Mr. Lewis noted that the students that his dean was working with related to her not because she was African American, but because she understood the underlying issues that these students brought with them to school.

Mr. Woods commented that principals should understand that students do have some cultural differences. According to Mr. Woods, principals should acknowledge, celebrate, and embrace those cultural differences. As most principals in this study would agree, Mr. Woods stated that all should be treated the same regardless of culture or race. The only reason for treating students differently was because of their different learning needs.

**Research Question 5**

Research Question 5 investigated the beliefs that principals of high achieving schools have that influence their practice with Hispanic students. Emergent themes included having the right teachers, caring for all kids, teaching all students, and planning for success.

**Having the right teachers.** An emergent theme of the beliefs that principals of high achieving schools had that influenced their practice with Hispanic students was having the right teachers. Every principal in this study noted that they have the best teaching staff. Principals elaborated on the importance of having the right teachers with the right students in order to close the achievement gap. Mr. Carrier mentioned, “the staff makes all the difference in the world and I have the greatest teachers ever.” He further mentioned that having all the technology in the world will never replace an effective teacher. Teachers are what matters. Along the same lines, Mr. Lewis stated, “If you get the right teachers with the right students, they will be successful.” For Mrs. Malone and Mrs. Munoz, having the right teachers was so important that they expected their teachers to teach their students as if it were their own child.

**Caring for all kids.** Caring for all kids was an emergent theme of the beliefs that principals of high achieving schools had that influenced their practice with Hispanic students. All ten principals in this study commented on the need for school employees to truly believe in and care for their students. Three principals specifically noted that they will not hire teachers or keep teachers that did not care for kids as if they were their own. Further, Mr. Carrier commented that he has personally worked with struggling kids just by checking up on them. Whenever progress reports or report cards are completed, Mr.

Carrier has found the time to locate certain students and has asked them about their grades. These students are often not in programs, but by him taking the time to ask about their grades, “those kids know that someone cares about them.”

Principals noted that students should all be treated with the same respect and high expectations. Student differences should be acknowledged but only in the way their needs are being met. Ms. River noted that she had found that teachers have a higher rate of success when they have strong relationships with students. She further commented that strong relationships with students have shown them that they are cared about. Students knowing that they are cared about has played a big role in their school’s success.

Several principals noted their direct involvement with students. Principals commented on home visits, visits to hospitals, as well as small group meetings with students. For example, Mr. Woods mentioned that he had a student who was diagnosed with a bad case of swine flu. Mr. Woods made it a point to visit that student at the hospital. Where most principals would avoid the contagious virus, Mr. Woods did not and made the visit. Mrs. Munoz commented on an incident where one of their students lost his family when their trailer was burned to the ground. Mrs. Munoz had her family liaison connect that student’s surviving family with social services for support. For Mr. Lewis, he and his staff make home visits to all their sixth grade students at the beginning of every year.

**Teaching all students.** Teaching all students was an emergent theme of the beliefs that principals of high achieving schools had that influenced their practice with Hispanic students. All principals noted that they wanted teachers who truly believed that all students could learn. As Mr. Booth commented, “As administrators or teachers, we

need to say one thing. All kids can learn, we expect all kids to learn, and they all need to be treated the same.” Ensuring that all students are successful in the classroom was the minimum expectation for principals. Regardless of race, all students were expected to be academically successful. Mr. Rutkowski stated his challenge, “This year I challenged our students to be the first school in our area to Exemplary by having a 100% passing rate on TAKS.”

Mr. Ibarra firmly believed that his school’s success has come from the fact that they have taught all of their students based on their individual needs. Mr. Woods and Mr. Lewis stated that teaching all students has meant that their teachers have recognized the various learning styles of students and adjusted their teaching style to accommodate those learning styles. Mrs. Malone attributed the success of her Hispanic students to her teachers doing an excellent job of connecting the core subjects across all curriculums. Students made the connections in various settings and as a result they have scored better on assessments. When it comes to educating all students, Mrs. Munoz noted that educators cannot try to do it all at once. Educators have to take students and educate them one at a time. She emphasized that it is only after all the work was done that we would be able to look back and see the impact that we have made on students’ individual lives.

