Addressing Continuous Middle Grades Academic Achievement Decline through the Implementation of Turnaround Strategies

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Abstract

There are twenty-three grade 7-8 configured schools in North Carolina. Yadkin County, a small, rural school district in the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina, enrolling approximately 5,700 students, asserts two of those schools. The two schools in Yadkin County were opened in the 2009-2010 academic school year. Since their opening, student achievement has continued to decline. District leaders have recognized over the course of the past five years an increasing sense of urgency to address the declining middle schools academic achievement and eliminate the consequential effects it was having on the middle schools’ staff and students.

In-depth interviews were conducted with six of the top-performing grade 7-8 configured middle school principals to ascertain what differentiates higher-performing schools from lower-performing schools. The qualitative data suggested that top-performing schools focused on relationships between staff and students, staff responsiveness to young adolescents’ social, emotional, and academic needs, partnerships within the school community, and communication with parents to actively involve them in their child’s education. This study informed the development of a strategic plan for the two Yadkin County middle schools with the goal of promoting whole-school reform to subsequently eliminate the pattern of low student achievement.
CHAPTER ONE

Problem Statement

In 2009-2010, Yadkin County Schools, a rural district in the foothills of North Carolina, opened two new middle schools, Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School, housing seventh and eighth grades. Prior to that time, middle school students were a part of the elementary PreK-8 schools, but the district wanted to address parental concerns about high school transition and decided to reorganize the grade configurations in the district’s schools to PreK-6 and grades 7-8 schools. Decisions by the Yadkin County School Board were to retain eight elementary schools with a PreK-6 grade configuration, open two new middle schools with a grades 7-8 configuration, and retain two traditional high schools and two non-traditional high schools for grades 9-12 in the district. Because of capacity issues at Forbush Middle School, all sixth grade students remained on the PreK-6 campuses. As a result in 2009, there was much excitement about meeting the needs of middle school students via the district’s new 7-8 grade configuration.

However, since the opening of Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School in the academic year 2009-2010, middle school achievement has been spiraling downward. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on school improvement strategies, thenceforth referred to as turnaround strategies. District leaders have recognized over the course of the past five years the increasing urgency to address declining middle school academic achievement. These efforts were complicated with the introduction of the state’s new accountability model, the NC Ready
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Accountability Model, in the 2013-2014 school year. Now that the NC Ready Accountability Model enters its third year and appears here to stay, Yadkin County Schools must address its declining middle school academic achievement before this decline is perceived as an educational leadership crisis by external and internal stakeholder groups.

The 2008-2009 North Carolina End-of Grade (EOG) composite score, including reading and math achievement, was only slightly higher when seventh and eighth graders were served in the elementary schools as compared to when they transitioned the following year due to the administration of an EOG test in 2007-2008 aligned to newly adopted curriculum standards. As research as shown, student achievement continues to climb in succeeding years of better alignment and instructional practice with new curriculum and testing coherence (Tienken & Wilson, 2001). However, in 2009-2010, the seventh and eighth grade reading and math composite score dropped by ten percentage points in comparison to the sixth graders, assessed in the same year, but who did not transition from elementary to the middle schools. From 2010 to 2012, middle school scores continued to fall below the composite for grades 3-6, especially in mathematics with a 20% gap in performance. Test results for the 2013-2014 school year indicate that 44.3% of middle school students were proficient in reading while 41.5% were proficient in math. Thus, district leaders feel an urgency to implement turnaround strategies within the district’s middle schools in order that students’ have a more positive academic experience at the middle school level.

For many reasons, while the two new middle schools opened in Yadkin County over five years ago, there has not been a serious investigation into the problem of low student achievement. What is known is that the district has not focused on a deep development of the middle school concept, and teachers have been underserved in their new roles as middle school
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When the grades 7-8 middle schools were staffed, elementary teachers were selected, based on interest and subject area certification. However, being steeped in the tradition of an elementary teaching environment, transitioning to the middle school concept without appropriate training and follow-up may be a major factor in the problem of underperforming middle school students in reading and math in Yadkin County Schools.

A Vision

The Yadkin County Middle Schools will produce literate learners who will make a difference in society.

Problem Context

Yadkin County, population 38,038, is situated in the foothills of North Carolina. The winding Yadkin River borders its north and east sides. The home ownership rate is 78.2%. Seventy-eight percent of its residents have high school degrees and an estimated 12% have bachelor’s degrees (State and County Quick Facts). There are approximately 1000 farms including over 100 acres of land, eleven wineries, and large industries such as Unifi, Phillips Van-Heusen, Lydall, and Johnson’s Motor Electric. Including part-time and before-and-after school care employees, Yadkin County Schools is the largest employer in the county, followed by Unifi, a leading producer of polyester and nylon-textured yarns.

Most of Yadkin County’s fourteen schools were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. There are some structures on individual campuses constructed prior to 1960 that are still in use today. Recent construction, of course, includes the two new middle schools in addition to two science wings at the two traditional high schools in the district.
Yadkin County’s fourteen schools enroll 5,666 in PreK-13 and currently claim an 89.9% graduation rate. Of the almost 5,700 students, 72% are white, 22.6% are Hispanic, and 3% are African-American. Approximately 13% are identified as exceptional, and over 56% qualify for free/reduced lunch.

Recently sanctioned 2013-2014 EOG test data reveal that the average score, for all subjects, in Yadkin County Schools is 57.5% - 1.2% above the state average for all subjects. Relative to middle grades, Grade 7 reading and math, as well as Grade 8 reading, are below the state average as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>North Carolina</th>
<th>Yadkin County Schools</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7 Reading</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7 Math</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8 Reading</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8 Math</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>52.2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


As represented in Table 2, 28.5% of the schools in Yadkin County met their Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) in 2013-2014, falling short of the percentage of schools meeting their AMOs throughout the state. However, based on the Educational Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), eleven of Yadkin County’s fourteen schools either met or exceeded student growth for the same year. The two middle schools and the alternative school were the exceptions.
Table 2

2013-2014 State and School-level Annual Measurable Objectives Met and EVAAS Growth Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Percent AMO Targets Met</th>
<th>EVAAS Growth Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boonville Elementary</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtney Elementary</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Bend Elementary</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Creek Elementary</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbush Elementary</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbush Middle</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbush High</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonesville Elementary</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starmount Middle</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starmount High</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Yadkin Elementary</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadkin Early College</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadkinville Elementary</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadkin Success Academy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A total of 858 seventh and eighth students populate the two middle schools. Forbush Middle School is slightly larger serving 497 students, while Starmount Middle School serves 361. Both schools implement interdisciplinary teaming. At the time of ground breaking in 2008, two existing Yadkin County principals were selected as administrators for each of the middle schools slated to open in August 2009. The two appointed principals, former middle school
teachers, resumed their duties as principals of their elementary schools until April of 2009. At that time, they began work in a central location and collaborated on a daily basis with the superintendent, Human Resources Director, and curriculum director.

The district arranged an opportunity for the new staffs to visit the Ron Clark Academy with the intent and purpose of observing dynamic student engagement strategies in practice. However, in the absence of a strategic plan to guide and shape future success, follow-up was minimal, and until three years ago, all countywide professional development monies were used to prepare kindergarten through third grade teachers to diagnose and correct reading problems. Therefore, teachers in upper elementary, middle, and high school did not participate in any professional development between 2009 and 2011.

**Problem Analysis**

Since 2009-2010, middle school achievement has been spiraling downward resulting in a need for turnaround strategies. Numerous factors may have contributed to the lack of success and consistent decline in student academic achievement at Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School. A lack of strong support by the district at the time the schools were opened, a lack of necessary supports to help teachers become more effective, neglecting to deeply involve parents and families in the education process, and neglecting to activate students’ interests and desire to learn are factors that may have contributed to the development of the problem.

At the time the middle schools opened, Yadkin County Schools employed a part-time secondary director whose job was to oversee curriculum and instruction for grades 7-12. Limited time and resources put the new middle schools at a disadvantage. There was minimal effort from the onset for continuous improvement and for monitoring the schools’ academic achievement.
Without the expectation for teachers to restructure their classrooms and to increase student engagement, the professional development effort failed. The trip to the Ron Clark Academy simply became an event rather than a jumpstart for continuous learning. Researchers have suggested that not building leadership capacity among administrators and teachers may lead to student achievement shortfalls (SREB, 2011).

Furthermore, parents and families need to be fully engaged in the “tween” years as middle school students are ready to make decisions about their futures. However, at Forbush and Starmount Middle Schools, there is little evidence to suggest that parents and families have ample opportunities to meet and discuss ways to help their children make academic and career plans. As well, teachers are not using multiple teaching and learning strategies to excite and motivate students. Project and problem-based and technology-based learning are largely non-existent. It is critical to help parents and students make the connection between their academics, personal interests, and career aspirations - an area in which the district’s middle schools are failing (SREB, 2011).

Problem Critique

A review of literature on middle school academic achievement reveals that research and leadership practice inform the need to place a greater emphasis on identifying strategies that support academic achievement. All districts want high student achievement for moral and ethical reasons, as education contributes to a student’s future success. Reform models call for middle schools to have a more rigorous curriculum that builds higher-order thinking, hold high expectations for students and provide the necessary supports they need to achieve, and actively engage families in education. This statement from Southern Regional Education Board’s (SREB) Making Middle Grades Matter: A Planning Guide for School Improvement (2000) addresses past
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These programs have been unsuccessful for the most part because they did not focus clearly on raising student achievement and strengthening the academic core curriculum and classroom practices” (p.1) (as cited in Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2002).

A frequently debated issue in regards to best meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of middle grades students’ focuses on the “right” grade configuration for middle level students. Researchers disagree on the “right” grade configuration to serve young adolescents well. On one hand, for example, Yecke (2006) argues that the middle school concept has failed, suggesting that middle schools should be reconfigured back into K-8 schools. Swaim (2004), however, argues that young adolescents need the time to develop and transition within a middle school grade configuration. Yadkin County Schools needs to turn its focus toward developing strategies to turn around student academic achievement in the middle grades. It is imperative the negative trends in student academic achievement in the middle grades in the Yadkin County Schools be reversed immediately to improve the images of Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School.

A subsequent report of the SREB Middle Grades Commission titled A New Mission for the Middle Grades: Preparing Students for a Changing World recognizes the importance of providing middle school students with a positive academic experience which prepares them for success in high school and beyond. Twenty-five out of 100 rising ninth-graders in the SREB region do not graduate from high school on time. The chances of a ninth grader heading to college after graduation from these middle level schools is less than 50%. As a result, the commission developed a new mission statement to address several important objectives of a positive academic experience during the middle school years which states that the middle grades
will: “…prepare more students for success in rigorous high school courses – and, ultimately, for more students to graduate and proceed to college or technical training” (SREB, 2011, p.i).

Former North Carolina Governor, Beverly Perdue, who served as Chair of the SREB Middle Grades Commission, proclaimed a sense of urgency to define new actions for system leaders and middle grades educators which might positively address the fading numbers of rising ninth-graders prepared to graduate and attend college. A framework developed by the commission with six goals based on research about what works “in the middle” is as follows:

- Communicate and clarify the mission in every middle grades school,
- Focus the middle grades curriculum on literacy and STEM disciplines,
- Identify middle grades students likely to drop out of school and intervene with increased learning time and accelerated instruction,
- Require middle grades students to complete individual academic and career plans,
- Refocus professional development for middle grades teachers, counselors, and school leaders, and
- Hold district and schools accountable for meeting the middle grades mission.

(SREB, 2011 p. i).

In conclusion, the middle years are important and should not be underestimated. Rick Wormeli (2011), author of *The Middle/High Years/Movin’ Up to the Middle*, says that how one handles life in later years is often traced back to specific experiences in middle school. Middle school experiences, as previously mentioned, directly correlate with graduation rates and impact an individual’s decision for college and career. Wormeli states “so, if high school success, navigating the larger world, and discovering the direction we want our lives to take all have roots
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in young adolescence, why would anyone leave the transition into this impressionable phase to chance?” (p.48).

