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Providing Equitable Access to Education for African American Students:
The Journey of One Administrative Team

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Abstract

This study explored the journey of one administrative team in a Midwestern suburban high school in their efforts to provide equitable access to education for African American students. It examined the high school administrative processes, and the perceived impacts of these processes in identifying, addressing and removing the institutional barriers to academic success for African American students. I focused on an initiative developed by members of this administrative team that is an intervention designed specifically for African American students and articulated as such. As both an insider to this school's administrative team and a veteran administrator, and as an outsider to the design of this intervention, I used grounded theory to develop administrative models for other administrators working to even the playing field for all students. By deconstruction of this initiative through in-depth interviews and observations, I mapped the varied successes and challenges encountered in administrative processes.

Chapter One: Introduction

I like that we get to like go into the office with the principal and look over our grades and see how we are doing. I like that we get prizes and awards and that there is always someone, who like if you're doing really well, will like call home and say like you're doing this really well, and this is her grade point average and stuff...and everything about it seemed, you know, very right (a sophomore African American female student participant regarding the Challenge, program feedback interview transcript April 9, 2010).

We have to be sensitive toward those things though because over the years I have been, like I have been asked to join those things for Black people but there's, sometimes they just kind of make me feel like, wow, I'm not dumb. I can fit in with the rest of this stuff, I mean I'm in AP classes, I don't need that extra stuff and I know other people feel that way and sometimes it makes me feel like a charity case (a junior African American female student non-participant regarding the Challenge, program feedback class discussion transcript, April 28, 2010)

The General Purpose

The two quotes above were two different student perspectives on the same initiative started by a suburban high school principal to “reduce the achievement gap” (Challenge Initiative Power Point, 2009). These quotes illustrated one aspect of the difficult, risky and complex task administrators have in addressing barriers to academic success of African American students. Such efforts may have positive impacts on many students, and at the same time may inadvertently create barriers for these same or other students. Some may herald this initiative while others may criticize it.

The title of this study reflects my interest in examining the role and processes of the suburban high school administrative team in creating and implementing an initiative to improve the academic success of every African American student. I was particularly interested in these processes as they relate to identifying and removing barriers to academic success of African American students. I was an assistant principal in this school for the past 24 years and a teacher or school social worker for an additional 17 years in several parochial and public schools in this state and other states. Having worked with many principals, I saw this current White male principal of this school as the best I have worked with in terms of his vision, collaboration with staff, genuine concern for students and his ability to take risks to get things done. I was especially impressed with his ability to move forward in spite of what Barth (2007) would describe as a “culture of caution” (p. 213) in schools that may negatively influence many administrators in terms of bringing about real change.

In addition, this administrative team, which included two African American assistant principals, seemed to collaborate and work well together. This superintendent and assistant superintendent supported this initiative and this support was crucial. Many considered this superintendent, at the time this Challenge initiative was developed and implemented, a strong and supportive leader. The assistant superintendent clearly had a passion for social justice, as she was the key person in establishing the social justice trainings for staff. She had become the superintendent at the time I conducted my research. I believed this setting provided me with an excellent opportunity to analyze administrative processes as they relate to bringing about positive change in removing barriers to academic success for African American students.

How can a high school principal and his or her administrative team best address this issue? This is a qualitative study of the administrative processes involved in high schools identifying and reducing institutional barriers to academic success for students. The quotes above highlighted the need to take action to improve the environment for African American students so that it is welcoming and caring, offers support and encouragement, acknowledges efforts and fosters a positive sense of academic success. The second quote highlighted some of the dangers or additional institutional barriers that could be inadvertently created when administrators try to eliminate barriers. These barriers could include such things as student suspicion that staff may feel African American students are “dumb” or even some self-doubt by African American students regarding fitting into higher level programs. Barriers could be African American parents believing and complaining that the administration is treating their sons or daughters differently in a derogatory way. Barriers could be White students or parents complaining that other students are getting services not available to students because they are White. These inadvertent barriers could create resentment and lead to a negative or hostile environment at the school that may significantly jeopardize well-intentioned efforts.

This was an exploratory and qualitative study and I hoped it would provide insights for this administrative team as well as administrators at other schools in having the courage to develop plans and strategies that will improve access to excellent educational opportunities.

The Setting

This study was in a suburban high school of approximately 1400 students. Perhaps what was unique about this high school was that it people saw it as a typical high

school. Phillips (2007) reported in her book about this school that it was the subject of CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) television documentaries in 1966 and 1967 as a place where you could see what it was like to be 16 years old in a suburban school. In addition, she reported that President Clinton visited this school as a place to give a speech in 1996 regarding the efforts of schools in the suburbs to combat drug abuse. In 1999, *Time* (Gibbs, 1999) selected it as the subject of a suburban school addressing issues related to a typical school after Columbine, the high school that was the victim of mass shootings by two students who were allegedly harassed and bullied in a Colorado school.

Our school district and high school drew students from a community of five small cities in a suburban area near a large city. Approximately eight percent of students who lived in the large urban area were part of a voluntary inter-district cooperative. All these students identified themselves as African American, a criterion for participating in the inter-district cooperative program.

An additional 17 percent of our students were African American students from within the school district boundaries. The majority of these students were from the mostly segregated area on the northwest side of the school district. This is an African American neighborhood community dating from the mid-19th century. Phillips (2007) explained that a senior apartment building in the middle of this community was once a high school for African American students until 1956, two years after the Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka decision that led to the discontinuation of the dual school system for African American and White students. At that time, African American students began to attend this high school for the first time. In my conversations with our African American students, many of these students say their grandparents and great grandparents have

spoken to them about attending the all African American high school and some of their grandparents have spoken about the transition to the school that occurred in the 1956 - 1957 school year.

I assume that these grandparents most likely passed on both the good as well as the bad memories to these current students of living in this community and attending the schools here. As documented in a history of this Black community written by members of this community, they shared many of these good and bad memories. Morris and Ambrose (1993) told the story of this “small Black community within an upper-middle-class suburb” and the “ambiguous relationship between Blacks and Whites” (p. 1). They spoke of the all African American high school as an “outstanding” school and this community as a place where one can find “the human potential for perseverance and achievement” (p. 1). Morris and Ambrose told stories about the community that parallel the stories of African Americans in other cities and communities around our nation. They told the story of how African American high school aged students in this community had to take a train several miles into large urban area each morning rather than attending a much closer all White high school. They told the story of how this community had to fight to get their own local high school. They spoke highly of this all African American high school once it was established, but they spoke more of the dedication of the Black teachers and administrators rather than being treated equally by the district in terms of resources. Morris and Ambrose (1993) explained that many Black residents remember this high school fondly. In fact, in my own experience at a social justice meeting, one elderly woman, talking about her former high school, shared with me that “we just loved our Black teachers!” When this high school closed in 1956 after the 1954 decision of

Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, and African American students began to attend the formerly all White high school, Morris and Ambrose lament that they did not hire many of their beloved Black teachers. They also note that many of these Black students “felt lost” (p. 43) and were reluctant to get involved.

This “ambiguous” (Morris and Ambrose, 1993, p. 1) and discriminatory relationship continued beyond the integration of schools. One could see this outside the school walls as well. Morris and Ambrose (1993) told the story of how in the early 1960’s the city closed the pool rather than having it integrated. This battle around African Americans and Whites sharing the same pool continued for three years. It would appear that this racism about sharing a pool would indicate there were most likely still issues in this community in sharing a school. Morris and Ambrose (1993) told the story of African Americans wanting to see a movie at the local movie theatre in the early 1960’s where they were not allowed in the past and they told the story of the efforts of African American community members communicating with city and theatre personnel to finally integrate the movie theatre. They also mentioned having police in the area to be sure there were no problems. In their documentary, Morris and Ambrose (1993) told stories of the courageous members of this community who provided leadership in putting aside caution to fight for city services and for access to community facilities and for housing opportunities that White citizens took for granted. This documentary brought to the front at least three important points that I kept in mind as I looked at administrative processes.

The first is that leadership to gain access involves excellent communication. A leader must be persistent and untiring in communicating to those that can make a

difference in student success. The leaders in this community were not satisfied with the status quo and were persistent in trying to improve the situation for African American community members.

Secondly, leadership that eventually moves people forward involves courage to take risks. Leaders need to put aside unnecessary caution. This African American community had leaders who were willing to do this and could be a model for leadership in schools in courage and taking risks.

The third leadership quality is a good sense of understanding a situation. Based on these stories told in this documentary, it would be a reasonable assumption that feelings about this ambiguous and tense relationship between Blacks and Whites was passed on to our current students who may still carry this resentment with them. Good leadership seeks to identify and understand this possible barrier and works to address it.

With the eight percent of the African American students bussed in from an urban area, there was a total African American population of about 25 percent of the student body. Less than three percent of our students were Hispanic, Asian and other combined. The remainder of the students identified themselves as White.

This school did not lack material resources and the ability to recruit and pay for good teachers. As was stated earlier, this school was the subject of a *Time* Magazine special report in 1999. *Time* described the high school as sitting “off the main street of a pretty town of old elms and deep porches” (Gibbs, 1999, p 68). *Time* described the community in 1999 as a “mix of \$90,000 cottages and \$750,000 homes, young marrieds and old-line families and transient middle managers...looking for a comfortable place to

settle and keep their kids on track toward prosperity” (Gibbs, 1999, p. 68). Regarding race at this high school, *Time* reported:

Look in at the high school, and you’ll see a real life Benetton ad in which Whites and Blacks joke and gossip easily between classes, study together in the library and date one another. ‘Race doesn’t really matter here’ says a White senior. Listen closely though and you can hear undercurrents of tension: Black kids complaining about being misunderstood by White teachers and singled out as being troublemakers; Black parents worrying that their children are held to lower academic standards; White teachers whispering about undisciplined, unmotivated Black students. (Gibbs, 1999, p. 95)

Gibbs (1999) reported that *Time* Magazine chose this school because in many ways they saw it as a typical suburban school, much like when this same high school was the subject of a CBS documentary on a suburban high school back in 1966. Being a school, much like other suburban schools, was a reason that an examination of this administrative team and this school’s efforts to reduce barriers to achievement might have implications for other similar schools.

The Problem

Educational leaders continue to struggle with developing administrative strategies to identify and address the institutional barriers to academic achievement for African American students as data continues to show the gap between African American students and White students. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that nationally African American students continue to be significantly behind White students in reading and math scores (US Department of Education, 2007).

As do many high schools, our school reported lower attendance rates, lower graduation rates, lower Grade Point Averages, less participation in honors and AP class, higher identification for special education and higher percentage of discipline referrals for African American students (US Department of Education, 2006; Howard, 2010; (PBIS and Challenge Data, 2009). The Achievement Gap had been designated the number one Critical Issue by this district's Board of Education. The year this initiative began, the 2008-2009 Grade Point Average (GPA) for 9th grade African American students was a 2.4 compared with a 3.3 for White students. Attendance for 9th grade African American students was slightly lower at 93.4 percent compared to White students at 96.4 percent. The average number of *F*'s for African American students was .60 as compared to .16 for White students. The percent of African American students in the top two levels of the Communication Arts section of the 2008-09 State End of Course (EOC) exams was 57 percent as compared to 91 percent for White students. In Math, 42 percent of African American students compared with 89 percent of White students were on the top two levels. As might be expected at a high school such as this one with adequate resources, African American students here scored better than the State average for African American students. However, the downside was that there was still a gap in their achievement at this school as compared with White students (District EOC Data and Strategic Plan).

Discipline had also been an issue that indicated inequitable access to education. In 2008-2009 when this initiative began, there were a disproportionate number of discipline referrals for African American students who received 47.4 percent of the referrals while only being 25 percent of the population (PBIS data, 2009).

All schools must be concerned about the success of each of its students. This is an important social justice issue. All students have the right to have equal access to an appropriate education. The No Child Left behind (NCLB) Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) required that all schools work to close the achievement gap and help all students achieve academic success. The act required schools to focus more attention on adequately serving groups such as low-income students, students with disabilities and students of various major ethnic or racial groups, such as African American students or Hispanic students. It required schools to collect data on standardized tests and disaggregate it based on these various subgroups. Each of these groups was required to make adequate yearly progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

It is difficult to avoid discussing African American achievement in terms of a gap. As Span and Rivers (2012) point out “closing the gap seems to be the focus of everyone interested in education” (p. 2) from President Bush to President Obama who supported the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and who wanted to see students achieve at higher levels, it is important at this point to note that this comparison is contested. For example, Span and Rivers (2012) proposed an “intergenerational comparison” (p. 1) that focuses on the progress that African American students have made in academic achievement in spite of the historical discrimination and marginalization they have faced. Terms such as achievement gap tend to focus on a deficit rather than on a positive framework for a continued growth in achievement.

Marshall and Oliva (2010) argued that administrators in schools must develop a social justice framework for leadership. They encouraged school leaders to develop ways to provide an improved social level for African American students and more equity in the

environment. They explained that this task is a challenge that not only involves a strong desire for social justice but also the ability to do the work.

This high school's approaches included professional development on differentiated and culturally responsive teaching techniques; hiring social workers or other staff to assist students whose achievement might be impaired by their low income status or other social or emotional issues; remedial and tutoring programs; an intensive social justice training program for teachers and staff; a credit recovery program and an in-the-building alternative program called the (Mascot) Center; and other academic and social programs. In addition, the school had initiated the Positive Intervention and Behavior Support (PBIS) program and Response to Intervention (RtI). These two programs were three tiered programs that are positive approaches to assisting all students to improve their behavior and academics. PBIS at this high school was in the eighth year of the implementation process and was one of a few in the State that was recognized with a silver award for implementation of tier one and tier two processes.

Lane et al. (2007) explained that PBIS shifts the focus from reactive to a proactive approach that is positive and teaches expectations. In a PBIS model, there are clear expectations stated in a positive way. It is a three-tiered, data driven model providing different levels of support based on the needs of students. Simonsen et al. (2008) explained that in a PBIS program has a secondary tier designed to provide supports to a targeted group of students who may need more support than the majority of students. PBIS designs supports for students to have an impact on trust in the institution when expectations are positive and consistent, and discipline is administered in a fair and supportive manner. These are universal efforts for all students at the high school.

Nunnally (2012), in her research on trust in African Americans, explained in her book, *Trust in Black America: Race, Discrimination and Politics*, that trust improved the likelihood of “building beneficial relationships” (p. 157) and when there was more positive social interaction you could expect higher levels of participation.

Another program in this district that deserved mention in this report was a district wide social justice training for staff. The district, gradually but systematically, provided training in social justice to administration and staff. Social justice training encourages the appreciation of diversity. It also promotes an inclusive environment. Faculty members that attended this training remarked to me that they believed they had a better understanding of themselves in terms of their race and particularly a better understanding of the marginalization and struggles of African Americans. I believe that when students experience themselves as better understood that this can help teachers build the “beneficial relationships” (Nunnally, 2012, p. 157) that lead to improved participation and achievement.

All these approaches, including specific academic help, aimed to assist every student at this high school. However, even though these efforts appeared to help all our students as compared to students in other high schools throughout the State, they had not yet appeared to have a significant impact on achievement of African American students as compared to White students in reducing the gap at this high school. Therefore, at this suburban high school, the principal developed an intentional and specific effort beyond these universal efforts that exclusively targeted African American students.

