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A Case Study of the Impact of the Learning Focused Schools Model on Culture in a Middle School Setting

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A Case Study of the Impact of the Learning Focused Schools Model on Culture in a
Middle School Setting

By
Jonathan Fitzgerald Kay

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

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Abstract

A Case Study of the Impact of Learning Focused Schools Model on Culture in a Middle School Setting. Kay, Jonathan Fitzgerald, 2012: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Educational Improvement/School Culture/Climate/Collaborative Teaming/Student Learning/Effective Schools.

This dissertation was designed to evaluate the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on culture in a middle school setting. The school used in this study is a Title I school with low student achievement. The Learning Focused Schools model was implemented to provide comprehensive school reform strategies and solutions based on exemplary practices and research-based strategies. These practices and strategies focus on five areas: Planning, Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and School Organization. The study analyzed the effects of the Learning Focused Schools model on the school culture and how that, in turn, affects the academic achievement of the students.

The researcher compiled and analyzed data from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Surveys that were administered before, during, and after the full implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. The Learning Focused Impact Survey was developed and administered to teachers at the school to gain insight into the culture of the school and how much of an effect on that culture occurred due to the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. North Carolina Report Card Standardized Test Score data were used to measure the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model student achievement at the school.

The findings of the Teacher Working Conditions survey and the Learning Focused Impact survey indicate that the Learning Focused Schools model had a positive impact on the school's culture. There was no evidence that the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model had any impact on student achievement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research study was designed to ascertain the impact on the culture of a school that is caused by the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. In this study an overview of the school was presented to explain the school's decision in implementing the suggested reform model. The study presents research findings from experts in the field of education to demonstrate a correlation between a school's climate and the achievement of its students. The study also provides evidence of the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on schools that have chosen to implement it as a model of reform. Chapter 1 explains the purpose of the study, why it is important, and the problem that it seeks to address. Chapter 2 reviews the literature that supports the study, the line of thinking by the authors, the experts in the field, and the research design. Chapter 3 describes and outlines the methods used to gather, analyze and desegregate the data collected by the study. Chapter 4 displays and desegregates the data collected, and lastly, Chapter 5 discusses and concludes the results of the findings and explains its significance, while offering ideas for future studies.

Nature of the Problem

The rate at which the students of the inner-city school used in this study are progressing toward achieving an adequate level of proficiency in the various academic disciplines is below the state and district average as depicted in the data gathered from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Over the years, the students change, but the methods to teach them have remained the same and so have the results. In an article by Wolk (1998), the researcher mentioned that a failing-school strategy might give the appearance of making progress without fundamentally changing the culture of schools, which is required to enable real teaching and learning. Studies have shown that

student achievement is very closely linked to the beliefs of the school leaders and the culture of the school. According to McCay (2001), principals must be willing to change their own thinking and practices before they can lead others in implementing the dynamic challenges of school reform. School administrators have a challenging task of creating the type of atmosphere that is conducive to student achievement. Green (2000) stated that the school could not rise above the level of how school leaders think. “Leaders who can learn how to rethink and challenge their reality will own their performance. Student learning cannot move forward unless school leaders rethink the thinking behind their efforts” (Green, 2000, p. 35). Having a school culture that promotes student achievement and learning is critical at every school level (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996).

Although a positive culture of a school is vitally important, it would seem that many schools and districts have only looked into programs and reform models that change teaching habits and styles. In 1983, the *A Nation at Risk* literature was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report spurred many districts and educational leaders to look at school improvement models and to search for things that could be done to produce better results and increase the American students’ global competitiveness. This document also leads educators to look into different programs in an effort to adjust teaching methods and techniques so that the full impact of a teacher’s ability could be realized in the classroom. Year after year, teachers enter the profession with very limited knowledge of the best teaching practices. Many times, college courses focus on conceptual ideas and educational jargon instead of skills and techniques that can be applied in the classroom. These terms and ideas give novice teachers a false sense of preparedness as they are then sent to stand before a class. As a result, teachers arrive their first day of school without knowing exactly what is expected

of them by the schools in which they work and are shocked by the diversity of the classrooms.

In the spring of 2007, a project called “Lessons Learned” was conducted by the National Comprehensive Center of Teacher Quality and Public Agenda. This project was designed to gather information and data on multiple outcomes; one is of particular interest. One of the goals in the study was to determine the preparedness of the new teachers entering into the public schools. In the study, a survey was given to new teachers from across the country which asked them how they felt about their level of preparedness in the areas of content, discipline, teaching strategies, and how much support and relevant professional development they received from their college or university, as well as from the school district in which they worked. The data indicated that 70% of the teachers entered the profession with a B.A. degree in the field of education, 11% completed a fifth year program, and 15% percent had a master’s degree in education with an undergraduate degree in some other field. The remaining 4% reported that they had received an alternative certification. The study also highlighted that teachers were not specifically prepared to deal with the diversity of the American classrooms. More than half, 53% of middle and high school teachers, say their preparation was too theoretical (Rochkind & Ott, 2007). Almost 70% of the teachers surveyed in this study expressed a lack of understanding and preparation for the cultural differences of the students in their classrooms. The survey expressed that the teachers felt they had been exposed to proper training, but that the training was not aligned to the reality of what they would encounter once in the classroom. The teachers seemed to be “caught off guard” by the diversity of the backgrounds, socioeconomics, ethnicities, and skill sets of the students that comprise a single classroom, and only 38% of the teachers

strongly agreed that the students were “learning and responding” to their teaching (Rochkind & Ott, 2007, p. 9).

Based on what we know about the impact of the school’s culture on the new staff, this is where the school’s culture can assist them in the transition. Danin and Bacon (1999) explained that teachers, new to a school environment, must quickly learn the culture and the related nuances that go along with the singular and collective personalities of the staff. The culture of a school can have a direct effect on a first-year teacher’s experience (Danin & Bacon, 1999, p. 99). “The culture of a building consists of, not only the individuals inside its walls, but also the school’s governing norms and procedural structures” (Danin & Bacon, 1999, p. 100). Every organization has a culture, that history and underlying set of unwritten expectations that shape everything about the organization. A school culture influences the way people think, feel, and act. Being able to understand and shape the culture is “key” to a school’s success in promoting staff and student learning (Peterson, 2002). Morgan (1997) wrote that a school’s culture is created by all of these factors working together and then overtime, become a fairly uniform set of behaviors for the members that are part of that school. “Every school has a set of expectations about what can be discussed at staff meetings, what constitutes good teaching techniques, how willing the staff is to change, and the importance of staff development” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 8). The effect of school culture can have a wide spectrum of outcomes, and the importance of school culture cannot be undervalued. Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) wrote that having a school culture that promotes student achievement and learning is critical at every school level and that the closest researchers in educational administration have come to employing a cultural construct for analytical purposes is the exploration of organizational cultures as contexts for leadership. Each

person that holds a leadership position in the school must bare this in mind. The behaviors of the school staff will be a reflection of what the school leaders hold as valuable.

The tenets of the Learning Focused Schools model have components that address the specifics of the school's culture which has been highlighted as one of the nine correlates of effective schools as identified by Kirk and Jones (2004) in the assessment report of Effective Schools. The nine correlates are as follows:

- instructional leadership
- clear and focused mission
- climate of high expectations
- frequent monitoring of student progress
- opportunity to learn and student time on task
- safe and orderly environment
- positive home and school relations
- professional development
- school culture

One can argue that it is the school culture that can address all of the correlates if it is molded to the expectations of the leadership in the school. A school's culture is listed among the nine correlates; however, the other eight correlates are embedded within or they have some bearing in the culture of the school. It is noted that some cultures are extremely positive and produce great outcomes for students and foster good teaching and working habits for the staff. Within the district this study was conducted, schools possess a strong push for professional learning communities. These learning communities are also a major reform effort instituted to initiate change within the school's culture. In schools

with effective professional learning communities, the culture possesses a widely shared sense of purpose and values; norms of continuous learning and improvement; a commitment to and sense of responsibility for the learning of all students; collaborative, collegial relationships and opportunities for staff to reflect; collective inquiry; and share personal practices (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002). New teachers are immersed into social relations and professional roles inherent within the school communities that involve academic and extracurricular responsibilities (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993). Professional culture, as a distinct entity in each school, influences new teachers' roles and contributions to school and curricular initiatives (Williams, 2003). Peterson and Deal (2002) contended that staff learning is reinforced when sharing ideas, working collaboratively to learn, using newly learned skills, and being recognized for accomplishments are recognized symbolically and orally in faculty meetings and other school ceremonies. In addition, these schools often have a common professional language, communal stories of success, extensive opportunities for quality professional development, and ceremonies that celebrate improvements, collaboration, and learning (Peterson & Deal, 2002). When all of these elements are coupled together, they produce a school climate that is conducive to student learning and provides the expectations and resources that help that process along.

The unmistakable power of the school culture can also have the opposite effect on student achievement. Negative cultures are often marred with norms and values that hinder the school's mission and stifle student growth. Cultures that are without clearly defined goals and objectives, find comfort with the status quo, and make excuses and post blame beyond the scope of the school. Low expectations for student behavior and academic achievement are typically the most destructive types of cultures. Peterson and

Deal (2002) explained that schools with negative school cultures lack clear sense of purpose, have norms that reinforce inertia, blame students for lack of progress, discourage collaboration, and often have actively hostile relations among staff. These schools are not healthy for effective staff and students. In a school, most teachers' thought patterns, expectations, and behaviors are learned, perpetuated, and reinforced by the culture of the school. Positive and negative behaviors begin with culture in the school. The most positive cultures value staff members who help lead their own development, create well-defined improvement plans, organize study groups, and learn in a variety of ways. Cultures that celebrate, recognize, and support learning bolster the professional community.

The United States Department of Education (USDE, 2000) Office of Elementary and Secondary Education produced literature that references obstacles to reforming urban high schools. One of the many things cited was a prevalent low expectation for the students and the community that the school served. The authors wrote, "Many reform efforts will continue to struggle to succeed if the public does not believe that children and youth in cities are worth investing in financially and educationally. Districts must confront negative perceptions about the futility of investing in urban students and provide more compelling pictures of urban school successes" (USDE, 2000). These ideas of low expectations for the students permeate throughout the district and the cities where many of these types of schools are present. Pressures to overcome this line of thinking must come from the stakeholders and the staff members within the schools, which again points back the culture of the school. Overcoming this is difficult when the staff of the schools do not have a shared vision for the students' success.

A shared vision of high standards for all students is essential to high school

reform. Schools need to clearly articulate their vision and high standards to the students, staff, and the community. Schools must also be able to supply the resources needed to provide the quality teachers, instructional materials, adequate facilities, etc. to ensure that all students reach those high standards. (USDE, 2000)

Moreover, the level of staff commitment also determines the school climate.

School reform is a difficult challenge, thus creating the necessary environment to sustain the commitment of school staff is essential for change. Urban districts must remain committed to goals that are often difficult to reach, such as smaller class sizes, smaller schools, ending social promotion, increasing parent involvement, and holding all students to high standards.

The School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) (ASSC, 2004) was developed to allow for in-depth studies of a climate in a particular school. This instrument examines the health, function, and performance of the school by focusing on a variety of aspects within the building. The term climate, broadly used by the SCAI, is one component of the eight primary dimensions of a school. However, all of these dimensions together make up what could be considered the school's climate. These dimensions are

- Appearance and physical plant
- Faculty relations
- Students' interactions
- Leadership/decision making
- Discipline environment
- Learning environment
- Attitude

- Culture school-community relations

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the selected urban middle school's culture and thus the academic achievement of the students within the school. Students that typically populate our most needy and challenging schools (Title I), such as the one used in this study, tend to have parents that value education but are not in a position to provide support of their child's academic advancement for any number of reasons. In the climate of the national economy and job market, parents of students in Title I schools are under even more pressure to make ends meet while trying to be part of their child's educational success. In the article, "Connecting Families and Schools to Help Our Children Succeed" (USDE, 2000), it is stated that the schools must respond to the needs of the parents and provide additional support necessary for them to be involved in their children's learning. President George Bush noted the importance of parental involvement as he made this part of his Goals 2000 initiatives. The issues present themselves in the fact that parents are either maintaining the rest of the family or working long hours to provide for the family. Therefore, these parents often do not have the time to either tutor or supervise the students to ensure the completion of quality homework. Often, the parents are younger and they were not successful in school, thus lacking the ability to aid their children. Bowman (1994) concluded that children from poor and minority families have been judged to be inadequate because they do not already know nor do they easily learn school curricula. Inadequate communication, inaccurate assessment, and inappropriate education are the inevitable results of poor and minority children labeled as delayed, and their families labeled as dysfunctional because they have different resources, lifestyles,

and belief systems. As a result, student and the school's success are tied to the climate and the ability to overcome these boundaries.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as many children of color, consistently achieve below the national average in mathematics and language skills, with the gap widening as children continue throughout their time in public education (Bowman, 1994). While some children are at risk for abnormal development because of the deprivations inherent in living in poverty or in crisis-ridden families, most poor and minority children are developmentally normal and their families are able to carry out the essential child rearing functions. Poor and minority children's range of adaptive and learning capabilities is as broad as that of any other group of children. The low academic performance of these students may also be affected by the difference in life experiences. Depending on the students' socioeconomic group, they may not share the same beliefs and attitudes regarding the importance of a formal education. Studies have shown that the way information is presented to students renders different results depending solely on the cultural exposure of the students. Vasquez (1990) suggested Hispanic students learn better in a cooperative environment, probably based on the impact of the extended family that is so pronounced in the culture. Shade (1982) wrote that African American students are more people-oriented, whereas Caucasians are more object-oriented. These differences can have major implications on how a student learns. If these life differences between children, their experiences, their beliefs, and their traditional practices are ignored, then the potential abilities of some children may not be properly developed.

There is always the risk that when implementing a new program, everyone will not agree on the merits of the programs and thus stifle the impact of the effectiveness.

“All those who are involved in any new program implementation understand that there is a common goal to which everyone is accountable and that policies, practices, and resources are aligned with that goal” (Lashway, 2002). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the school’s culture and how the climate change that is caused by the Learning Focused Schools model in turn effects the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers and thus the academic achievement of the students. “The Learning Focused Schools model was developed in response to national, state and local efforts to increase achievement for all students and to reduce achievement gaps. The model provides comprehensive school reform strategies and solutions for K-12 schools based on exemplary practices and research based strategies” (Thompson, 2001). The results of this study provide some idea as to whether a noticeably positive impact on the school’s culture and student achievement was created by the Learning Focused Schools model. This information will help administrators who may wish to implement this model in an effort to adjust the climate at their respective schools. The culture of the school encompasses many different components each of which can impact student achievement. Coleman (1966) stated that schools do not make a difference in the education of a child much beyond that child’s environment and socioeconomic status. The public education system did nothing more than reinforce the gaps created by the birthplace and demographics of the children in a given community (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, & Weinfeld, 1966). Knowing this, educators should strive to provide a great school culture that can lead students to future success. In 2003, Ben Levin and John Wiens wondered why many years of school reform models have failed to bring about the desired results of increased student achievement. They contend that improved students’ outcomes resulted from appropriate changes in classroom and school

practices that were widely accepted and implemented by teachers, seen as meaningful by students, and supported by parents and communities. Reforms have not worked because they have not focused on the things that we know can affect student performances in schools (Levins & Wiens, 2003).