Significance of Addressing Problem

The time to begin work on the Yadkin County Schools middle grades student achievement problem is now. What will it take? It will take a sharp focus on students. Students want to be challenged and motivated. Educators have to be knowledgeable of the skills students need for high school and beyond. No single strategy is sufficient, but a focus on continuous improvement is urgently needed. Teachers need effective professional development that is unlike the old “sit and get” lecture style. Professional development should become an integral part of the school culture. Further, middle level teachers need assistance analyzing the Common Core State Standards, creating assignments that are more complex, and using data-driven instruction to personalize learning for individual students to help them meet performance expectations. Because a number of jobs go unfilled each year due to too few students pursuing studies in math, science, and technology, middle schools need to build STEM initiatives into the curriculum to increase student interest and provide the opportunity for career exploration. Most importantly, middle school staff must consciously identify and intervene with students likely to drop out by paying attention to students with chronic absenteeism, poor behavior, and poor grades (SREB, 2011, pp. 6-13).

If the contributing factors that are likely associated with the problem of low student achievement are not addressed, and a strategic plan is not developed to provide a pathway to improvement, middle grades teachers will continue to do the same thing they have always done and middle grades students will continue to get the same results they have always gotten. Due to the downward trend in the Yadkin County Schools middle grades student academic achievement
over the last five years, it is a problem which will require progressive actionable steps to resolve.

As Judith Rizzo, Executive Director and CEO of the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute, states:

> Many of us have talked about changing the middle grades schools for what seems like a 100 years. The biggest challenge we face is figuring out how not to have this conversation again in five years. How are we going to get ourselves to stop doing what does not work? (SREB, 2011, p. 6)

**Client Support**

Yadkin County Schools unconditionally wants to address the problem of low student achievement in the middle grades. The two middle school principals, assistant principals, Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator, and superintendent support my work on this problem of practice. There is a united desire for students and staff to become life-long learners, which in turn, should lead to positive change in middle grades academic achievement. Once student and middle grades staff buy-in is established, we will then discern that students are ready for the next level in their academic careers.

**Literature Review**

There are many challenges facing today’s middle schools. During the middle school years, young adolescents experience physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes that often influence their adulthood. Additionally, schools that serve these young teens play a critical role in shaping their futures. An ongoing debate exists regarding the time devoted to addressing the developmental needs of young teens during the middle school years at the expense of academic rigor in preparation for high school. Therefore, the question now, after the emergence
of the middle school concept in the 1980s, is how successful middle school reform has been in furthering the developmental and academic growth of our students.

This section of the Dissertation in Professional Practice focuses on the literature about what is working in middle grades education that ultimately impacts student achievement. Presented in this section is an overview of the middle school concept, an examination of the performance of effective middle schools, the role of the leaders at both the school and district levels, and a review of the perception data linked to the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWCS). The primary purpose of the literature review is to synthesize the key findings in the professional literature related to the previously mentioned main topics.

The Middle School Concept

The middle school concept is designed to promote best practices for the education of young adolescents (George, 2009). Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, and Constant (2004) suggest it originated as a result of increased awareness among educators to address the “mismatch between the needs of young teens and their middle school environments” (p. 20). Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, and Constant (2004) also suggest as a result, researchers hypothesize that developmentally inappropriate practices are the root cause of the decline of students’ motivation and achievement in the middle grades. Hence, middle school organizers recommend a number of practices to address this mismatch.

Juvonen et al. (2004) point out three core practices that are considered hallmarks of the middle school concept:

- Interdisciplinary team teaching,
- Flexible scheduling, and
Interdisciplinary Team Teaching

In the Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School, interdisciplinary teaming is defined as

a way of organizing the faculty so that a group of teachers share: (1) the same group of students; (2) the responsibility of planning, teaching, and evaluating curriculum and instruction in more than one academic area; (3) the same schedule; and (4) the same area of the building. (George & Alexander, 1993, p. 249)

As noted by George (2009), interdisciplinary teaming stands out as the most significant contribution to the middle school movement.

Interdisciplinary teams are generally comprised of two to five teachers representing the core subjects, English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies, who share the same students. They work as colleagues to solve problems and meet the diverse needs and backgrounds of their students. Styron and Nyman (2008) propose that interdisciplinary teaming reduces teacher isolation, enhances collegial relationships, and provides a strong network of social and emotional support for teachers (p. 3).

A key component of interdisciplinary team teaching is common planning time which facilitates collaboration, joint decision-making, curricular cohesion, as well as curriculum integration. Common instructional planning time is one of the most powerful tools that middle school teachers can use to develop strategies to help students obtain their performance goals. Teachers are free to share successes, failures, and innovative ideas in a supportive environment (Styron & Nyman, 2008). Most importantly, teaming ensures a system of support for each
student. Since teachers share the same students, they can analyze their strengths and weaknesses and collaboratively brainstorm academic solutions.

In *Understanding Middle Grades Students’ Perceptions of Their Peer World: Implications for Teaming*, authors Kiefer and Ellerbrock (2010) believe in order for students to develop healthy relationships and positive perceptions of their world, schools must implement developmentally responsive structures, such as interdisciplinary teaming, that promote positive student-teacher and student-student relationships. *This We Believe* characterizes the role of teaming in the following way:

The team is the foundation for a strong learning community characterized by a sense of family. Students and teachers on the team become well acquainted, feel safe, respected, and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks. (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010a, p. 31)

Kiefer and Ellerbrock discovered that young adolescents’ perceptions of their peer world change significantly from elementary (sixth grade) to middle school (seventh grade). In a two-year longitudinal study, they found that student perceptions of socially successful peers as sincere and responsible declined over time, while student perceptions of socially successful peers as dominant, disingenuous, attractiveness, and athleticism increased over time. Positive characteristics of the peer world decreased in importance. Thus, it is extremely important for middle grades educators to find ways to support students’ social and emotional development and foster positive peer relationships. The value of student-teacher relationships and teaming is vital in order to increase connectedness and promote care and mutual respect between and among students and teachers (NMSA, 2010a).
Middle school teachers have two related missions. One is to teach young adolescents. The other is a deeper, often unspoken, mission to continue the middle school movement itself.

Sustaining the growth of the middle school movement can be daunting if the environments in which teachers are practicing their craft do not align with the middle school philosophy, or if they fail to understand the tenets underlying the philosophy (McEwin & Dickinson, 1995). Huss and Eastep’s Tri-State Study (2011), seeks to determine whether or not middle school teachers believe the essential elements of the middle schools model are implemented in their buildings, and to highlight the factors that allow the middle school concept to flourish and factors that inhibit its growth. Teachers perceived varying levels of the full implementation of the essential elements of the middle school model within schools included in Huss and Eastep’s Tri-State Study (2011). Essential elements with the greatest teachers’ perceptions of full implementation within their middle schools include:

- Presence of an after-school extra-curricular program – 87%,
- Teachers are chosen based on their certifications, interest, and skill with young adolescents – 79%,
- Active learning strategies centered on the learning styles – 68%,
- Use of interdisciplinary teams – 67%,
- Building facilities designed especially for middle school students – 49%,
- Curriculum with a broad range of exploratory opportunities – 49%, and
- Regular, systematic shared decision-making model with an administrator – 48% (p. 6).

Essential elements with the greatest teachers’ perceptions of never been implemented within their middle schools include:
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- Organizational arrangements that encourage long-term teacher-student relationships – 70%,
- Long block schedule of no more than five periods per day – 66%, and
- Special interest activities emphasizing student and teacher choices – 46% (p. 6).

However, according to Huss and Eastep (2011), a lack of fit with state testing and accountability measures is the primary reason for the current lack of implemented middle school components within the respondents’ schools.

A “lack of fit with state testing and accountability” should be presumed to mean that teachers and school administrations felt the need to replace some tenets of the middle school philosophy with teacher-centered approaches that focus on test-taking skills and memorization of lower-level facts…We moved away from a very interdisciplinary program because of the onset of state testing and poor first-year performance… (Huss & Eastep, 2011, p. 7)

**Flexible Scheduling**

In an attempt to move away from an organized, discrete number of academic periods with fixed lengths, middle school advocates recommend flexible scheduling (Juvonen et al., 2004). Flexible scheduling necessitates changes in “the school day schedule from several equally divided periods to a format that provides fewer, but longer flexible periods” (Brown, 2001, p. 52). While there are a few other alternative scheduling formats intended to provide more flexibility than the traditional period-by-period schedules, such as the “4 x 4” plan where students attend four class periods that meet every day for one semester, but begin four new class
periods at the start of the next semester, true flexible scheduling can be distinguished from others based on the fact it is not defined by periods of fixed length (Juvonen et al., 2014).

Many middle schools adopted some form of flexible scheduling following the development of the concept of interdisciplinary teaming. The benefits, noted by Styron and Nyman (2008), include:

- Giving teachers and students sufficient time to work together to develop solutions to relevant problems,
- Facilitating teacher-student relationships and enhancing peer relationships,
- Allowing the teacher to provide more intensive guidance and support,
- Allowing the teacher more time to develop more meaningful units of learning better suited for the needs of the students,
- Providing teachers ample time to initiate small-group instruction, individualized instruction, and skill development, and
- Promoting flexibility in planning for instruction and regrouping to meet the diverse needs of students (pp.3-4).

McEwin and Greene (2010) defend the notion that “flexible scheduling is a key component that supports successful interdisciplinary teaming and allows teachers to make strategic modifications to enhance teaching and learning” (p.50). Results, from the 2009 National Surveys of Randomly Selected and Highly Successful Middle Level Schools, indicate that 72% of the random middle schools implement daily, uniform periods, while the percentage of schools reporting the use of flexible schedules declined from 33% to 14% since a 1993 random study. The Highly Successful Middle School Survey, also conducted in 2009 and sent to middle schools
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named as “Schools-to-Watch” by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform or as Breakthrough Middle Schools by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, purports that 30% of schools used a flexible schedule. A greater use of flexible scheduling, involving periods of varying lengths (22%), was also reported. Moreover, only 45% of the highly successful middle schools reported using daily, uniform periods.

Departmentalized instruction, while not a favored organizational structure for young adolescents, is found in middle schools. Parker (2009) declares “in a departmentalized setting, teachers may instruct five or more short periods of less than an hour each day to students who are of like abilities” (p. 3). Departmentalization presents many advantages for teachers, such as planning efficiency and content specialization. However, this organizational approach, according to Parker, makes it difficult for teachers to:

- Get to know their students well,
- Develop positive student-teacher relationships,
- Create a caring and supportive environment, and
- Make curriculum connections through integration (p. 3).

The rationale for supporting the use of flexible scheduling relates to the quality of student learning. Activities that stress problem-solving and critical thinking require more time, which a traditional, fixed schedule does not accommodate. Extended class periods also help students make connections across disciplines and allow for opportunities for students to interact with teachers and students, which can improve interpersonal relationships (Juvonen et al., 2004).
Advisory Programs

Advisory programs differ slightly from interdisciplinary teaming and flexible scheduling because they are not intended to affect student achievement directly. “Every student needs to have a relationship with at least one adult in the school which is characterized by warmth, concern, openness and understanding” (George & Alexander, 1993, p. 201). Adults meet regularly with groups of students to serve as mentors, guides, and provide assistance. The objectives vary, but most aim to simply provide individual attention to students because a “more positive, psycho-social climate, in turn, can enhance student learning” (Goh, 1995).

The advisory group consists of one adult and a small group of students. They usually meet daily for 15-20 minutes, at which time, advisors gain valuable knowledge of students in an effort to better meet their needs. The core means of support is the one-on-one relationship established between the students and their advisors (Styron & Nyman, 2008). The program ensures all young adolescents have adult advocates who know them well and help them succeed (McEwin & Greene, 2010).

Advisory programs have been a recommended component of middle schools since the beginning of the middle schools movement in the 1960s. However, these programs are difficult to sustain. In the aforementioned 2009 National Surveys of Randomly Selected and Highly Successful Middle Level Schools, conducted by McEwin and Greene (2010), 53% of the random middle schools had advisory programs in comparison to 65% of the highly successful middle schools. The highly successful middle schools, recognized as “Schools-to-Watch”, also devoted more than 15 minutes daily to the advisory program. However, an analysis of the 2009 data revealed that only 54% of schools with advisory programs scheduled daily meetings,
representing a 24% decline since a similar study from 1988. Almost half of all middle schools still have no formal advisory program.