What we know about the problem is that African American students have had a history of isolation and marginalization in society and schools. This includes current

segregation in many urban schools that is a result of White flight and the subsequent reduction in property values. However, it also includes some isolation and marginalization within suburban schools when African American students are in the minority (Ogbu, 2003). Span and Rivers (2012) referred to the “educational debt which has occurred over time” (p. 2) and that this term describes, “how race or ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, heritage, and particular histories in the United States have directly influenced their access, preparation, and educational outcomes” (p. 2). This history of marginalization seems to require extra efforts by school administration to reduce the barriers to academic success of African American students. Since research has shown that a positive identity development associated with academic success helps students to be successful in school, schools may have to work diligently with African American students because of this history and current experience of marginalization and the impact this may have on their positive identity development. These efforts should be intentional and the goals of these efforts specifically explained (Cokley, 2008; Carter 2008; Wakefield, 2007; Irving, 2008; Pollock, 2004). Schools need to make every effort to help correct negative impacts that they have had on the identity development of African American students, especially as it is associated with academic success.

What we also have learned from research is that schools should provide opportunities for African American students to have positive academic oriented connections with their racial group to improve perception of self and their fellow African American students as achievers (Carter, 2008). This would help counteract some of the institutional barriers such as teachers who have had lower expectations for African American students or who have not communicated that they are valued as much as their

White counterparts. Therefore, if this positive connection develops correctly in a school, it could be an opportunity for these students to see themselves and their racial peers as achievers. This peer group was a cohort group. Cohort groups were a significant part of the social justice training that this high school administration received beginning several years ago. It would seem that this cohort group could be a source of peer support and encouragement.

Research has also shown that it is important for administrators, teachers and school staff to develop positive, encouraging and caring relationships with students in an environment that is responsive to their culture (Graham, 2008; Schellenbert, 2009; Bruce 2009). Parents also play an important part in encouraging their children to achieve and should be included in efforts to assist students. Families are very influential in conveying racial socialization messages and can have a big impact on how children perceive themselves and their ability to benefit from an environment (Nunnally, 2012). Students can gain confidence and motivation through being encouraged by family who instill positive messages about whom they are and how well they can learn (Graham, 2008; Cowhey, 2009).

The Administrative Team and the Initiative

There was an increased interest and passion for improving African American success gained by participating in the district social justice professional training. In addition, there were the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act in effect at the time. In response to this, the principal at this school established a school wide program that would eventually target all African American students at all high school grade levels. This principal was aware that with all efforts in place for all students as were mentioned

earlier in this report, this high school was not yet seeing sufficient success in reducing the achievement gap. We needed to do something more. The high school had failed to meet the adequate yearly progress (AYP) for African American students in communication arts and math during the 2007-2008 school year (District MAP Data, 2008).

Strong and effective leadership was necessary to move students and staff forward at this high school. Six standards have surfaced as indicators of effective school leadership for this role of the principal. One of these standards is facilitating a shared vision. Principals need to make decisions about how to use their time and resources to address many important and competing tasks (ISSLC, 2010). In their study, Catano and Stronge (2006) explained that principals have to identify, discern and prioritize which tasks they should focus their attention on. There are many competing interests for time and resources that the principal has to address. This principal at this school had the vision of improving the achievement of all students but particularly African American students who as a group were not achieving as well as White students, who were in the majority at this school. Dantley and Tillman (2010) explained that a major task of improving a school climate or culture is creating a passion so that there is more staff that is willing to do something about social injustice. Barth (2007) talked about the a “culture of caution” (p. 213) that often infiltrates schools and can interfere with progress and keeps administrators from taking courageous steps to move forward, thus getting in the way of better instruction by teachers and better achievement by students. Marshall and Oliva (2010) said that we have to stop talking about it and start doing something about it. They said that we should be angered and driven by students’ unmet needs and we should work hard to build positive relationships and a caring community.

This principal set out passionately to motivate his staff and his students to share in his vision. He was willing to commit his time and prioritize his resources to bring this vision to reality.

The principal established an initiative. He called it the Challenge and the stated goal was to reduce the achievement gap. He collaborated in the establishment of this program with two African American assistant principals at the school, one of which is a co-director of the program with the principal. Key components of the program aligned with the themes highlighted above. These components included an articulated and specific initiative exclusively for African American students. Membership in the initiative was voluntary and all students who identify themselves as African American may participate.

The principal began the initiative with ninth graders in 2008-2009 and then incrementally extended it to ninth through 12th grade. A major component is to provide care, support and encouragement to African American students. The focus was on climate and a positive environment where students were encouraged to believe in their capacity to meet high expectations. The principal hired African American staff advocates to meet with students to update them on their progress and encourage them after consulting with teachers. In addition, each student had an administrator for an advisor and a teacher as a mentor. Each student participant wrote academic goals with their administrator advisor.

In addition to caring and positive student-staff relationships, parents were also involved in positive ways. In addition to teachers calling parents, as is usual practice throughout the school, advisors and advocates also called parents to report on their goals

and on positive gains. They invited parents to a dinner with their students at the beginning of the year to socialize with other African American parents and to get more information about the Challenge.

Another component of the initiative was the effort to create a positive peer culture by having monthly meetings with their racial peers. In addition to establishing individual goals with their advisor, students met in small groups at these meetings to establish group goals. This included an agreement that they will complete all their assignments or they will all be involved in some activity or sport at the school. They intended this initiative for all African American students, even if they have high achievement in school. Students worked together in these groups to connect in a positive way toward achieving academically and to encourage one another. This high school brought in African American students who have completed college or have been successful in their jobs as speakers to encourage students.

The principal reported in 2012, that in its first few years that there were some positive indicators that this initiative may be making a difference (PowerPoint on Challenge Data, 2012).

- In 2012, adequate yearly progress required by No Child Left Behind Act met.
- Gap in GPA reduced by 22%
- Gap in attendance reduced by 50%
- Gap in number of F's reduced by 46%

A full chart provided by the principal of all the gains by our African American students in rate of attendance and GPA, as well as in the reduction in F grades, is in

chapter four of this study. The scope of this program also appeared to be larger than anything else found or reported in the literature.

However, we still needed to know more about the problem of reducing the barriers to academic success for African American students and the impact of this type of program.

One issue was that as part of this initiative, the administrators showed African American students and their parents the data of the achievement gap. How did students and parents perceive this? Jeanne Theoharis, who co-authored the book *Our Schools Suck*, states that there is a danger that many students start believing the stereotypes of African American students of not being able to achieve (Alonso et al., 2009).

- Did sharing this data in any way contribute to this stereotype and to victimizing the student rather than placing the responsibility on the school?
- Has this in any way contributed to a deficit based theory of achievement of these students which Howard (2010) discusses in his book, *Why Race and Culture Matter?*

The necessity of this component of sharing the data and the communication process by the principal needed more evaluation for its value and possible dangers. Cambron-McCabe (2010) argued that many leaders are not willing to take these risks. They are much more comfortable talking about safe topics such a general student achievement rather than controversial topics such as race. Therefore, while I examined the issues of talking specifically about the achievement gap by race and some of the negative impacts that were possible, I also needed to examine this aspect of leadership that involves taking risks in order to move to action. Again, leaders need to avoid the

“culture of caution” that Barth (2007, p. 213) spoke about and that can be damaging to progress at a school.

Another possible issue was the exclusiveness of this program for African American students. Was this necessary and if so, what was the communication process to these students, other students, parents and staff? Did this create an additional stigma for these students? For example, an examination of the literature on affirmative action in college admissions indicates that it may cause an additional stigma for Black college students. Charles et al. (2009) argued that affirmative action makes the psychological burdens that minority students must carry on campuses worse. Sometimes, if not thought out and communicated correctly these efforts may create what Claude Steele (1995) referred to as “stereotype threat” (p.797) where African American students begin to internalize the low opinion of their abilities. Rodriguez and Fabionar (2010) argued that leaders in schools could be an instrument for continued inequality. How school leaders frame the disadvantage of students is key in promoting social justice and equal access to education. They explained that we must avoid a cultural deficit model. They said we must instead frame it in terms of a lack of responsiveness of schools to the diverse educational needs of students.

As the literature review supported, schools need to take a comprehensive approach improving academic achievement with intentional efforts to assist African American students, but there must be constant vigilance in identifying institutional barriers that currently exist and barriers that may be created inadvertently in our efforts to assist our African American students.

Focus of Study and Purpose

Excellent administrative leadership was essential in this process. A focus of this study has been to examine the leadership processes of this White principal, his administrative team and the superintendent in their specific efforts to establish an initiative that had helped to address perceived issues related to achievement of African American students. This study also examined the successes, as well as the issues, related to these processes and of this initiative as perceived by these administrators and selected students.

My purpose was to examine current structures in this school and the administrative processes involved in creating and sustaining a school culture that is conducive to learning for all students. I was particularly interested in why some administrators put aside caution and are willing to take risks to improve student achievement. Through an examination of these administrative processes, I believe I contributed to the knowledge of school personnel, especially administrators, in having a better understanding of how to lead staff, parents and students in a way that will enable them to break down barriers and reduce the isolation and marginalization of African American students so as to improve learning and achievement.

Theoretical Framework

I anticipated that the theoretical frameworks for this study would develop as I gathered and analyzed qualitative data. I expected that one framework that would emerge in analyzing administrative processes would be two of the standards listed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 2010). One of the two standards I was particularly interested in is how these administrators developed a vision

of learning that all stakeholders could support. How did the principal develop the vision? How did he communicate it in a way that the community supported it? The other standard that I believe particularly applied here was the standard of collaboration with faculty and community members in responding to diverse needs. These two standards helped me analyze the administrative processes as they specifically relate to the efforts to provide equitable access to education for African American students.

Another framework that I had expected to emerge is Barth's (2007) concept of "culture of caution" (p. 213). Barth says that administrators must be willing to ask themselves the question: "Just how much are you prepared to risk of what is familiar, comfortable and safe for you in the name of better education for others (p. 218)? I was aware of several complaints and concerns expressed by staff, parents and students regarding this Challenge initiative. I thought that collecting and analyzing information about the leadership process of moving forward in spite of risks, and the process of balancing the fear of risks with the strong motivation for improvement, would be useful information for administrators who want to improve education for students.

This study is ethnography. As Merriam (2009) explains, ethnography is a study of a culture and involves immersion in that culture for a longer period. This certainly applied to this study as I have been at this suburban high school for 27 years, and I was able to put into perspective the intense interviews with students about their experiences over the last four years.

I anticipated that my research consisting of collecting qualitative data through observations and interviews would reveal information about the power dynamics involved in the school system and that power dynamics would develop as a framework

naturally as part of my critical research. Merriam (2009) stated “power dynamics are at the heart of critical research. Questions are asked about who has the power, how it is negotiated, what structures in society reinforce the current distribution of power” (p.35). She stated that Patton (2002) observed that what makes critical research “critical is that it seeks not just to study and understand society but rather to critique and change society” (p.131).

What are the power structures in schools around racism? Howard (2008) explained that one could question if there are “low expectations for African American males, suspicion or surprise about academic success, common acceptance of underachievement, lack of positive reinforcement for their accomplishments, differential forms of punishments, demeaning comments, failure to place them in leadership positions, and reluctance to refer them for advanced classes” (p. 974). So, analyzing this qualitative data with a lens for power structures and examining how teachers and administrators use the power of their positions to encourage or discourage the aspirations of students was an important framework.

Therefore, this study had the goal of better understanding the administrative processes, structures and culture of the educational system. How did this influence student learning? Through frameworks that developed during the course of this study as well as anticipated frameworks such as vision, collaboration, risk, and power structures, I hoped to gain information that would allow me to offer suggestions and insights on how to change it to improve the success of our African American students.

My Role

A key component of this study was to include in-depth interviews of administrators and selected students at this school regarding leadership for social justice. Because of this, I believed it was important for me to reflect first on my motivation for this study as well as my role as both an insider to this school's administrative team as a veteran administrator, and as an outsider to the design of this Challenge initiative. This initiative is one focus of this study. Had my experiences brought me to a place where I could conduct this study with insight, an open mind, and ability to identify my own biases so that they did not get in the way of my listening and seeing with a clear view the school structures and issues that either hold progress back or move it forward?

I asked administrators to reflect on their motivation for educational leadership, specifically educational leadership for social justice and equitable access to education. This study is a collection of stories of those administrators involved in change. What motivated them, what challenges had they faced, what risks had they taken and what processes had they used to move forward in removing barriers and improving educational opportunities for students, especially African American students?

Exploring motivation, inner drive and passion and how these have contributed to the actions administrators took, required a more probing and deep reflection. What is our story? What are the experiences that have brought us to where we are? What motivates us toward leadership in education and toward social justice? How are we motivated in terms of power and how do we use it? How much are we influenced in what we do by a need for power for ourselves and to maintain the current power structures rather than to use the power as an ally for justice? How much are we influenced by internalized

oppression? Does our immersion in the culture of the school blind us to certain injustices? Are we able to see injustice when it occurs or are we so involved in the culture that we do not see it, or rationalize it as necessary or acceptable? Administrators need to answer these questions if we are working toward justice.

As I reflected on my own story and journey, several experiences have given me insights and influenced me in terms of social justice.

I attended segregated elementary schools in Florida as well as in this area. I am very well aware now that a culture for privilege can be developed and that privilege can perpetuate itself. We immerse ourselves in the culture of privilege in a way that we do not see it for what it is, or see it as the way things are supposed to be. I can still remember being on a public bus in Florida that had a sign that said “colored to the rear of the bus” and thinking to myself, as a 7-year-old, that these “colored” people in the front of the bus should be sitting in the back of the bus like the sign said. How easy it is to be in the mindset and culture of prejudices and power structures that society perpetuates, and then begin to see it as normal. Why would people be highly motivated to challenge a culture that lets them have a seat while others stand up? Later experiences in my life allowed me to see segregated busses as blatantly racist, that this was about a culture that accepted different levels of opportunity and viewed it as normal. We may not realize that public signs and even those persons closest to us pass on this culture. Then, what is our motivation to question? More importantly, as I explained later in this study, I began to see this undeserved opportunity as dehumanizing for me as well as for those that this culture oppresses. While you no longer see these blatant signs of racism in busses, we must ask ourselves about the culture in our schools. How many subtle signs of racism still

exist that we are missing or even perpetuating at our schools. Deal and Peterson (1999) discuss the importance of school administrators being able to “read between the lines to decipher complex cultural codes and struggle to figure out what is really going on” (p. 197).

My first teaching experience was right out of college in a parochial school located next to a large public housing complex in New Orleans. As with most new teachers, I came with the attitude that I liked kids and that I wanted to make a difference in their lives. Perhaps, quite a bit of the motivation this first year was about me. Could I do this? Would I be respected and liked? Was I capable and competent?

The students in my class were all African American. This was really my first experience leaving the all White world and working with African Americans since I had been isolated in White schools and in White neighborhoods from elementary through college. The pastor required that we do home visits for all students to get to know their parents as well. This was an important experience for me because, unfortunately, it was the first time that I interacted on a daily basis with African Americans. There was certainly a growth in my understanding of myself and in my African American students and their parents. I loved this experience and hold these days fondly in my memory even though it is more than 45 years ago. More importantly, this experience gave me something concrete to reflect on as I continued to evaluate justice, privilege, power and motivation.

After this experience, I continued my studies in a Roman Catholic seminary and began four years of graduate studies in theology. This study helped give a new insight in my reflection on this experience.