The Learning Focused Schools model turned to the results of studies done by Douglas Reeves (2000) at the Center for Performance Assessment. In 2000, Reeves coined the term 90/90/90 schools to describe group of schools with the following characteristics: 90% or more students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, 90% or more of the students were members of ethnic minority groups, and 90% or more of the students met the district or state academic standards in reading or another area. Between the years of 1995-1998 test data was compiled from students in a variety of school settings, from elementary to high school. It is important to note that the Performance Center put the following disclaimer on the research findings:

It is important to acknowledge, however, that these results are associative in nature. We make no claim that a single instructional intervention can be said to 'cause' a particular achievement result. What we can say with a high degree of confidence, however, is that there are some consistent associates between some classroom strategies (for example, performance assessments that require writing) and student achievement in a wide variety of tests and subjects. (Reeves, 2000, p. 195)

Dr. Reeves (2000) reported that it was important to study these schools and their practices because of the commonly held assumption that there is an inextricable relationship between poverty, ethnicity, and academic achievement, yet these schools were still able to succeed. The study gathered data by two methods: the first being

analyses of accountability data and the second being the site visits to the individual schools. The study allowed the researchers to conduct categorical analysis of instructional practices similar to the way Peters and Waterman analyzed information in the book, *In Search Of Excellence*, in which they explained how they were able to identify common practices of excellent organizations. The study's goal was to identify the extent to which there was a common set of behaviors exhibited by the leaders and teachers in a schools with high achievement, high minority enrollment, and high poverty levels. Both of the studies supported the notion that the schools that were successful had similar characteristics (Peter & Waterman, 1982). These characteristics were

- A clear focus on academic achievement
- Clear curriculum choices
- Frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement
- An emphasis on nonfiction writing
- Collaborative scoring of student work.

All of these characteristics can be seen in the climate and culture of the schools.

Max Thompson was able to take these characteristics and provide a framework for implementation that became the Learning Focused Schools model. The focus on achievement and clear curriculum choices can be seen in the implementation of Essential Questions and Student Learning Maps that are commonly used tools in the Learning Focused model. Reeves (2000) explained that it is possible, for example, that many of the teachers in these schools did not “cover the curriculum” (p. 4) in the strict sense of checking off objectives from a wide variety of curricular areas. They chose to emphasize the core skills of reading, writing, and mathematics in order to improve student

opportunities for success in a wide variety of other future academic endeavors. Along with the other components of the Learning Focused Schools model, collaborative planning and common assessment also seems to be a focus embedded in the climate of successful schools. Reeves (2000) suggested that these remarkably effective schools did not have a “collaboration day” or a “collaboration workshop” (p. 196) but rather made the collaborative scoring of student work part of the regular, ingrained process. He went on to say that the schools with the greatest improvements in student achievement consistently used common assessment. Common assessments also provide a degree of consistency in teacher expectations that is essential if fairness is our fundamental value. The use of common assessment for each major discipline allows for a combination of daily discretion and independence by teachers, while preserving a school-wide commitment to equity and consistency of expectations. This study was conducted to show the links between the Learning Focused Schools model and the overall improvement of the school climate and the benefits that may be had in the implementation of such programs.

Description of the Setting

When determining the characteristics of the school, one must consider the demographic of the students as they relate to their peers economically. Research has shown that students who fit a certain demographic struggle with math; therefore, they perform poorly on standardized tests. A part of the reason would include the family structure and the role that the parents play in the educational lives of the children. The school used in this study was chosen by the researcher from the list of schools that have implemented the Learning Focused Schools model as a means to facilitate changes within the school. The enrollment for the school the year before implementing the school

reform program was 603 students. The school included

- 39 classroom teachers
- 11.5 Exceptional Children personnel including teacher assistants
- 11 support personnel
 - 3 assistant principals
 - 1 media coordinator
 - 2 guidance counselors
 - 4 secretaries
 - 1 In-School suspension supervisor
- 1.5 Art Education position
- 3.2 workforce development positions
- 1 ESL teacher
- 1.5 drop-out prevention counselors
- 2 campus security associates
- 5 custodians
- 9 cafeteria workers.

The demographics of the students were approximately

- 75% African American
- 16 % Hispanic
- 3.8%, White
- 3.6% Asian
- 2.7%, Multi-Racial
- 0.2% American Indian

Over 80% of the students at the school received assistance through the federal

government's food assistance program. In addition to the socioeconomic demographics, 17% of the students were identified as students with disabilities and 12% of the students had Limited English Proficiency. This school has one Principal, two Assistant Principals, and one Dean of Students; the school served students in grades 6-8. The building has a wide variance as it pertains to the physical plan with about a third of building in disrepair. Information that was gathered and reported on the school report card states that the school had an average of 100 students less than other schools like it in the state and about 300 students less than other middle schools in the district. The average class size was about three students less than the district and the state. Both of these data points are positive as it relates to the school's culture. North Carolina students are required to complete annual ABC's End of Grade test in reading and mathematics. Students enrolled in the following courses complete End of Course tests: English I, Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, biology, chemistry, physical science, physics, civics and economics, and US history (NCDPI). The data collected from NCDPI for this school in the 2006-07 school year show an overall reading proficiency rate for grade 6 was 62.6%. Compared to 78% for the district and 82.5% for the state. Grade 7 students performed approximately 15% lower than the district average on the reading test and 20% less than the state average at 66.8%. The students in the eighth grade suffered a deficit of 12% compared to the state and approximately 15% in the area of reading with a score of 67.4%. (see Table 1).

Table 1

Student Proficiency in Reading for year 2006-07.

	<i>Grade 6 Reading</i>	<i>Grade 7 Reading</i>	<i>Grade 8 Reading</i>	<i>Overall</i>
School	62.6%	66.8%	73.4%	67.4%
District	78.0%	81.2%	85.0%	83.3%
State	82.5%	86.3%	87.9%	85.5%

To be proficient in a particular subject area a student must score either a III or a IV. The data collected from NCDPI for this school in the 2006-07 school year show an overall math proficiency rate for grade six was 40.7% compared to 61.4% for the district and 64.6% for the state. Grade seven students performed approximately 30% lower than the district average on the math test and 32% less than the state average at 29.9%. The students in the eighth grade suffered a deficit of 24% compared to the state and approximately 26% in the area of math with a score of 39.2%. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Student Proficiency in Math for year 2006-07.

	<i>Grade 6 Math</i>	<i>Grade 7 Math</i>	<i>Grade 8 Math</i>	<i>Overall</i>
School	40.7%	29.9%	39.2%	36.5%
District	61.4%	59.6%	63.2%	65.3%
State	64.6%	63.5%	65.1%	66.4%

These data points indicate the possibility that something must be done to assist the students' quest for academic achievement. Before the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model, the school implemented a multitude of interventions to address the lack of student academic performance, as highlighted in the School Improvement

Plan. The School Improvement Team was developed and included stakeholders such as students, parents, certified and non-certified staff, and business and community agencies. The group's purpose was to provide insight and voice to the betterment of the school. The team helped to develop comprehensive reading, writing, and mathematics plans as well as professional development ideas to address differentiated instruction and increase in literacy strategies. Student attendance at the school was approximately 2% less than the state and district average, and the number of short term suspensions was 20% higher than the district average. The school had a much higher percentage of classes that were connected to the Internet; however, the rest of the building was in much disrepair, as teachers had cited holes in the walls, mice, and water leakage. In 2002, the school used in the study became a partial magnet school with the magnet theme being of math, science, and environmental studies. The magnet component of the school adjusted the population of students. There were now two groups of students: "magnet" and "non-magnet." At the time, the data collected illustrated that 34.6% of the sixth grade students were magnet students, 56.1% were non-magnet students and about 9% of the students were enrolled in other classes or cross-enrolled. In the seventh grade 37% of the students were in magnet classes and 49% were enrolled in non-magnet classes with about 13% of the students in other or cross-enrolled classes. The magnet students in the eighth grade made up about 32% of the student body with 59% being non-magnet and 9% cross-enrolled.

In the 2006 Teacher Working Conditions survey, much of the school's climate and culture was ascertained from the responses to specific questions. In response to a question about the amount of time that was available to teachers for non-instructional duties, the response showed that approximately 60% of the teachers felt that they had less than 3 hours a week and over 70% felt that less than 3 of those hours were available for

their individual planning. Nearly the same percentage of teachers, 70%, felt that they had 3 hours or less of structured collaborative planning time. Another very enlightening question queried teachers if they felt that they were invited to assist in selecting instructional material. The data shows that 50% felt that they were not and another 40% felt that their role was moderate. Fifty-five percent of teachers responded negatively to the question about whether they were able to have input in the development of the teaching techniques. National school reform initiatives placed high expectations on the potential of teacher participation in school level decision making to effect school change. The widespread use of participatory governance models has catapulted 'participation' to the forefront of school reform efforts (Bodilly, Keltner, Purnell, Reichardt, & Schuyler, 1998). In an article for the Learning Environments Research, Turnbull (2002) wrote that the assumption is any model will have a greater likelihood of success when teachers have 'bought-in' before they begin implementation. Based on the results of these questions that dealt directly with the teacher's input, it is evident why some programs were ineffective. Over 70% of the teachers felt they were not invited to help determine the professional development content and over 90% felt they had no voice in the hiring process of new teachers, discipline of students, and budget decisions.

Administrative support for the teachers and school culture has always gone hand in hand. According to Liu and Meyers (2005), disruptive student behavior plays a vital role in teachers' satisfaction with their profession, and those teachers who left teaching due to job dissatisfaction often linked decisions to student discipline problems. Strong leadership and administrative support have been closely linked to increased job satisfaction (Perie, Baker, & American Institutes for Research, 1997). In the Teachers Working Conditions survey, there were indicators that the teachers did not feel supported

and thus created a poorer climate for the teachers and lowered their job satisfaction. Forty-five percent of teachers felt the administration did not shield them from disruptions and 60% felt that rules were inconsistently enforced for student conduct. Only 40% felt that the overall school leadership was effective. One of the most telling data points in reference to the schools climate and culture is the response to the question about whether the school was a good place to teach and learn. Less than 50% of the staff agreed with that statement.

Gaps in the achievement between poor and advantaged children and minorities and non-minority students of all ages continue to be the most central problem in the field of education. Various measures, including grades, standardized test scores, course selections, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, have been used to assess achievement differences and show that performance gaps by ethnic (Caucasians vs. African Americans or Hispanic/Latinos) and socioeconomic (SES) status (higher income vs. lower income families) are large, persistent, and troubling to our nation (Olszewski-Kubilius & Thompson, 2010). Over the past two decades, the underachievement of minority students in mathematics has been well documented (Secada, 1992; Tate, 1997). This information supports the research indicating that students in this demographic tend to have lower levels of math skills across the grade levels. The second and most important part of the story is that the students' math skills were actually declining in a direct correlation to the amount of time that they spent in this particular middle school.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that some will argue that students in the same demographic/cultural environment, with academic issues previously identified with academic underachievement, are all concentrated in one school—exacerbating the problem and justifying the numbers. In 2001, Lubienski suggested that lower

mathematics achievement levels of minorities, African American students in particular, might be indicative of the curriculum and instruction that these students receive. She stated that data collected on instructional practices indicate differences between how minority and Caucasian students are taught. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an organization composed of male and female teachers ranging in ages from early twenties to the mid-sixties. Many of them have been involved in the field of education for most of their adult life and all of them have experienced learning from a teacher. The data collected from a study by NAEP suggest that many minorities are receiving instructional practices in math classes that are not consistent with the National Council Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). Instructional practices are related to teacher quality because teachers who are highly qualified have strong pedagogical knowledge and strong mathematical knowledge (Darling-Hammonds & Sykes, 2003). Unfortunately, students in schools with a large number of minority students and low-income populations have fewer qualified teachers than schools with larger Caucasian populations (Darling-Hammonds & Sykes, 2003). A study completed in 2009 by Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2009) found that African American third graders perform substantially worse when they have a higher percentage of African American classmates. The optimum class composition that may yield the best achievement results and construct positive attitudes is a compromise that maximizes group diversity and prevents individual isolation. The interaction between the two factors (ability and multiculturalism) gives the best-desired results (Faris, 2009).

However, another possible cause for these test scores is that the teachers at the school studied professional development to address the specific needs of these students. Most pre-service teachers spend little time in the community surrounding the school to

understand the experiences and background of the children they will be serving (Koerner & Abdul-Tawwab, 2006). Currently, the majority of new teachers graduating from teacher preparation programs are middle-income, Caucasian and female (Ladson-Billings, 2006). They rarely reflect the culture of the children where they will be teaching and are not familiar with the communities that surround the school and often find the community different from where they grew up (Koerner & Abdul-Tawwab, 2006). The students' test scores, from the school in this study, reflect the disheartening reality of the need to help the students achieve, in spite of the demographics of the school. The data that was used came from the state-sponsored standardized test most commonly referred to as the "End of Grade" test, or EOG. Many websites display the results of these tests; our students were compared to district norms.

Research Questions

In order to evaluate the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the selected urban middle school's culture and thus the academic achievement of the students within the school, the following research questions were explored.

- RQ1 – What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on the teachers' attitudes and behaviors towards student achievement, the school and learning?
- RQ2 – What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on the culture as demonstrated by student academic achievement on statewide and district mandated standardized tests?
- RQ3 – How does the impact on the school's culture caused by the Learning Focused School model reflect any changes on the teachers' working conditions

(TWC) survey?

- RQ4 – What is the relationship between the cultural changes caused by the Learning Focus School model and student achievement results?
- RQ5 – To what extent are there indications of a positive school present as a direct or indirect result of the implementation of the Learning Focused School model?

Definition of Key Terms

- **Accelerated Instruction:** Instruction that challenges students with intense instruction aimed at the immediate academic shortcoming. The goal is to obtain grade level standards in the shortest amount of time.
- **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):** The minimum level of improvements that schools and school divisions must achieve each year as determined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).
- **Administration:** Principals, Assistant Principals, and directors of guidance at a school, responsible for providing instructional leadership and for supervising all facets of school operations.
- **Bench Marked Assessments:** Assessments that consists of tasks administered to a group of students within a school system in order to determine the level of mastery of important concepts or skills by a specified grade level. (Hammerman, 2009)
- **Content Area Literacy:** The level of reading and writing skills necessary to read, comprehend, and react to appropriate instructional materials in a given subject area.