**Planning for success.** Planning for success was another emergent theme of the beliefs that principals of high achieving schools had that influenced their practice with Hispanic students. Every principal in this study commented on the importance of having a plan in place for students to be successful. Principals elaborated on planning time and the importance of working together as a campus to achieve its goals. In creating campus

goals, principals utilized data from both formal and informal assessments to identify campus strengths and weaknesses. Once needs were identified, principals along with staff members created a plan to address those needs.

Seven of the ten principals stated that they focused much of their time, personnel, and resources on their target students as identified by the data. These students were often required to attend after school tutorials or placed in classes with teachers who could best meet their needs. Once a plan was in place, principals noted the importance of communication and follow up with teachers to ensure that progress with those students was being made. A few principals elaborated on ways they monitored their teachers and student progress. For example, Mr. Lewis stated that he monitored teachers by evaluating the student value added reports. These reports gave Mr. Lewis the breakdown on how much students have learned through their previous assessments.

Several principals mentioned the importance of accountability when planning for success. Accountability pertained to all school stakeholders. In order for their campuses to continue their success, students, parents, staff members, teachers, and administrators must all do their part to ensure students are getting the support and resources needed to be successful. Mr. Ibarra noted that his philosophy is “thirds.” For students to reach their true potential, students, teachers, and the school must divide the responsibility by three. By having divided the responsibility into three, everyone has to do their part in making their students successful. Mr. Woods has done the same thing with his campus. His philosophy is “7-17.” His campus has never spent time worrying about the seventeen hours that students spend outside of their school; instead they have focused on meeting the needs of their students during the seven hours that they have them. For both

principals, this system has worked well because teachers and staff have not spent precious school time on problems and issues that they have no control over.

### **Summary**

This section summarizes the chapter. Concerning the first research question, which investigated the ways school principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools account for the socioeconomic status of their students, the emergent themes were meeting the basic needs of students, building relationships, having high expectations, providing additional support, engaging students through extra-curricular activities, and being aware of students served. Addressing the second research question, which investigated the way school principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools involved parents in the educational process, emergent themes were communicating with purpose, welcoming environment, providing engaging activities, and appreciating family dynamics. The third research question investigated the actions of the principals that had a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement and found that emergent themes were communicating effectively, being visible, staying focused on goals, relating to students, and scheduling.

The fourth research question investigated the strategies that principals of high achieving schools utilized to establish a culture of success and found that emergent themes were knowing school history, committing to success, supporting teachers, and embracing student cultures. The fifth research question, which investigated the beliefs that principals of high achieving schools had that influenced their practice with Hispanic students, found that emergent themes were having the right teachers, caring for all kids, teaching all students, and planning for success.

In Chapter XV the narrative analysis of the findings were presented. In Chapter XVI, the researcher reports conclusions, implications, and makes recommendations for further studies.

## **Chapter XVI**

### **Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

This study investigated the beliefs and effective practices of Texas school principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools. This chapter begins with a summary of the study which includes an overview of the problem, the purpose statement and research questions, the design of the study, the participants, data collection and analysis, and a summary of the major findings. The Conclusions section contains an analysis of the major findings. In the section Implications for Practice the researcher offers recommendations of actions for practitioners to implement into their practice. The section Recommendations for Further Research contains suggestions for future research on the topic. The last section of this chapter includes the researcher's brief concluding remarks.

#### **Summary of the Study**

The Hispanic population has dramatically increased over the last decade (Suro & Passel, 2003). This increase has led to more Hispanic students being enrolled in our public schools (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008). With many Hispanic students not succeeding in our public education system, many school administrators are searching for effective practices that will help them better serve their Hispanic population (Kuykendall, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify effective practices and beliefs of school principals in majority Hispanic mid-level schools.