My course of four years of graduate studies in this seminary in the early 1970's had a huge influence on my thought and my motivation. I remember several inspirational professors. One professor in particular inspired my interest in social justice. He used the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1993) as a text for a course. The focus of this social justice was not so much on victims of oppression because of race or gender but rather on those that were in poverty. However, it served as a springboard for a growth in understanding oppression and social injustice in general. This Latin American professor used Paulo Freire's (1993) writings in a Christology course and framed his concept of the death and resurrection of Christ not just in terms of this redemption being a once and for all event but as process that has been set in motion that continues through man as we liberate those who are oppressed. While this liberation theology came into disfavor with the Roman Catholic Church, it continued to have an empowering impact on me and how I evaluated my motivation toward social justice. In this book, Freire (1993) refers to those who put others in a situation to ask for help as engaging in a "false charity" (p.45). He argues that if society is such that it results in causing others to reach out for help, it is possible that this is actually maintaining the current power structures. We need to work toward no one having to ask for help because we have a society that is equitable. The motivation in some situations when one provides assistance might be more to maintain the current power structure rather than to create a socially just society; a society that shares power fairly. As I reflected on my experience in New Orleans as a teacher, I had to ask myself if this had anything to do with my motivation. A key insight by Freire is that this was not only dehumanizing for the oppressed, but was dehumanizing for the oppressor as well (Freire, 1993). So, why should we as privileged be motivated to

change the power structures that maintain our dominance? I think that Friere would argue these power structures ultimately benefit no one, at least in terms of our humanity.

One theoretical framework used in my study to evaluate administrative processes was analyzing the power dynamics in the school. Again, Freire (1993) would seem to argue that when there is an unbalanced power structure, it is dehumanizing for everyone. It seems that to be fully human, we must work for social justice. While social justice might be seen as an African American or Latino issue, a gender issue, an issue for those in poverty or who are disabled and for others who are oppressed, it is also a human issue in general. When there is social justice it benefits all of us because it allows us to better benefit from our contact with others and allows all of us to be more human.

At the same time, liberation theology was getting my attention, another theology or philosophy that was getting my attention was process theology. One particular author that had a process orientation who had a great influence on my worldview and my motivation to be more involved in social justice was Pierre Teilhard De Chardin (1959). He sees the world as a “gigantic process, the process of becoming, of attaining new levels of existence and organization which can properly be called a genesis or evolution” (p. 13). When we look at those in our community, we need to describe them “by their direction, their inherent possibilities and their deducible future trends” (p. 13). He sees two major trends, “individuation” and more “extensive interrelation and cooperation” (p. 20). Similar to Freire (1993), he talks about this process in terms of it allowing man to become more fully human. In my view, being more fully human means that we are taking advantage of opportunities to interrelate, to love, to be compassionate, and to experience and to appreciate difference and individuality. It is also taking pleasure in the

cooperative efforts that make things better for everyone. To be fully human is to avoid the routine and the monotony of sameness.

Teilhard de Chardin (1968) seemed to have optimism, an excitement, and a passion about the world and about man and seemed to view the direction of things in an upward motion. I think this optimism and passion is an important part of motivation because people need to believe that they can make a difference by their actions. This is especially true if one is in a leadership position. It seems we need to have an optimistic passion about man. We should not focus so much on the mistakes of the past but focus on the direction we should be heading and the progress we are making. The first standard of the school leadership standards set by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 1996) is facilitating the development of a vision of learning that our school community shares. It seems that not only a vision is important. A leader must show and model a passion for this vision so that it is catching and that the leader can bring along the community in this vision. This task is complex and a slow process that requires some patience. Admittedly, though, patience in the process of change and bringing about social justice may come easier to the privileged than to the oppressed. Therefore, I believe a sense of urgency is important and accomplished by not dwelling on our mistakes of the past but continually moving in a forward direction by developing a shared vision and working hard with others in bringing it to action.

My point here has been to address my personal motivation and some foundation principles of my motivation. My intention was to emphasize the importance that the concepts of liberation, process, power and becoming more fully human have played on my world view and my motivation toward a socially just society and how ultimately that

pays off for me and for everyone. I also did not mean to claim that these concepts alone will instantaneously make one a socially just person but rather that they can be used as guiding principles that I have applied and reflected on as I had varied experiences related to social justice. These experiences combined with these principles have helped me to grow in this area. These principles alone, without the experiences and reflections on these experiences, would have been meaningless.

There have been key experiences for me as a leader that have caused reflection and helped me understand that developing a socially just school with equitable education is not an easy task. This process takes a determination and an increasing awareness of power structures and barriers. It also takes courage, risk taking, cooperation and communication.

My first experience as an associate pastor in 1976 at a church located in a blue collar White neighborhood where White members of the parish were moving out as African Americans began moving in to the neighborhood. I remember the panic that the students at the school had when they came to me at a weekend basketball game as they told me that another Black family was moving in down the street. I believe that this panic was a reaction to their parents' concern but I also had to reflect on any subtle messages that I was inadvertently or unknowingly giving them that would make them think that I would share in their panic or concern. I had to admit also that I did not have the awareness or courage to address this issue from the pulpit. I did not feel good about this and it was cause for reflection on why I did not take this risk. For various reasons, I left the priesthood soon afterwards and pursued teaching full time since I had positive experiences teaching in the parish school.

Since then, I have been in public education in this State and another State for the past 36 years. I have been a teacher, crisis counselor and school social worker. I have been an administrator for the past 23 years in my current school district.

About 18 years ago, I had a student who was missing a lot of school. She was a senior but this pattern had begun in her junior year. I could not understand why her attendance was sporadic. My several conversations with her and her parents, counselor and teachers did not seem to provide any helpful insights. While she managed to graduate, her grades and achievements were well below what was expected based on previous grades and standardized achievement scores. When she was a senior in college, she came back to visit me and told me that she wanted to thank me for trying to help her a few years earlier but she wanted me to know that she had been struggling at school because she is gay. I felt bad she was unable to share this with anyone and that we were unable to assist her more directly with issues related to this. She said that in college she had become involved in a local high school in the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) and felt that this was something we needed to start at this high school. I was very concerned that the environment at school may have been such that it contributed to her missing a lot of school. Therefore, I wanted to address this. The process of starting a GSA was an illustration of some of the barriers, as well as some of the resources, to promoting social justice and equitable access to education in a school. It particularly relates to the importance of moving forward in spite of the culture of caution that Barth (2007) refers to as hampering school reform. This situation illustrates the need for the quality of courage in a leader and the willingness to take risks to improve the school. As we explored the issue of providing a safe environment and equitable education for gay

students, we discussed how we might best accomplish this. There was concern that a GSA might not be well received by some students and parents in that some might claim that it promoted a gay lifestyle. Perhaps we could call the group something else like Safe Environment Club to avoid the controversy some schools were experiencing with GSA clubs. Remember, this was the early 2000's and still the time of "Don't Ask Don't Tell" where gays could not serve openly in the military. We then turned to another student group called Acting to Build Character (ABC). We thought that this mission of a safe environment might be incorporated into this student club. When I discussed this with this with the students in the ABC group there was mixed reaction. Some students were fine with this; however, a couple of students said they could not support this because of their religious beliefs. As I explained that the purpose is to make this a safe and welcoming environment for all students and help all students be free from harassment, one student said she felt a religious duty to address the "gay lifestyle" and that this should not be tolerated. On the other hand, several students felt that emotional safety was an issue for these students and we should specifically address this and that we should have a GSA and call it a GSA. Because of the discussion with some students regarding this issue, the student newspaper did a special editorial report on this topic and on a GSA at another high school in the area. The editorial was promoting the need for a GSA. By this time, we had a new principal. The principal that would later start the Challenge initiative, and he, in consultation with central office, decided that they would begin the process of starting a GSA and would just deal with any negative feedback because we believed this was good for kids, especially in terms of promoting a safe environment and equitable access to education. Administrators need to take risks to move forward and get

something done. Barth (2001) believes that there is a “culture of caution” (p.213) in education. This creates a barrier in education. He explains that there can be a lot of talk about what to do, or what are the strengths and weaknesses of a project. This can delay or even impede moving forward. Marshall and Oliva (2010) say that we must move from discussion to doing, we must move from theory to getting it done. They say that we should be outraged about the unmet needs of students and create a caring community where relationships matter.

At some point, an administrator has to take a risk to move forward in order to better the education of students. Our principal selected faculty sponsors who were dedicated to this issue and respected by students and community. He communicated clearly with parents, school board and students about the purpose and mission of this club to provide a safe environment and equitable access to education. He listened to complaints from parents and staff and calmly repeated the mission of this group. This was certainly a courageous act by a principal in his first year when there could be controversy. This situation illustrates that social justice is a process, that it involves courageous discussions and taking risks. It involves evaluating the support you have and the climate and culture in the school and it involves determination, passion, and clear communication.

As I moved forward with this study, I needed to keep in mind that another issue in creating a socially just environment is that, even when intentions are good, there is not always agreement on how best to accomplish this and exactly what a socially just environment looks like and sounds like. There can be good intentions and strong beliefs on both sides of a perceived best course of action. There was a situation when several

African American students walked off a voluntary transfer bus when it had mechanical problems and had to stop. The driver clearly instructed students to stay on the bus for their safety until another bus arrived in about a half hour. However, some students felt they were only a few blocks from their homes, opened the emergency door in the back, and walked out in defiance of the driver's instruction and in disregard possibly for their safety. Our administrative team discussed appropriate consequences. One African American administrator believed that the consequences should be suspension from the bus for the rest of the semester, which would have been about nine weeks. This was in the context of a discussion about high expectations for our African American students in terms of academics and their behaviors. Others felt this was too severe and that for a few of these students this was also an issue of poverty and that suspending them from the bus would in effect be suspending them from school as it may not be possible for them to find or pay for alternative transportation. The courageous conversations had to do with having high versus low expectations for African American students. If we did not suspend them were we enabling unacceptable behaviors and having lower expectations by not holding them to high standards? Would these lower expectations perpetuate a subtle racism? Perhaps, this would be the "false charity" described by Freire (1993, p.45) and discussed earlier in this paper. Eventually the team compromised on a three-week suspension from the bus, which at least would make it possible for students who did not make it in to school because of transportation issues to have some chance of recovering academically from the time out. A few students did not make it in to school the first week but, with the help of a few teachers who bought them metro bus passes, did make it in the second two weeks. Some questioned the provision of metro bus passes as a

possible enabling behavior of students. However, the teachers argued that this still inconvenienced these students by having to get up earlier and had a longer ride on public transportation and could still experience in this way the consequences of their actions. Some made the point that this suspension from the bus was not equitable for all students. Students riding the bus within the district, when suspended from the bus, had a distance that would be possible to walk. In addition, other students on the voluntary transfer bus who had parents who had cars to transport them or money to pay for transportation had access to their school and education. Providing a socially just school and equitable access to education seems to involve a process: courageous discussions about our motivations, about false charity, about internalized racism, about appropriate and culturally responsive expectations. It involves students' obligations and responsibilities for their actions versus our obligations and responsibilities toward them. It also appears to involve humanization: building relationships, caring and honest communication regarding our intended purpose for our actions, and cooperation and open-minded listening to concerns.

How effective can an educational leader be in building relationships with African American students if he has not experienced oppression? I am coming to grips with the assertion that I am privileged as a White male. I needed to be aware of my privilege as I conducted this study. My subconscious assumption of privilege was made evident to me one night during one of my doctoral classes. I was giving a power point presentation of a draft outline of my proposal for my dissertation. As one theoretical framework, I stated that I might use Critical Race Theory (CRT). One African American student said that she believed Whites could not use CRT because we did not have a counter narrative. I was

not expecting this and hesitated in my reply. Seldom had my access to something, especially because of race, been challenged or denied in my life. The professor in the class responded for me, and we began a discussion of CRT and its relevance in my study and whether or not it was appropriate for use by Whites. Nevertheless, that moment gave me pause for reflection on privilege and where I was with this. I view this awareness of privilege in terms of process, a journey; because I believe that it is easy to fall back into privileged behavior when privilege for Whites, especially White males, still exists. I see process not so much as a straight continuous line up but a wavy line that has its ups and downs. Yet, hopefully, with continued commitment and reflection, overall and in the end this process is an upward movement toward an increasingly more socially just outlook and toward more socially just actions. While privilege should not be used to maintain discriminatory power structures, I believe that it is appropriate for me to use my privilege as an ally and advocate for oppressed groups as long as it is not more about me than them.

I must insert here, however, that while I maintain my White male privilege, I have also experienced more recently the assumptions and subtle exclusions of ageism. In a State with a good retirement system for teachers, those of us in our 60's are few. People frequently ask me when I am going to retire. Because of my late start in a public education, some teachers are 15 to 20 years younger than I am that have as many or more years in the retirement system than I do. Nevertheless, because my hair is gray and I look older and am older, the assumption is that I should be retiring soon. It bothers me that there is even an assumption that I would want to retire, that education is something I would want to get out of as soon as I can. The assumption negates my individuality and

lumps me in with the stereotype of a group. With this assumption, older educators are sometimes not asked to be on committees or to attend conferences. The assumption might be that they will not be here much longer, that they are tired, that they are set in their ways, or that they might not have the energy or enthusiasm. How often I have heard staff and even students say that we need someone “young and energetic” or someone “young that can relate with the kids.” These are discriminatory assumptions.

Fortunately, for me, I still have enough privilege that I can assert myself and say that I want to be on a committee that I was not invited to be on. It still bothers me, however, that I have to assert myself or that the assumption is that because of my age I might not be able to relate or understand an issue with a student.

I do not mean to make a comparison to racism here in terms of intensity. However, this experience had heightened my awareness of the negative power of assumptions. As an interviewer and researcher, I had to be keenly aware of our assumptions based on race, gender identity, handicap, sexual orientation, gender identity, age and other classifications of people. It is dehumanizing to make these assumptions because it robs those who are discriminated against of their individuality and robs those who are making the assumptions of opportunities to truly know and benefit from these individuals. Decisions need to be on observations of actions and conversations with people, not socially unjust and discriminatory assumptions. Therefore, as I conducted this study, I was looking for assumptions regarding race and the limiting impact they have on access.

My journey got a boost and was significantly influenced by social justice training that was facilitated by Educational Equity Consultants (www.eec4justice.com). This

training provided an opportunity for the articulation of these issues and facilitated the courageous conversations with my White and African American colleagues. I received this training as part of being in this school district eight years ago. It was at this time that the sense of social justice made another significant gain in my life and a time that I was better able to understand my own privilege as a White male. Courageous conversations with good people in this social justice training and throughout my life have made a difference in my worldview and my motivation to make a difference for a just society and for a just school for students, especially African American students who have had this history of marginalization.

Reflection on our experiences of social justice, whether as one who has been privileged or oppressed, is essential for educational leaders. It is very difficult to address the power structures in this school that promote or maintain injustice and inequitable access to education unless one can take a step back and evaluate himself and address his own motivations. This is especially so with issues of power, privilege, and assumptions based on categories. As I conducted this study, I needed to be honest about my motivations, evaluate, and adjust them.