- Differentiated Instruction: A way for teachers to recognize and react responsively to their students' varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, and interest (Hall, 2002)
- Collaboration: A systematic process in which educators work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002)
- Common Assessments: Agreed upon assessments that will be used at the end of a given time frame by all collaborative teachers to see if the essential standards have been learned within a particular group.
- Culture: The pattern of behavior and thinking that people within a social group create, learn, and share.
- Essentials: Agreed upon objectives from the standard curriculum that must be learned within a given time frame.
- Essential Questions: Specific questions that are derived from the essential standards of information that are presented to the students to assess the level of mastery of the essentials standards and concepts.
- Economically Disadvantaged Students: Students at, near, or below the poverty level.
- Free and Reduced Lunch F/R: Subgroup of students that receive assistance through the free and reduced lunch pricing program.
- Integrated Literacy: When language arts are brought together with a different curriculum to achieve a specific desired outcome of learning.
- LEP: Students with limited English proficiency.

- Professional Learning Communities (PLC): A process by which teachers and administrators in a school continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn to enhance their effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1993)
- Scaffolding: A metaphor that is used in the context of classroom interaction, where it portrays the assistance teachers provide for their students to help them to accomplish a task that they would not have been able to accomplish on their own, so that they will eventually be enabled to complete such tasks alone (Mercer 1994).
- Vision: The collective belief of what the school will become in relation to student achievement.

Limitations and Assumptions

Personnel changes have occurred since the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model at the selected urban middle school. There is different leadership and many different teachers. These changes may have had an impact on the culture of the school, which this study attempted to evaluate. The school district has made major commitments to improve the cultures of all of the school through instilling a strong push for the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in every aspect of school operations; this is done in efforts to change how teachers feel about their jobs and the roles they play in school and student academic achievement. The principal who initially established the use of Learning Focused as a school reform model has since then left the school for other employment. A first-year principal is now in his second year at the school. Although many aspects of the Learning Focused Schools model are in place,

there is a new vision at the school that focuses on the use of technology.

Some of the data collected in this research will be qualitative in nature, using surveys, interviews, and focus groups. These methods were used to provide a common language to individual responses to specific questions about feeling and beliefs. The study then attempts to quantify the responses and make meaning of the thoughts and ideas of the teachers who were at the school during the academic and personnel transitions. Although surveys are efficient methods of data collection they can contain, by the nature of their development, inherent problems such as readability, word meaning, validity of responses, and intended or unintended meaning can occur. Regardless of the researcher's efforts, validity is difficult to ensure when individualized surveys and interview questionnaires are used.

When participants are interviewed, their answers are dependent upon their interpretation of the questions and their most recent, individual experiences that may or may not have much to do with the question that was asked. Another limitation of using surveys includes the difficulty in quantifying open-ended responses in surveys and interviews. The researcher used specific words or phrases that would lend more insight to what the respondent meant by their responses to survey items. However, each participant might develop unintended interpretations of the survey items and assign different meanings or strengths of responses based on these individual interpretations.

This study uses the perception of facilitators and teachers at one particular urban middle school where the Learning Focused Schools model was implemented. Care was taken to determine if the results and analysis of this study are results of data analysis and that the impetus for change was a result of having knowledge available that previously was not a factor in decisions.

In 1983, the document *A Nation at Risk* opened the eyes of lawmakers and educational leaders to the possibility that the American public schools were failing American children (NCOEE, 1983). Since that time, a focus on school reform has dominated the landscape of scholarly research on the topic of education. Research in *A Nation at Risk* and many other pieces of literature suggest that students in our inner-city schools are not successful. As explained by Hallinger and Leithwood (1996), the importance of a school's culture is its ability to facilitate student achievement or stifle it. One aspect that can be ascertained from the research is that not only is this a general problem, but it has a much larger scope with more devastating consequences for the students who exist in higher poverty and higher minority populations. Many different researchers have chimed in on the subject, including the federal government. In October of 2000, the United States Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education produced literature-referencing obstacles to reforming urban high schools. One of the many hindrances that was cited was a prevalent low expectation for the students and the community that the school served. Researchers and educators began to understand that school reform can best be accomplished by first changing the culture and beliefs of those educators and stakeholders associated with that school. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the selected urban middle school's culture and thus the academic achievement of the students within the school.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Based on the problem, this literature review examined the research and the studies conducted that led to the development of the Learning Focused Schools model. For decades, the field of education has been adjusted, adapted, and retooled based on the research and contributions of many great educators. During the early forties, Edgar Dale seemed to lead the way with his Cone of Experiences. During the seventies and eighties, almost all of the educational reforms were based on the studies and philosophies of Madeline Hunter. Moving closer to the present, school reform transitioned to ideals introduced by Robert Marzano (1998) that focused on the different levels of understanding and the complexities that each level involves.

Today many districts are looking for ideas to assist students in their achievement in the traditional classroom. However, in light of the most recent failures of public schools to adequately educate all of the students they serviced, many scholars attempted to find the ways that would change the schools into viable engines and propel the youth forward. Michael Fullan and Matthew B. Miles (1992) were two well-known researchers that collaborated in highlighting the flaws in the current system and noted the adjustments needed if true reform were to become a reality. Robert Herman and Samuel Stringfield (1997) identified similar activity-based programs that studies seemed to suggest to enhance the educational experience of the students participating in these types of programs. Just a few years later, case studies were completed around the country in order to pull together the strategies that were being used successfully in urban schools where students had been expected to struggle but, instead, were performing well.

Max Thompson developed the Learning Focused Schools model imitating some

of the same ideas suggested by research conducted by Steven Wolk (1998). According to Thompson (2002), educators understand how to “plan for learning” and then how to “teach for learning.” The research and data Max Thompson used to develop the Learning Focused Schools model focused on exemplary practices that occur in schools that were 90% minority, 90% free-or reduced lunch, but had 90% or above students that are on grade-level.

To determine how well the Learning Focused Schools model effects school culture, school culture must be defined and understood. School culture, according to Deal and Peterson (1999) is a powerful phenomenon and key factor in determining possible improvements. Every school has a culture that permeates the school environment. Because of this level of importance changing or shaping the schools culture is most often a huge undertaking. Roland Barth (2002) wrote that probably the most important and most difficult job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of the school. Given that the school culture is more than climate or morale, the culture can be seen as the feelings, behaviors, and attitudes within the school that form the vision, values, beliefs, rituals, and many other aspects of human behaviors. A strong collaborative culture has been identified as an effective context for students and teacher learning (Gruenert, 2005). Gruenert collected data from 81 schools in Indiana during the 2002-03 school year. School leaders were provided surveys to administer to all of their staff. The surveys provided scores in six specific areas of measurement in relation to the school’s culture. The six areas include Collaborative Leadership, Teacher Collaboration, Professional Development, Unity of Purpose, Collegial Support, and Learning Partnership. These results were then measured against the student achievement in the areas of language arts and math at each school that responded to the surveys. Out of the

schools that responded, there were 35 elementary, 18 middle, and 28 high schools. Gruenert received 2,750 surveys that he could use in the study. According to these findings, the more collaborative schools are more likely to have the higher student achievement (Gruenert, 2005, p.46). Moreover, Fullan (1992) suggested that school leadership is about creating the best conditions for learning. This study demonstrated the correlation between a collaborative school culture, a collegial climate, and high student achievements. It is vitally important that attitudes and behaviors in the less productive schools change for students to be successful.

As we begin to look at how to change behaviors en masse, it is important to remember that they have been developed over time and that they persist because of a number of reasons. All of these reasons are imbedded in the culture of the school as a whole. An understanding of the culture can be looked at as the first step in school reform. There are a number of different ways to evaluate the culture of the schools, which is an essential part of determining what must be done to correct the problems caused by cultures or to enhance their usefulness. Peterson (2002) explained that principals can learn the history of the school by talking to the “school’s story tellers;” looking through prior school improvement plans for signals about what is really important, not just required; or using a faculty meetings to discuss what the school has experienced, especially in staff development, over the past two decades. There are many different types of surveys that can be applied to a situation to help build a sense of what the culture is like in the organization. Some of them are quite formal and detailed while others are simple and involve asking the teachers and staff members to describe the school’s unique and open-ended ways. For instance, one approach asks staff members to complete a metaphor that shows a relation between the school and an animal. A teacher may

complete a metaphor on a survey that says, “If the school were an animal it would be a hungry tiger because it is singularly focused and aggressive.” One can view this teacher’s response to demonstrate a somewhat hostile environment for the staff and a major push for results. Metaphors such as these are analyzed for patterns and themes about the known characteristics of certain animals suggesting that foxes are sly and sneaky or that a lion is strong and even that mother hens are nurturing and protective of the young. These types of exercises open the door to a more complete level of understanding. A more traditional and commonly used way to assess culture is the use of surveys. There are a number of surveys and tools that can be used to get a better understanding of the school culture in a location. Many of them are based on measuring or gathering data on the same or similar norms upon which schools exist.

In 1985, Saphier and King assessed school culture based on the 12 norms of a healthy school. Collegiality is the first of the 12 norms. This refers to the professional relationships that the staff develops with each other and how often the staff works together to solve mutual problems and share ideas. Experimentation also makes the list. Teachers must feel that they have some flexibility to attempt new methods and express creativity that is helpful to the organization and student achievement. High expectations are a major part of the school culture and must be established by the school leaders and demonstrated in their behaviors in day-to-day activities. “Schools that establish high expectations for all students ... and provide the support necessary to achieve these expectations ... have high rates of academic success” (Rutter, 1979). Rutter (1979) also wrote that schools that foster high self-esteem and promote social and scholastic success reduce the likelihood of emotional and behavioral disturbances (p. 83). Trust and confidence is also vital within all relationships. The students must trust the teachers and

the teachers must also have a level of trust in the students, given they are mutual partners in the process of teaching and learning. This trust and confidence can be built in a number of different ways. “One of the most obvious and powerful is through personal relationships in which teachers communicate with the students, this work is important; I know that you can do it; I won’t give up on you” (Howard, 1990, p. 39). Rutter’s (1979) research found those students who maintain relationships with teachers that hold views that are in contrast to negative views that students may hold of themselves, develop self-esteem and self efficacy, which in turn brings about success for the students and the schools that they attend. The parents must trust the school to do what is in the best interest of the students. The teachers must trust that they will be supported by the administration when making student-centered decisions. Each stakeholder must display a level of student trust and confidence that supports the other parties. The sense of support that occurs here is not just verbally communicated support but tangible support that can be seen and even measured. Resources and manpower are needed for the students to be able to achieve the level of the high expectation that are set by the school’s administration. The use of a knowledge base, and how relevant and assessable this base is, impacts the culture immensely. Resources, a strong knowledge base, and appreciation are all major components that can largely impact the schools culture but can be easily addressed by the administration. Once these components are addressed and equally distributed, celebration and a level of involvement in the decision-making process can be implemented to build support from teachers. Critical conversations will become easier and the adjustment to higher expectations will be accepted and embedded in the culture more easily. The school leaders must then protect those aspects of the school and the culture that are important and maintain the traditions, which are in line with the vision

and the school reform models. Lastly, when expectations are not met or adjustments to the plan must be implemented; honest and open communication must occur amongst all stakeholders. The School Culture Survey (NSDC, 2001) was said to examine the core norms and values of schools. Once the data from these surveys is analyzed, the principal of the school is able to decide if these are the norms that he wants the school to reflect and how well these ideals merge with the vision of the school.

Analyzing the current vision is only the first step in the process. The culture of the school is so important that it is imperative that the school leaders get this right. Shaping the culture of the school is a big part of what the Learning Focused Schools model does, but the general aspects of the building and shaping culture are universal to almost any school reform program. The success of these programs hinges on their reception and the culture of the school and how well they affect the entire school as an institution. Fullan (2001) identified six components of leadership that influences and promotes change. These components are aligned with the goals and common practices of the Learning Focused Schools model. The idea is that there must be an investment in the need for change. Secondly, an atmosphere that encourages real personal learning and developing learning capabilities must be created. The next step is personal investment and an upward spiral of results. Fourth, there must be enthusiasm and willingness to commit. The fifth step is the institutionalization of change practices, and finally, the sixth step is identifying measured results.

“The Learning Focused Schools model is a program for school improvement design reform” (Thompson, 2001). This model is built on the notion that it can provide a framework for organizing and streamlining practices. The organizational components of a school are vital to improvement. “Effective schooling apparently requires more than

technically proficient teachers, a professionally appropriate curriculum, and adequate facilities. Recent studies and proposals for the improvements of schools have also highlighted the importance of organizational features” (Carnegie Forum, 1986). Many dimensions of school climate have been proposed but have yet to be synthesized into widely accepted theoretical frameworks (Anderson, 1982). Another part of the Learning Focused Schools model that assists in dealing with school reform is the standpoint of putting together school-wide systematic planning for teachers to ensure collaborative planning time. As highlighted in the Massachusetts 2020 mission, which was developed to expand educational and economic opportunities for children and families across Massachusetts, collaborative planning time is pivotal to a school faculty’s ability to share successful teaching strategies, pool resources within a grade level or discipline area, examine students work, and develop a solid school culture of collaboration. New research ties collegiality and collaboration to positive school outcomes; ongoing research into school culture, change, and improvements is finding that success is more likely when teachers are collegial and work collaboratively on improvement activities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Teacher collegiality and collaboration are not merely important for the improvement of morale and teacher satisfaction but are absolutely necessary if we wish teaching to be of the highest order. Collegiality and collaboration are also needed to ensure that teachers benefit from their experiences and continue to grow during their careers (Hargreaves, 1991). Once the structures are in place to enhance collaboration through The Learning Focused School model, the specific curriculum driven instruction can become part of building the culture and improving the achievement. Curriculum may drive instruction, but equally as important is the proposition that school culture supports curriculum (Capozzi, 2005). The administrator’s position as an instructional leader is to

monitor and lead teachers, provide adequate instructions, support the curriculum, and provide common assessments to evaluate the learning process. The Learning Focused Schools model component of instruction and assessment is provided by the data that can be gained from common assessments. The strategies used in the Learning Focused Schools model are directly and indirectly related to the research of Marzano (1997) and the staff at the Mid-Continent Regional Education Lab (McREL).