Results of the previously mentioned Tri-State Study led by Huss and Eastep (2011), suggest that middle school teachers still consider the middle school concept to be fairly relevant and applicable. Teachers discovered 11 of 14 essential elements to be at some level of implementation, either “currently fully implemented” or “implemented now, but less fully than in prior years.” Huss and Eastep (2011) suggest that, “the real issue appears to be in the intensity, integrity, and strength with which the components are actually implemented” (p. 11).

In the executive summary, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* Position Paper of National Middle School Association (2010b), the National Middle School Association (NMSA) describes the nature of an educational program that reflects what research and experience have demonstrated to be the best educational program for 10-15 year olds. In addition to the major goals of middle level educators to ensure young adolescents become fully functioning, self-actualized citizens, and the essential attributes to guide and support students in their quest to reach these goals, the NMSA put together a group of characteristics in three general categories that provide the conceptual framework for the middle school concept:

1. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Characteristics
   a) Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.
   b) Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
   c) Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
   d) Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.
   e) Varied and ongoing assessment advance learning as well as measure it.

2. Leadership and Organization Characteristics
a) A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guide every decision.

b) Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.

c) Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.

d) Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.

e) Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

3. Culture and Community Characteristics

a) The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive for all.

b) Every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

c) Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.

d) Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.

e) The school actively involves families in the education of their children.

f) The school includes community and business partners (NMSA, 2010b, pp. 2-3).

The Executive Summary concludes with a Call to Action whereby all educators, appropriate to their role in middle school, commit or recommit, with a sense of urgency, to the philosophy of middle level education.

The Impact of Middle Grades Reform

Literature pertaining to the state of the middle school movement has been discouraging over the past few years. The literature heralds a shift to K-8 organizational structures and accuses the middle school model for discounting young teens at the expense of rigorous academics (Huss
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Eastep, 2011). Juvonen et al. (2004) argues that modern middle school is characterized by learning lags and maturity delays which were unforeseen by middle school designers. Yecke (2003) proclaims that many contemporary middle schools overemphasize learning techniques, such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and heterogeneous grouping, that lower expectations and achievement for students,. In *Mayhem in the Middle: How Middle Schools Have Failed America and How to Make them Work*, Yecke (2005), states “this is the age of results-based accountability in education, and organizational structures that fail to emphasize achievement and discipline will wither” (p. 16).

Eccles, Midgley, Buchanan, Wigfield, Reuman, and Maclver (1993) argue that the “fit” between the needs of young adolescents and their school environment provides an explanation for motivational, interest, performance, and behavior declines across the transition from elementary to middle school. For example, at a time in their lives when adolescents want to become more autonomous, Eccles et al. (1993) describe the following typical “stage-environment mismatches:

- Teacher control,
- Focus on discipline,
- Whole task organization,
- Ability grouping, and
- Public grading (pp. 93-94).

Further, the changes teens experience in the school environment as they are going through social, psychological, physical, and cognitive changes decrease the fit between the student and the school environment as seen through a lack of:
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- Student-teacher relationships,
- Decision-making opportunities, and
- Challenging assignments (pp. 93-95).

Because the middle school “stage-environment” mismatches often clash with the needs of young adolescents, they may experience a regression in academics and social functioning in a new school environment (Parker, 2009).

According to researchers Williams, Kirst, Haertel, Rosin, Perry, Webman, Wilson, Payne, and Woodward (2010), authors of a narrative summary of a comprehensive study conducted in 2008-2009: *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better*, states that expectations in the middle grades matter more than ever. Williams et al. (2010) supply a number of reasons why the focus on middle grades is of utmost importance:

1. It is in the middle grades where many students begin to lose ground in key subject areas such as mathematics. In California, which educates one in every eight students in grades 6-8 in the United States, middle school mathematics achievement is lower than in elementary grades in any given year. For example, two-thirds of 4th graders in California scored proficient or advanced in mathematics in 2009, according to the California Department of Education, as compared with only 43% of 7th graders. Nationally, most states see a dip in middle grades proficiency levels on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) compared with elementary levels.

2. Middle grades are the last best chance to identify students at risk of academic failure and get them back on track in time to succeed in high school. Kurlaender, Reardon, and Jackson (2008) show that many students at the greatest risk of high
school failure could be identified early - during the middle grades years - simply by their attendance, behavior, and test scores. Robert Balfanz, who wrote a 2009 policy and practice brief, looked at students in Philadelphia, and found that in high-poverty environments, a student’s middle grades experience strongly impacted the odds of graduating from high school.

3. Success in key subjects in the middle grades is a strong predictor of success in high school and beyond. Students’ scores on middle grades standards-based assessments in math and English Language Arts (ELA) can signal their chances of passing high school exams. In California, for example, a student’s success rate on a high school mathematics test has implications for science placement, and consequently for completing requisite college preparatory coursework needed for admissions to the California State University system (p. 1).

Williams et al. (2010) go on to state,

The past two decades have seen the release of many reports stressing the importance of the middle grades. All have focused to one degree or another- and with more or less specificity- on the broad concepts of developmental responsiveness (to young adolescent needs), social equity (ensuring that all students are encouraged and supported to achieve at their full potential), and academic excellence or rigor (consistent with standards-based instruction) as central tenets of their recommendations. (p. 2)

However, it was only recently that any research or analysis has been directed on middle grades student outcomes. Furthermore, even less research has been conducted on the relationship of middle grades practices and policies to improve those outcomes.
In 2008-2009, researchers from EdSource and Stanford University conducted a large-scale study, *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades*, to determine what differentiates the higher-performing schools from the lower-performing schools serving middle grades students in California. The team surveyed 303 principals, 3,752 ELA teachers and math teachers in grades 6-8, and 157 superintendents from district and charter schools. The sample schools included grades 6-8 (50%), K-8 (24%), and 7-8 (26%). Half of the schools were located in predominantly low-income areas, while the other half were located in predominately middle-income populations. Three separate surveys investigated 10 broad domains of effective middle grades practice and included over 900 items combined.

Williams et al. (2010) conducted one of the largest studies of its kind which focused on concrete, actionable practices and policies derived from an extensive review of middle grades research and theory as well as current state and federal policy. The practices Williams et al. (2010) identified include:

1. Intense focus on academic outcomes,
2. Standards-aligned instruction and curriculum,
3. Use of data to improve instruction and learning,
4. Proactive academic interventions,
5. Teacher competencies, evaluation, and support,
6. Principal leadership,
7. Superintendent leadership and district support,
8. School environment,
9. Organization of teaching and instruction, and
10. Attention to student transitions (p. 6).
The study finds that some schools are doing much better than their peers at improving student outcomes in ELA and mathematics regardless of the socio-economic background, parent education level, and ethnicity (Williams et al., 2010). This is attributed to a shared district and school-wide culture that places its primary focus on improvements in the academic outcomes for all students, from the lowest performing to the highest, and designs its instructional program to prepare all students for a rigorous high school education (p.1).

Williams et al. (2010) also reveal several policies and practices that correlate with high student performance in the middle grades. These schools, according to the research, possess a strong culture that emphasizes improved student academic outcomes. Further, these schools direct all the education professionals, resources, and strategies on that focus by:

- Setting measurable goals for improvement,
- Communicating with students and families about the relationship of middle grades achievement to future goals,
- Making improved student outcomes a part of educator performance evaluations,
- Increasing the intensity and coherence with which educators align school curricula, assessments, and instruction to the state’s academic standards,
- Reviewing and analyzing assessment data to improve instruction and learning, and
- Requiring academic interventions to proactively keep students on track (p. 1).

The findings also reveal that no single grade configuration was consistently associated with higher performance on the state’s standards-based tests in ELA and math. More and less effective policies and practices are evident in schools with every grade configuration. In truth, almost all 6-8 and 7-8 middle grades schools appear to be more alike than different in how they
configure core instruction. This seems to be true whether they use an interdisciplinary approach or assign teachers to only one subject (Williams et al., 2010).

According to Anfara and Mertens (2012), there is a wealth of literature on middle school reform, types of middle school reform initiatives, and the educational change process for middle schools. The 16 characteristics of successful middle level education scripted in This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents (NMSA, 2010a) have also been identified by The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006); Breaking Ranks in the Middle; The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (2003); Schools-to-Watch Criteria; the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989); and in Turning Points 2000: This We Believe. These characteristics include:

1. Educators who value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them,
2. Students and teachers engaged in active, purposeful learning,
3. Curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant,
4. Educators using multiple learning and teaching approaches,
5. Varied and ongoing assessments to advance learning and measure it.
6. A shared vision for the school,
7. Leaders who are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, educational research, and best practices,
8. Leaders who are courageous and collaborative,
9. Ongoing professional development reflecting best education practices,
10. Organizational structures that foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships,
11. Students’ academic and personal development guided by an adult advocate,
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12. Family involvement in the education of their children,

13. A safe, inclusive, and supportive school environment,

14. Inclusion of the community and business partners in the work of the school,

15. Health and wellness initiatives supported in the curricula and school programs,

and

16. Comprehensive guidance and support services to meet the needs of young adolescents (p. 61).

The aforementioned recommendations have not been implemented with fidelity in middle schools across the nation (Anfara & Mertens, 2012). “Too frequently, we have heard the saying: ‘The name of the school above the schoolhouse door was changed, but what happens inside still looks like a junior high or miniature high school’” (p. 58). Anfara and Mertens suggested that a key part of understanding how to implement sustainable middle grades reform involves looking at the concept of capacity building. Also, Anfara and Mertens concluded that middle level schools have unique structures, such as interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time, to help them facilitate, implement, and sustain capacity building efforts.

Fullan (2007) defines capacity building as “the policy, strategy, or action taken that increases the collective efficacy of a group to improve student learning through new knowledge, enhanced resources, and greater motivation on the part of people working individually and together” (p. 58). With the current emphasis on student accountability, research increasingly focuses on how specific reforms, such as increasing school capacity, impacts student achievement (Anfara & Mertens, 2012). Addressing the link between capacity building and the accountability movement, Cosner comments (2009): “this accountability for improved achievement has elevated school reform to central work within the life of schools, work that
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depends on school capacity” (p. 10). Therefore, the idea that schools can build capacity to increase the instructional quality of teachers, which then leads to increased student achievement, is important (Anfara & Mertens, 2012).

In their article titled, Capacity Building is a Key to Radical Transformation for the Middle Grades Schools, Anfara and Mertens (2012) describe five dimensions of school capacity building that are interrelated (p. 58). Each has the potential to effect one or more of the others. Listed below are the five dimensions accompanied by a more complete understanding of how it relates to middle grades reform, because, as Fullan maintains (2007), one of the primary reasons reform efforts do not work is because people do not know how to improve the situation. Capacity building strategies work because “they give people concrete experiences that improvement is possible. People need proof that there is some reality to the higher expectations” (Fullan, 2006, p. 62).

1. Teacher knowledge, skill, and dispositions – Teachers must have the necessary knowledge and skills regarding the curriculum, assessments, and professional development opportunities to drive the reform agenda. This means:
   a) Teachers must observe other teachers, share best practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
   b) Teachers must provide feedback as a means to increase knowledge.
   c) Teachers must create meaningful tasks, engage students in active learning, draw connections to students’ prior knowledge, provide clear standards, and give feedback (p. 59).
   d) Teachers must possess and exhibit the disposition of caring, have a positive work ethic, and be able to think critically (Helm, 2007, p. 110).
2. Professional Learning Communities – They are viewed as necessary for ongoing collaboration and development that must occur school-wide in order for capacity building to succeed. Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek maintain the following core elements for creating effective professional learning communities (2004):

   a) There must be a shared vision, common values, and goals.

   b) There must be a collaborative culture that focuses on learning for all

   c) There must be an emphasis on transforming collective inquiry into best practice.

Hord (2009) contends the following warrants consideration as well:

   d) The group should be small and meet weekly.

   e) The discussion topics should be focused on student needs, the curriculum, and instructional strategies.

   f) There should be a reliance on data for decision making.