As I explored the administrative processes and school structures that create barriers for our African American students, I needed to be mindful that I am a privileged White male. This privilege still exists. I had to challenge myself to determine if in any way I was perpetuating that privilege by what I did and by this study to serve, perhaps, my own interests. While my intention here in this study was to be of assistance to our African American students in identifying and eliminating barriers to their success, it was important for me to evaluate my motivation and my impact continually.

I did not have a stake in the specific Challenge initiative that was a key component of this study since I did not propose it or have a significant part in implementing it. I believe this helped my objectivity. I also believed I could get honest and sincere input from my fellow administrators who I have worked with from six to twenty years. I think their reflection on the administrative processes and the structures in this school that might have been impeding academic achievement based on race were extremely valuable to me and to others. I believe that my relationship with this team has been excellent and that by examining racial inequity together it has allowed us to evaluate current process and programs and search for other ways to improve educational equity. I also found the experience of completing in-depth interviews with 16 African American students about their experiences of race to be one of the most powerful, enjoyable and enlightening activities I have done in my long career. I believe that ultimately, this study was a humanizing experience for me and others involved had this experience as well.

Limitations

This was a qualitative study. This research was limited to the high school and central office administrative team. It also was limited to African American students who have attended this one school. It focused specifically on administrative processes regarding the action taken by this team in establishing an initiative to address equitable access to education. While there were other initiatives that were implemented at this high school such as social justice training for staff and behavior and academic programs for all students, they were not the focus and were briefly described and additionally referred to if identified specifically as significant by those interviewed. Since this study was ethnography, even though I was not directly involved in the initiative that was a focus of

this study, I was immersed, nevertheless, in the school culture. I had to be constantly of this as I interpreted data. Immersion in the culture was both an advantage and disadvantage as I interpreted data. I am also friends with the principal and I had to separate my respect and admiration for him as a person as I interpreted data.

Summary of Research Questions

What are the administrative processes involved at this Midwestern high school in establishing an initiative to improve equitable access for African American students? My research question focused on administrative processes. I looked at these administrative processes by looking first at the initiative this administrative team at this high school established. Then, by deconstruction of this initiative, as well as other structures affecting equitable access, through in-depth interviews of students and administrators, I attempted to identify and map the various administrative processes used. Following were the questions that I asked those that I interviewed to try to gain a better understanding of their experiences of the Challenge initiative and the administrative processes that brought it about.

For the administrative team I had several questions and hoped these questions would encourage them to add reflections on issues I did not anticipate. What was their story as an educator and administrator? What were their experiences of prejudice or inequitable educational opportunities? What assumptions did members of our staff hold that might hold students back? What was the motivation for establishing this initiative? How had the principal communicated his vision for this initiative? How did the administrative team identify the barriers to equitable access to education and what did each member believe were the barriers? How had the administrative team collaborated

on their design and implementation of the initiative? Did they feel they listened and were listened to by other members of the team? What was the resistance to this effort by the team, by central office, staff, parents, community and students? How did the administrators adjust to this resistance? What did they perceive as the reasons or emotions tied in with resistance of this initiative? How did members of the team feel supported? From whom was the most valuable support? How did each member of the administrative team view the successes, strengths and weaknesses of the current efforts? Had anything inadvertently been harmful to students at this school? What would each administrator have done differently if he or she could do it again?

I interviewed thirteen African American senior students or former students who had participated in the initiative and three who had chosen not to participate in this Challenge initiative. These students were primarily residents of this local community but several were also voluntary transfer students. These students represented both genders.

My questions to them were intended to get a sense of their perceptions of their experience at this high school and, specifically, of this initiative. What was their story as an African American student at this high school? What were the positives about this high school for them? What were the barriers to success at this high school? Why did they choose to be a member of the Challenge or why did they choose not to participate in the Challenge? How did they think the Challenge made a difference for them or for their classmates? How had opportunities to meet regularly with their racial peers and with their mentor or advisor made a difference? What insights did they have regarding the removal or creation of institutional barriers by these efforts? What did they think of the

leadership of this administration in providing equitable access to academic success? If they were principal, what would they do the same and what would they do differently?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This study sought to explore the administrative processes and the impacts of these processes in identifying, addressing and removing the institutional barriers to academic success of African American students. This study focused on an initiative developed by the principal and two African American assistant principals at this Midwestern high school to improve equitable access to education for African American students. By deconstruction of this initiative and other administrative efforts through in-depth interviews of students and administrators, this study identified and evaluated administrative processes.

I asked students who were participating in the initiative to share their stories as African American students and their perceptions of this initiative, the school, and any barriers or supports that they had experienced. I explored their perceptions along with the perceptions of the administrative team. The principal created this initiative from reflections on the collective life experiences of himself as well as two African American assistant principals. He did this with the support of the superintendent. Since it was not created out of a thorough review of the literature, it seemed important to examine the literature to determine if the literature might support their efforts or perhaps raise cautions. While the study of this initiative and the administrative processes that created and sustained it was qualitative and remained open to learn from the perceptions of administrators and students at this school, it was still helpful to have a framework from which to approach these efforts.

Roberts (2010) explains that, among other things, a literature review helps to focus a study, develop a theoretical framework, and identify pertinent information. As I explored the literature, I was particularly interested in what the literature identified as relevant to academic success of African American students and how this related to the main components of the initiative, called the Challenge, which this Midwestern high school team developed. Through this review, I hoped to be able to better frame my study to use it to contribute better to the gaps in the literature or to support the findings in the literature. I believe that studying this initiative and the processes involved in creating it added to our knowledge of addressing social justice issues in schools particularly as they relate to the academic achievement of African American students.

First, the initiative was designed to help students develop a positive identity toward academic success. Students and staff participating in this initiative set high goals and expectations for their success and they asked students to set goals with their advisor for improved grades each semester. What did the literature say about the relationship of positive identity toward academic success and the impact it actually has on academic success? How did a high school administrative team create an environment that enhances a student's identity toward academic success? What was the impact of the institution itself in influencing this identity?

Secondly, the administrative team intended this initiative to develop systems for working specifically and exclusively with African American students. This administrative team had chosen to use the term achievement gap in referring to the desire to improve. The measurements used to determine this gap at this school was comparing the Grade Point Average (GPA), reduction in number of F grades, and attendance rates of

African American students in relations to Caucasian students. The team specifically presented this information and data regarding this gap to African American students and their parents to justify the need for this initiative. Therefore, this initiative was specifically for African American students who sought to be a part of this initiative. The administrative team excluded. These extended efforts for African American youth were in addition to any efforts offered to other students. What did the literature say about articulating efforts specifically for African American students and what did the literature say about the positive and negative impacts this could have on these students?

Thirdly, this initiative provided opportunities for African American students to connect in a positive, academic oriented way to their racial group. There were monthly meetings with their cohort group to set goals together and discuss successes and struggles. What did the literature say about the importance of providing opportunities for these students to connect to other African American students in terms of its impact on their academic success as defined by improved GPA? What did the literature say about the positive or negative effects of connecting with one another as a racial group?

Fourthly, this initiative appeared to seek to provide more opportunities for African American students to develop relationships with staff that were encouraging, positive and supportive. The principal hired two African American advocates to monitor the achievement of African American students by talking regularly with their teachers as well as the students themselves. In addition, each student was assigned an administrator as a mentor as well as a teacher mentor who regularly met with them. What did the literature say about the importance of positive, caring, encouraging relationships and the impact on

academic achievement? Did the literature say anything about what this should look like or what the negative impacts might be?

Therefore, this was a review of the literature on academic achievement of African American students, especially as it related to several aspects of the educational institution and the administrative processes that affect it. These aspects included the impact of the educational institution on positive identity associated with academic success; the impact of intentional, articulated and targeted efforts; the impact of providing structured opportunities for connectedness to one's racial group as cohorts; and the impact of positive, caring and challenging relationships on academic achievement.

Positive Identity toward Academic Achievement – The School's Role

Research has shown that the formation of identity is a major developmental task for adolescents. The development of ethnic identity is a significant developmental task for many adolescents (Wakefield, 2007). Irving and Hudley (2008) conducted research regarding the correlation of cultural identification of African American males with their academic achievement. They noted that African American achievement is still a wide-ranging problem and that this is especially so with African American males. They argued that while developing a sense of self is something that all adolescents must do, it is an especially difficult chore for African American adolescents because they must also develop a racial and ethnic identity in a society where African Americans have had a history of being victims of oppression and marginalization by the more dominant White society.

Ogbu (2003) suggested that because of this history of marginalization some African American students develop an identity that is oppositional toward schooling and

do not trust the educational system. Ogbu (1990) argued that even middle class and well off African Americans develop oppositional identities. He believed this might be rooted in a fear of acting White. He believed that the descendants of these involuntary minorities carry on some of the resentment of their loss of freedom. Therefore, according to Ogbu (1990), it may be that African American students may still undervalue academic achievement because they see schooling as part of the institutionalized oppression of African American students. In addition, they may also believe that the benefits and rewards of schooling will not be equal to Whites.

In their literature review, Irving and Hudley (2008) determined that the relationship of identity and achievement was not that simple. Because of this, they decided to examine a multivariate correlation of aspects of racial identity. They concluded that these findings, which were not consistent in terms of the relationship of racial identity and achievement, might be the result of concepts not taken into consideration within racial identity. Therefore, after the review of literature they decided to study the issue further. They found that the literature on cultural mistrust suggests that there is a relationship between this mistrust and academic achievement. They defined cultural mistrust as “the tendency for African Americans to distrust institutional, personal, or social contexts that are controlled by Whites” (p. 679) and they see cultural mistrust as a “construct that attempts to capture the influence of discrimination on academic motivation” (p. 679). They also identified other areas that may be the result of coping with racial discrimination such as not seeing value in educational outcomes or their value within the society.

Nunnally, in her book, *Trust in Black America: Race, Discrimination and Politics* (Nunnally, 2012) reported on her study on the analyses of the data sets of the *2000 Social Benchmark Survey* (SCBS; Robert Putnam, principal investigator) and the *2007 National Politics and Socialization Survey* (NPSS; Shayla C. Nunnally, principal investigator) on the way that race is processed and on African American distrust (p.17). While her study focused on political and social interactions of African Americans, it could be applied to the school setting. Nunnally (2012) stated that a person who is “trustable or trustworthy is empowered to fulfill actions on behalf of others” (p. 24). She defined trust as “a belief about a person, institution or context that stems from an assessment about who or what can deliver an outcome with the least harmful risk and with the greatest benefit to the trustor” (p. 24). So, one might argue from this that if African American students and parents assessed the school as an institution that could be trusted, it would empower staff at the school to have more of an impact on the achievement of African American students.

In her study, Nunnally (2012) developed a “theory of discriminative racial-psychological processing” (p. 227). She argued that there are several ways that race influence African American perceptions of self and institutions. One process is what she calls “racial socialization” (p. 58). She describes it as a process in which African Americans discover the impact of race on their status in America. This could include the impact of race in schools as well. In this socialization process, African Americans develop a perception of the likelihood that others, such as the school, might discriminate against them. One could argue that this would influence the investment that African Americans would be willing to make in the system. In her study, Nunnally (2012)

identified parents and family as the most important source for racial socialization and self-identity but found that schools were the least important source. While schools should probably not try to compete with families, it would seem, however, that schools need to make it a priority to involve parents and also attempt to become more of a positive source of identity for African American students. As schools work to be trustworthy for African American students, it may allow our schools to be more empowered to make a difference in creating a positive racial identity with the school that may affect student achievement.

Returning to Irving and Hudley (2008), they identified several aspects for their study on cultural mistrust and racial identity that their research supports. They stated that early identification of students with a resistant cultural identity might assist with the prevention of lower academic achievement. They also suggested that school policies and practices should support positive identity development that is consistent with academic achievement and students valuing outcomes of a good education. It is important to note that examining school policies and practices that may support positive identity may be a difficult undertaking but may be at the center of this issue.

Irving and Hudley (2008) believed that research which leads to a stronger understanding of the relationship of identity, financial circumstances and achievement beliefs would not only contribute to theoretical knowledge but would also give educators some practical knowledge in identifying school issues and in planning programs to improve the achievement of African Americans.

In his book, *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools*, T. Howard (2010) stated that some researchers have explained that the issue is not ethnicity or race at all but rather

one of low socioeconomic status, which is more disproportionate for African Americans but affects students from all ethnic groups. However, while socioeconomic status has an impact, he emphasized that when you look at the data it shows that even when you hold the social class constant, African American students still do not do as well. He pointed out that race, in itself, is a significant piece in the achievement gap. Howard (2008) argues that the problem is “racist practices and ideologies that are institutionalized and normalized within school” and they “are not recognized because they are so normalized” (p. 968). Wildhagen, in her study on race and its impact on the realization of academic achievement, stated that “teachers’ perceptions of African American students’ efforts may stem from the use of a seemingly neutral lens that is actually calibrated by the expectations of White middle class culture” (p.23).

Schmoker (2012) emphasized that placing lack of achievement solely on poverty rather than including the impact of race “can promote a dangerous complacency among those that believe that, on balance, our schools are doing well enough” (p. 70). Schmoker asserted that we should not accept the position that schools can have only a marginal effect on the achievement gap. Schools can have a significant impact on student achievement.

Alonso et al. (2009) in their book, *Our Schools Suck*, referred to the articles that Orlando Patterson (2006) wrote in the *New York Times*, arguing that the social sciences have failed to identify the causes, and therefore the answers, for the achievement gap. Patterson (2006) believed that the social sciences have focused too much on structural factors such as joblessness, low income, and housing rather than on the values and attitudes that are part of their culture. However, Alonso (2009) contradicted Ogbu,

Patterson and other researchers who argued that students bring all aspects of this culture to school with them. He cautions that a focus on this culture is missing the point without also understanding African American students developed this culture, in part, as a way to cope with the prejudiced actions and culture in society as well as in our schools.

Alonso et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative research in a high school in Los Angeles that was on the state list of failing schools. From what they learned in this study, they explained that Ogbu and others who promote the theory of oppositional identities might not completely comprehend how these identities were developed. Instead, they may put too much focus on changing those identities through counseling or mentoring programs. The focus should be on addressing the problems with the school. They argued that many of these experts seem to “draw on a long tradition of radicalized images that have historically denied the complex and multidimensional humanity of people of color” (p.66). Alonso et al. (2009) explained that unfortunately this gives us approval to focus on students as the problem rather than on the greater issue of discriminatory barriers and structures in the schools.

Nuri-Robins et al. (2007) identified some of these barriers as individual and systemic. Systemic barriers include “an unawareness of the need to adapt and resistance to change, presumption of entitlement and unearned privilege, and systems of oppression and privilege” (p. 19). This is can be witnessed with teachers who argue that students need to adjust to the schools and fit into the mainstream in order to be successful rather than looking at instructional and disciplinary practices. Possibly another systemic barrier was illustrated by a few parents of privileged students, or privileged students themselves,

resenting any initiatives to assist students with a history of marginalization and pointing to this as reverse discrimination.