The entire field of education at all levels is very much indebted to the research of Marzano (1997) and his colleagues at the McREL. Just as Madeline Hunter did in the 1970s and 1980s, Marzano and McREL have provided educators with the models of learning and strategies research that enables educators to have a common vocabulary and build other models around common concepts and understandings. The Learning Focused Schools model uses an adaptation of Dimensions of Learning as a model for educators to understand how to “plan for learning” and then “teach for learning”. Leaders are highly encouraged at every school to have a professional learning study for all teachers and administrators using Dimensions of Learning (Marzano, 1992) and *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

To study and understand the premise behind what the Learning Focused Schools model is, one must look at the individual parts of the model that the creators of this model cite as the major components. The Learning Focused Schools model website explains that the program was based on information obtained from the 2006 United States Department of Education document introducing a Balanced Achievement model for education (Thompson, 2001). This Balanced Achievement model was comprised of a variety of practices that were proven to significantly close achievement gaps and be the most effective way to approach the increase in student achievement. These practices

included Research Based Instruction, Integrated Literacy for K-12, Acceleration and Scaffolding, Standard Driven Curriculum, Assessment, balanced on a fulcrum of strong school Leadership. The Learning Focused Schools model takes these models and attaches specific strategies to address each of them and provided training as to how each would be achieved within the Learning Focused School model framework; in addition, the roles of the administration and teachers were in achieving each of these stages. The Learning Focused Schools model provides the most comprehensive model for reaching Balanced Achievement using research-based framework and support solutions focused on the learning. Additionally, The Learning Focused Schools model website explained that it can provide teachers with information that can help them decide what to teach, how to better use what is already known; connect and use the most important practices/strategies in every lesson; find instructional time for higher level thinking activities/lessons; quickly assess students learning; differentiate instructional easily; quickly build background knowledge and move students from where they are; accelerate learning; integrate writing, reading comprehension, and higher level thinking; how to focus on key vocabulary and good vocabulary strategies. Finally, the website provides support for administrators: how to monitor for learning and achievement, provide teachers with higher level of support, provide students with double doses of learning, provide teachers with substantial planning time, and provide students with acceleration lessons and unit planning. The Learning Focused Schools model uses different components to achieve each of these goals for the administration and the teachers. This study will consider and discuss each of these in turn to determine the impact of the schools culture and student achievement. The Learning Focused Schools model begins with Research Based Instruction.

The Research Based Instruction can be broken down into smaller key components

that have been shown to impact student learning. One of them is the use of Essential Questions (EQ). EQs are questions that focus the reader's attention and help students determine what is important in a lesson. The use of EQs would fit in the context of a shared vision between the students and the teachers. As Goldring (2002) suggested, a shared vision is a powerful picture for the future generated by all members. They focus the students' attention on what they are to get from a lesson. These questions are designed to move the learner beyond yes or no answers into a realm of rigor and more complete understanding. Students understand that when they are able to answer EQs for each lesson, they have a better understanding of what the teacher was hoping to teach them with any given lesson. The Learning Focused School model allows the teachers to begin the lessons by introducing the EQs to the class at the start of a lesson. There are a variety of ways to do this. One common use of the EQs is for the teacher to embed the EQs in a meaningful, real-world example that is used to "hook" or entice the learner to want to know more. EQs came from the notion that some students are not successful because they are passively engaged in the lesson and are really not sure what the instructor is trying to get them to understand. Dr. TheodoreSizer (1984), a Dean of Brown University School of Education is given credit for conceiving the idea of EQs after conducting research on high schools across the country for a Carnegie research project. This research concluded that oftentimes, students were not successful at hitting the mark because they were unsure of exactly where they should shoot. An article by The Technology for Learning Consortium Inc. (TLC, n.d.), stated that teachers who use EQs report that they are a powerful tool for focusing daily classroom activity on a meaningful goal. The article also states that for students, EQs are a clear statement of expectations for what they will know and be able to do, allowing them to take more

responsibility for what they take away from every lesson. One goal of an EQ is to spark interest and awaken curiosity in the learner, which will in turn make them a more active participant in the lesson. The Enhanced Educational Strategies website (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, n.d.) refers to EQs as an instructional strategy teachers use to engage students and encourage in-depth study. EQs are often used to make connections between units of study and can lead to the integration of disciplines. They are sometimes linked to other EQs and can also help focus assessment efforts. In the book, *Understanding by Design*, authors Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) defined EQs as questions that are not answerable with finality in a brief sentence. “Their aim is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry and to spark more questions ... including thoughtful student questions ... not just pat answers” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 106-107). Another Research Based Instructional practice featured by The Learning Focused School model is the use of the graphic organizers, specifically, the student learning map. Student learning maps show the connections between what has been taught in previous lessons, what is being taught now, and what will be taught at some future date. Learning maps are most often arranged in a hierarchy. The larger, broader concepts are at the top connecting smaller and more specific concepts with lines that link the concepts most often displaying short phrases that help the learner to visualize how the two concepts are related. Donna Saulsberry (2008), an Associate Professor of Computer and Information Technology explains in a January online seminar that, “assessing students’ critical thinking skills and knowledge transfer is the strong point of concept maps” (p. 4). Learning maps were originally developed to focus students to connections between prior knowledge and new information. In an article written in the 1983 *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, J.D. Novak, who is considered the author of concept mapping,

suggested it is understood that concept maps are a procedure that is used to measure the structure and organization of an individuals' knowledge. Novak developed this tool to represent the frameworks for interrelationships between concepts (Novak & Gowin, 1984). The learning maps are extremely useful for visual learners. In the summer of 2009, the Georgia Department of Education began using these maps as a way to impact the students in the state (Shankland, 2010). During that summer over 1,100 administrators and staff from 27 schools were trained on how to use and develop "Thinking Maps." That fall, the teachers introduced the use of maps to the students in their classes. Data was collected from each of the sites that were using the maps. Staff members involved in the project visited the schools and different content areas, collected data, conducted walkthroughs, and provided feedback to teachers. John Newman, state director at Elder Middle School, described the process of data collection: "What are you doing? How is it working?" (Shankland, 2010, p. 1). In one year, the students at Elder Middle School surpassed the math achievement benchmarks set on the state assessment. Through the research conducted by the state on the integration of these maps, the educators found that the maps created a common language for the visual learner and helped students to organize thoughts and concepts. The maps highlight specific connections between the disciplines and the concepts in each discipline (Shankland, 2010). These connections assisted with scaffolding and are used to direct the students to the specifics of the lessons and build upon prior knowledge more easily; this is extremely important when it comes to learning new material. Graphic organizers are among the instructional tools of The Learning Focused Schools model.

The synthesis of the teaching models and strategies of the Learning Focused Schools model were implemented at the urban middle school site in an attempt to make a

significant impact on student learning. As highlighted in the mandatory restricting plan for the school in 2007-08, it was explained that the Learning Focused Schools model would be the model used to guide the instructional practices.

The Learning Focused Schools model was developed by Dr. Max Thompson in an effort to increase achievement for all students. This research-based model provides comprehensive school reform strategies and solutions for middle schools based on exemplary practices. Implementing this model provides strategies focused in five areas: planning, curriculum, instruction, assessment and school organization. This model provides guidance for administration concerning effective implementation and monitoring through walk through, lesson plans, and follows up conversations. The administration and the teachers will work as a team to intensify efforts in order to meet the learning and achievement needed of all students in those four component areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and organization. (Thompson, 2002)

The Learning Focused Schools model also has a strong literacy component. The incorporation of literacy has long been respected as a means to increase student achievement in all content areas. Since its conception, the No Child Left Behind Law has been a driving force in what is taught, tested, and how students and school effectiveness are measured. The impact of this law has been enormous and has created many substantial changes that govern the business of education. Two components of the NCLB mandate deal specifically with literacy. The first states that by year 2013-2014, all students will be proficient in Math and Reading. The second states that by 2013-2014, all students will be proficient in reading by the end of the third grade. Schools' Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) can very easily measure the proficiency levels in each of these

subjects. In the case of reading, every state has one or more tests to measure reading achievement in general and state reading standards in particular. Based on survey results with the faculty, many of the teachers from all of the disciplines within the selected school continue to rely on a small core of Language Arts teachers to carry the burden of trying to prepare the students with skills in literacy, despite the fact that literacy plays such a large role in all of the subject areas (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). The article titled “Reading and Writing in the Academic Content Areas” appeared in the June 2006 brief for the Alliance for Excellent Education. It explained that among researchers, school reformers, and professional associates, a consensus view is held that every middle school and high school teacher has a role to play in helping students to become fully literate (AEE, 2006). This idea seems to support that the full interdisciplinary approach to literacy is important to student achievement. The article went on to say that content area teachers can and should provide certain kinds of literacy instruction, but they cannot be expected to do exactly the same work as a reading specialist (AEE, 2006). Dr. David Pearson, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley explained that combining science and literacy “may strengthen the standing of science in the school day” (Pearson, 2006, p. 5). During a speech to the National Science Teachers Association, Pearson said that combining the two disciplines work for students because facts have to mean something. “If facts are attached to a concept, students are more likely to remember them” (Pearson, 2006, p. 5). “Reading and writing are better when they are tools, not goals” (Pearson, 2006, p. 5). Teachers of science, history, and other content areas are frequently reluctant to accept an instructional emphasis that fuses reading with content. In part, this is because many content teachers have false assumptions about reading instruction and the reading abilities of students

when they arrive in subject matter classrooms. A recent study, highlighted in the book entitled, *Content Area Literacy: An Integrated Approach*, offered a list of the five False Assumptions of Content Teachers. The first false assumption is that students have learned to read in elementary school. The second is that students have sufficient prior knowledge to cope effectively with the important information in content textbooks. Next, the processes involved in reading and comprehending efficiently in content textbooks are identical to those utilized in reading from basal readers in elementary school. Another false assumption is that content reading means teaching phonics and other skills not directly related to their subject areas. Lastly, teachers are information dispensers (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). Steve Peha (2003) wrote, in his article, “Switching Gears: Helping Students Move Successfully from Reading Literature to Reading in the Content Areas,” “the implementation of literacy in every classroom is a vital ” (p. 1).

Acceleration and scaffolding are explained in the Learning Focused Schools model literature as a part of the reform model. Acceleration and scaffolding are two techniques that require a certain level of student-teacher relationship and a more intimate knowledge of the students in the class. Acceleration means adapting curriculum to the student’s assessed level of mastery rather than insisting that a single curriculum is appropriate for all students of the same age (DeLacy, 1996). Acceleration most often occurs as a response to student achievement level on specific test and is used to enhance, enrich, and refine lessons in the class and take students further, based on the fact that the material is learned more readily than expected. Over the course of years many local, state, and federal dollars have been spent to assist the students who do not comprehend material and a great amount of work has been done to respond to these types of students.

According to a draft version of The University of North Carolina

Remedial/Developmental Activities Report (2007-08), over 2.5 million dollars were spent directly on remedial courses for students within their family of colleges and universities. Although it is widely recognized that this must occur, it cannot be done in the absence of a response to the students who are achieving and learning. Educators must continue to ask the following questions: “What do I do if they all get it and understand?” “How do I respond to achievement?” This is where The Learning Focused Schools model provides a framework for teachers to “extend and refine” lessons. This kind of response to student success is a key factor, as growth for every student is paramount.

Scaffolding is a technique that was developed by seminal psychologist Lev Vygotsky, in 1978, in his theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). “The zone of proximal development is the distance between what a child can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). When educators pretest or use formal assessments to determine the achievement level of the student or to gain some insight into the student’s prior knowledge, they are better able to scaffold the instruction and provide the supports the student needs to be successful at the next level of the new task. This cannot be done without this information that hints to the importance of formative and ongoing assessments. Vygotsky defined scaffolding instruction as the “role of teachers and others in supporting the learner’s development and providing support structures to get to the next stage or level” (Raymond, 2000, p. 176). In the executive summary of “Research Synthesis on Effective Teaching Principles and the Design of Quality Tools for Educators,” six characteristics of scaffolded instruction were detailed (Ellis, 1994). In this 1990 summary, Barbara Rogoff explained how caregivers use certain types of scaffolds to help young children become more independent and learn new tasks. The

scaffolds appear as activities and goal-oriented tasks that

- Motivate or enlist a child's interest related to the new task
- Simplify tasks into more manageable and achievable components
- Offers direction to help the child focus on the goals
- Identify similarities and differences between what the child does and that the desired outcome should be.
- Reduce frustration and risk
- Demonstrate or provides a rubric for the clearly defined outcomes and expectations of the activity to be performed.

It must be noted that despite the documented success of acceleration and scaffolding, these strategies are difficult for a teacher to implement unless the focus is student centered and individualized so that the teacher knows which students can be accelerated through appropriate utilization of the scaffolds for those students who need them (Rogoff, 1991). The Learning Focused Schools model merges these two techniques for student achievement into a comprehensive program for school reform.

A shift in the composition of the modern day classroom has signaled a need for a change in instructional strategies. When public education was first envisioned, all of the students had very similar demographics. The diversity in the classroom has caused a demand for a new approach to reach a variety of students; this is the catalyst for differentiated instruction. In the 2006 *International Education Journal*, Pearl Subban of Monash University wrote, "with contemporary classrooms becoming increasingly diverse, educational authorities, teachers, and school administrators are looking to teaching and learning strategies that cater for a variety of learning profiles" (p. 935). A paradigm that is gaining ground in many educational circles is differentiated instruction. It is

documented that there are many challenges that are facing the educational system at this time in history and the diversity in the classroom is just one of them. Research has proven the argument that individuals do not learn in the same way (Fischer & Rose, 2001). The question that remains is how to provide the same adequate education to such a diverse group of students within the same classroom. In an article for the *Journal of Engineering Education*, Rebecca Brent (2004) of Educational Designs Inc. wrote, “Students have different levels of motivation, different attitudes about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environment and instructional practices. The more thoroughly instructors understand the differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of all of their students” (p. 280). Even though the research has shown that learning is individualized, educators continue to struggle with the notions of what to do about it. While educators understand that not all learners are the same and that their needs are diverse, few teachers accommodate these differences in their classrooms (Gable, Hendrickson, Tonelson, & Van Acker, 2000). One common practice to address the different ability levels of students is for teachers to provide more remedial services and tutoring for students who fall behind in the regular classroom settings and provide outside enrichment for students who are ready to move ahead. In a study conducted by the National Center of Education Statistics (Snyder & Dillow, 2003), it is noted that nearly a third of first-year students and post-secondary students take a remedial course of reading or math and the most common response has been to place ill-prepared students in remedial courses. Because teachers and researchers do not normally have the opportunity to experience the momentum from intensive, one-on-one skill training, they naturally lean toward whole class instruction. Yet, research tells us that an hour of one-on-one instruction is better than six hours of classroom

teaching (Eckwall & Shanker, 1988). Although there are some documented cases where some success is shown by this method, it seems counter-productive to remediate what can be addressed before remediation or enrichment is needed. Differentiated instruction as defined by Tomlinson (2005) is a philosophy of teaching that is based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences of readiness levels, interest, and learning profiles. He wrote that a chief objective of differentiated instruction is to take full advantage of every student's ability to learn (Tomlinson, 2005). To differentiate instruction is to acknowledge various backgrounds, readiness levels, languages, interest, and learning profiles (Hall, 2002). To accomplish this type of instruction, a new type of relationship between teacher and student must be fostered. "Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms" (Thompson, 2001). The teacher must understand the strengths and weaknesses of each student, the qualities and characteristics each student brings to the class, and use this knowledge to the advantage of the student. "Beyond the potent benefits of human beings learning to understand and appreciate one another, positive teacher-student relationships are a segue to student motivation to learn. A learner's conviction that he or she is valued by a teacher becomes a potent invitation to take the risk implicit in the learning process" (Tomlinson 2005). It further empowers the teacher to prioritize tasks designed to enrich the learning experiences of specific students. Students on Individualized Education Plans (IEP) can be directed to tasks that may involve mastery of essential skills, while students on accelerated programs may be challenged through completing tasks or independent research projects (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). Although differentiated instruction is important, the curriculum can be driven by the specific

standards that the students are expected to know. Differentiation must be a refinement of, not a substitute for, high-quality curriculum and instruction. Expert or distinguished teaching focuses on the understandings and skills of a discipline, causing students to wrestle with profound ideas; use what they learn in important ways; organize and make sense of ideas and information; and connect the classroom with a wider world (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