3. Program coherence – “The extent to which a school’s program for students and staff learning are coordinated, focused on clear learning goals, and sustained over a period of time” (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000, p. 263). Anfara and Mertens (2012) note there should be a strong alignment among the school’s goals to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, professional development, and to resources including time, money, and personnel. They note the following elements:

   a) There must be a common instructional framework.

   b) The staff working conditions must support the implementation of the instructional framework.
c) There must be a commitment to allocate resources to grow the instructional framework.

4. Technical resources – The efforts to build capacity for reform often require “additional resources such as materials, equipment, space, time and access to expertise” (Fullan, 2007, p. 164). The school must commit to providing teachers with tools needed to implement and sustain change efforts that are aligned with the school’s instructional goals.

5. Leadership – As mentioned earlier, the five dimensions of capacity building are interrelated, and the absence of quality leadership will hamper the others. According to Marzano, Water, and McNulty (2005), leadership accounts for one-fourth of student achievement. Fullan (2007) maintains that quality leadership is imperative for capacity building to occur, and notes “The role of the principal is to cause the previous four factors to get better and better in concert” (p. 164). Furthermore the work of the principal is divided into three domains (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004):

   a) Setting direction, expectations, and goals,

   b) Developing people, and

   c) Redesigning the organization.

**The Role of the Middle School Principal**

Leadership is critical to making middle schools work (Erb 2006). Gale and Bishop (2014) remark that findings from research studies, such as the review by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) on *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, suggest that school leadership accounts for one quarter of total school effects on students, making it second only to
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classroom instruction among school-based factors affecting student achievement. There have, however, been few studies on examining the leadership of middle grades schools despite the fact that student performance in the middle level years has been linked to later successes in life (Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, Ducette, & Gross, 2006).

Researchers attest that middle school principals face particular challenges in their role as an effective leader due to three key concerns:

1) The unique nature and needs of 10-14 year olds (Anfara, et al., 2006).
2) The variety of building configurations in which they are served (Powell, 2011).
3) An increasing awareness of the critical role the middle grades play in later life successes (Balfanz, Hertzog, & Mac Iver, 2007).

In the United States of America, accountability in the public schools has been intimately linked with The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Since its inception, this federal mandate has brought a significant amount of attention to achievement gaps, rewards and sanctions for teachers and schools, and has caused public scrutiny “so intense that a day does not go by that a school, district, a teacher, or a leader’s practice is not brought into question in a highly public manner” (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2010, p. 32).

While schools must work together toward greater achievement, the role of the principal in ensuring that schools continually meet their AMOs, the federal accountability standards under NCLB, is vital because the school leader sets the tone for all activities in the school. (Gale & Bishop, 2010). According to Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Hopkins, & Harris (2006), “there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership” (pp.14-15).
Leadership at the middle school level is complex. Numerous demands are placed upon principals on a daily basis. In addition, the efficacy of the current middle school model is being questioned. Accountability demands are placing a strain on middle schools’ ability to meet the academic needs of students. Nonetheless, the middle school leader is “characterized as one who must be a transformational leader, the primary change agent in the school, an expert in teaching and learning, and one who can engage in collaborative leadership and decision making” (Petzko, Clark, Valentine, Hackman, Norn, & Lucas, 2002, p. 4).

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), find that leaders who improve upon their leadership skills and responsibilities can attribute as much as a 10 percentile point increase on test scores. Leithwood et al. (2006) proclaim there are four common core practices of successful school leaders:

1) Setting directions,
2) Developing people,
3) Redesigning the organization, and
4) Managing the instructional (teaching and learning) program (pp. 35-43).

While these core practices are not all that people in leadership positions do, they are recognized to have significant influence on organizational goals.

Sanzo, Sherman, and Clayton (2010) performed an inductive, exploratory study to discover how a small group of principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia conceptualized actions taken to promote and sustain successful schools. Research questions included:

1. How do leaders develop a shared understanding of their organizations?
2. How do leaders support and sustain school performance?
3. What do leaders do to facilitate change? (p.34).

For the purpose of the study, successful school principals were defined as those whose schools met the Commonwealth of Virginia accreditation standards; those whose schools met the federal NCLB standards; and principals in at least their third year as the leader. In one-hour interviews, principals representing a diverse cross-section of school sizes, locations, and student groupings, were asked to frame their responses around actions that best exemplify their leadership practices.

Four common themes emerged:

- **Shared leadership** – Principals cannot lead without staff collaboration. They must empower staff members to make decisions and work with them in a collegial manner.

- **Facilitating professional development** – Successful leaders should provide individualized support for their staff and ensure professional development activities are systemic and link to other school goals.

- **Leading with an instructional orientation** – Principals must have an understanding of the current status of students within the organization in order to work to improve achievement. It is imperative to spend a portion of time during the instructional day working alongside staff and students to support their instructional needs and efforts. Principals set the tone and direction for quality teaching.

- **Acting openly and honestly** – Principals need to be open and honest with staff. This is fostered through strategic, thoughtful, and deliberate practice to facilitate a sincere and genuine work atmosphere where the staff feels free to take risks.

Students in middle school do not experience one teacher; they experience an entire program. Courageous, collaborative leadership drives consistency and instructional coherence.
through a shared vision. Erb (2006) suggests how middle school leaders might lead their middle school teachers in this direction:

Getting the team to function coherently and energetically requires leaders who have a sound understanding of the middle school concept, of how to create and maintain healthy organizations, and how to energize the people who have been recruited to do the work expected of schools. Superficial understanding of the elements of successful middle schools and of reform principles and failing to cultivate the involvement of the people who will carry out the reforms can lead to disappointing outcomes in the battle to improve schools. (p. 8)

Anfara et al. (2006) asserts that the work of the middle grades principal requires a strong understanding of the adolescent’s social, emotional, physical, moral, and academic needs. Moreover, they note “that the 10-14 year old learner is a special kind of learner with unique gifts that are short lived since no one stays a middle grades student for very long” (p. 22). Therefore, “developmentally responsive practice commands adults to know how to design school to support the needs of youngsters at this pivotal stage in life” (p.3).

Gale and Bishop (2014) used a qualitative methodology to create a study for the purpose of describing and analyzing middle grades principals’ perceptions of effective school leadership. The overall theory of the developmentally responsive leader informed the study blueprint. Using two face-to-face interview questions (although four interviews were captured over the telephone), authors sought to identify themes within the participants’ thoughts, words, phrasing, and actions that described the role of an effective middle grades principal. Twenty-four principals participated who led schools distributed across the six most common grade configurations for young adolescents: K-6, K-8, K-12, 5-8, 6-8, and 7-8. Study participants
linked two developmentally responsive dispositions to what they perceived as critical to the work of a successful middle grades leader. They include:

- **Responsiveness**—pertains to the principals’ strong sense of empathy for young adolescents. Of the twenty-four leaders in the study, each relies on empathy and understanding to create a culture in students’ best interest responsive to their:
  a) Physical development,
  b) Emotional development, and
  c) Psychosocial development.

- **Relationship**—the relational approach that the principals employ in their daily work with multiple stakeholders, again related to the needs of the students. All participants related the relational leader to the increased awareness of adolescent needs communicated clearly between students, faculty, parents, board members, district teams, and other grade level principals, community leaders, and outside agencies.

  According to one interviewee, “What this boils down to is relationships. Relationships with kids to adults, kids to content, teachers to content. If you don’t put a significant amount of time into relationships at the middle level, then you are short-changing the system” (p. 8). Hence, paramount to relational leadership are:
  a) Relationships with students,
  b) Relationships with faculty and staff, and
  c) Relationships with family (pp. 6-11).
The Role of the District and Superintendent

In a 2010 report, *Capturing the Leadership Premium*, Barber, Whelan, and Clark stated there has been less concern among researchers and policy-makers on enhancing performance at the district level than on enhancing performance at the school level (p. 23). However, Anderson (2003) claimed an upsurge in attention toward school districts because of increased accountability demands on schools and an acknowledgement that district influence is unavoidable. Leithwood (2010) also suggested that school districts have been rediscovered for their role in school reform. Further, Barber, Whelan, and Clark asserted that “many principals cannot be successful without the best possible district leadership (p. 23).

Relative to the school district’s role in educational change, a number of strategic actions that are common to many successful districts include:

- Creating a district-wide sense of efficacy (Anderson, 2003, p. 8). District-level leaders must be able to evince a strong belief in the capacity of school personnel to achieve high standards of learning for all students, and high standards of teaching and leadership (Clark & Wildy, 2011, p. 25).

- Developing a shared sense of purpose about student achievement for generating the “will to improve” (Leithwood, 2010, p. 252). According to Waters and Marzano (2006), district leadership can make a difference and district office staff should not be regarded as an “anonymous bureaucracy” standing in the way of progressive change (p. 8).

- Assuming the role of instructional leader (Leithwood, 2010). Instructional leadership prompts superintendents to help principals develop their expertise in making decisions for improving students’ literacy and mathematics skills (Wildy, 2009).
• Emphasizing data-informed decision-making. Encouraging the use of multiple types of data in schools to supplement standardized test results, allows principals to use data for improving teaching and learning (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Moreover, Bottoms and Fry (2008) noted that effective districts incorporate training in data analysis and in the use of district data as a fundamental component of professional learning.

• Assisting principals to become skilled observers and interpreters of the quality and progress of teaching and learning (Anderson, 2003). It is imperative for principals to be skillful in engaging in conversations with teachers starting with evidence of student performance in relation to district or state standards (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

• Providing effective professional development to support improvement efforts. Togneri and Anderson (2003) indicated that successful districts implement coherent strategies focused on the improvement of teaching and learning. Additionally, the authors argue for districts to adopt an innovative approach to professional development that is primarily job-embedded. Similarly, Bottoms and Fry (2008) advocated that professional learning be embedded in principals’ and teachers’ daily work and linked directly to the schools’ goals as well as to state and district standards.

Raising student performance is now viewed by most public school superintendents as one of their most daunting tasks (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). Previous scholars have noted that superintendents of academically successful school districts share similar leadership practices and priorities. According to Waters and Marzano’s (2006) meta-analysis of effective superintendents,
there are six identifiable leadership practices positively linked to improving student achievement.
These include:

1. Collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders,
2. Establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction,
3. Aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals,
4. Continuous monitoring of the district’s progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals,
5. Effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals,
and
6. Superintendents providing defined autonomy to principal within clearly defined operation boundaries (p. 3-4).

While the above correlates represent a set of common leadership practices for superintendents, these practices alone may not be adequate to ensure the district leader’s success in all school contexts. Researchers, such as Luis, Wahlstrom, Michilin, Gordon, Thomas, Leithwood, and Moore (2010), increasingly emphasize context as a critical factor in leadership success focusing on the link between the leader and the situation within which the leader is being asked to lead. As different contexts present different challenges, successful leadership becomes a matter of matching the appropriate response to a particular challenge (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012).

Specifically, rural superintendents face a leadership context very different from that experienced by urban and suburban school leaders (Theobald, 1988; 2005). Nonetheless, most of what we know about effective school district leadership practice has been garnered from
studying urban and suburban leaders (Arnold, 2004; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). The consequence is a significant gap in the knowledge base regarding the work and professional practice of effective rural superintendents (Arnold et. al, 2005).

In a case study steered by Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012), designed to look at effective superintendent leadership in rural districts, seven superintendents were interviewed to ascertain the leadership actions participants attributed to the improved student achievement gains in their district. The criterion used to select the superintendents were:

- The identification of all rural districts in a mid-western state, equaling 304 of the total 678 districts in the state.
- The inclusion of only those rural districts that had a) an economically-disadvantaged student population of 40% or higher, and; b) successfully met the United States Department of Education’s Adequate Yearly Progress performance requirements for the 2008-2009 academic year. This criterion narrowed the sample pool to 85 districts.
- The inclusion of only those rural districts whose high schools had received a letter grade of A on the Michigan School Report Card in either the 2007-2008 or 2008-2009 academic years. This criterion narrowed the sample pool to 16 school districts.
- The identification of those rural district whose high schools had received a letter grade of a B or lower on the Michigan School Report Card for the 2004-2005 academic year. This criterion narrowed the sample pool to 12 districts.
- The identification of superintendent leaders who: a) had been hired by their districts in 2005 or earlier, and; b) had maintained their employment with their districts over the next five years. This narrowed the research sample to eight superintendents. Seven agreed to participate (p. 3).
From the interviews, common leadership priorities emerged that were distinguishable from leadership practices. Leadership priorities represented the superintendent subjects’ primary goals and work commitments, while leadership practices represented the means and methods used by subjects to pursue their leadership priorities (Forner et. al, 2012).