The book, *Our Schools Suck*, (Alonso et al. 2009) spoke explicitly to the segregation of urban schools and the poverty and lack of funding, and this appeared to be what they were saying was the cause of the lower achievement and higher dropout rates. However, in the political and media area, the book spoke to the prejudice that still exists and the way that the media and many people tend to pick up on authors that talk about the culture of failure and the fear of acting White of African American and Hispanic students. With the idea that the problem is within the African American student, it gave those with power a reason to excuse the lack of sufficient funding for these urban schools. The authors pointed out that there are many African American and Hispanic students who state that they want a good education and that in their interviews no one was talking about fear of acting White. In fact, they spoke about the struggles these students had in their schools, their jobs and in their community. The basis for their research were journal writings collected from the four junior American History classes by one of the authors of this book, *Our Schools Suck*, Jeanne Theoharis (Alonso et al., 2009), who co-taught these classes with another teacher. The classes consisted primarily of African Americans along with Hispanic students. She explained that students often wrote about the importance of hard work, their desire to succeed, and their optimism about school. Theoharis (Alonso et al., 2009) also recorded that many students who expressed a resolve to do well was partly from wanting to make their parents happy and proud, having heard from their parents about the importance to succeed in high school and go on to college. Therefore, she was reporting that many African American students

do want a good education, but their fear of not being successful, which was reinforced by the school itself, might have a detrimental effect on their participation. She observed that many students start playing in to the stereotypes of African Americans of not being responsible or working hard enough to succeed. She says this self-doubt, created and reinforced by the structures of the school system can contribute to less success in school. She reported that some students were able to react to these stereotypes and felt they had to prove people wrong about them. So, Theoharis appeared to support the concept that identity does impact school success. However, she points her finger not so much on the attitude that African American students bring with them but rather their getting caught in the downward slope of beginning to believe the stereotypes that they hear at school and the barriers the school is putting up to them. She argued that more than being turned off to school, it is being unsure of themselves and their future that got in the way. She told the story about students who “identified their resistance in class as a construct put on for self-protection; they sought to camouflage their vulnerability and their fears of not doing well through stony silence, rudeness, or outright resistance” (p.86).

Cokley and Chapman (2008) explored identity development by completing a study based on the premise that a major source for understanding why African American students at each educational level underachieved was by understanding the relationship among cultural identity, academic identity and school environment. After a review of the literature, they believed that negative stereotypes of African Americans, including their ability to achieve in school, could influence the ethnic identity. These stereotypes would contribute to their own low self-concept regarding their ability to achieve. Cokley and Chapman (2008) believed the literature supported the importance of positive and

supporting student-faculty relationships in improving academic achievement and coincided with a positive academic self-concept.

Cokley and Chapman (2008) conducted a path model analysis regarding academic achievement that examined the impact of several factors including ethnic identity, anti-White attitudes, perceptions of a caring faculty, and academic self-concept. The advantage of completing a path analysis was that it could help identify the direct and indirect impact of different variables on academic achievement. The study involved 274 African American college students, but they believed that it had application for earlier levels of education, as well. In their study, they found that academic self-concept has a positive relationship to academic success. In the path analysis, they also found that perceptions of a caring faculty and ethnic identity had an influence on this academic self-concept. From this, they concluded that ethnic identity was a significant piece contributing to academic achievement. On the other hand, they found anti-White attitudes actually had a negative impact on academic achievement. When correlations were calculated, Cokley and Chapman (2008) determined that “ethnic identity may be more important than anti-White attitudes in a model of African American academic achievement” (p. 360). From this study, one may conclude that school administrators should examine their school to determine if it hinders or promotes a positive ethnic identity, especially in its relationship to a positive academic self-concept. In part, it would suggest that encouraging staff to have positive, challenging and caring relationships with students could have at least an indirect impact on academic achievement.

Schellenberg and Grothaus (2009) conducted an action research study to determine the importance of students having teachers and other staff members who help students understand themselves as unique, capable and valued individuals of a diverse community. They provided counseling sessions to six male African American elementary students that included strengthening of core academic courses while providing a counseling curriculum that increased self-esteem. This included promoting positive, culture supporting messages. They stated that they developed this program in the framework of trying to create a more culturally responsive school climate. They reported this intervention resulted in student improvement from the pre-test to the post-test in academic and counseling curriculum objectives. While there was nothing to show that this project created a school wide climate of positive and caring staff, the importance of this study was that it suggested that if at least a few students have some staff that regularly provide a positive, culturally responsive environment, this may help improve student achievement.

Carter's (2008) review of the literature led her to design research regarding positive identity development and the importance of the role of African American connectedness with members of their own race and a critical race consciousness. She explains that critical race consciousness is an awareness of how race can possibly be a barrier to success. Carter (2008) says it also involves developing some sense of the inequality in the distribution of power in the relationships between Whites and Blacks. She suggested that a critical race consciousness can actually result in a positive race identity and can motivate African American youth to prove the institution wrong about the ability of African American students to achieve in school. In her qualitative study

with 20 high school African American students, she collected data that would suggest the possibility that the combination of a positive identity associated with race and a sense of connectedness to their racial group could support academic achievement and encourage African American students to work hard in school. However, figuring out how we develop this in our youth is so important in developing an environment where our African American students can be successful. While she was not specific about how to go about this, she suggested that parents and teachers could be very important in this process. She suggested that caring adults in the school environment, along with the school having high expectations and good curriculum have proven to help the academic performance of African American students. She made a point of stating that this caring relationship is not just the job of Black teachers but all teachers. She found that many African American students identified both Black and White teachers who have helped aid the development of an identity associated with positive achievement beliefs.

Graham and Anderson (2008) completed a qualitative study to add to the understanding of the possible impact of ethnic or racial identity with academic achievement mentioned earlier in this report. They examined the relationship between ethnic and academic identity in African American students by interviewing high achieving male students in an urban high school. There were three themes in the open ended interview questions they used which included how much do these African American students value educational success; how much do they identify with their ethnic group; and how do significant others encourage or discourage a relationship between ethnic identity and academic identity. In collecting the data from the interviews, they identified three developing themes from these three questions. These themes

include “School is serious to me, I’m real big into knowing your heritage and without guidance we’d be heathens” (p. 10). Regarding the first theme, confidence, hard work, and wanting to improve themselves and their community were patterns for these achieving students. These students were able to let go of the negative attitudes about school and turn this into a more positive drive to do well in school. Regarding the second theme of knowing your heritage, the pattern that came out of this was a more confident approach to their classes that seemed to come out of a pride in their ethnic identity and improving the African American community. They talked about getting strength from African Americans who came before them and the struggles they overcame. Lastly, they spoke about the guidance of their parents who taught them that they had to work harder because it is tougher for African American males. Graham and Anderson (2008) said these students described above gained a great deal of strength from their parents and trusted staff and community members. The authors suggested that these students gained strength and were motivated to achieve by being surrounded by supportive people who continually instill a positive message of what it means to be African American.

I believe it is important to point out again that several of the articles cited could be seen as focusing on African American student attitudes and behaviors that they may bring with them rather than focusing on the institutional barriers within the school. Maryann Dickar (2008), in her qualitative study at an urban high school in New York resulting in her book, *Corridor Cultures: Mapping Student Resistance at an Urban High School* said that a significant portion of the literature focuses on student behavior and perceptions that they bring to schools as part of their culture and identity. However, she stated that more studies now propose that schools participate in this process. In fact, she argued that

schools play a big role in forming these identities. For example, she explained that Ogbu's assumption that the culture some Black students bring to schools "has obscured the complex ways that these students contend with schooling and ... is adapted in significant ways to suit the school and student context" (p. 79). In this context, she discussed "resistance theory" (p.143) which she described as a "response to oppressive and at times demeaning systems and school practices" (p.143). She described in detail how some students indirectly confront staff by clowning or by slow removal of a hat when requested to remove it. Different from oppositional theory, resistance theory is seen as "an important survival tool that is potentially transformative" (p. 18). It is used more as a way to change the power in the school and respond to oppressive systems. Dickar (2008) also saw that students act on a range of intensity of resistance. One example she used was the hat rule. She discussed how many Black students would sooner or later remove their hat when requested but that often it takes a couple of requests and that often they put the hat back on later. She said that hats are often associated with the male Black identity and could be interpreted as part of the whole respect and popularity aspect of identity. This type of resistance was seen a lot but often did not result in substantial disciplinary action.

Dickar (2008) explained that an extremely important difference in the meaning of resistance theory as opposed to oppositional cultural theory was that oppositional cultural is seen as within the students themselves, where resistance theory understands that the school itself may be oppositional to Black culture. Opposition needs to be seen as "co-constructed by students and schools" (p.193). It seems then, that as we work with our African American youth to help them feel included and valued, we must continually

examine our school for institutional barriers that include actions that diminish students' culture. Ryan (1971) explains that when it comes to viewing African American culture some teachers may be involved in deficit thinking. This is a way of taking the effects of community and school structural inequities and blaming them on student or family deficits. Rather than a cultural deficit, he explained that there is a cultural difference, difference not deficit, to which teachers need to adapt their instruction.

As Dickar (2008) pointed out, the factors at her urban school can contribute to students feeling they are not valued and this can influence the efforts that they put into their education and their behavior. While she is describing an urban high school with few White students, the concepts she introduced such as resistance theory, the hidden curriculum, the role of the school in fostering oppositional identities, and the inconsistent communications students receive from teachers regarding discipline and academic expectations in the school may be relevant to most high schools, even ones that are majority White with an African American population. Based on her research, Dickar (2008) suggested that schools continue to accept their responsibility for student resistance. She said that schools should also understand student resistance in terms of a continuum rather than something that is constant in them. Students can grow and change. She stated "recognizing that students move along a continuum between opposition and accommodation more adequately captures student engagement" (p. 194). She believed that "shifting our attention to the factors that inform why and how they move along this continuum (rather than assessing where they are at any given moment) may prove to be more helpful in improving academic outcomes for Black students and closing the achievement gap" (p.194).

Regarding this shift to exploring factors within our schools that interfere with positive academic outcomes, T. Howard (2010) conducted four different studies in schools with predominantly African American or Latino populations. From these studies, he gathered data that document classroom practices, teacher-student interactions, programmatic interventions and teacher and parent viewpoints of schools. From this data, T. Howard (2010) had concluded that there are five key principles for culturally responsive pedagogy. These principles are quoted below:

1. The eradication of deficit based ideologies of culturally diverse students
2. The disruption of the idea that Eurocentric or middle class forms of discourse, knowledge, language, culture, and historical interpretations are normative
3. A critical consciousness and sociopolitical awareness that reflects an ongoing commitment to challenge injustice and disrupt inequities and oppression of any group of people.
4. An authentic and culturally informed notion of care for students, wherein their academic, social, emotional, psychological, and cultural well-being is adhered to
5. Recognition of the complexity of culture, in which educators allow students to use their personal culture to enhance their quest for educational excellence (p.70).

In looking at examples of school successes in closing the gap, he identified several practices or characteristics that I used in developing further research regarding administrative processes and efforts in our school to reduce the achievement gap. The

practices Howard identified include “visionary leadership, teachers’ effective practices, intensive academic support, acknowledgement of race and parental and community engagement” (p.130). Deal and Peterson (1999) believed that good administrators should always be “alert to the deeper issues agitating beneath a seemingly rational veneer of activity” (p. 197). Deal and Peterson discussed the importance of school administrators being able to “read between the lines to decipher complex cultural codes and struggle to figure out what is really going on” (p. 197). The literature review appeared to suggest that schools have to take a significant part of the responsibility for African American students’ positive identity toward academic success.

Intentional and Articulated Efforts

While a primary focus of my literature review was to explore research on the school’s role in the development of a positive identity in African American students associated with academic success, other related aspects emerged that deserved some focus. One of these aspects was how the school goes about articulating and implementing its efforts in improving the academic success of African American students. Do schools identify students of all races who are struggling and then implement programs that are school-wide? Is there a need to focus on African American students as a group and identify barriers specific to them?

Carter (2008) stated that all staff members in schools must be intentional about helping African American students. She argued that this should be done in terms of African Americans as a group. She also stated, “schools need to be explicit in talking about the structural inequalities that present potential obstacles to student success” (p.

24). Hennen (2005) also discussed the importance of schools being deliberate about this and clearly establish and communicate rules.

The importance of being intentional about efforts to assist African American students and to have a critical race consciousness was reiterated by Mica Pollock's 1994-1997 field study of racial talk at Columbus High School in California (Pollock, 2004). She added to the literature regarding the impact of race, particularly explicitly talking about race, on school and district policy and practice. This could influence many areas including student placement, curriculum, discipline, staff hiring and retention, and educational access and equality.

Her data collection methods were centered on her involvement in the life of the Columbus School community for 3 years. She stated that she wanted to "examine the everyday politics and patterns of talking racially (p. 11). She explained:

I documented discourse from school board meetings, superintendent addresses, conversations with teachers held in classrooms, hallways and happy hours, conversations between students, parents and administrators in and out of classrooms, and conversations with students both in and out of school. I also systematically gathered the written artifacts of legal opinions, district and school level statistics, district pronouncements and press releases, union newsletters, faculty newsletters and memos, student assignments, newspaper articles, and educational research itself (p. 12-13).

She developed several themes from her study but one theme that is relevant here was one she stated as "the de-raced words we use when discussing plans for racial equality can actually keep us from discussing ways to make opportunities racially equal" (p. 75). She

centers this theme on the California Department of Education's Consent Decree which she felt promoted the main concept of "eliminating racial or ethnic segregation and identifiably" (p. 79). This led to the language of helping all students rather than naming a group of students, which she concluded, would hamper a public analysis of how the schools were assisting African American and Hispanic students. She reported that one African American administrator said that "people don't even want to disaggregate the data, we don't have Black students or White students...we just have students" he said and Pollock analyzes this as "sarcastic" in tone (p. 101). Again, she stated that it is easier to talk in aggregated terms of reforms for all students than to determine if they are working for a particular race of students.

Administrators may need to take risks to move forward and get something done. Barth (2001) believed that there was a "culture of caution" (p.213) that envelops education. He explained that there could be a lot of talk about what should be done and the strengths and weaknesses of a project. However, at some point an administrator has to take a risk to move forward in order to better the education of students.

So, efforts to assist African American students may need to be specifically articulated. From Pollock's qualitative research, we saw that this kind of talk could be perceived as risky, especially since talking about African American students in terms of an achievement gap may be misinterpreted as making derogatory comments about African Americans. She discussed in her book the fear that some teachers have of talking about students in terms of race because this might result in some people thinking they are racist.

It seemed that African American students need and deserve special articulated efforts. As was noted earlier in the literature review, research had shown that identity is a major developmental task for adolescents (Wakefield, 2007). Ogbu (2003) suggested that because there has been a history of marginalization of African Americans, these students might have a more difficult task of developing a positive identity toward academic achievement. A possible assumption from this is that African American students would therefore need efforts that are more specific.

Whenever there is special attention called to a group by race, there is a possibility of both positive and negative side effects. For example, an examination of the literature on affirmative action in college admissions indicated that it might cause an additional stigma for Black college students. Affirmative action at the college level may be seen as a parallel for specific articulated efforts at the high school level in terms of looking at issues that may develop. While affirmative action seeks to remedy years of discrimination and marginalization of African American students in college admissions Charles et al. (2009) argued that affirmative action exacerbates the psychological burdens that minority students must carry on campuses. Affirmative action can also create a stereotype threat where Black students begin to internalize the low opinion of their abilities. However, Charles (2009) is optimistic that this can be overcome by positive student faculty relationships, a focus on the challenge and hard work and promoting a sense of belonging.

Another issue that may develop beyond the possibility of inadvertently adding to the stereotype of African American students is the possible development of resentment toward African American students because Caucasian students are not getting some of

the attention or services that they see African American students getting. Trying to explain why Caucasian students were not included in these efforts may be difficult.