A Standards Driven Curriculum was introduced in the publication *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (NCOEE, 1983). This publication is considered to be a landmark in modern American educational history. Ronald Reagan, president at the time, commissioned a group of individuals to compile a report on the state of the public educational system in America. The panel of 18 members (all from different sectors including privately owned business leaders, educators, and members of the government), implied in their report that students were not being adequately prepared by the public education system and major systemic changes needed to occur. As quoted in the report, “the United States’ educational system was failing to meet the national need for a competitive workforce” (NCOEE, 1983 p.1). The report made 38 different recommendations that were divided into five categories: Content, Standards and Expectations, Time, Teaching Leadership, and Fiscal Support. This was one of the first times it was suggested on a national level that the focus on uniform standards for teaching be developed. In 1989, President George H. Bush proposed the goals for year 2000 which also focused on uniform goals and standards (NEGP, 1999). In the same year, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics published the Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics, which focused on specific standards for teaching Math. With the progression of time, as standards based curriculum gained more

strength, the focus shifted away from individualized classroom practices and the focus on the individualized curricula. President Clinton, with the help of Congress, passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This bill was used to ensure that all states taught from a rigorous set of standards covering all subject areas and grade levels. This bill became the basis for many of the components of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) bill that was set forth by President George W. Bush. Schools, like most other organizations, need to pay equal attention to the quality of what they produce as they do to the processes and content involved. In fact, this is the primary logic behind national and state standards efforts. The National Educational Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) stated, “the purpose of setting standards is to raise expectations for all students. The object is not to make school more difficult, but to make instruction more challenging and engaging and to establish goals that the entire educational system will strive to reach” (NESIC, 1989, p. 2). Because of the legislation that came out of this panel, curriculum content and teacher expectations for students in the same courses and grade levels could no longer vary greatly within and across buildings, districts, and states. Although there is no question that teachers need the freedom to teach in different ways to best meet the needs of their students, it is difficult to justify that a teacher in a first-grade classroom can define reading as having students memorize five words a week, while a first-grade teacher across the hallway has students reading books of all genres throughout the week (Martin-Kniep, 2000). Now that the importance of the standards driven curriculum is established, it is equally important to determine how well the students understand that curriculum once it is taught. On the surface, this may seem like a monumental task; however, on-going formative assessments may help to lighten the load, which is another tenet of the Learning Focused Schools model.

While many educators are highly focused on state tests, it is important to consider that over the course of a year, teachers can build in many opportunities to assess how students are learning and then use this information to make beneficial changes in instruction. This diagnostic use of assessment to provide feedback to teachers and students over the course of instruction is called formative assessment (Boston, 2002). To begin to formatively assess students, a change in paradigm must occur. Educators must develop new relationships with students and understand the skills, or the lack there of, for every student in the class. The teacher must find strengths and weaknesses early on in the process to effectively change and assist the students before the summative assessment that will occur at the end when it is too late. In 1998, a comprehensive study was conducted by Paul Black and Dylan William (2010) on formative assessments and the impact it had on student achievement. They found that the students who were exposed to formative assessments did significantly better on the summative assessments even without the teachers going back to address the deficiencies in learning that was pointed out by the assessments. The students were able to make meaning out of their results and use them to their advantage just as the teachers would (Black & William, 2010). Feedback given as part of formative assessment helps learners become aware of any gaps that exist between their desired goal and their current knowledge, understanding, or skill and guides them through actions necessary to obtain the goal (Ramaorasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989). The most helpful feedback on tests and homework provides specific comments about errors and specific suggestions for improvement and encourages students to focus their attention thoughtfully on the task rather than on simply getting correct answers (Bangert-Drowns, Kulick, & Morgan, 1991). This type of feedback may be particularly helpful to lower-achieving students because it emphasizes that students can improve as a

result of effort rather than be doomed to low achievement due to some presumed lack of innate abilities. Formative assessment helps support the expectation that all children can learn and counteracts the cycle that students attribute poor performance to lack of ability and therefore, become discouraged and unwilling to invest in further learning (Ames, 1992). The Learning Focused Schools model has bought into the notion that this can greatly impact teaching and learning and incorporates formative assessment in multiple ways. Two of which are summaries of daily lessons and individualized EQ.

The question is whether or not culture and collaboration can be credited for the increase in student achievement or if the implementation of the strategies of the Learning Focused Schools model in the classroom has made the most significant difference is of interest to the researcher. Max Thompson (2001) quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson in his the Learning Focused Schools model manual having said, “As to methods, there may be a million and then some, but principles are few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man, who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble” (p. 34). Chapter 19 of the text *Accountability in Action* (2000) focuses on 90/90/90 schools and explains the prevailing commonly held view that there is an inextricable relationship between poverty, ethnicity, and academic achievement. Jean Anyon (1981) wrote, “the cultural basis for failure in inner-city schools is political, economic, and cultural, and must be changed before meaningful school improvement projects can be successfully implemented. Educational reforms cannot compensate for the ravages of society” (p. 77) The environments of children and youth impact their growth, development, and their academic achievement. If we are to improve one outcome (academic achievement), all of the mitigating forces impacting that outcome must be addressed. No Child Left Behind was established in response to the growing

number of children in America who are “segregated by low expectations, illiteracy and self-doubt” (Bush & The White House, 2007, p. 1). Success for students in similar schools, as the one in this study, face uphill battles toward achievement because of many factors that are out of their control. Teachers and other stakeholders are put in positions to have to do more and build unique relationships with the students before beginning to focus in the content. School-based research and national survey data documented the importance of connectedness (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Students who believe that their teachers care about them perform better on test (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Students that have strong connections with both teachers and pro-social peers are more likely to resist the pull of gangs that offer an alternative form of connection for alienated students (Goldstein & Soriano, 1994). Although this data is clear and persistent, success in similar locations does occur. Doug Reeves (2000) reported, “90/90/90 schools are schools where 90 percent or more of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, 90 percent or more of the students were members of ethnic minorities, and 90 percent or more of these students met the district or state academic standards.” (p. 1). The 90/90/90 schools success proves that although the difficulty remains, there are some places that are able to show academic achievement in spite of the demographics of the students.

Despite these successes, loss student success in inner-city, high-poverty schools remains a problem in America, and there is no one program that can be replicated to address the issues in all locations (Reeves, 2000). “The plight of inner-city schools and many rural schools that serve poor children throughout the United States is not a secret or unknown fact. It is widely recognized that many urban public schools are places that should be avoided because they are dangerous, chaotic, and potentially damaging to those who go there” (Noguera, 2003). Author of the Learning Focused Schools model, Max

Thompson (2002), does not make any claim to a single instructional intervention that can be said to “cause” a particular achievement result. But he does say, “with a high degree of confidence, however, is that there are some consistent associations between some classroom strategies and student achievement in a wide variety of tests and subjects” (Thompson, 2002, “Learning Focus Research,” para. 6). This study is attempting to separate and filter through the strategies and determine what is necessary to bring about the achievement. What parts make the difference for the students? Is it just a cultural shift that is somewhat of a “side effect” of the Learning Focused School model or is it the collection of strategies that make up the model that has the impact. As researchers visited the 90/90/90 schools from which the Learning Focused School model was derived, even though many schools were successful in accomplishing their missions in starkly different ways, there seemed to be a strong focus on student achievement that trumped all other undertakings within the school. It is important to note, however, that a strong emphasis on reading and writing was a prevalent theme among the schools. “By far the most common characteristics of the 90/90/90 schools were the emphasis on requiring written responses in performance assessments. While many schools with similar demographic characteristics employed frequent assessment techniques, many of the less successful schools chose to emphasize oral student responses rather than written responses. Students who were subjected to the increase in writing and written instruction in the language arts classes scored higher on standardized test than students who were not” (Waring, 2007, p. 39). “The use of written responses appears to help teachers obtain better diagnostic information about students and certainly helps students demonstrate the thinking process that they employed to find the correct (or even incorrect) response to an academic challenge” (Reeves, 2009, p. 3). These writing techniques may yield more

academic success; however, with the shortage of time and the emphasis on standardized testing, it is difficult to merge instructional delivery strategies that support this while covering all the material and preparing students to respond to questions by bubbling in a particular multiple-choice answer. Grading and responding to students written responses can be very tedious and time consuming for teachers that require a mind-shift for each instructor and time outside of the classroom to analyze the writing samples. This mind-shift is part of a cultural shift that would have to occur in the school. The administration would need to establish a vision that supports it and the teachers need to develop a desire to work in a different capacity for the well being of the students.

The researcher's experiences have shown the impact of the students' attitudes about school on their academic success. The researcher's experience in education has lead to the belief that students' attitude maybe the most important factor responsible for the achievement gap between the students that are successful and those who are not. The premise scholars hold is that students with parents or role models that have been successful in school and have an appreciation for learning are most likely to develop the same positive views about schooling, thus performing well. The researcher's experience suggest that students whose parents or role models had negative and unsuccessful experiences with school are more likely to replicate those same attitudes about school. Thus, the self-fulfilling prophecy is born.

On the other side of the equation, the teachers also possess attitudes about the students that greatly affect the students' success. Teachers form different expectations of students as a function of race, gender, and social class, and these expectations seem to be established in different ways (Baron, Tom, & Cooper, 1985). A 1997 study by Madon, Jussim, and Eccles found that teacher expectations and perceptions of academics and

behaviors had significant implications for sixth graders and how well they performed on mathematical standardized test. Their study found that teachers held expectations that were almost three times higher for Caucasian students than the expectations that were held for the African American students (Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997). Similarly, Robert Berry (2003) reported that African American male middle school students experienced lower expectations from their mathematics teachers. He contended that these lower expectations affected their achievement in mathematics and their opportunities to gain access to high-level mathematics courses. Whether it is just lowered expectations or a general dislike of some aspect of teaching the particular students in the class, the outcome is the equivalent. One problem that the administration must analyze in this study is the impact The Learning Focused Schools model has on the attitudes of both teachers and students.

New teachers still arrive at the first day of school not knowing exactly what is expected of them and what constitutes good teaching strategies. Large numbers of new teachers describe themselves as distinctly underprepared for the challenges of dealing with ethnic students and racial diversity that they find in their classroom at a time when many schools have increasingly varied populations (Rochkind & Ott, 2008). Title I schools are typically located within minority and varied ethnical groups are found. Thompson (2002) designed The Learning Focused Schools program to address these issues. Through The Learning Focused Schools training, these strategies are shared with the teachers. Educational Leaders now have the unique opportunity to change the future of education and focus their efforts on providing assistance to schools and teachers with the implementation of exemplary practices that increase learning and achievement. Educational leaders are charged with helping the teachers develop frameworks and tools

for effective organization, planning, assessing, and designing instruction for learning. Many studies have shown that when teachers feel more comfortable with the expectations, and have the necessary tools, along with proven methods, they are much more successful as they strive to increase the academic achievement of their students. In the uncompromising world of modern education, its leaders are required to find and implement new ways to improve student achievement. The ever-growing diversity in the classroom and the challenges that come with this diversity, teachers must be equipped with new tools to address these challenges. Teachers must work even harder to engage students and make learning relevant to them. Reform must focus not solely on structure, policy, and regulations but also on deeper issues of the culture of the system (Fullan, 1992, p. 4).

The two surveys were used by the researcher to help identify the changes that the components of Learning Focused Schools model have on the attitudes of all stakeholders. A few examples of the survey questions can be found in the Appendix.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore and measure the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the culture of an urban middle school on the northeastern side of the central piedmont area school system of North Carolina. As research indicates, the culture is vitally important to success of the students and teachers at that school. The school's culture has a direct impact of the possibility of student achievement. In the school at the center of this research, the Learning Focus Schools model was the primary piece of the school's reform plan implemented to change the culture of the school. The school was facing government takeover and forced reforms unless significant growth in student achievement could be shown within a three-year period. The methodology used in the study to collect and analyze the data was a variety of quantitative methods that sought to answer the following research questions.

- RQ1 – What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on the teachers' attitudes and behaviors towards student achievement, the school, and learning?
- RQ2 – What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on the culture as demonstrated by student academic achievement on statewide and district mandated standardized tests?
- RQ3 – How does the impact on the school's culture caused by the Learning Focused School model reflect any changes on the teachers' working conditions (TWC) survey?
- RQ4 – What is the relationship between the cultural changes caused by the Learning Focus School model and student achievement results?

- RQ5 – To what extent are there indications of a positive school present as a direct or indirect result of the implementation of the Learning Focused School model?

The researcher used quantitative data from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, the North Carolina Report Card, and a Teacher Survey in an attempt to ascertain some level of understanding into the culture of the school and how much of an effect on that culture occurred due to the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model.

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the Learning Focus Schools model on the school's culture. The method of research chosen to study the impact on the culture was a case study. As with any research method, there are pros and cons to the design. However, of the various research designs available, the researcher chose this method based on its ability to gather differing quantitative data and answer the research questions that were raised by studying the problem. Case studies are recognized as an excellent design method to systematically interpret and understand institutional and educational phenomena, such as school culture. Patton (1985) describes the value of the case study in this way:

It is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting—what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting—and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting. (p.

1)

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of the Learning Focused School model on the school's culture on a middle school in a North Carolina public school system.

RQ1. The Methodology used to answer Research Question 1: What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on the teachers' attitudes and behaviors towards student achievement, the school and learning; was teacher survey after implementation the Learning Focused Schools Model. The use of surveys allowed the participants to express their ideas about the effects and the impacts on the school caused by the school-wide implementation on the Learning Focused Schools model. The surveys were administered online and confidentially using the website, SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey allows users to develop and administer a variety of different surveys to participants allowing participants to remain anonymous to the researcher. By allowing the participants to remain anonymous, the researcher was able to establish and add validity to the survey and gain more of an authentic look at the ideas and feelings expressed the participants. An example of the survey can be found in the Appendix.

RQ2. The Methodology used to answer Research Question 2: What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on the culture as demonstrated by student academic achievement on statewide and district mandated standardized tests; this was comparison of standardized test scores from the North Carolina Report Card before, during, and after implementation of the Learning Focused Schools Model. The data that is shown by comparing the composite scores of student achievement suggests that the Learning Focused Schools model did not have a significant impact on student achievement

(variance); therefore, no Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed.