**Overview of the problem.** Closing the achievement gap is seen as being important not just for the education system but for our economy, our social stability, and our moral health as a nation (Evans, 2005). As the Hispanic school-age population in the United States continues to grow, it is expected to reach 28 million in the year 2050 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). According to Fry and Gonzales (2008), this growth will be a 166% increase from the 2006 Hispanic school-age population of 11 million. With the Hispanic population increasing at a substantial rate, state and federal accountability reforms are putting pressure on schools to close the achievement gap of such historically low performing groups of students (Kim, Zabel, Stiefel, & Schwartz, 2006).

**Purpose statement and research questions.** The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the beliefs and effective practices of Texas school principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools. The research questions explored were:

1. In what ways do school principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools account for the socioeconomic status of their students?
2. In what ways do principals of schools with high achieving majority Hispanic students involve parents in the educational process?
3. What are the actions of principals that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement?
4. What strategies do principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools use to establish a culture of success?
5. What beliefs do principals have that influence their practice with Hispanic students?

**Design of the study.** The research design of this study was qualitative with a phenomenological narrative approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative researchers study happenings in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Creswell also indicated that to study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. Creswell further wrote in his qualitative definition that the final written report or presentation includes voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and the complex description and interpretation of the problem as it extends the literature or signals a call for action.

**Participants.** The participants in this study were 10 highly effective Texas middle school principals. The selection of the participants was purposive in order to include the stories of principals who met certain criteria for effectiveness. These criteria for selection included the following: (a) the principals had to be principals on the same campus for at least two years; (b) the campus where these principals served had to have a majority Hispanic student population, which was defined as having 51% or more Hispanic students enrolled on their campus; and (c) the schools in which these principals served had achieved a state rating of Exemplary or Recognized in the previous two years. The Just4Kids website was utilized for identifying schools with high achieving mid-level

schools with a majority 51% Hispanic student enrollment. Once the list of schools was created through the Just4Kids website, the TEA website was then used to provide the schools' ratings for the previous two years.

**Data collection and analysis.** Following suggestions by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the researcher collected data by audio recording the interview as well as scripting the answers given by the participants. Each participant was initially contacted by e-mail and phone and later interviewed in person. Each participant was given the research questions that were asked in the face-to-face interview in advance. The e-mails and phone calls were informal and were also the first step in contacting the participants. The phone conversations lasted no more than 15 minutes. The face-to-face interview lasted approximately 45 minutes with an additional 15 minutes where participants were asked for clarification on certain responses given by the participant. The audiotape was later transcribed into field texts. The researcher also wrote notes on the body language of the participant as each answered the interview questions.

**Summary of major findings.** Major findings of this study are summarized by research questions.

**Research question 1.** This question investigated how principals accounted for the socioeconomic status of their students. The study found that meeting the basic needs of their students required building relationships, having high expectations, providing additional support, engaging students through extra-curricular activities, and being aware of students they served: All were elements of principals accounting for the socioeconomic status of their students.

**Research question 2.** This question investigated how principals involved parents in the educational process. The study found that communicating with purpose, establishing a welcoming environment, providing engaging activities, and appreciating family dynamics were all elements of principals involving parents in the educational process of their student.

**Research question 3.** This question investigated principal actions that had a direct impact on academic achievement. The study found that communicating effectively, being visible, staying focused on goals, relating to students, and scheduling were all elements of the actions of principals that have a direct impact on academic achievement.

**Research question 4.** This question investigated strategies that principals believed established a culture of success. The study found that knowing school history, committing to success, motivating teachers, and embracing cultures were all elements of the strategies that principals have used to establish a culture of success.