Regarding the issue of the exclusion of White students in this particular initiative and the impact this may have on White students, it seemed important to have a response that will not be detrimental but instructive to White students. G. Howard (1999) explained that the process of discussing White privilege with these students is necessary but complex. He asked the question “how can Whites identify with their own culture and heritage if these are understood as only negative and only oppressive” (p. xiv)? It is important that White students can learn about their privilege without forming more resentment toward Black students and without their seeing their whole identity as oppressors. G. Howard explained “we need to promote the development of a healthy White identity that is at the same time anti-racist and multicultural” (p. xiv).

While administrators must be sensitive in specific efforts to reduce the achievement gap, and while it seemed to be important not to approach this in terms of a deficit in students but rather the responsibility of the institution, it seemed the literature was suggesting that these efforts should be specific and articulated.

Connectedness with Racial Peers

A component of the initiative developed by this suburban school’s principal and African American assistant principals was the opportunity these students were given to meet in a type of cohort group to support and encourage one another to set goals and improve their grades. Motivated by the achievement data that African American students are underachieving at alarming rates compared to their White peers, Bruce, Getch and Ziomek-Daigle (2009) conducted action research at a Georgia high school on a group

counseling approach to improve the test performance of African American students.

These students had an opportunity to bond with one another, to process their experiences at the school, and to set goals for success. As with previous research cited above, they were concerned with positive identity development of African American students that included opportunities to discuss what it means to be African American in a dominant White culture. They suggested that providing opportunities for adolescents to develop a healthy sense of belonging to a positive peer group is critical to school connectedness and school success.

Carter (2008) suggested that a critical race consciousness can actually result in a positive race identity and can motivate African American youth to take on a competitive attitude about achieving in school. She concluded that the “connectedness to one’s racial group, awareness of racial discrimination, and self-perspective as a succeeding member of the racial group” could assist them in overcoming barriers and better achieve in school (p.24).

Cokley and Chapman (2008) calculated correlations in a pathway analysis of the impact of identity on academic achievement. They determined that “ethnic identity may be more important than anti-White attitudes in a model of African American academic achievement” (p. 360).

In her study, Wildhagen (2012) discussed the damaging impact on academic achievement of strict disciplinary climates in integrated schools. This impacts even students who do not personally experience the disciplinary actions. This is because there is an association with African American students who are being disciplined and “racial meanings are ascribed to the disciplinary climate” (p. 22).

In their qualitative research of high achieving African American high school students, Graham and Anderson (2008) discussed the developing theme of students being aware of their heritage. The pattern that emerged was the more confident approach by participants toward their classes that appeared to be connected to a pride in their ethnic identity and improving the African American community. The pattern they saw was that these students seemed to gain confidence from African Americans who went before them and the barriers they overcame. Therefore, providing opportunities to discuss their heritage and identify themselves positively with their race may be important, especially if they are still experiencing marginalization in their school. Graham and Anderson (2008) stated that “schools reinforced beliefs learned at home...schools often encouraged them to be invisible and silent rather than visible” (p. 12). The authors further reported that these African American students “realized these subtle, hidden behaviors and worked to change them by visibly and vocally asserting themselves in school” (p. 13). The authors highlighted that once these students sensed that they had a voice that this had an impact on their success.

Positive and Caring Environment

Creating a positive and caring environment that focuses on teachers building relationships with students in a high school with over 140 staff members was a formidable task. While this suburban high school that was the focus of this study had about half of its staff members complete an intense training in social justice, and while all teachers received professional development in differentiated instruction, culturally responsive instruction and positive behavior interventions and support, this task of creating a welcoming, supporting and challenging environment for our African American

students may still seem overwhelming, given the history of marginalization. After having explored the literature on the marginalization of African Americans and on the impact schools have had on student identity associated with academic achievement, it would seem that creating this positive environment for African American students would, at best, be a process that will take time. Through the Challenge initiative, this administration attempted to systematically surround these students with caring staff who frequently had supportive and positive contact with them. Did the literature support these efforts through this specific initiative that sought to provide positive interactions with some staff while at the same time these staff and other staff were still possibly influenced by at least some prejudice, lower expectations and stereotypes of African American students?

Alonso et al. (2009) in their book, *Our Schools Suck*, talked about how students appreciated faculty who have pushed them to study and learn. The authors argued that it is not so much that the students are alienated toward the school, it is rather that they have lost confidence that they can be successful with all the struggles they have to overcome. In their path analysis study discussed earlier, Cokley and Chapman (2008) found that perceptions of a caring faculty and ethnic identity had an influence on students' academic self-concept.

In the policy recommendations that resulted from her study on what impacts African American achievement, Wildhagen (2012) concluded that "programs that focus on relationships between teachers and African American students seem a promising avenue for increasing the fulfillment of African American students' potential" (p. 23).

Hennen (2005) also emphasized the important impact a caring climate of concern for students as individuals can have on academic achievement. He discussed the importance of schools being deliberate about this and carefully planning ongoing support along with clearly established and communicated expectations. His study suggested that a positive school climate has been associated with academic success. One element of this positive school climate is that it tends to encourage students to trust the administration and staff. As a result, these students may be more likely to engage themselves in school, in spite of the fact that it is a predominantly White institution.

Irving and Hudley (2008) found that the literature on cultural mistrust suggested that it is one of several variables in attitude, which are within identity, which might influence motivation and achievement. They defined cultural mistrust as “the tendency for African Americans to distrust institutional, personal, or social contexts that are controlled by Whites” (p. 679). They saw cultural mistrust as a “construct that attempts to capture the influence of discrimination on academic motivation” (p. 679). Perhaps when students feel they are valued by the care they experience, it can counteract the mistrust they have developed. However, what if not every staff member in the environment provides the welcoming and supportive attitude that might encourage academic engagement? Could an initiative alone influence students’ engagement in academics?

In her study, as described earlier, Nunnally (2012) spoke of the empowerment that can come from when an institution or person was viewed as trustworthy. Bruce (2009) established a counseling group of 15 11th grade African American students in a 1500 student high school consisting of 85% Caucasian and 11% African American students. According to Bruce (2009), students participated in eight weekly counseling sessions and

the weekly group topics included: academic data for the school; achievement goals for the group; defining school success and barriers; test preparation and strategies; perceptions of the climate and culture of the school; discussion of views and experiences that students had on discrimination and power in the school; and behaviors and goals that might lead to student success. Bruce (2009) reported that the results of this intervention appeared to be favorable. Data show that all of the African American students participating in the group met the performance standards on the English component of the Graduation Test compared with 84.2% of all African American students. On the math component, 67% of the students participating in the group compared with 63.2 % all African American students. Bruce (2009) believed the validity of the results was dependent on the sample being random and representative of the 45 African American students who took the graduation test. The conclusions drawn from this study included the importance of increasing student connectedness to the school, the importance of providing a positive and inclusive school climate and culture, as well as the importance of working to improve any areas of concern such as academic rigor and equity.

Graham and Anderson (2008) suggested that the academically successful African American students they studied were strengthened and motivated to achieve by having significant others who continually instilled positive views of what it means to be African American.

Carter (2008) suggested that caring adults in the school environment, along with the school having high expectations and adequate curriculum have proven to help the academic performance of African American students. She made a point of stating that this caring relationship is not just the responsibility of Black teachers but all teachers.

She found that many African American students said both Black and White teachers have helped them with positive achievement beliefs.

Culturally responsive teaching may be one way in which teachers can show care for students by recognizing and acknowledging them for who they are and from where they have come. It is a way to address the achievement issues that can contribute to some African American students giving up. It is a way to examine instruction in an effort to improve the academic performance of African American students (Gay, 2000). T. Howard (2010) discussed how important it is to value what other cultures have to contribute and to not see our own culture as the norm. T. Howard (2010) explained that culturally responsive teaching “seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing student academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well-being” (p.67). He explained that culturally responsive teaching takes the focus away from deficit-based theories of poor achievement and puts the responsibility on the school to make instruction and curriculum meaningful for students.

In identifying the institutional barriers that may inadvertently be created by efforts to assist Black students, schools also need to examine the impact that caring has on the power structure in the school. For example, Pennington (2007) observed that White teachers often see themselves as saving Black students from themselves and their environments away from school. This can sometimes maintain the dominant power balance and could be seen by Black students and Black staff as condescending.

T. Howard (2010) developed five principals for culturally responsive pedagogy after several studies in schools. One of these principles was “an authentic and culturally

informed notion of care for students, wherein their academic, social, emotional, psychological and cultural well-being is adhered to” (p. 70). Nieto (1999) wrote about the importance of student identification with teachers in order to promote learning. She stated that “forging strong identification with teachers and schools is a fundamental ingredient in student learning because it helps students define schools as places that can give them an academic identity with which they can relate” (p. 96).

This literature review seemed to support the idea that schools must communicate to African American students that they are valued and that they can be and are expected to be successful. However, in this process, it is important to be cautious and reflective to determine if the motivation is in any way to maintain the White power structure. It would seem that genuine caring is expressed by schools valuing the culture of each of their students and educating staff to be culturally responsive in instruction and discipline.

As described earlier, the literature also seemed to support the importance of providing African American students opportunities to develop a connectedness and positive identification with their racial peer group in a way that help them feel included and welcomed in the all areas of the school. It seemed these efforts often needed to be intentional and articulated. Administration may need to be on constant vigilance in order to identify existing and developing institutional barriers to positive identity development and to academic success for African American students.

Theoretical Framework

I anticipated that the theoretical frameworks for this study would develop as I gathered and analyzed qualitative data. Several key concepts and possible frameworks emerged from the literature review. I organized the literature review around these

frameworks and as noted in the literature review these possible frameworks included student identity toward academic achievement; the school's role in this identity formation and in being culturally responsive; the importance of intentional and articulated efforts; student connectedness with racial peers; and the importance of a positive and caring environment. In addition, as discussed in the introduction, other frameworks emerged as I analyzed the data, which included: vision and collaboration, which were two of the standards that were set by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 1996); risk and administrative caution; and power structures existing at the school. Howard (2008) explained "manifestations of individual and institutional racism are not always blatant, overt, and easy to observe" (p 973). Yet, it seemed that identifying these disparities was the first step to removing them.

Chapter Three: Methods

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insights into the structures and administrative processes of a suburban high school, particularly those structures that support achievement of African American students and those structures that place barriers to their achievement. Specifically, through interviews with administrators and students, it sought to identify and examine the perceptions of barriers to education as they relate to race and the current efforts by the school's administration team to break down these barriers. A focus of this study was the Challenge initiative. By deconstruction of this initiative through in-depth interviews of students and administrators, I attempted to identify and map the various administrative processes used. This Midwestern suburban high school administrative team established an initiative called the Challenge that was an attempt to level the playing field for African American students. This initiative's stated purpose was to reduce the achievement gap and included efforts to provide these students with supportive, caring relationships with faculty and their peers as well as academic encouragement and support. This Challenge initiative, therefore, was a focus of this study as I sought to identify the administrative processes involved with this initiative, as well as other processes in this high school that promote equitable access to education for our African American students. A qualitative study which involved interviews and classroom discussions also provided information to better determine the impact of the Challenge initiative in comparison with other initiatives at the high school.

Therefore, using this qualitative data, I attempted to identify and evaluate this administrative team's processes and effectiveness in improving the academic

achievement of African American students. Academic achievement trends data available to the public were also used. The results were assessed for their general application to this school as well as other high schools that strive to be more responsive to African American student needs.

Research Question

This study examined an initiative developed by the principal and two African American assistant principals at this Midwestern high school with the support of the superintendent to improve equitable access to education for African American students. By deconstruction of this initiative and other administrative efforts through in-depth interviews of students and administrators, the question I sought to answer was what administrative processes were involved and were successful. Specific questions that I attempted to answer are:

- What were the administrative processes and what were the perceived impacts of these processes in identifying, addressing and removing the institutional barriers to academic success for African American students? Particularly, how did the Challenge initiative come about, what were the risks involved and reactions of staff, parents and students, and what is its perceived impact in addressing and removing the barriers to academic success?
- What was the perception of African American students and members of the administrative team about the barriers that exist to equitable access to education?
- What were the student and administrator perceptions of structural supports for these students? Specifically, what were the perceptions of administrators and

students about administrative efforts, particularly the Challenge initiative, to help address institutional barriers to academic success?

- What were the perceptions of administrators and students regarding the effectiveness of these efforts and what did academic achievement trend data, available to the public, tell us about the effectiveness of these efforts?

I saw two important components to my research question. What did administrators do and why did they do it?

The first component was the administrative processes involved in identifying, addressing and reducing the institutional barriers to academic success. What did administrators do? Equitable access to educational opportunities for African American students was my primary interest and was the goal in this study.

The second component of this question was motivation. Why did administrators do it? Particularly, what were the risks anticipated, and what motivated administrators to move beyond caution to action? This study encouraged administrators to reflect on their experiences with race and the impact race has had on them as individuals and as leaders in a school system. It also encouraged them to reflect on their collaboration and communication with each other and with staff members, parents and students in developing this specific initiative. What resistance did they encounter and how did they address the issues related to this resistance? Why did they persevere? Did those who resisted this initiative change their minds as the initiative progressed? Did this resistance cause some reshaping of the initiative? What would they do differently if they could start over again? What are the individual stories of these administrators and how did this

influence the motivation of the individual members in addressing this issue of the impact of one's race in a suburban school system?

The stories of students were also important in this question. Student reflection on their experiences at this high school was encouraged, especially in relation to the impact of race and the impact of this specific initiative. How did these African American students in this initiative view it? What were their stories relating to race in a school system and what was their perception of how this initiative removed or created barriers to their academic success? Why did they choose to be a member of the initiative or why did they choose not to participate in the initiative? How do they think the initiative made a difference for them or for their classmates? What things would they do the same and what things would they do differently if they were a principal at this high school?

The Initiative

To be able to better explore the rationale for this study and the effectiveness of the design of these efforts for equitable access to education, it was important to understand what the initiative was and be aware of concurrent programs that were being implemented at this high school.

The initiative was called the Challenge. As the name may imply, it encouraged students to accept the challenge to achieve to their potential and eliminate the achievement gap. It was an effort in our high school that had a specific goal of reducing the achievement gap. The achievement gap at this school was measured by Grade Point Average (GPA), attendance and the number of failing grades each student receives (Challenge PowerPoint, 2008). At an initial meeting for those African American students and their parents who had accepted the invitation to be in the initiative, they were shown

a power point that illustrates the achievement gap as measured in our school by GPA. The participating students were asked to make a commitment to accept the challenge to reduce this achievement gap. A significant portion of the literature review would not support the name or implied initial intent of the Challenge initiative because it appeared to be based on a deficit model. That is, it seemed to appear that there was a perception that our African American students came to us deficient in some way. In a deficit model the focus is on fixing students rather than fixing the system. It appeared to put the primary responsibility of the gap on the African American student rather than on the school system and the barriers this system builds (Alonso, 2009; Gay, 2008; Howard, 2010; Ryan, 1971). However, as I examined more closely the initiative as it plays out for these students, there were several components within the initiative and outside the initiative but within the school as a whole that addressed the systemic issues.

These students had a special access to administrators as their advisors as part of this initiative. This relationship between student and administrator developed outside of the discipline referral process and was a key investment in these students. As a result, the perceived purpose and impact of this initiative from the point of view of the students compared and contrasted with the point of view of the administrative team proved enlightening.