RQ3. The Methodology used to answer Research Question 3: How does the impact on the school's culture caused by the Learning Focused Schools model reflect any changes on the teachers' working conditions (TWC) survey? The data collected from comparing the results of the surveys will demonstrate if there were any meaningful increases in positive responses each year that the survey was conducted. This measurement will begin the year the Learning Focused Schools model was implemented comparing the 2006-2007 school year to the 2009-2010 school year.

RQ4. The Methodology used to answer Research Question 4: What is the relationship between the cultural changes caused by the Learning Focus School model and student achievement results, was teacher survey results after implementation the Learning Focused Schools Model. The relationship between the cultural changes and the level of student achievement will be readily determined. Interest in whether or not the culture exhibited a positive change, as well as comparison to student achievement.

RQ5. The Methodology used to answer Research Question 5: To what extent are there indications of a positive school present at the school as a direct or indirect result of the implementation of the Learning Focused School model? Although an analysis of all three measures, the teacher survey, the Teacher Working Conditions survey, and student test scores indicate that there were direct and indirect positive changes to the schools culture but the changes did not manifest themselves as an increase in student achievement.

Participants

This study included teachers and students from the school. As of the 2009-2010 school year, the school had a population of 708. The enrollment for the 2006-2007 school year, before implementing the school reform program, was 603 students. The

school included

- 39 classroom teachers
- 11.5 Exceptional Children personnel including teacher assistants
- 11 support personnel
- 3 assistant principals
- 1 media coordinator
- 2 guidance counselors
- 4 secretaries
- 1 In-School suspension supervisor
- 1.5 Art Education position
- 3.2 workforce development positions
- 1 ESL teacher
- 1.5 drop-out prevention counselors
- 2 campus security associates
- 5 custodians
- 9 cafeteria workers.

The demographics of the students were approximately

- 75% African American
- 16 % Hispanic
- 3.8%, White
- 3.6% Asian
- 2.7%, Multi-Racial
- 0.2% American Indian.

Over 80% of the students at the school received federal assistance for poverty reasons. In addition to the socio-economic demographics, 17% of the students were identified as students with disabilities, and 12% of the students had limited English proficiency. Because the Learning Focused School model is intended to bring about change for schools with demographics similar to those at this school, this school was a logical choice for the study.

The students whose test scores were used in this study are all students that were in attendance during the 2006-2007 to 2009-2010 school years. Only the subgroup and school averages were used in the study; therefore, permission to use individual student scores was not needed. The teachers who were asked to participate in the survey included those teachers who were employed at the school before the implementation of the Learning Focused School model, during the implementation phase, and remained after the program was implemented. These are the only teachers who can truly speak to the impact the implementation had on the school's culture as they were intimately involved in the process and witnessed the impact firsthand. Any teacher who specifically met these criterion received an electronic invitation, asking them to participate in the study. All teachers who accepted the invite were given a link to an online survey that asked specific questions that were designed to lend insight in the responses to the research questions that this study hoped to answer. The letter included the provision that anyone could choose not to participate in the study at anytime and that any data collected by their participation would not be used in the study population to maintain validity.

Instruments

The student test score data and the results of the teacher's working conditions

survey were obtained from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's public records. The survey used in the study is a modified version of the Teacher's Working Conditions surveys used to measure school culture. The survey was uploaded to the SurveyMonkey website for distribution. Additional components present in the survey were to not only measure the culture of the school but to also measure the beliefs and attitudes of the teachers about the Impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the culture of the school. The data collected references the teachers' experiences; attitudes and beliefs were expressed on these surveys (questionnaires). According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) questionnaires are printed forms of questions that will be asked of each participant. They noted that the benefit of using questionnaires is that they typically takes less time to collect the data. The researcher considered but rejected the idea of using focus groups and interviews. It was determined that validity could better be maintained if the participants could best express their thoughts and feelings without having to do so in person or within a group setting. The researcher used a Likert scale survey to gather information from the teachers. The survey was developed by the researcher to help evaluate the climate of the school. A Likert scale is a psychometric scale that uses surveys and questionnaires to gather data in research studies. It is a widely used approach to scaling responses in survey research and is commonly used to gather quantitative data from qualitative responses. The scale is named after its inventor, and psychologist, Rensis Likert. The Likert scale surveys are written in such a way as to allow each response to be scored along a range. Using a symmetric agree-disagree scale, each of the participants' responses to a Likert scale survey item must specify a level of agreement or disagreement. The range on the scale captures the intensity of the participant's feelings on each individual item. The results of an analysis of multiple

items on the survey should reveal a pattern of scaled properties. The agree-disagree scale that was used in this study requires participants to select a single response; these responses include strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. In a Likert scale survey, numerical values are assigned to each response that will be analyzed for quantitative data.

The survey was administered electronically to the participants. The participants used a given code to login and take the survey anonymously. The survey consisted of 25 items that were correlated to specific attributes of the Learning Focused School model that can directly affect a school's culture. These attributes are administrative support and monitoring; accessibility to knowledge base; Collaborative Practices; communication of shared vision; and response to student achievement. Along with the attributes of the Learning Focused School model, the survey also measured the presence of the 12 norms of school culture explained in an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Kent Peterson (2002). Peterson is professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Director of the Principal's Leadership Institute. He has authored multiple books and articles in the areas of school culture, school improvements, and effective leadership. In this interview, Dr. Peterson discussed the effect that school culture has on a school and the achievement of the students. Peterson explained that school culture consists of the following: (a) collegiality, (b) experimentation, (c) high expectations, (d) trust and confidence, (e) tangible support, (f) reaching out to the knowledge base, (g) appreciation and recognition, (h) caring, celebration and humor, (i) involvement in decision making, (j) protection of what's important, (k) traditions, and (l) honest and open communication (Peterson 2002). Keywords and phrases were associated with each attribute of Learning Focus and the 12

norms of school culture. The researcher recognized that some keyword identifications are present in multiple categories, due to the similarity of terms in The Learning Focused Model and the norms of school culture. The survey included many keywords and phrase associations. Administrative support was associated with the following terms and phrases: encouraged, providing, afforded, addressing, support, and given opportunities. Collaborative practices and collegiality were associated with the following terms and phrases: involved, expected, value opinions, accept, available, together, and build collegiality. Communication of the school's vision and open communication were associated with the following terms and phrases: expected, speak, ensure, and communicate. Accessibility to knowledge bases and tangible support were associated with the following terms and phrases: tangible support, instructional strategies, professional development opportunities, academic facilitator, materials, resources, new methods, activities, best practices, and instructional decisions. Response to student achievement and high expectations were associated with the following terms and phrases: accountable, high performance, instructional purpose, challenging, good teaching, individual needs of students, and concern. Protection of what's important was associated with the following terms and phrases: protect and reserved. Traditions were associated with the following terms and phrases: recurring events, tradition, and ritual. Appreciation and recognition and celebrations were associated with the following terms and phrases: caring, awareness, benchmarks, accomplishments, events, goals, recognized, and appreciated. Involving decision-making was associated with the following terms and phrases: autonomy, adapt, decisions, empowered, and involved. Experimentation was associated with the following terms and phrases: implementing new strategies, new ideas, experiment, design, and best practices. Trust and confidence were associated with the

following terms and phrases: autonomy, trust, professional judgment, value, readily accept, and professional competence.

Procedure

During the spring of 2012, the selected group of teachers completed an online survey. The participants were chosen based on the years that they were employed at the school being studied. Attempts were made to invite all teachers who were employed at the school during the 2006-2007 to 2009-2010 school years. The participants in the study received a detailed explanation of the study and were given the opportunity to participate or decline participation in the study. A link to SurveyMonkey and a password were given to all participants so that they could access and complete the survey.

The researcher petitioned the school's principal in the fall of 2011 and the correlating school district for permission to conduct the study in the spring of 2012. The timeline requested for this study was a semester, which allowed the dissemination of the surveys, and the compilation and analysis of the results upon the completion of the data collection. Each question used in the Likert scale survey evoked answers for specific research questions. Question numbers 3, 4, 5, 10, 16, 17, 22, and 23 were directly or indirectly related to RQ1 – What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on the teachers' attitudes and behaviors towards students, the school and learning? Question numbers 6, 13, 14, 21, and 25 were related directly or indirectly to RQ2 – What is the impact of the Learning Focused School model on student academic achievement on state-wide and district mandated standardized tests? Data relating to RQ2 can be found on Tables 8-9 and Figure 1, displaying student scores from the years 2006-2010. The changes in the status of the working conditions at the school that occurred between the years 2006-2010 that may have been caused by the implementation of the Learning

Focused School model are reflected in the working conditions surveys and were directly relate to RQ3 – Does the impact on the school’s culture caused by the Learning Focused School model reflect any changes on the teachers’ working conditions (TWC) survey?

There was also a direct or indirect relationship shown in answers to question numbers 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 15. Lastly, question numbers 1, 2, 18, 19, 20, and 24 related directly or indirectly to RQ4 – Is there a relation between the Learning Focus School model and student achievement results? To answer RQ5 - To what extent are there indications of a positive school present at the school as a direct or indirect result of the implementation of the Learning Focused School model, all three measures were analyzed.

Chapter 4: Results

This study was an attempt to ascertain the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the culture of an urban middle school in the northeast region of the central piedmont of North Carolina. The Learning Focused Schools model was developed to increase the academic achievement of students at similar schools. The Learning-Focused Strategies Model was developed in response to national, state, and local efforts to increase achievement for all students and to reduce achievement gaps. The model provides comprehensive school reform strategies and solutions for K-12 schools based on exemplary practices and research-based strategies.

Findings

The first research question (RQ1) explored the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the teachers' attitude and behaviors towards students' achievement, the school, and learning; teachers reported a meaningful impact. Answers to this question can be found in multiple places. In Table 7, teachers responded to the item on the survey that read: The Learning Focused Schools model provides me the autonomy to adapt my instructional decisions based on the individual needs of my students. Eighty-one percent of the respondents agreed that the Learning Focused Schools model provided them with the power to focus on student achievement in their classroom in the ways that they felt were most appropriate. Good teaching is recognized and appreciated in this school and community; this sentence is another sentence that attempts to answers the first research question. Here the focus is on the belief in the school. Seventy-one percent of teachers agreed to some level that the school respects and recognizes good teaching.

The second research question (RQ2) focuses directly on the culture as it relates to the student test scores. The study attempted to answer this question by comparing the

students' test scores before, during, and after the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. The data that is shown by comparing the scores does not seem to support the notion that the Learning Focused Schools model had a significant impact on student achievement, even if the teachers felt that it did. The scores dipped and then rebounded, but it is difficult to determine whether the rebound in the scores was caused by the new model or the change in the reporting of the scores that occurred in the 2008-09 school year.

Research Question 3 (RQ3) explores the survey and attempts to marry the changes in the responses to the components of the Learning Focused Schools model. The Working Conditions (TWC) survey provides a great deal of insight into the minds of the staff during the years of this study. The items on this survey are designed to help administrators and district personnel evaluate the feelings and attitudes of the staff in key areas that are known to have major impact on the culture and climate of the school. Between the 2008 and 2010 survey there was a 35% to 40% increase in positive responses of teachers on the Teacher Working Conditions survey. Thirty-five percent of respondents agreed to the item on the survey that asked if teachers have time available to collaborate with colleagues. This item is directly related to the Learning Focused Schools model. The model mandates that time is allotted during the school day for the teachers to plan together and collaborate on the instructional decisions and build common assessments. Changes in this area are a direct reflection of the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. The implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model greatly affect how the following items on the working conditions survey were answered: Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction; teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues; the faculty has an

effective process for making group decisions to solve problems. Because of the collegial attitude and the importance of collaboration in the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model, there was significant impact in these areas at schools that are using this model. The survey demonstrates an average of 40 point increase in the percentage of teachers who agree that these things are occurring in the school after the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model.

Research question 4 (RQ4) revisits what can be gleaned from the students achievement levels over the years. Again, the change in the scores that were reported do not give a clear picture of what is happening due to the change in the reporting standards by the state.

Lastly the fifth research question (RQ5) reflects on any positive changes at the school during and after the years of the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. Throughout the survey that was created specifically for this study and TWC survey, positive changes in culture could be seen; however, there was no evidence that the implementation of the Learning Focused School Model had any impact on student achievement.

Presentation of Data

This study collected multiple forms of data. A unique survey was administered to the faculty members who were present before and through the full implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. Data was collected by comparing the results of the Teacher Working Conditions survey before the implementation, throughout the implementation process, and after. These three data points helped to shed light on where the implementation of the model affected the climate of the school.

The survey was developed and administered anonymously through www.SurveyMonkey.com, which is an online survey resource. The survey was titled “The Learning Focused Schools model Impact” and it contained 25 items. Each item on the survey was written in such a way to connect the components of the Learning Focused Schools model to correlates of the effective schools. The survey items were written on the Likert scale and response choices ranged from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, Strongly Agree (Scored 1-5).

Participants

Twenty-six surveys were administered with 21 of the teachers responding to the survey. Because the participants were asked to respond anonymously, the survey was administered twice with reminders to all possible participants that included deadlines for responses.

Survey Scale

The scale used in the survey assigned a specific numeric value to the each response choice. Strongly Disagree was assigned the number 1, Disagree was assigned number 2, Undecided or Neutral was assigned number 3, number 4 was used for Agree and number 5 was Strongly Agree. Because a neutral response gets a rating of three, any rating over three indicates a positive response. The survey is divided into five sections containing five survey items each. Each item on the survey focuses on specific characteristics related to effective schools. The five characteristics are trust and respect, professional development, common planning, open and honest communication, and resources. The items of the survey that attempt to gather insight on the amount of trust and respect that was present after the implementation of Learning Focused Schools model are represented in the Table 3. The data in Table 3 indicate that the majority of the

participants have a positive outlook on the school when it comes to the level of trust and respect that is felt. Although each item varies in the level of impact felt, the average rating for the responses is 3.96. The table shows that the majority of the responses are either agree or strongly agree.

Table 3

Survey Responses to Questions about the Level of Trust and Respect

<i>Survey Item</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
The Learning Focused Schools model values each of us as professionals; we are provided ample opportunities to show our caring and awareness of significant events in each other's lives, as well as celebrating benchmarks in the life of the school.	0.0%	5.0%	10.0%	70.0%	15.0%
The Learning Focused Schools model encourages teachers to value and accept each other's opinions and professional competence.	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	71%	14.3%
The Learning Focused Schools model does not hinder the recognition of traditions, rituals and celebrations of special events and goals that extend through professional and personal accomplishments.	0.0%	5.0%	5.0%	75%	15.0%
The Learning Focused Schools model provides me the autonomy to adapt my instructional decisions based on the individual needs of my students.	0.0%	0.0%	19.0%	52.4%	28.6%
Good teaching is recognized and appreciated in this school and community.	4.8%	9.5%	14.3%	47.6%	23.8%

To gain insight into how the teachers felt about professional development that they received related to the Learning Focused Schools model, the participants responded to five items throughout the survey. Table 4 presents the results to of individual related items on the survey. The results indicate that the majority of survey participants

responded positively with an average of 4.13. Similar to the response rate of Table 3, the majority of the responses are either agree or strongly agree.