Forner et al. (2012) studied the interview transcripts to distinguish the following as leadership priorities:

1. All students can and will achieve academic success - This belief, regarded by the superintendents interviewed, applied to both students and adults.
2. A high quality teacher in each classroom - Superintendents cited the classroom teacher as being the most critically important factor in determining student academic success.
3. Creating resources - District leaders discussed how important it was to become more creative in terms of finding new sources of school monies and more assertive in terms of reprioritizing how existing monies were spent (pp. 5-6).

The daily actions, activities, and habits to actively pursue leadership priorities were the ensuing leadership practices:

1. The superintendent established goals and expectations, and drove the reform in the district. Academic reform efforts in the rural districts were not overtly collaborative, according to the authors, nor established by a committee. Instead, academic reform in the rural school districts involved the superintendent pushing core leadership priorities (e.g. all students achieving and quality teachers in each classroom).
2. The superintendent supported reform built through direct, personal conversations.

The study found that effective superintendents built support for academic reform through direct, personal conversations concerning the importance of improving student achievement. These conversations included board members, teachers, adults, and students in the community.

3. The superintendent believed in constructive confrontation and providing intervention strategies for struggling students and teachers. Instead of being labeled a success or failure, student academic and teacher instructional performance were evaluated in terms of how that particular performance could be improved. The superintendents cited such practices as data analysis, identification of learning gaps, and targeted tutoring for students who needed academic assistance. As well, peer coaches were assigned to teachers who needed to improve their instructional performance and paraprofessionals were assigned to classrooms that required additional academic support to aid and improve teacher quality.

4. The superintendent was committed to removing low-performing teachers or principals. The fourth major finding involved the willingness to remove teachers and building principals who were unable or unwilling to improve their job performance as it related to student achievement. The superintendents clearly adopted the philosophy “grow or go”.

5. The superintendent leveraged the close working relationship with the building principal. The superintendents displayed a willingness to support their principals by granting them a wide-range of autonomy in their efforts to improve student academic achievement. Many of the school leaders in this study described the transformative
power of autonomy and its potential for empowering the entire organization. One principal noted: “He is tremendous about listening to my ideas. I’ve always felt like my opinion matters and is considered even if it isn’t always agreed with.”

6. The superintendent withstood a hard line in union contract negotiations. This included practices that involved one of the following proposals: health care benefits, employee salaries, seniority steps, privatization of operational services, or the declaration of impasse and unilateral imposition of the school district’s last contract offer.

7. The superintendent re-aligned financial commitments to match district priorities. The final major finding included the practice of re-prioritizing the district’s existing financial commitments, and re-aligning those resources to support the district’s efforts to improve student academic performance. One example was the creation of a hybrid position involving the practice of combining two, usually administrative, positions and having one individual serve both roles (e.g. Superintendent-Business Officer, Superintendent-Principal, Principal-Curriculum Director, Guidance Counselor-Teacher) (Forner et al., 2012, pp.6-9).

As presented in Table 3, the findings of the case studies (Forner et al., 2012) were consistent with five of Waters and Marzano’s (2006) six correlates. The authors found that the superintendents offered non-negotiable goals for student achievement and aligned board support via direct, personal conversations with board members and other stakeholders. These actions were an important part of the leadership priority that all students can and will achieve academic success.

The superintendents also offered examples of continuous monitoring via their constructive confrontations, including intervention strategies for struggling students and
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46 teachers. Additionally, when necessary, they used the results of their continuous monitoring to remove low-performing teachers and principals. The superintendents also provided defined autonomy to leverage close working relationships with principals. These actions align with the leadership priority of having a high quality teacher in each classroom (Forner et al., 2012).

Finally, the superintendents were skillful at effectively utilizing resources. They reported taking a stance in union contract negotiations and realigning finances to match district priorities. Creating resources, the third leadership priority, was clearly demonstrated as the superintendents discussed the need to pursue improvement in student academic outcomes with shrinking resources (Forner et al., 2012).

While there was great consistency with much of Waters and Marzano’s (2006) work, one exception was noticed. There was no evidence to indicate that “formal” collaborative goal-setting occurred in these rural districts. Cleary, the leaders established goals and expectations, then used direct, personal conversations to persuade staff and community to assume the priorities as their own, but it appeared to be through consensus-building, rather than a bottom-up process (Forner et al., 2012).
### Table 3

**Effective Rural Leadership Practices as Aligned with Effective Leadership Correlates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Leadership Correlates (Waters &amp; Marzano, 2006)</th>
<th>Effective Rural Leadership Practices (Forner et al., 2010)</th>
<th>Effective Rural Leadership Priorities (Forner et al., 2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative goal-setting</td>
<td>1. Superintendent establishes goals/expectations and drives reform</td>
<td>All students can and will achieve academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-negotiable goals for student achievement and instruction</td>
<td>2. Superintendents build support for reform through direct, personal conversations with staff and board</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning board support</td>
<td>3a. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous monitoring</td>
<td>3b. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing define autonomy to principal</td>
<td>4. Low-performing teacher or principals are removed</td>
<td>A high quality teacher in every classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively utilizing resources</td>
<td>5. The close working relationship with the building principal is leveraged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Takes a harder line in union contract negotiations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Re-aligns financial commitments to match district priorities</td>
<td>Creating resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey

In 1999, the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission and the North Carolina State Board of Education developed working conditions standards for schools in an attempt to address issues impelling teacher turnover. The standards, revised and unanimously
adopted by the State Board of Education in 2001, are assessed using a statewide survey of school-based licensed educators to determine if they have the necessary supports for effective teaching. Since 2002, the biennial survey has informed significant reforms in school, local, and state policies and practices to ensure that North Carolina educators have supportive and trusting school environments that are essential to helping students achieve at the highest levels (New Teacher Center [NTC], 2014b).

During a four week window, the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NCTWCS) Survey is administered online. The survey is a statistically valid and reliable instrument that assesses eight research-based teaching and learning conditions standards. Educators use an anonymous password to complete the survey anytime, from any location. The working conditions standards are as follows:

1. Standard 1 – Time: Available time to plan, collaborate, provide instruction, and eliminate barriers to maximize instructional time during the school day,
2. Standard 2- Facilities and Resources: Availability of instructional technology, office, communication, and school resources to teachers,
3. Standard 3- Community Support and Involvement: Community and parent/guardian communication and influence in the school,
4. Standard 4 – Managing Student Conduct: Policies and practices to address student conduct issues and ensure a safe school environment,
5. Standard 5 – Teacher Leadership: Teacher involvement in decision that impact classroom and school practices,
6. Standard 6 – School Leadership: Ability of school leadership to create trusting, supportive environments, and address teacher concerns,
7. Standard 7 – Professional Development: Availability and quality of learning opportunities for educators to enhance their teaching, and


Results from the surveys are posted online for schools and districts that meet a minimum participation rate of five respondents and a 40% response rate. This is significant in order for schools and districts to be able to use their own data to facilitate the improvement planning process. Understanding and improving teaching conditions can result in:

- Increased student success,
- Improved teacher efficacy and motivation,
- Enhanced teacher retention, and
- Recruitment strategies targeted to bring educators to hard-to-staff schools (NTC, 2014a, slide 27).

As a result of the administration of the spring 2014 NCTWCS, approximately 97% of surveyed schools met or exceeded the 40% response rate threshold required to receive an individual school-level data report. Over 93,000 educators (89%) in the state responded, an increase of 3 percentage points from the 86% responding in 2012. Response rates varied by school type. Table 1 reveals 92% of elementary school educators in North Carolina participated in the survey, 87% of North Carolina middle school educators responded, and 85% of North Carolina high school educators responded. Also, 72% of educators assigned to alternative education settings in North Carolina, designated as “Special” in Table 4, responded to the survey (NTC, 2014b).
ADDRESSING CONTINUOUS MIDDLE GRADES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DECLINE THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TURNAROUND STRATEGIES 50

Table 4

2014 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey Response Rate by School Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Headcount</th>
<th>Responded</th>
<th>Percent Responded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>47,656</td>
<td>43,705</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>25,004</td>
<td>21,842</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>32,016</td>
<td>27,299</td>
<td>85.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105,136</td>
<td>93,178</td>
<td>88.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The eight constructs are empirically linked to teacher retention and student learning (NTC, 2014b). Large-scale studies present evidence that contextual factors matter for teachers’ decisions regarding staying at and leaving their schools, such as in the meta-analysis of 34 studies, where researchers suggest that teaching and learning conditions influence teachers’ career paths more than previously recognized (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Factors include teachers’ perceptions of the school administration (Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2011), relationships between teachers’ perceptions of school facilities and their plans to stay or leave (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005), as well as the school’s culture, the principal’s leadership, and relationships among peers (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012).

Mounting evidence suggests that school context in which teaching and learning occurs can have significant consequences for teachers and students. Recent studies record the influence of school contexts on teachers’ career decisions, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement.
ADDRESSING CONTINUOUS MIDDLE GRADES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DECLINE THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TURNAROUND STRATEGIES 51

(Loeb, Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2014), determined that positive working conditions contribute to improved student achievement. A recently published peer review study analyzing a decade of student achievement and NCTWCS results in Charlotte, North Carolina concluded that teachers who work in positive school environments improved student achievement 38% more than their peers with lesser supports after 10 years (Kraft & Papay, 2014). These same researchers linked student-teacher data and school-level teaching conditions as measured by The New Teacher Center’s Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning Survey (2010) to surmise that teachers who work in more supportive environments become more effective at raising student achievement on standardized tests over time than do teachers who work in less supportive environments.

North Carolina’s responses to the NCTWCS indicate that, overall, teaching conditions have remained stable since 2010. Educators have reported comparable conditions across all eight constructs in 2010, 2012, and 2014. While Community Support and Involvement and Teacher Leadership have remained consistently positive over time, the challenges reported by teachers remain a concern. For example, North Carolina educators reported the lowest average rate of agreement across all areas on the Time construct. The difficulties that teachers have finding sufficient time to teach, plan, and collaborate is evident in Table 5, which shows that the average rate of agreement among North Carolina educators was 64 % for the three iterations (NTC, 2014b).
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Table 5

*Items and Percent of Teachers in Agreement Related to Standard 1: Time*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select Items Related to Time</th>
<th>Percent Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The non-instructional time provided for teachers in my school is sufficient.</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efforts are made to minimize the amount of routine paperwork teachers are required to do</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students.</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class sizes are reasonable such that teachers have the time available to meet the needs of all students.</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers have sufficient instructional time to meet the needs of all students.</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Construct Overall Rate of Agreement</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Ratings for items linked to the Professional Development construct have remained constant over time as shown in Table 6. For 2010, 2012, and 2014, at least 90% of educators responded that the professional development opportunities are aligned with their schools’ improvement plan, and that they are encouraged to reflect on their own practice. Conversely, the lowest rates of agreement show that, on average, only 65% of teachers support the statement that professional development is differentiated to meet their needs and that professional development is evaluated and results communicated to teachers.
### Table 6

**Items and Percent of Teachers in Agreement Related to Standard 7: Professional Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items Related to Professional Development</th>
<th>Percent Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources are available for professional development in my school.</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An appropriate amount of time is provided for professional development.</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development offerings are data driven.</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional learning opportunities are aligned with the school’s improvement plan.</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development is differentiated to meet the individual needs of teachers.</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development deepens teachers' content knowledge.</td>
<td>78.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers have sufficient training to fully utilize instructional technology.</td>
<td>74.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own practice.</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this school, follow up is provided from professional development.</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues to refine teaching practices.</td>
<td>79.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development is evaluated and results are communicated to teachers.</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development enhances teachers' ability to implement instructional strategies that meet diverse student learning needs.</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development enhances teachers' abilities to improve student learning.</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Instructional Practices and Support remain critical as 37% of survey participants chose this area as the single most important construct to them in promoting student learning. Figure 1 shows that twice as many teachers agreed that Instructional Practices and Support is essential in
order to foster student success as compared to the other constructs in the survey. This finding was consistent for both the 2010 and 2012 surveys (NTC, 2013).