**Research question 5.** This question investigated principal beliefs that influenced their practice. The study found that having the right teachers, teaching all students, planning for success, and caring for all kids were elements of the beliefs that principals have that influence their practice with Hispanic students.

## **Conclusions**

This qualitative study investigated the effective practices and beliefs of principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools. Findings from this study affirm that passionate principals who are involved, engaged, and lead by example are able to transcend the social and economic barriers that separate them from their students and achieve success. Other findings include the importance of building relationships with the

students and recognizing and then meeting their needs. Further, findings from principals in this study emphasize the importance of “keeping the main thing, the main thing” (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994). In other words, principals supported teachers in focusing on the importance of academic success in school for all students. Based on the findings from face-to-face interviews, specific conclusions are discussed in terms of the research questions that guided the study.

**Research question 1.** In what ways do school principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools account for the socioeconomic status of their students? Based on the findings it can be concluded that principals of high achieving Hispanic majority mid-level schools build relationships with their students that lead to better understanding the many obstacles that students who are economically disadvantaged bring to school. Based on their understanding of those obstacles, principals provided school resources and community partnerships to better meet the needs of those students. Further, it can be concluded that principals held students to high expectations regardless of their race or cultural background. These conclusions based on the study findings are consistent with the research by Terrell and Lindsey (2007) which stated that culturally proficient leaders are committed to educating all students at high levels through knowing and using the students’ cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning styles within the selected curricular and instructional context.

**Research question 2.** In what ways do principals of schools with high achieving majority Hispanic students involve parents in the educational process? The findings in this study lead to the conclusion that principals understood the importance of parental involvement in the education of their children. Though there were struggles noted,

principals acknowledged that most parents were willing to do their part when expectations were clearly communicated to them. This suggests that effective principals make a commitment to providing opportunities for parent involvement regardless of the level of involvement on their campus. These conclusions based on the findings in this study were consistent with the literature which noted that parent involvement is the single most important factor in determining high school completion (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Further, VanVoorhis (2003) stated that increased parental involvement is crucial to the academic success of students; consequently, educators should encourage participation at every given opportunity. Principals in this study clearly understood the importance of involving parents as evidenced by their efforts to involve them.

**Research question 3.** What are the actions of principals that have a direct impact on Hispanic academic achievement? Effective communication and visibility are important in positively impacting student academic achievement. Principals also demonstrated a commitment to being instructional leaders and keeping their staff focused on campus goals. In addition, whenever funds were available, principals hired additional personnel to help lower class sizes or to provide more individualized support to struggling students. By having lower class sizes, teachers were better able to build strong relationships with their students which directly impacted student learning. This leads to a conclusion consistent with the literature which stated effective communication as a core component of the successful principal (Arnold, Perry, Watson, Minatra, & Swartz, 2006). Further, effective school principals share similar approaches to influencing student success: developing strong teachers and implementing effective organizational procedures (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Effective

principals also provided smaller classes for teachers which was also consistent with the literature which stated that smaller classes benefit at-risk students most by providing closer communication between staff and student which allows for more personal contact and less opportunity for students to fall between the cracks (Zvoch, 2006).

**Research question 4.** What strategies do principals of high achieving majority Hispanic schools use to establish a culture of success? The principals in this study understood the importance of culture and climate on their campuses. They committed to utilizing incentives for students and staff as well as acknowledging on a regular basis the hard work of students and staff. Findings also suggest the conclusion that a culture of success comes from the commitment to success by the teachers as well as the support they are given from campus and district administrators. These conclusions were consistent with the literature which stated that whenever a school culture supports the assumption that all students have the capacity to learn and achieve, the staff and students have the freedom to modify previously held philosophies about how students learn (Burke, Baca, Picus, & Jones, 2002). Once educators commit to the belief that all students can achieve, a school's principal and teachers can explore alternative strategies to help underachieving students become more successful (Burke, Baca, Picus, & Jones, 2002).