Table 4

Survey Responses to Questions on Professional Development

<i>Survey Item</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
Through the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model, I am now encouraged to bring new ideas into my classroom and I am afforded specific and individualized professional development opportunities.	0.0%	4.8%	9.5%	52%	33.3%
The monitoring and accountability that accompanies the Learning Focused Schools model helps administrators use constructive criticism to ensure my professional growth, and makes the school's vision clear.	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%	60%	30.0%
The Learning Focused Schools model encourages teachers to implement strategies and best practices presented through professional development opportunities.	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	67%	28.6%
Teachers are currently presented with resources to implement best practices from professional development opportunities presented at Learning Focused trainings.	0.0%	9.5%	4.8%	57%	28.6%
I have accessibility to professional development opportunities, tailored to my individual needs to ensure my professional growth based on observations and administrative feedback.	0.0%	9.5%	4.8%	62%	23.8%

Table 5 displays the results of the participants responses to the items related to their planning time. Again the participants responded to five items in the survey related to this theme. Common planning is at the core of what the Learning Focused Schools model is about. The ability of teachers being about to collaborate and share ideas and data is essential to the success of the school. The results indicate that the majority of

survey participants responded positively with an average of rating of 3.98. It should be noted that there were a few responses that shows that teachers felt that their instructional and planning time was interrupted by meetings and paperwork.

Table 5

Survey Responses to Questions about Common Planning

<i>Survey Item</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
The Learning Focused Schools model helps administrators protect my instructional and planning time by keeping meetings and paperwork to a minimum.	4.8%	9.5%	14.3%	61.9%	9.5%
Common planning sessions and other collaborative practices in the Learning Focused Schools model allows teachers and staff to be more involved in the decision making process with regard to the material, resources and instructional strategies.	0.0%	4.8%	9.5%	71%	14.3%
During common planning sessions and other collaborative practices, teachers are expected to practice collegiality and to experiment with new teaching strategies.	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	62%	33.3%
The Learning Focused Schools model helps administrators and parents trust my professional judgment and show confidence in my ability to carry out the school's vision through my design of instructional activities.	0.0%	4.8%	19.0%	57.1%	19.0%
Through the Learning Focused Schools model, administrators encourage teachers to plan, develop, and evaluate curricula and special projects together.	0.0%	4.8%	4.8%	61.9%	28.6%

Schools that are consistently successful have administrative teams that are good at developing and communicating a clear vision of the school. This level of communication allows teachers the direction and guidance to fulfill the mission of educating students.

When asked to respond to items related to communication at the school, the participants

responded at a rating averaged at 4.03. The results of the participants' responses to each item are indicated in Table 6. It is important to note some teachers responded negatively to the items which related specifically to the use of meeting times and what they consider to be wise use of the meeting time.

Table 6

Survey Responses to Questions about Open and Honest Communication

<i>Survey Item</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
During our common planning sessions, I am able to speak to my colleagues and administrators directly and tactfully when I have a concern without fear of losing their esteem or damaging our relationship.	0.0%	9.5%	4.8%	67%	19.0%
When something is not working in the school, The Learning Focused Schools model empowers me to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for the administration to tell me what to do.	0.0%	9.5%	4.8%	48%	38.1%
Learning Focused schools encourage activities that build collegiality.	0.0%	9.5%	4.8%	43%	43%
Faculty meetings and trainings are reserved for curriculum and instruction purposes; whereas, business and announcements are handled through memos or email.	4.8%	14.3%	4.8%	48%	28.6%
Through regular evaluations and monitoring, the teachers and administrators are held accountable for high student performance.	4.8%	0.0%	14.3%	48%	33.3%

Financial support and access to veterans of instructional leaders can have a major impact on the success of novice teachers or teachers that are new to content areas. There were five items on the survey that addressed the impact on this theme by the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. The responses have an average rating of 3.97. This rating indicates that the teachers can see a positive impact on the

school in this area based on the Learning Focused Schools model. The results of participants responses to each individual question addressed related to this theme are indicated in Table 7.

Table 7

Survey Responses to Questions about the Amount of Resources Available

<i>Survey Item</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
The Learning Focused Schools model training sessions helps administrators provide tangible support to teachers in addressing curriculum issues and implementing new instructional strategies.	0.0%	4.8%	9.5%	57.1%	28.6%
Academic Facilitators and veteran teachers make themselves and resources available to me through collaborative and collegial ways.	0.0%	9.5%	4.8%	57%	28.6%
There are recurring events that students and teachers alike see as refreshing, challenging, and a definite change of pace.	0.0%	9.5%	9.5%	71.4%	9.5%
As a practice of the Learning Focused Schools model, teachers and administrators are continually reaching out to various knowledge bases to improve their teaching and leadership qualities.	0.0%	5.3%	5.3%	57.9%	31.6%
In our school, it is the norm for teachers to consult the knowledge bases, while reaching out to learn new methods and examine the latest materials.	0.0%	20.0%	15.0%	35%	30.0%

The study conducted contains a combination of soft and hard data. The hard data that is used in this study compares the achievement level of the students at the school over a 4-year period. During the 2006-07 school year the Learning Focus Schools model was just being introduced. The students being tested were still very familiar with the status quo and their scores reflect the work and effort of the teachers before the model

was imbedded in every classroom. Each subsequent year, the Learning Focused Schools model became more of the standard in all classes culminating in a full school inclusion by the 2009-2010 school year. Table 8 indicates the students' End-of-Grade scores in reading over this period. The results shown on the table indicate that the students were actually performing better the year before the Learning Focuses Schools model was implemented. The results suggest that the students had a significant drop in achievement initially but rebounded and had marked improvements each year after that. However, it must be noted that beginning in 2008-09, results for reading and math for grades 6-8 contain retest scores. There is significant and substantial growth reflected in the data starting in the 2008-09 school year.

Table 8

Results of the End-of-Grade Reading Assessment

<i>Student Subgroups</i>	<i>2006-2007</i>	<i>2007-2008</i>	<i>2008-2009</i>	<i>2009-2010</i>
All Students	67.4%	31.7%	47.1%	55.1%
Female	77.9%	35.2%	50.9%	51.1%
Male	58.1%	28.3%	43.5%	51.9%
American Indian	*	*	*	*
Asian	89.5%	52.6%	50.0%	71.4%
Black	68.5%	29.1%	44.1%	49.9%
Hispanic	52.7%	30.1%	49.6%	49.7%
Multi-Racial	80.0%	60.0%	66.7%	64.7%
White	90.5%	52.2%	68.4%	73.7%

*Indicates that the student population in the subgroup is too small to report the value.

Table 9 indicates the results of the students' test scores on the End of Grade test in Mathematics. The results indicate a very small almost insignificant change in the test

scores from the 2006-07 school year to the first year of The Learning Focused Schools model's impact. After the implementation, the scores rose significantly in the 2008-09 year. Again, it must be noted that beginning in 2008-09, results for math for grades 6-8 contain retest scores. Table 9 reflects that a significant and sustained growth is exhibited in the data starting in the 2008-09 school year.

Table 9

Results of the End-of-Grade Mathematics Assessment

<i>Student Subgroups</i>	<i>2006-2007</i>	<i>2007-2008</i>	<i>2008-2009</i>	<i>2009-2010</i>
All Students	36.5%	34.1%	54.7%	66.9%
Female	38.4%	34.4%	59.0%	66.0%
Male	34.8%	33.8%	50.7%	67.8%
American Indian	*	*	*	*
Asian	52.6%	52.6%	66.7%	85.7%
Black	36.2%	31.0%	51.2%	66.8%
Hispanic	25.0%	35.8%	61.0%	60.9%
Multi-Racial	60.0%	60.0%	66.7%	88.2%
White	61.9%	47.8%	57.9%	84.2%

*Indicates that the student population in the subgroup is too small to report the value.

Table 8 shows data that indicates the students who performed at or above the proficiency level on the state standardized test over the time frame of the study. The table provides a clearer picture of what happened over the years of the Learning Focused Schools model implementation. The table shows that each year, the students performed better than the year before excluding the 2006-2007 school year that shows results from before the implementation. Again, what must be taken into account is the fact that the

results of the 2008-09 and the 2009-10 include the students' retest scores. In North Carolina, students have the opportunity to take the test and then retest if they score below proficient on the state End-of-Grade test. Starting in 2009, the results of the retest were added to the final overall school's scores. The two most significant data points on this chart is the major decrease in the scores between the 2006-07 year and the 2007-08 year, and the large increase in reported scores starting in the 2008-09 school year.

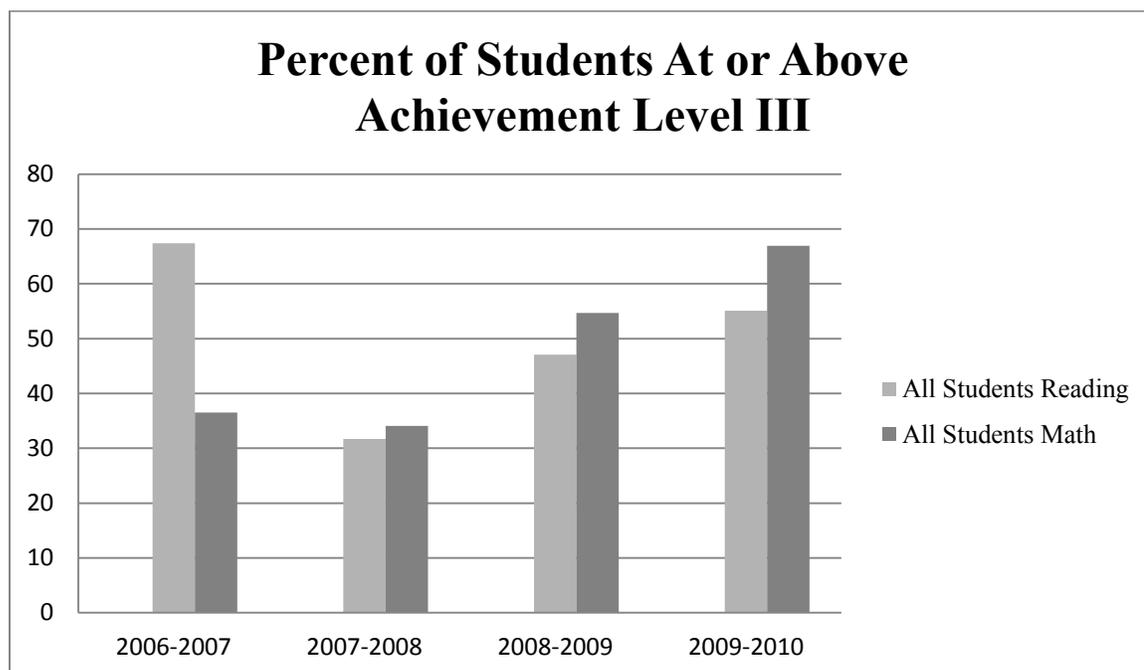


Figure 1. Overall students that achieve at or above proficient.

In 2006, approximately 91% of the teachers responded to The Working Conditions Survey. The survey is designed divided into specific themes to quickly identify a consensus across broad areas that may be used to determine strengths in a school or areas of weaknesses. Among those themes (significant factors), managing student conduct was not measured on the 2006 survey; therefore, Table 10 shows the absence of data in that area. Fifty-eight percent of the staff responded to the survey in 2008 and 81% in 2010.

The survey is designed in part to identify a general consensus across broad areas through the identification of strengths and weaknesses across theme specific categories such as time facilities and resources, community support and involvement, management of student conduct, teacher leadership, student leadership, professional development, instructional practices and support, and overall conditions.

Table 10

Percentage of Positive Responses to the Teachers Working Conditions Survey Significant Factors

<i>Significant Factors</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2010</i>
Time	62.3%	33.0%	60.8%
Facilities and Resources	60.0%	47.3%	71.4%
Managing Student Conduct	*	40.8%	49.2%
Teacher Leadership	62.7%	41.3%	72.9%
School Leadership	62.6%	44.2%	69.1%
Professional Development	63.4%	53.1%	63.1%
Overall	62.2%	45.5%	63.0%

* This factor was not present on the 2006 version of the survey

Analysis

The results of the Learning Focused Schools model survey indicate that the teachers felt that the Learning Focused Schools model positively impacted the school. The comparison of the working conditions survey shows that most of the teachers were fairly comfortable with the school before the implementation of the new model but suffered a significant decrease, average of about 20% less, in the next two years. Two years later, the culture and attitude of the teachers at the school seemed to rebound to the

level similar to where they were before the Learning Focused Schools model was ever introduced. The researchers experiences suggest that major change in any organization will cause a short-term negative impact that is almost unavoidable, but the members in the organization adjust and positive outcomes are then possible.

The researcher was able to determine, based on the answers to the survey administered in this study that the teachers felt that the Learning Focused Schools models provided a framework for the tenets of effective schools. The results show positive feeling among the teachers in every sector and each section was developed to measure how often the participants felt that they model impacted the school in ways that are proven to be important for positive changes with in a schools culture. With the Learning Focused Schools model facilitating these tenets, it would be expected that the students' test scores would also show positive change. The comparison of the students' tests scores shows that in the year of the initial change students' test scores were lower, but each year following, the scores increased.

Limitations

During the research on the background of the school, it was discovered that the facility was undergoing massive conduction projects. Students were moved off hallways so that the building could be renovated and then moved back. The old gymnasium was torn down and rebuilt, and the entire front office and entrance of the school was remodeled. This study did not attempt to determine what impact of these changes had on the culture of the school or how it impacted the attitudes of the teachers, which might be reflected on the Teachers Working Conditions survey.

During the years that were covered in the survey, the leadership at the school changed. The 2006-07 school year was the first year of the principal who introduced the

Learning Focused Schools model and the school was under extreme pressure to show improvements. The following year was marked with very low teacher retention (35% teacher turn-over), adjustments in staff, facilitators, and administrators. The 2009-10 school year began with a new first year principal and all new administrative team. Many of these changes could have some effect on the working conditions survey and the survey administered for this study. These factors limited the ability of the researcher to minimize variables introduced into this study.