Figure 1. One Aspect Most Important in Promoting Student Learning. This figure illustrates that Instructional Practices and Support is an important construct to educators in promoting student learning. Adapted from *2010 North Carolina Teaching Working Conditions Initiatives – Listening to North Carolina Educators: General Trends*, by New Teacher Center, 2013.

Further analysis of the questions contained in the Instructional Practices and Support section imply that teachers are largely empowered to make pedagogical decisions. Approximately 93% of teachers felt they were encouraged to try new things to improve classroom instruction, and 80% felt they have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery. Although the results disclosed that teachers are anchoring their instructional decisions in data, the availability
and relevance of that data appears to be less consistent. Table 7 exhibits the educator perception data from three iterations of the survey related to Instructional Practices and Support: 2010, 2012, and 2014. The most significant decreases are reported below (NTC, 2013):

- Local assessment data are available in time to impact instructional practices – 8.1% decrease from 2010 to 2014.

- State assessment data are available in time to impact instructional practices – 24.1% decrease from 2010-2014.

- State assessments accurately gauge students’ understanding of standards – 10.9% decrease from 2012-2014 (p. 7)
### North Carolina Educator Perceptions of Instructional Practices and Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers use assessment data to inform instruction.</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>93.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are encouraged to try new things to improve instruction.</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>93.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher work in professional learning communities to develop and align instructional practices.</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curriculum taught in this school is aligned with Common Core Standards.</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided supports (i.e. instructional coaching, professional learning communities, etc.) translate to improvements instructional practices by teachers.</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local assessment data are available in time to impact instructional practices.</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery (i.e. pacing, materials, and pedagogy).</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>77.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State assessment data are available in time to impact instructional practices.</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State assessments provide schools with data that can help improve teaching.</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are assigned classes that maximize their likelihood of success with students.</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>68.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State assessments accurately gauge students’ understanding of standards.</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the same constructs as previously examined in this section (i.e. Time, Professional Development, and Instructional Practices and Support), Table 8 displays how strongly educators from a random sample of grades 7-8 schools in North Carolina agree or disagree with select items. After carefully considering the variables that positively or negatively impact academic achievement in the middle grades, items from the School Leadership construct were added to the table for the purpose of the analysis. The four schools, identified as S-A through S-D, represent the most high-performing (67.1%) to the most low-performing (27.8%) 7-8 configured schools across the state in descending order. Also used for comparison purposes are the North Carolina Public School (NCPS) and North Carolina Middle School (NCMS) data.

Among the items related to the Time construct, there was a noticeable decrease in the percent of agreement between the high performing and low performing schools in correlation to the following:

- Teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruption – a difference of almost 30%.
- Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students – a difference of nearly 20%.

Also, fewer teachers reported being “protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students” in the two lower performing schools by close to 15 percent when compared to the two higher performing schools.

Within the School Leadership construct, seventy-five percent of the schools rated an “atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school” below the NCPS and NCMS percentages. Seventy-five percent of the schools also rated feeling “comfortable raising issues and concerns
that are important to them” below the state. Curiously, educators in the highest performing school (School A) responded 13% below the state average and 12% below the state middle school average on this particular item. The School Leadership was the only construct where ratings dropped below 50% on two of the three survey items. To be clear, half of the educators from the lowest performing schools reported challenges with their school leadership.

Nearly 72% of teachers from School A, B, C, and D agreed that “professional development is differentiated to meet their needs,” an item found in the Professional Development construct. School B reported a significantly higher rating than its cohorts on the item associated with “professional development deepens teachers’ content knowledge.” Consequently, there was a 32% difference between School B and School D’s responses. Perhaps most significant to the analysis of the Professional Development construct is the fact that the highest performing school (School A) reported an 87% agreement rating for “follow up is provided following professional development.” This is approximately 20% higher than School B, C, and D.

Educators reported similar ratings for selected items in the Instructional Practices and Supports construct with the exception of teachers being “assigned classes that maximize their likelihood of success with students.” This particular item received a variety of rankings from the four schools. However, the agreement percentages from School A and School D were more comparable to the NCPS and NCMS data as compared to the other two schools.
Table 8

*Items Related to Constructs from Select 7-8 Middle Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select NC TWC Survey Items</th>
<th>Percent Agreement</th>
<th>NCPS</th>
<th>NCMS</th>
<th>S-A</th>
<th>S-B</th>
<th>S-C</th>
<th>S-D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class sizes are reasonable such that teachers have time available to meet the needs of students.</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions.</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students.</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The faculty and staff have a shared vision.</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>91.1</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school.</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them.</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development is differentiated to meet the needs of teachers.</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development deepens teachers’ content knowledge</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this school, follow up is provided following professional development.</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Practices and Supports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers use assessment data to inform their instruction.</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers work in professional learning communities to develop and align instructional practices.</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher are assigned classes that maximize their likelihood of success with students.</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The NCTWCS is a valid and reliable instrument used to evaluate whether or not educators have working conditions that support effective teaching. Understanding specific areas where schools need support can maximize available resources, protect educator time, and ultimately improve teacher working conditions. The survey is not an assessment of teacher morale or a measure of teachers’ happiness with specific policies. Further, survey data do not provide information as to why teachers perceive conditions as they do. This is best determined through data-driven conversations as part of the school improvement planning process (NTC, 2014b).
CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the best instructional practices of top-performing grade 7-8 configured schools in NC which can be incorporated within a strategic plan designed to increase middle school achievement in the Yadkin County school system. Section one identifies the school system and the problem of practice. In section two, the 2013-2014 School Level EOG Report for Grades 7-8 Schools in NC is presented, as well as the criteria and methods used to collect and analyze data. The third section contains the comprehensive strategic plan that includes the strategic planning process, the vision, mission, core values, a description of the goals identified to address the problem of practice, and a timeline for implementation and evaluation. The action plan proposal, comprising one strategy and the recommended method used to implement the action plan, is found in the fourth section. An overall summary of Chapter Two is found in section five.

Section One

There are twenty-three schools in NC with a 7-8 grade configuration. Two of those schools are located in the Yadkin County school system, a rural district in the western Piedmont Triad with nearly 5700 students. Since the opening of the two Yadkin County middle schools in the 2009 academic year, Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School, there has been a downward trend in student achievement resulting in the need for turnaround strategies.

The 2013-2014 School Level EOG Test Report for Grades 7-8 Schools in North Carolina summarizes the test data for the twenty-three 7-8 configured middle schools. Eight grade 7-8 configured middle schools are outperforming the two grade 7-8 configured middle schools in
Yadkin County. Forbush and Starmount Middle Schools are outperforming the other thirteen 7-8 configured middle schools. Based on these comparisons, the Yadkin County middle schools have room for improvement, as do most grade 7-8 configured middle schools, when compared to schools with similar grade configurations. A careful consideration by the primary investigator, the essential question for this action project is: What differentiates higher-performing grade 7-8 configured middle schools from the lower-performing schools? Based on the findings, the researcher will make recommendations to the strategic planning team for the purpose of ultimately increasing the achievement level for students in Yadkin County’s grade 7-8 configured middle schools.

Section Two

An in-depth interview with school leaders was used to research what six of the top-performing grade 7-8 configured schools in NC do to achieve high student performance. The case study, Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents: Connections to Waters and Marzano’s Leadership Correlates conducted by Mark Forner, Louann Bierlein-Palmer, and Patricia Reeves (2012) contributed to the investigator’s decision to conduct this particular type of research. In the Forner et al. study, seven superintendents, from rural school districts in the state of Michigan, were interviewed to ascertain the leadership actions attributed to improved student achievement in their districts based on test scores. Findings revealed that rural superintendents face a leadership context very different from that encountered by urban and suburban school leaders.

As made known by the aforementioned study, it is believed that leaders of grade 7-8 configured schools are faced with different contextual challenges than their counterparts who lead traditionally configured 6-8 middle schools. Examples of these contextual challenges
ADDRESSING CONTINUOUS MIDDLE GRADES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DECLINE THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TURNAROUND STRATEGIES

63 include: the revolving door effect, described by Combs (2008), that does not allow students time to identify with the school in two years, or the emphasis on subject matter (as opposed to student centered programs) that is inappropriate for the developmental needs of middle schools students. Also, grade 7-8 schools often possess a junior high mentality and adopt high school programs and methodologies resulting in a more difficult transition to the grade 7-8 configured school.

Since Yadkin County Schools has two low-performing 7th and 8th grade schools, the decision was made to research the approaches and methods used in higher-performing grade 7-8 configured schools in NC to realize academic success.

North Carolina uses the EOG tests to measure student performance on the goals, objectives, and grade level competencies specified in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for reading and math in grades 3-8 and science in grades 5 and 8. Student achievement is reported on five levels. The levels are denoted below:

- Level 5 – superior command of knowledge and skill,
- Level 4 – solid command of knowledge and skill,
- Level 3 – sufficient command of knowledge and skill,
- Level 2 – partial command of knowledge and skill, and
- Level 1 – limited command of knowledge and skill.

The 2013-2014 School Level EOG Report for Grades 7-8 Schools in NC is presented in Table 9.
Table 9

2013-2014 School Level EOG Report for Grades 7-8 Schools in NC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Percent Level 1</th>
<th>Percent Level 2</th>
<th>Percent Level 3</th>
<th>Percent Level 4</th>
<th>Percent Level 5</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anson County Schools</td>
<td>Anson Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>23.2</td>
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<td>Ashe County Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>38.4</td>
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<td>All EOG</td>
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<td>25.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Camden Middle</td>
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<td>24.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
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<td>9.6</td>
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<td>41.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
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<td>River Bend Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
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<td>28.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland County Schools</td>
<td>Kings Mountain Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Shelby Middle</td>
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<td>10.0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
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<td>All EOG</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
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<td>Elkin City Schools</td>
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<td>All EOG</td>
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<td>19.5</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>9.8</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham County Schools</td>
<td>Robbinsville Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
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<td>30.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Kannapolis Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
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<td>9.0</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Mooresville Middle</td>
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<td>18.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macon County Schools</td>
<td>Macon Middle School</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Randolph County Schools</td>
<td>Archdale-Trinity Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robeson County Schools</td>
<td>Lumberton Junior High</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadkin County Schools</td>
<td>Forbush Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadkin County Schools</td>
<td>Starmount Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Information highlighted in yellow denotes the top-performing grades 7-8 schools in NC based on 2013-2014 EOG scores. Information highlighted in gray denotes the Yadkin County Schools middle school data for the same academic year. Adapted from 2013-14 State, District, School Level EOG and EOC Report, by United States Department of Education, 2014, Retrieved from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/

Based on the statewide data, eight middle schools, highlighted in yellow, emerged as performing above the threshold set by the Yadkin County middle schools, Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School, highlighted in gray, for the percentage of students scoring a Level 3, 4, or 5. They are:

- Ashe County Middle School in Ashe County,
ADDRESSING CONTINUOUS MIDDLE GRADES ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT DECLINE THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TURNAROUND STRATEGIES 65

- North Buncombe Middle School in Buncombe County,
- Camden Middle School in Camden County,
- Jacobs Fork Middle School in Catawba County,
- Mill Creek Middle School in Catawba County,
- Kings Mountain Middle School in Cleveland County,
- Elkin Middle School in Elkin City Schools, and
- Mooresville Middle School in Mooresville City Schools.