The Challenge started in 2008 with the class of 2012. The African American students from each of the subsequent new freshmen classes were invited to be part of this effort. In the school year of 2011-2012, every African American student in the school in 2012 had an opportunity to participate in this initiative.

It should also be noted that the concurrent programs in place with the Challenge Initiative included Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), social justice training for school staff members, and professional development for teachers in differentiated instruction and culturally responsive instruction. It appeared these elements had an impact on the success of the Challenge initiative and might have accounted for some of the positive outcomes. I expected that administrators would see the Challenge as one component of a comprehensive approach.

Two of these school-wide approaches should be summarized because they had been developed and were intended for all students, including African American and White, to help them form a positive identity in a culturally sensitive environment. While my intention was to focus on the Challenge initiative, these programs may have influenced the perceptions of this school by students and administrators when they were interviewed.

One program was the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Program (PBIS). The high school was in the eighth year of the implementation process. Lane (2007) explained that with PBIS, there was a shift from a reactive approach to expectations to a proactive approach that was positive and taught expectations.

Expectations were made clear and framed in a positive way. It was a three-tiered, data driven model which provided different levels of support based on the needs of students. Discipline data was reviewed regularly to determine who was referred frequently and was also analyzed by race and gender.

Simonsen et al. (2008) explained that in a PBIS program, a secondary tier is designed to provide supports to a targeted group of students who may need more support

than the majority of students. The supports provided to some of the students who participated in the Challenge may be considered to fall in this second tier of support since a disproportionate number of African American students were referred for discipline.

Another program that may have influenced the perceptions of the effectiveness of the Challenge was a district wide Social Justice Training for staff. This Midwestern school district gradually and systematically provided training in social justice to administration and staff. Social Justice training encouraged culturally relevant teaching, the celebration and acceptance of diversity, and a culture that is inclusive of difference rather than one that promotes or forces assimilation.

Ongoing efforts were also made through cohort groups comprised of administrators and staff members who had received the social justice training as well as professional development for all staff in differentiated instruction and culturally responsive teaching.

Research Design

This was a basic qualitative study which focused on students' and administrators' stories and experiences regarding the impact of race in education and the institutional barriers and the supports, interventions and processes put in place to address academic achievement. I was particularly interested in their experiences around the impact of school efforts intended to break down bias and barriers to equitable education so that I could identify and evaluate administrative processes involved in implementing this initiative. I believe this basic qualitative method provided the data that answered my research question regarding effective administrative processes to provide equitable education for all students. Merriam (2009) explained that a basic qualitative study seeks

to examine how people interpret their experiences and what meaning they attribute to these experiences. I believed an account of these experiences and the meaning attributed to them may help give insights to administrators at this school and other schools in designing future programs or initiatives that will remove barriers to academic success. Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative researchers “use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes pattern and themes” (p. 37).

Ethnography is one approach to qualitative research. Elements of this approach were relevant for this study, especially in terms of my immersion in the culture of the school and in the analysis of interviews with students. Creswell (2007) explained that ethnography focuses on a cultural group and seeks to understand their behaviors, values and beliefs. While I have been a part of this school for many years now, I still sought to better understand African American students with whom I had been working. This was an opportunity to immerse myself more deeply in their world by interviewing them and paying closer attention to them in my observations so as to better understand their experiences and the meaning they attach to them. Through reflection on my interviews with them as well as self-reflection on my personal experiences with race in the school system, I believe I have connected with these students and hopefully provided a comfortable relationship that allowed me to probe for more information and disclosure. Berg (2004) stated that the concept of ethnography “is that the practice places researchers in the midst of whatever it is they study” (p. 148). I believe I obtained valuable information about these students’ and administrators’ experiences and conveyed these stories and experiences to gain insights about how best to lead a school in providing

equitable access to education. Spradling (1980) stated that ethnography involves participant observation and “ethnography contributes directly to both description and explanation of regularities and variations in human social behavior” (p. 14). The “thick description” that Berg (2004, p. 148) describes as an element of ethnographic research was also an important element of this study and assisted in better understanding our African American students and the barriers to education that they face.

Berg (2004) identifies Action Research as a type of qualitative research. Elements of this type of qualitative research were relevant for my research as well, especially in interviewing and working with the administrative team. Berg stated that “this approach endorses consensual, democratic, and participatory strategies to encourage people to examine reflectively their problems or particular issues affecting them or their community” (p. 197). Shank (2006) described Action Research as a process that not only involves studying a situation but is an effort to make things better for the people involved. He stated that sometimes Action Research needs “to go beyond the idea of ‘fixing’ something...mind sets need to be changed and awareness needs to be raised” (p. 68). Therefore, my research helped to understand better this issue of providing equitable education and helped change some attitudes. It also provided an opportunity to work with a team to develop and refine strategies that should have an immediate impact at this school. In addition, I believe this contributed to the knowledge base that may help other administrative teams at other schools in developing strategies.

Setting and Population

In order to understand the context and applicability of this study to this school and to other schools as well, it was important to have an understanding of this setting and

population. One could say this high school is unique in that it was seen as a typical suburban high school by national media and politics. In 1966 and 1967 it was the subject of an hour long CBS documentary. In 1996, President Clinton chose this high school as a place to give a speech on a suburban community's efforts to address the issues of drug use by teenagers. In 1999, it was chosen by *Time* magazine for a look into what a suburban high school is really like after Columbine. *Time* selected this school because they saw it as a "bellwether" community and as "middle of the road" (Gibbs, 1999, p. 68).

This school was a Midwestern high school with adequate resources. This was important because much concern was expressed about the lack of resources contributing to lower achievement of African American students, especially in urban schools (Alonso, 2009; Dickar, 2008; Pollock, 2004). As a result, this study was able to focus on educational barriers other than material or financial ones in a school where the average GPA of African American students has been almost one full point below that of White students.

There were 1400 students at this high school with an African American population of 25 percent. Two thirds of these African American students resided within the district boundaries and one third resided in an adjoining large urban area. These students were bussed in to the high school. Students from within the district and from the urban area were invited to participate in the initiative.

Participants

The primary resources for this study were the members of the administrative team at the high school and district level, and senior students and former students who chose to participate in the Challenge initiative.

Several groups of people from the Webster Groves School District were included:

- Administrators at the high school and central office (N=7)
- African American former students who participated in the Challenge Initiative (N=2)
- African American current students who participate in the Challenge Initiative (N=11)
- African American former students who did not participate in the Challenge Initiative (N=1)
- African American current students who did not participate in the Challenge Initiative (N=2)
- African American, White and other non-African American upperclassmen social studies students in class discussions (N=35)

The administrative team at the high school consisted of a White principal, an African American female assistant principal, an African American male assistant principal, a White female assistant principal, and a White activities director. All participated in the interviews except for the activities director. When the initiative was started, there was also a White male assistant principal who is now the Director of Student Services who had very little to do with planning the initiative but did experience the results of this process for several years. He participated in the interviews as well. I am a White

assistant principal and I described my role later in this chapter. The White female assistant principal and the White activities director and I had very little to do with the planning or implementation of the initiative. In addition to the Director of Student Services at Central Office, the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent also participated. Their roles were primarily supportive roles. It should be noted that although the principal was instrumental in starting the initiative, the timing was right in terms of a strong superintendent who was open to this initiative and an assistant superintendent that had a passion for equity. In addition, the two African American assistant principals were also strong leaders and had a very good relationship with the principal. Each of the high school and central office administrative team members' perceptions of this initiative were among the several topics explored in the interviews with them.

Questions for the administrative team included questions that cause them to think inwardly and explored motivations and vision. What was their story as an educator and administrator? What were their experiences of prejudice or inequitable educational opportunities? What was the motivation for establishing this initiative? How did the principal communicate his vision for this initiative? How did the administrative team identify the systemic barriers to equitable access to education and what did each member believe were the barriers? How did the administrative team collaborate on their design and implementation of the initiative? Did they feel they listened and were listened to by other members of the team? What were the anticipated risks involved in beginning the initiative? What was the resistance to this effort by the team, by central office, staff, parents, community and students? How did the administrators adjust to this resistance?

What did they perceive as the reasons or emotions tied in with resistance of this initiative? How did members of the team feel supported? From whom was the most valuable support? How did each member of the administrative team view the successes, strengths and weaknesses of the current efforts? Had anything inadvertently been harmful to students at this school?

Inclusion Criteria

My inclusion criteria for students was to ask administrators who facilitate the Challenge initiative to identify current seniors and former students who have graduated that they believed were a true representation of those that participated in the initiative. In addition, they were asked to anticipate who they believed would be willing to be interviewed based on their knowledge of the students. I also asked that they select students who presented a balance of academic achievement and should include a proportionate number of students with a GPA below a 2.0, between a 2.0 and 3.0 and above a 3.0. These administrators of this initiative were very familiar with the achievement levels of the participants because they regularly tracked their progress. I asked the administrators of this program to identify a balanced academic achievement representation, and if necessary, review their transcripts. The permission letters stated that I had access to their school records so they knew that they were consenting to this as well as the interviews.

My inclusion criteria for administrator interviews were that they were either high school or central office administrators and that they were willing to participate. In addition, a requirement was that administrators have either worked with students in this initiative or were very familiar with the initiative. This applied to all current

administrators at the high school at that time and all administrators at central office, so all were asked to participate. All those who agreed to being interviewed were interviewed.

I selected two social studies classes in which I led discussions with the assistance of the teachers. Inclusion criteria were based on the classes having a diverse population, at least 20% African American students with a near balance of males and females. I also assured that at least two to three of the students in the class were participating in the Challenge initiative. The selection of these classes was based on knowledge that students in these classes were primarily juniors and seniors and thus, in the two to three years they were at the high school, had the benefit of drawing on experiences at the high school in the discussion of the Challenge initiative and the possible impact of race on success at this high school.

Many of the administrators who participated in the interviews were also randomly consulted for feedback on the themes of the interviews as they progressed.

The sample was one of convenience since I am an assistant principal at this school and students and staff were easily accessible to me for observations, interviews and class discussions. However, this made me a participant observer and therefore my presence may have had an impact on this study. I hoped to have tempered that influence by meeting with students who had already graduated or who were about to graduate. The fact that those being interviewed were seniors or graduates of the school and would not be at the high school the following year, also tempered my authoritarian role. My experience as a clinical social worker also provided me with the expertise to help students feel comfortable in the setting.

Method of Recruitment

I recruited current seniors at that time or recent graduates for individual or small group interviews by obtaining their names from facilitators of the initiative as described above and then by sending a letter to them and to their parents if students are under 18. The purpose of sending a letter was to help reduce a sense of coercion they might feel if I or another staff member would have asked them in person. The letter had information about the study and a phone number and email address where they could contact me if they were interested in participating or if they would like more information. They were given a week to reply. If they were not interested, they did not need to reply. I continued to send letters to students or graduates until I got the desired number of students for the interviews. The letter said they had the option of being interviewed individually or with one or two other students. If they responded, I asked them if they had a preference and then asked them to sign the consent, or assent and parent permission.

To recruit members of the high school and central office administration, I sent an email to them outlining the study. They were asked to contact me if they were willing to participate or if they had questions. If they chose not to participate, they were told that they did not need to respond. Recruitment forms were attached to this email. Consent forms were given to them if they agreed to participate.

After two classes were selected based on the criteria described in the previous section, I recruited students in those classes to participate in the discussion and to allow me to record the discussion for possible use in my dissertation. I asked the teacher of the class to read them the letter about the study and tell students that while their participation would be helpful to the purpose of the study, they were not required to participate. They

were also told that participating or not participating would in no way impact their grade. Those students indicating that they were willing to participate were able to clarify any questions with me at a pre-discussion meeting and I distributed the appropriate forms to them based on their age. It was planned that if a majority of the students who as a group met the selection criteria in a selected class did not wish to participate and be recorded, another class that met the selection criteria would be selected. This was not necessary.

I randomly shared progress on themes from the interviews with administrators and asked for feedback.

Role of Subjects

The anticipated role of student subjects was either to be interviewed individually or in small groups of two to three. All students chose to be interviewed individually except those that were part of the class discussion. The individual interviews helped ensure that I had the more in depth input of students who had participated in the Challenge Initiative and at least those who chose not to participate in the initiative. Other students participated in a class discussion, and the majority of these students did not participate in the Challenge Initiative but did know about it and did express that they experienced possible barriers to equitable access to education for themselves or other students. Anticipated barriers based on race were lower academic expectations of African American students by staff, disproportionate discipline referrals, or isolation in higher-level classes such as AP or Honors classes. This discussion was primarily for purposes of my research but was still related to the social studies class they were taking and hopefully had a positive impact on continued systemic change at this school. The focus, then, was on student and administrator perceptions of barriers as well as supports and catalysts at this high school

regarding equitable access to education. The Challenge initiative was specifically explored in this context.

The administrator subjects were interviewed individually and then again, informally and randomly for their input on themes. Students and administrators were asked to tell their personal stories that relate to race and their specific experiences at this high school regarding the barriers and supports to student success. In this context, administrators were asked to specifically comment on the formation process and impact of the Challenge Initiative and its impact on the success of students at this high school. There was no deception on the purpose of their participation. My role was as participant-observer and interviewer. I added my reflections on my experiences as part of this administrative team.

I conducted the individual interviews and then the class discussions with the assistance of the teacher of that class. It was assumed that the students would be more familiar with the teacher and would more readily respond to his or her probing questions. Administrators and students were informed that I was conducting the interviews when I was recruiting them by letter to participate and they were able to choose to simply not respond to the request if they were uncomfortable participating. I was interviewing older students who are close to graduation or students that have already graduated to help reduce the sensitivity and coercion factors that might be involved by being interviewed by an administrator.

Researcher's Role

My role in this study was one of a participant observer. I had the advantage of being both an insider and outsider. I was part of the administrative team and a veteran member of the team having been an administrator at this school for 23 years. I had the

experience of participating in collaborative efforts with this current team in regard to many different matters and also bring experience and longevity to this team. However, I am also an outsider regarding a focus of this study, namely the Challenge initiative. I had not been part of the inner circle of this administrative team in the planning and implementation of this initiative. So, in my interviews with the administrative team, I had the perspective of knowing each of them and how they generally collaborate on other matters but was also learning from them in terms of their experiences in collaborating on this issue which had so much to do with race. We had a White principal in a position of authority working with two African American assistant principals in a matter related to barriers to education for African American students. There were also two White assistant principals, including myself, and a White activities director.

I was also partially an insider and partially an outsider with our African American senior student participants. I knew the majority of them by name and, by their senior year, I had greeted them at least several times in the hall, visited their classrooms, and interacted with many of them at activities. I was the assigned assistant principal for about 25 percent of these students, I had met several of these students' parents and many of these students had spoken to me in my office about a variety of topics or concerns. Yet, I was also an outsider. I had not experienced what they had in the classrooms or halls; I was not African American; I was not young and I was certainly not a part of their inner circle. So, I was an outsider looking in to their experiences and what meaning they assign to these experiences.

I needed to be mindful that I was a privileged White male and while my intention here was to be of assistance to our African American students in identifying and

eliminating barriers to their success, it was important for me to evaluate my motivation and my impact.