**Research question 5.** What beliefs do principals have that influence their practice with Hispanic students? Without a doubt, principals in this study understood their responsibility for educating *all* students. Principals in this study believed that their teachers were their most important asset, specifically, teachers who were able to vary their teaching styles to meet the needs of the various learning styles of their students.

Principals stated that teachers were most effective when they related to students, had high expectations for all students, and held students accountable to those expectations.

Findings lead to the conclusion that principals must emphasize the importance of planning for success as vital to a successful campus that educates all students. These findings were consistent with the literature which noted that the responsibility for ensuring that quality school experience exists for every student is the responsibility of the campus principal (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005). Also, research indicated that specific approaches to instructional delivery can effectively impact the results of student achievement for various student groups (Curtin, 2006; Lessow-Hurley, 2003).

### **Implications for Practice**

The Hispanic student population in our public schools continues to increase. In addition, the achievement gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students has continued to widen. To close the achievement gap, educational leaders must come together and share best practices on how to best meet the challenge of educating all students.

For principals to identify ways to better meet the needs of their Hispanic students, the findings in this study provide them with proven instructional practices from principals in high achieving majority Hispanic mid-level schools. Principals in this study elaborated on effective practices that have allowed them to be successful in educating all of their students. These effective practices must be student-centered and simple to implement. Suggestions to implement for practice include the following:

1. Provide staff development that identifies ways for educators to build relationships with students.

2. Provide staff development that explores cultural understandings.
3. Involve parents in the work of the school.
4. Hire staff with care to ensure that individuals are committed to respecting and understanding their students and holding students accountable.
5. Engage students and staff in understanding the legacy of the community school.
6. Involve faculty and staff in book studies that emphasize best teaching practices with economically disadvantaged or diverse students.
7. Implement and follow through on a schedule that allows principals to meet with students and staff on a regular basis.
8. Hold themselves and teachers accountable to meeting the needs of all their students.
9. Create campus goals based on student needs identified by data, clearly communicate the goals to students, staff, and community, and also make clear the plan for meeting those goals.
10. Be visible in the process of meeting the needs of all students on campus.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Because there is a need to provide the best schools for all students, it is important to consider multiple ways to investigate what effective principals are doing on their campuses that support achievement for all students. Other research recommendations include the following:

1. Interview teachers to understand what beliefs and effective strategies they use in the classroom to support student learning.
2. Interview students themselves to investigate what they consider most effective in supporting them in school.
3. Hold focus groups in the community to investigate the support of parents and the community that leads to successful schools.
4. Research effective programs and community services that meet the social needs of families and students outside of school.
5. Interview teachers who graduated from the same district that they are now teaching in to investigate this impact on student achievement.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study provided insight into the effective practices and beliefs of principals in high achieving Hispanic majority schools. Through the process, I was enlightened to practical methods of educating all students. As I interviewed the principals in this study, it was apparent that they truly believed in and cared about their students. Each of the principals' approach in student-centered leadership was refreshing. What I was most impressed with was the fact that principals in this study did not tolerate excuses for lack of student success. They each led with high expectations and accepted nothing less than a student's best effort. I believe that it is this type of leadership that will eventually close the achievement gap among all students.

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Johnny Briseño graduated from Pearsall High School in Pearsall, Texas, in 1994. He attended Texas Lutheran University and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Kinesiology in May 1999. Briseño attended and earned a Master of Science degree in Educational Mid-Management from the University of Houston at Clear Lake in May 2005. He was accepted into the 2007 Doctoral Cohort at Lamar University where he earned a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership degree in May 2010.

Briseño began teaching in the Pasadena Independent School District in 2001. He taught ESL at Bondy Intermediate School for two years before transferring to South Houston High School where he taught ESL and coached football and baseball. After teaching for three years, Briseño served as assistant principal at South Houston High School for four years. Briseño is currently serving his second year as campus principal at Rancho Isabella Elementary in the Angleton Independent School District.

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