In an effort to ensure the feasibility of the research study, and to increase reliability of the interview responses, other variables were added to the selection process including student enrollment, free and reduced lunch population, percentage of Hispanic students, locale, school performance grade, and growth status. The following criteria were used for the interview selection process:

- The identification of schools with the percentage of students above 34.8 percent for NC Achievement Level 4 (lowest percentage of students scoring a Level 4 in Yadkin County).
- The identification of schools with the percentage of students above 7.4 percent for NC Achievement Level 5 (lowest percentage of students scoring a Level 5 in Yadkin County).
- The identification of schools with at least 35% free and reduced lunch population (35% is North Carolina’s minimum for Title I federal funding assistance).
- The identification of schools located in a rural environment.
- The identification of schools with a North Carolina School Performance Grade (SPG) of C or better.
The identification of schools that, at a minimum, met growth according to the 2013-2014 EVAAS calculations.

Table 10 illustrates the above-mentioned criteria and is color-coded to represent the selected schools. The limited number of grade 7-8 configured schools, as well as the before mentioned criteria, narrowed the research sample to six schools. It should be noted that the number of students enrolled and the percentage of Hispanic students served in the selected schools were inconsistent with the Yadkin County percentages and were, in essence, eliminated as variables. Instead, the free and reduced lunch population, locale, school performance grades, and growth status served as the additional indicators for the research study. North Buncombe Middle School did not meet the criteria due to its suburban context. Kings Mountain Middle School is excluded as it did not meet growth in 2013-2014.
### Table 10

**Selected Grades 7-8 Configured Schools for Research Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Percent Level 1</th>
<th>Percent Level 2</th>
<th>Percent Level 3</th>
<th>Percent Level 4</th>
<th>Percent Level 5</th>
<th># enrolled</th>
<th>F/R</th>
<th>Pop</th>
<th>Locale</th>
<th>SPG</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anson County Schools</td>
<td>Anson Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Town</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashe County Schools</td>
<td>Ashe County Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe County Schools</td>
<td>Erwin Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buncombe County Schools</td>
<td>North Buncombe Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
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<tr>
<td>Camden County Schools</td>
<td>Camden Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catawba County Schools</td>
<td>Harry M Arnhold Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
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<td>Catawba County Schools</td>
<td>Jacobs Fork Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Met</td>
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<td>Catawba County Schools</td>
<td>Maiden Middle School</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catawba County Schools</td>
<td>Mill Creek Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>477</td>
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<td>4.00%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>Exceeded</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catawba County Schools</td>
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<td>All EOG</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>Exceeded</td>
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<td>Cleveland County Schools</td>
<td>Kings Mountain Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
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<td>22.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>657</td>
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<td>Cleveland County Schools</td>
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<td>24.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>29.6</td>
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<td>27.6</td>
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<td>464</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<td>Elkin Middle</td>
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<td>19.5</td>
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<td>40.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Town</td>
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<td>Met</td>
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<td>16%</td>
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<td>18.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>918</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Met</td>
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<td>23.8</td>
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<td>9.1</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
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<td>Robeson County Schools</td>
<td>Lumberton Junior High</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
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<td>27.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>21.3</td>
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<td>531</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>37.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>493</td>
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<td>Rural</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>Yadkin County Schools</td>
<td>Starmount Middle</td>
<td>All EOG</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Information highlighted in yellow denotes the six grades 7-8 schools in NC selected to participate in the research study. Information highlighted in gray denotes the Yadkin County Schools middle schools for comparability purposes. Adapted from 2013-14 State, District, School Level EOG and EOC Report, by United States Department of Education, 2014, Retrieved from [http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/)

aThe number of students enrolled in each grades 7-8 configured school. bThe percentage of free and reduced lunch students in each school. cThe percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in each school. dThe location of each school. eThe school performance grade for each school. fThe EVAAS growth status for each school.

The Strategic Planning Team (SPT), consisting of the Yadkin County Schools’ superintendent, the two grade 7-8 configured middle school principals and assistant principals, the school system’s Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator, and the researcher, convened to review the 2013-2014 previously shown data shown in Table 10. Using the two Yadkin County
grade 7-8 configured middle schools’ data as an entry, the researcher described how to use the table to locate the eight higher-performing schools. Next, the SPT more thoroughly analyzed the test data for the six selected schools. As a result of the in-depth interviews with the six school leaders, the team decided to look for commonalities among the principals’ responses and draw upon characteristics of highly successful grade 7-8 configured schools to inform their own strategic plan. After a thoughtful discussion about what types of questions the team wanted to analyze, which might help the SPT better understand the district’s phenomenon, thirteen interview questions were generated for the one-on-one interviews to be conducted via the telephone by the researcher. They include:

1. How long have you been a principal? How many years have you been the principal of _______________ Middle School?

2. How do you and your staff motivate or increase the desire of middle school students to learn?

3. What are your strategies for helping seventh graders transition and adjust to middle school?

4. Does ______________ Middle School have an intervention and remediation plan? If so, please provide a description of the services including the timeline and the type of student that is targeted for the intervention or remediation.

5. Does your school practice the Middle School Concept including Interdisciplinary Teaming, Flexible Scheduling and/or the Advisee/Advisor program? If so, please explain how the teams are structured for teaching, learning, and collaborative planning.

6. What methods are used to personalize and differentiate instruction for ALL students (Regular-Ed, EC, AIG, ELL)? How do teachers know what level their students are working on?

7. Which model, EC Inclusion or EC Pull-Out, is most successful at ______________ Middle School and why?

8. Does your school have Instructional Coaches? If so, what is their role?
9. How is each subject area/grade level’s curriculum mapping and pacing decided? How often is it revisited and revised?

10. What types of assessments are teachers required to administer throughout the year and how often?

11. What systematic processes are used to collect, analyze, and interpret assessment results to guide instruction?

12. How do you determine the professional development needs of your teachers? Do you implement a year-long focus?

13. Lastly, considering how difficult it is to get parents involved at the middle school level, how do you actively engage them in the educational process of their child?

Upon approval from the High Point University Human Participant Institution Review Board (IRB), Protocol Applications for both principal interview questions and for the administration of staff and student school climate surveys, the researcher emailed an invitation to the principals of the six selected schools to participate in the research study. Five principals confirmed their participation. However, one principal declined. An alternative school, Harry M. Arndt Middle School, was selected. While this particular school met five of the six selection criteria (percentage of students achieving a Level 5, free and reduced lunch percentage, rural locale, school performance grade, and EVAAS growth status), it was the only school with a Hispanic population comparable to the Yadkin County middle schools.

Consent forms were provided to and signed by each principal and the researcher. A copy of the thirteen questions was emailed in advance of the scheduled interviews in order for participants to preview prior to the interview. As a show of appreciation, a summary of findings was presented to each participant at the end of the study.
The researcher conducted the one-on-one interviews at the participants’ preferred time and typed their responses on the interview question protocol. Using a coding process for qualitative research, the primary investigator examined the responses by (Creswell, 2015):

- Initially reading through the data,
- Dividing the responses into segments of information,
- Labeling responses of information with codes, and
- Reducing overlap and redundancy of codes.

Also discovered during the analysis was that the interview questions collapsed into the following topics:

1. Student motivation,
2. Intervention, remediation, and personalized learning plans,
3. Implementation of the middle school concept,
4. Professional development, and
5. Parent involvement.

The SPT met to review the segmented information and reduce the codes into themes alongside the interview question topics. The examination led to the identification of four themes: relationships, responsiveness, partnerships, and communication. Table 11 clarifies these findings. It should be noted that interview question number one, “How long have you been a principal?” and “How many years have you been the principal of ‘said’ Middle School?” were used as the ice-breaker questions.
Table 11

Interview Questions, Topics, Codes, and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Interview Question Topics</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you motivate or increase the desire of middle school students to learn?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your strategies for helping seventh graders transition and adjust to middle school?</td>
<td>Student motivation</td>
<td>Positive atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your school practice the Middle School Concept including Interdisciplinary Teaming, Flexible Scheduling, and /or the Advisee/Advisor program? If so, please explain how the teams are structured for teaching, learning, and collaborative planning.</td>
<td>Implementation of the middle school concept</td>
<td>Student focused</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Intervention, remediation, and personalized learning</td>
<td>Data-driven differentiation</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does ‘said’ Middle School have an intervention and remediation plan? If so, please provide a description of the services including the timeline and type of student that is targeted for the intervention or remediation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What methods are used to personalize and differentiate instruction for ALL students (Regular-Ed, EC, AIG, ELL)? How do teachers know what level their students are working on?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which model, EC Inclusion or EC Pull-Out, is most successful at ‘said’ Middle School and why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is each subject area/grade level’s curriculum mapping and pacing decided? How often is it revisited and revised?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What types of assessments are teachers required to administer throughout the year and how often?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What systematic processes are used to collect, analyze, and interpret assessment results to guide instruction?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your school have Instructional Coaches? If so, what is their role?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you determine the professional development needs of your teachers? Do you implement a year-long focus?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considering how difficult it is to get parents involved at the middle school level, how do you actively engage them in the educational process of their child?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent involvement</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Section Three**

Data from Table 11 served as the basis for the strategic planning process. The embedded data, in particularly, the themes, revealed why some students might perform better, which was the primary purpose for the interviews with principals of the top-performing grade 7-8 schools in NC. The SPT determined that the four themes: relationships, responsiveness, partnerships, and communication, would serve as drivers for four goals to be included in the comprehensive strategic plan for the Yadkin County grade 7-8 configured middle schools. The team worked collaboratively to craft a vision statement, “The Yadkin County Middle Schools will produce literate learners who will make a difference in society,” and mission statement, “Inspiring our children toward life-long service and success through rigorous academics, relevant activities, and valuable relationships,” which represent a desired long-term commitment to seek positive change in the middle school experience and beyond. The team also arrived at a motto, “Be the difference!” on behalf of all stakeholders (staff, students, district leaders, parents, and community members) which solidified the longing for improved middle school student achievement and future success.

Working with the members of the SPT was a rewarding experience for the fact that each member came to the table with a single purpose and goal in mind, which was to discuss and come to consensus on specific actions that would increase student achievement in both middle schools by the end of the 2015-2016 academic school year. In essence, the definition of success
was clear from the onset. The group met face-to-face to talk. They listened to each other, formulated proposals, defended their views, and took into account what the others said. The small amount of debate that occurred was managed through negotiation. Because the team had convened throughout the previous school year to discuss concerns and plan for the strategic planning process, the product was a good-faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders.

The primary investigator, while facilitating the development of the strategic plan, utilized technology to promote teamwork and shared decision-making. While the SPT conversed, the goals, objectives, and action steps were typed into a template as it was displayed through a data projector. This approach was met with much success as several iterations of the plan were written throughout the course of the day. Following the completion of the plan, it was shared via email with all members of the strategic planning team for review and potential edits. There were no corrections, additions, or deletions submitted.

If fully implemented, the strategic plan offers Yadkin County Schools middle school staff the opportunity:

- To create cultural conditions that will increase students’ motivation to learn by implementing an Advisor/Advisee (A/A) program,
- To personalize learning for students by utilizing data to inform and adjust instruction throughout the academic school year,
- To produce literate learners across all content areas by implementing new technologies and programs that will help students make connections to their futures,
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- To increase communication with parents by informing them of their child’s education and progress.

In addition, if fully implemented, the strategic plan offers Yadkin County Schools middle school students the opportunity:

- To establish a relationship with at least one adult in the school who cares about his/her total development while in middle school,
- To receive additional time and differentiated support for learning, regardless of the subject matter, by well-prepared teachers,
- To engage in 21st Century learning experiences that will prepare them for college or career, and
- To benefit from positive communications and interactions between their teachers and parents.

The preceding intended outcomes are rooted in four goals and objectives that comprise the Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan, as disclosed in Table 12. Identified action steps, person(s) responsible, and a timeline provide complete details as to how the goals and objectives will be accomplished, if implemented with fidelity.