The student test scores are raw data that is much less subjective. The data shows that there was an immediate drop in the scores; however, in subsequent years the scores began to rise back to their previous levels. There are many factors that could account for the changes in the scores, including the factors that may have impacted the other data sets. In 2008, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction changed how the overall school scores would be determined. Instead of using the data from the students first attempt on the End-of-Grade test to determine what the over all schools report would be, the NCDPI allowed the inclusion of retest scores. This change alone might account for the increase in schools overall performance. This study was not designed to remove the variable caused by this difference in reporting.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine the level of impact on a school's culture caused by the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. The culture is widely accepted to be defined as the attitudes, beliefs, and general behaviors of the members of a particular organization. The school climate-student achievement connection has been well established in the research (Freiberg, Driscoll, & Knight, 1999). Established cultures in a school manifest themselves through the teachers, and thus the academic achievement of the students. A school's culture influences the way people think, feel, and act. Culture in a school is composed of varying levels of collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible support, reaching out to knowledge bases, appreciation and recognition, caring and humor, involvement in the decision making, protection of what is important, traditions, and honest, open communication. Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning (Peterson, 2002). This study was conducted within a school that had been fairly unsuccessful and maintained, on average, poor student achievement. As a school reform model to improve the school's chances for success, the school implemented the Learning Focused Schools model. The goal of the Learning Focused Schools model was to provide comprehensive school reform strategies and solutions for K-12 schools based on exemplary practices and research-based strategies. These practices and strategies focus on five areas: Planning, Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and School Organization (Learning Focused Schools, 2002). The study analyzed the affects of the Learning Focused Schools model on the school culture and how that, in turn, affects the academic achievement of the students. To

answer the research questions, the researcher reviewed data from the three most recent Teacher Working Conditions surveys to determine how the teachers felt about the school before, during, and after the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. This survey was written with specific items that address significant factors that affect the climate and culture of the school. The significant factors included in the survey are Time, Facilities and Resources, Managing Students, Teacher Leadership, School Leadership, Professional Development, and the Overall feeling about the school.

Data in the study was also collected using a survey developed specifically for this study. The Learning Focused Impact survey was designed to compare and measure the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model as it related to the nine correlates of the of an effective school. These nine correlates are very closely aligned to the components of a school's culture: instructional leadership; clear and focused mission; climate of high expectations; frequently monitoring of student progress; opportunity to learn and student time on task; safe and orderly environment; positive home and school relations; professional development; and school culture. In this study, the researcher designed the survey items to gauge the level of impact the teachers felt on these areas by the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model on the school.

Lastly, the student's EOG scores in math and reading were analyzed to determine the impact of the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model on student achievement. To do this, composite scores were compared over multiple years. The years analyzed were also the same years that marked a period of time before, during, and after full implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. These three data sources were used to answer the research questions of this study.

Implications for Further Studies

The results of this study offer theoretical and practical implications. First, the results offer a much better theoretical view and understanding of how the culture of the school can affect the level of student achievement in a school building. Full implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model can change the impact of the school's culture and more specifically the thoughts of the teachers and the feelings about what was important at the school; however, the results of this study do not confirm many other studies that suggest that improving culture in a school leads to higher levels of student achievement. A possible explanation of lack of higher student achievement is that a drop in student achievement is expected at the onset of any new cultural changes in a school.

A case for practical consideration of the Learning Focused School model can be made when educational leaders are hoping to improve a school has the same or similar issues as the school in this study. The results show that the implementation of this program can build frameworks that enhance attitudes about achievement, build collegial behaviors among teachers, and demonstrate a clear, shared vision. Other practical considerations include the understanding that a culture of low achievement and accountability can result in apathy among the students that hinders growth and achievement, and this must be addressed by the administration. Another way to apply what has been learned by this study is for principals and school leaders to conduct an assessment of the culture of a school to determine the culture and how healthy the climates is, and then implement steps to address issues and preserve the positives. The study supports the notion of using working condition survey results and multiple assessment tools to identify practices and more importantly attitudes that lead to

unhealthy cultures.

Future studies on this topic should include a comparison between similar schools. Selected schools could serve as control groups without the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model and the other groups with full implementation. The study should run multiple years to mitigate the introduction of other factors including building projects, slight demographic changes, and changing in the administrations and faculty members. It might also be interesting to give voice to the students in the form of focus groups, interviews or questionnaires. There is much to be learned from the input of students and how their perception of the school affects the culture and vice versa.

Conclusion

The first research question (RQ1) explored the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model on the teachers' attitude and behaviors towards students' achievement, the school, and learning; teachers reported a meaningful impact. The focus on the culture is an important first step in the process of school reform. Because of the impact of the Learning Focused Schools model the school leaders can now begin to use the culture of collaboration to facilitate growth in the students. *Closing the Achievement Gap*, a report by the California Superintendent's P-16 Council recognized that addressing a school's culture is an essential component in any school's effort towards successful reform, and improving achievement for underprivileged students (O'Connell, 2009). The results of this study give school leaders a starting point for school reform. Although the study did not show a change in student achievement levels, it is a common belief in the education community that within the natural progression of school reform a healthy school culture will most often manifest itself in higher student achievement. School leaders can consider the Learning Focus Schools model as a framework for building cultural changes. Leaders

are cautioned not to focus on student achievement without first addressing the environment in which the students are learning. To do this would seem a proposition with limited returns. In 2003, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guild to Evidence Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs*. In this report they concluded that social and emotional skills could be taught, modeled, and supported by the school culture and that they predict motivation to learn and academic success as well as positive social behavior.

The second research question (RQ2) focuses directly on the culture as it relates to the student test scores. The study attempted to answer this question by comparing the students test scores before, during, and after the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. The data that is shown by comparing the scores does not seem to support the notion that the Learning Focused Schools model had a significant impact on student achievement. Although this study was unable to show a substantial impact on the students' academic achievement, it is important to note that other studies tell us that increased achievement is an expected outcome of positive cultural changes. Haynes, Emmons, and Comer (1993) wrote that specific research on school climate in high-risk urban environments indicate that a positive, supportive, and culturally conscious school climate can significantly shape the degree of academic success experienced by urban students. Oftentimes, the initial thought pattern is to address student achievement; however, when this occurs, the supports that are needed for the sustained growth of students are omitted. Students in high poverty and urban areas are in need of additional wrap-around services that can only be provided by a caring staff that attempts to build relationships and set high expectations for students. Interactions among faculty members

and all stakeholders in the building have the potential to support the growth of students and assist teachers in their own professional development. The Learning Focused Schools model provides a framework of common language. This common language assists in the establishment of a level of comfort among the students because they are able to apply this language across multiple settings. Teachers benefit from the common language as well because students are provided with scaffolds of support that makes learning easier and more attainable for all.

Research Question 3 (RQ3) explores the survey and attempts to marry the changes in the responses to the components of the Learning Focused Schools model. The Working Conditions (TWC) survey provides a great deal of insight into the minds of the staff during the years of this study. The items on this survey are designed to help administrators and district personnel evaluate the feelings and attitude of the staff in key areas that are known to have major impact on the culture and climate of the school. Between the 2008 and 2010 survey, there was a 35% to 40% increase in positive responses of teachers on the Teacher Working Conditions survey. The results of the TWC shows that the most significant changes occurred in the area of teacher leadership. This is very important because of the impact that teacher leaders have on the school as a whole. Cindy Harrison and Joellen Killion (2007) discussed teacher leadership in the September 2007 edition of the *Educational Leadership* journal. They highlighted the multiple roles of teacher leaders within a school. Among the ten roles that were discussed in the article they alluded to the importance of the teachers being resource providers, instructional specialist, and mentors for more novice teachers. When teachers are thought of as leaders within the school, they feel the autonomy to make decisions and to take risks in the classroom. Schools that develop teacher leaders have unexpected positive outcomes that

lead to an overall climate of self-actualization among staff members. Students benefit academically and socially when they are able to witness their teacher stepping out of their comfort zones and taking calculated risks on their behalf. School administrators should strongly consider focusing on building leadership from among the staff members for the sake of organizational “buy-in” and to foster a culture of collaboration and tangible support.

Research question 4 (RQ4) revisits what can be deemed from the students achievement levels over the years, and again, the change in the scores that are reported does not give a clear picture of what is happening due to the change in the reporting standards by the state. What must be noted in the results of this study is that full implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model is still fairly new at this school. Studies have shown that the implementation of new programs are most often not immediately embraced by members in the organization and thus the their level of the program’s effectiveness is stifled. Virginia Satir (1991), an author and psychotherapist, developed a model to describe performance variations as a result of change. The Satir Model explains that when a person experiences change (in this case, change imposed by the Learning Focused Schools model), they begin with the status quo or their present state of being. Once a change is required by the introduction of a foreign element, the individual experiences a short-term period of chaos. During this chaotic period, the individual may attempt to understand and apply the new knowledge and misunderstand or reject it outright. In this study, the period of chaos may account for the substantial drop in the student test scores and positive marks on the Teacher Working Conditions survey during the preliminary implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. In the Satir Model, the next phase of the cycle is practical application where those involved are

establishing a familiarity (Satir, 1991). The individuals within the organization are attempting to tie the new knowledge and procedures to the accepted norms, practices, and personal experiences. This part of process is where the most significant growth occurs within a culture. The roles of school leaders are extremely important and their support or lack of support for the program resonates with the staff. Based on the results of the study and the supporting data collected for the study, the school in the study is, at this point, in the change process. Small incremental changes are occurring at the school, but the full impact of the Learning Focused Schools model has not yet been realized. Lastly, a new status quo is established as part of the change process. This status quo creates a new reality and cultural norm for every member of the organization from what used to be foreign. School leaders must consider this when implementing any new program and allow the school time to work through this cycle or change before determine the level of impact.

Lastly, the fifth research question (RQ5) reflects on any positive changes at the school during and after the years of the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model. Throughout the survey that was created specifically for this study and TWC survey, positive changes in school culture can be seen. However, there was no evidence that the implementation of the Learning Focused School Model had any impact on student achievement. A major component of the Learning Focused Schools model is common planning and increased collegiality and collaboration. The framework for common planning built into the school day is essential for this model's success. In his book, *Improving Schools From Within*, Roland Barth (2002) stated, "...collegiality is not the natural state of things in schools and never will be. It will not occur on its own. It seems that collegiality will come to schools only if it is valued and deliberately sought

after, only if someone deliberately takes action to overcome these obstacles” (p. 32-33). According to Eaker, Dufour and Dufour (2002), principals are responsible for fostering this atmosphere of collaboration. Principals and school leaders must understand that this will require specific and special attention that must be coordinated by unique scheduling and a commitment to affording the teachers the opportunity to collaborate. The data from this study reflects how important these opportunities are to the teachers.

This study shows that the Learning Focused Schools model had meaningful impact on the culture of the school; however, it did not have a meaningful impact on student achievement. It can be said that implementing programs or reforms that address a school’s culture is an important step in the direction of increased, sustainable student achievement. School leaders are encouraged to consider these findings as they continue to look for ways to increase student achievement by providing ample time for these reforms to produce the desired results.

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Appendix

Learning Focused Impact Survey

Survey

Below are the statements that appear on the survey and the particular areas that they are created to address.

Each question was answered by choosing either (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree.

Question 1: administrative support /trust and confidence knowledge base

By the implementation of the Learning Focused Schools model, I am now encouraged to bring new ideas into my classes and afforded professional development opportunities.

Question 2: administrative support/experimentation, tangible support

The Learning Focused Schools training sessions helps administrators provide tangible support in addressing curriculum issues and implementing new instructional strategies.

Question 3: administrative support/ high expectations, honest open communication

During our common planning sessions, I can speak to my colleagues and administrators directly and tactfully when I have a concern without fear of losing their esteem or damaging our relationship.

Question 4: administrative support/ communication, caring, appreciation

The Learning Focused Schools model values each of us as professionals and we are given ample opportunities to show our caring and awareness of significant events in each other's lives, as well as celebrating benchmarks in the life of the school.

Question 5: administrative support/decision making process, protection of what's important

The Learning Focused Schools model framework helps administrators to protect my instruction and planning time by keeping meetings and paperwork to a minimum.

Question 6: collaborative practices/ involvement in decisions, knowledge bases

Common planning and other collaborative practices in the Learning Focused Schools model allows teachers and staff to be more involved in the decision making process with regard to the material, resources and instructional strategies.

Question 7: collaborative practices/ experimentation, collegiality

During common planning and other collaborative practices, teachers are specifically expected to practice collegiality and to experiment with new ideas.

Question 8: collaborative practices/ trust and confidence

The Learning Focused Schools model encourages teachers to value each other's opinions and readily accept each other's professional competence.

Question 9: collaborative practices/ tangible support

Academic Facilitators and teachers make themselves and resources available to me during collaborative and collegial ways.

Question 10: collaborative practices/ traditions, celebrations

The Learning Focused Schools model does not hinder the recognition of traditions, rituals and celebrations of special events and goals that extend through professional and personal accomplishments.

Question 11: Communication, Vision/ Honest communication

The monitoring and accountability that accompanies the Learning Focused Schools model helps administrators use constructive criticism to ensure my professional growth, and makes the school's vision clear.

Question 12: Communication, Vision/ Trust and confidence

The Learning Focused Schools model helps administrators and parents trust my professional judgment and show confidence in my ability to carry out the school's vision through my design of instructional activities.

Question 13: Communication, Vision/ Involved in decision-making process

When something is not working in the school, The Learning Focused Schools model empowers me to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for the administration to tell them what to do.

Question 14: Communication, Vision/ Collegiality

Through Learning Focused, administrators encourage teachers to evaluate and develop curriculum and plan special projects together.

Question 15: Communication, Vision/ Knowledge Base

As a practice of Learning Focused Schools, teachers and administrators are continually reaching out to various knowledge bases to improve their teaching and leadership qualities.

Question 16: Accessibility to Knowledge/ Knowledge Base

In our school, it is the norm for teachers to consult the knowledge bases, while reaching out to learn new methods and examine the latest materials.

Question 17: Accessibility to Knowledge/Collegiality

Learning Focused Schools encourage activities that build collegiality by bringing together teachers who wouldn't normally work together.

Question 18: Accessibility to Knowledge/ Experimentation

The Learning Focused Schools model encourages teachers to implement strategies and best practices presented through professional development opportunities.

Question 19: Accessibility to Knowledge/ Tangible support

Teachers are currently presented with resources to implement best practices from professional development opportunities presented at Learning Focused trainings.

Question 20: Accessibility to Knowledge/Honest Open Communication

I have accessibility to professional development opportunities, tailored to my individual needs to ensure my professional growth based on observations, and administrative feedback.

Question 21: Response to students/Involvement in decision

Learning Focused helps me to have the autonomy to adapt my instructional decisions based on the individual needs of my students.

Question 22: Response to students/Appreciation and Recognition

Good teaching is recognized and appreciated in this school and community.

Question 23: Response to students/ Traditions

There are recurring events that students and teachers alike see as refreshing, challenging, and a definite change of pace.

Question 24: Response to students/ Protection of what's in important

Faculty meetings and trainings are reserved for curriculum and instruction purposes, whereas business and announcements are handled through memos or email.

Question 25: Response to students/high expectations

In this school the teachers and administrators are held accountable for high performance through regular evaluations and monitoring.