Table 12

\textit{Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan}

| Goal 1: Yadkin County Middle Schools will foster positive relationships between staff and students as indicated by an increase of 10\% in positive perception data based on pre-and-post staff and student school climate surveys during the 2015-2016 school year. |
| Objective: To increase student motivation to learn |
| Action Steps | Person(s) Responsible | Timeline |
| Implement an A/A Program | Administrators, Teachers | August 31, 2015 |
| Train on Take Charge! Curriculum for A/A | Jane Williamson, Trainer | First Round August –Oct. 2015 |
## Increase the number of club opportunities available to students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal 2: Yadkin County Middle Schools will be responsive to the learning needs of students to increase the percentage of students by 10% who achieve growth as measured by EVAAS.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective: To personalize learning for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Steps</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Before/After School Tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue Intervention/Enrichment Period using data to form groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule Tier 2 LEP students strategically for inclusion services during ELA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement newly revised pacing guides in ELA and Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize quarterly data meetings for the purpose of analyzing data and adjusting instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide job-embedded professional development in ELA and Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train on TenMarks Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase TenMarks Math Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Make individual positive contacts with parents within the 1st two weeks of school; positive contacts by someone on team each semester; record in Google document

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal 3: Yadkin County Middle Schools will maintain existing partnerships and establish at least two, new partnerships within the school community by the end of the 2015-2016 school year.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective: To produce literate learners across all content areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Steps</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisit and revise quarterly pacing guides for ELA and Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe classroom instruction (including use of pacing guides) and provide on-site coaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implement a 1:1 Initiative; provide Canvas Learning Management System training for teachers</th>
<th>Yadkin County Technology Team, Instructional Technology Facilitator</th>
<th>August 18, 2015-June 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organize Lego Robotics Team; practice for fall competition</td>
<td>Lego Robotics Coach</td>
<td>August 2015-October 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize Science Gizmos for inquiry-based learning; provide science teachers with professional development</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum &amp; Instruction Coordinator, Teachers</td>
<td>August 17, 2015 November 6, 2015 February 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide job-embedded professional development in ELA and Math</td>
<td>Education Resource Group Consultant, Teachers, Administrators</td>
<td>August 2015-April 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure teachers’ Professional Development Plan (PDP) is in alignment with district and school level goals</td>
<td>Administrators, Teachers</td>
<td>August 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require at least one In the Know session aligned to teachers’ PDP</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum &amp; Instruction Coordinator, Administrators, Teachers</td>
<td>November 2015-February 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish a Career Café for student career exploration</td>
<td>School Counselor, Administrators</td>
<td>Once a month September 2015-April 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Goal 4:** Yadkin County Middle Schools will actively engage parents through at least two forms of communication throughout the 2015-2016 school year as measured by surveys (student, parent, teacher).

**Objective:** To inform and engage parents about their child’s education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Steps</th>
<th>Person(s) Responsible</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make individual positive contacts with parents within the 1st two weeks of school; positive contacts by someone on team each semester; record in Google Document</td>
<td>Advisor, Team Members, Administrators</td>
<td>By Sept. 8, 2015 Nov. 23, 2015 By Jan. 14, 2016 By June 2, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruct parents how to utilize Power School to access attendance and grades</td>
<td>Teachers, Yadkin County Schools Technology Team</td>
<td>August 20, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize social media to engage parents in their child’s educational process</td>
<td>Administrators or Principal’s designee</td>
<td>August 2015-May 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform parents, via video clip, about middle school life prior to band and choral concerts; post to school webpage</td>
<td>Administrators, Media Coordinator or Principal’s Designee, Teachers</td>
<td>December 2015 March 2016 May 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rationale for each goal was centered on improving academic achievement. The SPT concentrated on the elements within the school climate that positively impact student learning in the development of each goal. Goal 1 addresses core practices of the middle school concept and
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conditions for student learning. Goal 2 addresses best instructional practices. Goal 3 addresses engaging and motivating programs. Goal 4 addresses parental involvement. In summary, the strategic plan’s overarching goal was to promote whole-school reform by subsequently eliminating the pattern of low student achievement and the consequential effects it was having on Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School.

Members of the SPT, including the primary investigator, will monitor goal attainment. The Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator will serve as the administrators’ and teachers’ point person. She will assist the schools’ administrators on a weekly basis observing teachers and providing feedback, facilitate the teachers’ Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, attend faculty meetings, offer on-going professional development, and supply on-site coaching and instructional support, including data analysis. The strategic plan will serve as the coordinator’s primary document for guiding the middle schools through the 2015-2016 academic school year. The primary investigator will convene the SPT monthly to review the progress made toward the action steps. Again, a visual record will be created, such as a Google doc, to capture the key points and specified next steps in the implementation of the strategic plan. The strategic plan’s documented timeline and the data collected will function as benchmarks to determine what is working and what is not. If necessary, adjustments to the Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan will be made. Data include:

- Pre-and-post school climate surveys – beginning of year; end of first semester and end of year,
- Number of clubs available to students – beginning and end of year,
- Number of positive, parent contacts – first two weeks of schools; end of first and second semesters,
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- Tutoring achievement data – monthly; September through April,
- Intervention/Enrichment achievement data – every 4 ½ weeks,
- New pacing guides for reading and math usage – weekly,
- Benchmark assessment data for reading and math – quarterly,
- In-house professional development evaluations – following professional development opportunities,
- TenMarks Math Program usage – monthly,
- Classroom observation and feedback schedule – monthly,
- Canvas Learning Management usage – monthly,
- Lego Competition results – October,
- Science Gizmos usage – monthly,
- Professional Development Plan alignment to school and district goals – beginning of year,
- “In the Know” workshop attendance – monthly; October through February,
- “Career Café” attendance – monthly; September through April,
- Parent Power School usage – quarterly,
- Social media announcements – monthly, and
- Informational parent video clips – December, March, and May

In order to successfully launch the Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan, the middle school principals, primary investigator, and the Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator will present the plan to each middle school faculty on the first day staff returns to work for the school 2015-2016 academic year. The SPT feels strongly that all four objectives must be clearly staged
in order to appreciate the work that lies ahead in an effort to increase middle level student achievement in the Yadkin County school system. To reiterate, the strategic plan objectives are:

1) To increase student motivation to learn,

2) To personalize learning for students,

3) To produce literate learners across all content areas, and

4) To inform and engage parents about their child’s education.

Thus, the SPT desires that the action steps embedded in the strategic plan will provide the stepping stones for success and result in the replacement of the downward trend in achievement results that the middle schools have realized for the past six years with positive gains in student achievement during the 2015-2016 academic school year.

The Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan has the potential to meet the social, emotional, and psychological needs of early adolescents, which often thwarts academic success. Transition, especially at the on-set of puberty, is one culprit for declining student motivation, poor attitude about school, low self-esteem, and failing academics. The strategic plan is designed to create a match for the adolescent student and the school environment through developmental responsiveness.

There will be cause for concern if all middle school teachers do not buy-in to the strategic plan. It is important that all teachers realize that the needs of young teens in grade 7-8 configured middle schools are different from those of elementary and high school students. If middle school is viewed as simply a stepping stone to high school, rather than a separate experience of its own,
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Certain components of the strategic plan could fail, specifically the A/A Program. In turn, this could decrease the students’ motivation to learn and could negatively impact achievement.

Section Four

It is the desire of the Yadkin County Schools SPT for the middle schools to foster positive relationships between staff and students. They suspect that healthy, positive relationships between students and caring adults will motivate students to learn. For this reason, the A/A program will be one component of the Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan that the primary investigator will seek approval to implement during the first semester of the academic school year, which spans August 24, 2015 through January 14, 2016. Table 13 outlines the action plan proposal.

Table 13

Action Plan Proposal

| Goal: Implement the Advisor/Advisee (A/A) Program to help middle school students develop a sense of belonging in order to meet their educational, personal, and social growth goals. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **How** | **Who** | **Deadline** | **Resources** | **Challenges** | **Evaluation** | **Results** |
| Select A/A Curriculum | Administrators, District Leaders, School Counselors | 8-26-15 | Take Charge! Curriculum | Cost of workbooks & training | Purchase of workbooks | Complete; Secured funding of purchase with free training |
| Purchase A/A Curriculum | Assistant Superintendent | 8-26-15 | Local Instructional Supply Funds | Purchasing additional resources for A/A | County purchase curriculum; schools purchase additional resources | Complete; Students and staff enjoy the supplements for projects |
| Train | Jane | 8-26/27 | Training | Held first | Teachers | Complete; |
### Teachers on A/A Curriculum
- **Williamson, Author of curriculum**
  - at FMS 8-28/29 at SMS
  - materials
  - week of school
  - receptive and enthusiastic about training and curriculum
  - Teachers use the training to integrate their own topics into Take Charge! Curriculum

### Schedule period for A/A
- **Middle School Administrators**
  - 8-31-15
  - Master Schedule
  - Finding 25 minutes daily for A/A
  - Master schedule
  - Complete; Alternate “A” day and “B” day in each school for A/A and DEAR Time

### Begin lessons in Take Charge!
- **Teachers**
  - 9-1-15
  - Take Charge! Curriculum and Workbooks
  - Teaches’ feelings about A/A; Students’ participation
  - Teacher preparedness
  - Complete; Building the foundation for future A/A lessons by completing social Contract and “My Job Your Job” lessons

### Survey staff and students (Pre-assessment)
- **Middle School Administrators, Assistant Superintendent, Teachers and Students**
  - 9-17-15
  - School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI)
  - 100% completion rate
  - Completion rate
  - Complete; 90% of students and 79% of staff participated

### Analyze staff and student survey results
- **Administrators, District leaders, Jane Williamson, Charlie Lyons**
  - 9-24-15
  - Technology; SCAI Reports
  - Determining strengths/weaknesses and next steps
  - Student Strengths: Students do not feel like outsiders. Students do
  - Complete; Overall district score of 3.7 out of 5.0; Middle
not expect verbal abuse as part of their day.

**Student Weaknesses:**
Students believe they have no input. Students do not feel a sense of belonging or community. Students do not think they have a voice.

**Staff Strengths:**
Faculty believe they exhibit a high level of respect for each other. Faculty believe collaboration is practiced. Faculty believe colleagues are constructive when speaking about each other or

schools are not in crisis, but remaining at a level 3 school will yield “flat” test scores and little to no growth.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaknesses:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty believe that students think put-downs are OK.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty believe that student subgroups are not connected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty believe that students do not have a say in decisions that affect them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninety percent of surveyed faculty do not like change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follow-up training</th>
<th>Jane Williamson, Author of curriculum</th>
<th>10-20-at SMS 10-28 at FMS</th>
<th>Training materials</th>
<th>Teacher absences</th>
<th>Teachers receptive and enthusiastic about training and curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete; Principals contacting Mrs. Williamson to provide more training during team meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As previously mentioned, the primary investigator will facilitate monthly SPT meetings for the purpose of progress monitoring all action steps included in the Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan. In addition, the team will evaluate the implementation of the A/A program at Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School. Upon completion of the first semester of the 2015-2016 academic year, the impact of the A/A program will be measured by comparing the results of the pre-and-post School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) survey data for both staff and students, including an analysis of each of the eight components incorporated in the instrument. The eight components include:

- Physical Appearance,
- Faculty Relations,
- Student Interactions,
- Leadership Decisions,
- Discipline Environment,
- Learning and Assessment,
- Attitude and Culture, and
- Community Relations.
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The SPT will compare the ratings of the questions related specifically to the student and staff weaknesses noted in the Action Plan Proposal under the Evaluation column. The primary investigator hopes to find that after one semester of implementing A/A, student and staff perceptions will have positively increased.

Section Five

Chapter 2 presented the SPT with a snapshot of the best instructional practices of the top-performing grade 7-8 configured schools in NC captured via in-depth interviews with principals of the six identified successful grade 7-8 configured schools. The primary investigator used a coding process for qualitative research when analyzing the principals’ responses to a series of 13 interview questions. After segmenting the information to reduce overlap and redundancy, four themes emerged: relationships, responsiveness, partnerships, and communication, which served as the basis for the development of the vision, mission, motto, goals, and series of action steps to reach four intended outcomes:

1. To increase student motivation,
2. To personalize learning for students,
3. To produce literate learners across all content areas, and
4. To inform and engage parents about their child’s education.

Finally, after careful consideration of the components within the Yadkin County Middle Schools Strategic Plan, the primary investigator identified one major action to seek approval for implementation from the High Point University Doctoral Committee, which is the operation and monitoring of the A/A program at Forbush Middle School and Starmount Middle School during the first semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. The purpose, via perception data collected
through the staff and student SCAI, is to ultimately correlate positive school climate with improved student achievement.

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