My role and longevity of 27 years at this site gave me the benefit of historical perspective and familiarity with the setting and culture of this high school. As I described in the introduction, my experiences and reflections as a seminary student; an associate pastor for several years; and as a teacher, crisis counselor and administrator in various settings for an additional 15 years; contributed to my ability and desire to explore and reflect on this issue and offer perspective from outside this school. My experiences and training as a clinical social worker gave me the advantage of having done many interviews in therapeutic settings and provided me with the skills to help those being interviewed to be more comfortable in more freely sharing their experiences.

Trustworthiness

As participant observer I was aware that I brought my biases to this study and that this could have affected my interpretation of my interviews and observations. I needed to reflect constantly on my interpretations and how my biases influenced them. I also needed to reflect continuously on my impact on student responses and behavior. I needed to minimize my role as an assistant principal by interviewing students who had graduated or who were in their senior year. I discussed my observations and interviews with an African American administrative colleague in the building to determine if they were consistent with their perceptions through informal conversations with students in the building. Triangulation was used to compare and contrast emerging themes. I had multiple sources of data from in-depth interviews with administrators and students, from group interviews in a classroom, as well as my own experiences having been at this

suburban high school for a significant period. Consistent with Merriam's (2009) explanation of triangulation, I used multiple sources of data as described above, and in addition, compared and contrasted this data with my literature review. Overall, those who read it will determine the trustworthiness of this study. Did this data articulate something about their experience in a high school?

Measurement Procedures

Data were collected in several ways. I completed interviews with 16 African American senior students or recent graduates. I used criteria sampling methods. I asked the facilitators of the initiative to select students to be invited based equally on gender and to invite students proportionately who had a higher Grade Point Average (GPA), an average GPA and a below average GPA. The purpose of this was to be sure that I had gotten the perspectives of each gender as well as students who had excellent grades, average grades and below average grades with the expectation that these students may possibly offer different perspectives of the initiative and other structures in the high school. The interviews were semi-structured using the interview protocol described and I asked probing questions based on their replies. As an assistant principal, I had access to their school records but specifically mentioned this in their consent and assent forms. I anticipated that the interviews would last a half hour to an hour, which they did, and they took place at the high school in my office or a conference room and were before, after or during school hours. Interviews were audio-recorded.

My first question for students in individual interviews was to ask them to tell me their story, especially as it involved education and their race. I asked students to tell me about themselves and their families. I probed for more information about their

experiences, particularly at this high school, and the meaning they assigned to these experiences. While I explored their experiences of inequity based on race at the high school, I specifically asked them about their experiences with the Challenge initiative, about other supports they had found helpful at this school, their perception of conversations at meetings about the gap, about barriers they had experienced in their education, about staff members who had made a connection with them, about the role of their peers in their academic achievement, and about things that they would change or do differently if they were principal.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each member of the administrative team. My first question was open ended and I asked each to tell me their story regarding race and education. I probed for experiences and for the meaning they attached to these experiences, especially in terms of how these meanings move them to action. With administrators, I anticipated that several topics would be discussed including their motivation to provide equitable instruction, collaboration with the team, their vision for the school, perceived risks and setbacks, strengths and successes of the initiative, and barriers and supports they had identified in the systems and structures of the school. I specifically asked these questions if these topics did not come up. The interviews were audio recorded and took place in their offices at the high school or at central office.

Because of previous positive experiences with leading class discussions on a topic, I, with the assistance of the classroom teacher, led two class discussions on barriers to education based on race. Students, who did not agree to participate, were allowed to go to the library and complete an alternate assignment determined by the teacher. I selected a class with juniors and seniors who were at least 20% African American. There

was a 25% African American population at our school and I was able to get a proportional mix of race based on the demographics of the school. For the class discussion, I began by placing the following statement on the board and asking them to discuss: “there is equitable access to education at this high school for African American students, why or why not?” It was my plan that I would be able to help students identify possible barriers to success and those structures such as the Challenge initiative that they believed supported success at this high school. These discussions were audio recorded. I also had access to their school records but did not refer to the records since these are not in depth interviews and I assumed by the class I selected that there would be a range of achievement levels. They were informed of this access in the assent and consent forms. The discussions were in the classroom at this high school and were audio recorded.

As themes developed, I sought and considered their additional input, feedback and corrections. Documents related to the Challenge initiative were also collected and most were in digital form. These were public documents, available to anyone who requested them. These artifacts available to the general public were such things as power point presentations to students, staff, school board, community committees and parents on the goals of the initiative as well as general trend data on achievement and attendance of students, and especially African American students who did and did not participate in the initiative, since the initiative began. School records of individual students were also available to me as an assistant principal. This was stated on the consent and assent forms. These records were used primarily to insure recruitment of a wide range of students with various levels of academic achievement.

Following is a chart that summarizes the data collection process that I used in this study:

Data Collection Procedures Summary

Interviews with students	Individual semi-structured interviews with 13 senior students or graduates who participated in the Challenge and 3 senior students or graduates who did not. Questions were around their stories regarding race and education, perceptions of barriers and supports to education and what they would do differently if they were an administrator.
Interviews with administrative team	Individual semi-structured interviews with members of the high school and district administrative team. Questions were around their stories of race and education, their motivation for developing initiatives to address equitable access to education, structures of the school they have identified as barriers, resistance to efforts, and what they would do differently if they did it over again.
Data and documents available to public	Achievement data and other statistics available to the public were used.
Class discussions	Selected two upper classes with race of members proportional to entire school. Discussed barriers and supports to education based on race.
Challenge documents	Documents such as power points to parents and students, achievement data presented and other communication available to public.
Informal discussion with administrators	After coding of individual interviews, class discussions and documents, feedback and suggestions were sought in informal conversations with administrators and staff on the meaning and accuracy of data collected and coded.

Risk Management

Risks to administrators and students were minimal and those risks were primarily confidentiality regarding their possible identification by what they said in the interview, their known association with this high school and possible feelings of coercion to participate. The dissertation is a public document available for those researching this topic.

Data may be shared in a professional development with teachers if the administration believes it will be helpful to them, but if so, broad emerging themes and quotes will be shared but there will be no effort to tie quotes to specific students.

Consistent with my proposal to the IRB, student names were not used but only other names randomly selected and matched from a yearbook 10 years ago. I listed the actual first names of the students and then went through the yearbook and assigned the names of African American students in order that attended 10 years ago. Individual students will be difficult to identify and I told the students that any information that might easily identify him or her will not be used. There was some possibility that students might have felt coerced to participate since I am an assistant principal. I tried to reduce this possibility by my method of recruitment and by recruiting only students in their last year at the high school or who had recently graduated. My method of recruitment was by letter. They did not need to respond if they had any reason whatsoever for not participating. There was no face-to-face recruitment by me, so I believe it was very easy for a student to not respond if they were uncomfortable participating. In addition, it seemed those students in their last year at the high school, or who had recently graduated, were less likely than younger students to feel coerced. Most students interviewed individually or in small groups were 18 or near 18 years of age. In addition, students had the option to be part of a small group rather than being interviewed individually if they were more comfortable with this. No students chose this option. Students in the classes in which a discussion on this topic were conducted were not approached by me about participating in the discussion but were approached by their teacher and given a letter to take home and only needed to bring it back if they want to participate. They were assured

by the teacher that their participation or lack of participation would not impact their grade whatsoever. Once again, I had no face to face contact with these students to recruit them to stay in the class for the discussion. I did not have contact until after they have made a decision to participate or to get more information about the discussion.

I used names of streets in this community for administrators but administrators may be more easily identified by those that have identified this district and know them or know their position in the district. However, administrators might have been more guarded about sharing views they may not want to be public. However, they had the ability to correct or clarify information in the transcripts at any time before this dissertation was submitted.

Data Analysis

Transcripts of interviews, focus group, class discussions and observations, along with documents related to the initiative were analyzed continuously throughout the study. This continuous data analysis allowed me to go back, as necessary, to fill in the gaps or test hypotheses that emerged from the data. Emerging themes were shared informally with administrators in casual conversations for feedback and additions.

To help guide my analysis of the data, borrowed the methodology of grounded theory. Although I used my literature review as a framework for this study, I was still open to let the data guide the growth and development of new themes. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have developed a systematic approach to coding data. Shank (2006, p.130) reported that they developed several stages of the coding process, the following of which I used to some degree in my analysis of the data:

1. Line by line analysis of the data.

2. Open coding: data broken down into parts, compared and contrasted.
3. Axial Coding: relating categories to subcategories.
4. Selective coding process: selecting a central category and integrating existing categories. (Shank, p. 130)

I used some of these methods in relation to aspects of the constant comparative method as described by Merriam (2009). She stated that the constant comparative method of data analysis is when “data are grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it becomes a category” (p.30). Merriam explained that the ultimate objective was to discover pattern in the data. These patterns were then arranged in ways that they relate to one another.

To assist in organizing and analyzing data I used a qualitative analysis software package called ATLAS ti. Miles and Huberman (1994) described the process of analyzing data as proceeding “through first level coding, second level or pattern codes and the process of deriving even more general themes called memoing” (p. 51). This process of analysis can be cumbersome but ATLAS ti is a computer software tool that assisted with this. The software allowed me to select, manage and compare data into themes in this study.

While I was looking for emerging themes to build new theory, I anticipated using themes and theoretical frameworks developed from the literature review to provide some orientating ideas. Anfara and Mertz (2006) in their review of the literature on the role of theoretical frameworks in qualitative studies concluded that these theoretical frameworks have their place. They serve as “lenses from and through which the researcher looks at his study” (p. xxvii). They explained that theoretical framework helps to frame the

problem and the purpose of the study. I did not want to be limited by theoretical frameworks but I needed some frameworks to pose the problem and the purpose of the study.

One theoretical framework that I considered but did not use as complete framework is Critical Race Theory (CRT). However, I borrowed certain elements or themes from this framework. Howard (2010) described CRT as a “movement born out of critical legal studies seeking to address issues of racial inequality and the overlooked role that race and racism have played in the construction of the legal foundation” (p.98). Similar to the explanation of critical research described above, Howard (2010) stated that the question for CRT in education is “how has racism contributed to educational disparities, and how can it be dismantled” (p.99). Regarding its application to education, Merriam (2009) explained that questions are asked about “the way the educational system is organized, who really has access to particular programs, who has the power to make changes and what are the outcomes about the ways in which education is structured” (p.35). My research included interviewing students and asking them to tell me their story in terms of this community and school. Howard (2008) explained the importance of CRT as a methodology in terms of analysis of narrative and storytelling. In reference to an article by Matsuda (1993), Howard (2008) stated that “the idea of counter storytelling and inclusion of narratives as a mode of inquiry offers a methodology grounded in the particulars social realities and lived experiences” (p. 967). So, borrowing from CRT, I looked at student and administrator stories and lived experiences and I looked for themes around power structures and how race had impacted these structures.

Two other themes or frameworks were borrowed from the ISLLC standards. One theme for this study included how administrators were communicating a vision of learning that was supported by the school community. I was also looking at methods of communicating and collaborating with staff and community (ISLLC, 1996). These two ISLLC standards were used to help analyze the administrative processes as they specifically related to the efforts to provide equitable access to education for African American students.

Other frameworks that were used have been derived from the literature review and identified as principles found in the Challenge initiative that may assist in academic achievement. The principles identified and described earlier in the proposal were: positive identity toward academic success and the school's role; the impacts of intentional and articulated efforts; connectedness to one's racial peers; and positive and caring environment as it relates to trust in the institution.

Limitations

The limitations of this research included the small research sample that is typical of qualitative studies. This research was limited to one school and one administrative team. The researcher was a member of this team and must be aware of biases that may interfere with interpretations of data. This researcher is also a friend and has been a co-worker for more than twenty years of the principal of this suburban high school and this researcher must be aware of the impact this would have on analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Application was made to the Internal Review Board (IRB) to determine if this design meets acceptable standards. The IRB approved the methods of this study.

Methods of minimizing risk and protecting individual participants as described were reported. Informed consent was given to all participants 18 and older and assent forms and parent permission were obtained from students who were under 18 years of age.

Chapter Four: Results

As described previously, African American students at this Midwestern suburban high school have had lower grade point averages, lower attendance rates, and have been failing more classes than the general population. However, our African American students appear to have access to the same materials, same teachers, same activities and same resources as other students, or do they? So, while examining quantitative data may allow us to see that African American students are not being as successful as other students even though they are at the same school, the quantitative data is not as helpful in providing the insight we need to identify the cause. Instead of focusing on numbers and quantitative data, this study examined this issue from the perspective of these students themselves and the administrators who were responsible for providing a school environment where African Americans truly had equitable access to education and an equitable opportunity to achieve.

In order to gain insight from student and school administrator perspectives, I conducted intensive semi-structured individual interviews with 16 African American senior students or former students. In addition, classroom discussions were conducted in classes in which students represented the demographic population at this school. I also interviewed seven administrators from this high school and this district central office. These administrators included the principal at this school and the superintendent of this district.

With these interviews I tried to gain a better understanding of the administrative processes involved in identifying both the barriers and supports that students experienced at this high school. As a result I hoped to make solid recommendations for administrators

at this school and other schools to better provide equitable access for African American students. A focus was on the administrative processes involved in developing an initiative by members of this administrative team. It was an intervention designed specifically for African American students and was intentional and articulated as such. As both an insider to this school's administrative team and a veteran educator and the senior administrator in this district, and as an outsider to the design of this initiative, I attempted to integrate the perspectives provided by these interviews with my own experiences and reflections on my forty-one-year career educating students. In the words of students and administrators, I have reported the perceptions of administrators and students on how the Challenge initiative came about, the motivations of the administrators, the barriers addressed and the structural supports developed and the perceived effectiveness of these efforts. I have used Atlas-ti computer software to assist me in coding and identifying themes and patterns.

Through these interviews with our administrative team and our students, I described general perceptions of this high school and community, provided a broad description of those who were interviewed and their motivations to make special efforts to assist African American students, reported why the administration felt a need to start the initiative, provided a description of the initiative, pointed out the challenges and risks administrators took in starting the initiative, identified the barriers students were facing and the supports students were experiencing, and reported on the perceived successes of the school efforts, especially the initiative. I also included the data that the school has collected to measure progress on improving the academic success of our African American students.

It should be noted again that the names of administrators used in this report were not their actual names but were names of streets in this community. The names used for students were also not their real names but names of students whose names are in a yearbook that was published ten years ago.

Administrator and Student Perceptions of this High School and Community

Overall, the perceptions of our administrators and students about this high school were positive. It is important to note that many of these perceptions of this school, especially the perceptions of the students, have been expressed after interventions and the Challenge initiative have been in place for about seven years. The principal, Dr. Lockwood (all administrator's names have been changed), who was an administrator at this high school for over 20 years, said: "I have learned that every day I have more to learn. I'm really proud of the district I am in and the work we have done in the area of social justice." An African American male student, Corey (all student names have been changed), who was part of the Challenge initiative for four years expressed a consistent theme I have heard from most of our students interviewed about this high school:

At this high school, we have great, great teachers that they really do care about their students. I've had some teachers, and you are going to have this in every school, where some teachers, they may not like you, and they may not support you as well as other teachers do, but I think overall, I think it's really, they really do a great job here of understanding your situations and really keying into you as a person.

Other African American students echoed this same sentiment. Ashley, a senior African American female said "We have great classes, we have great teachers, it's more like the

school itself is good” and Crystal, an African American female graduate of this school said “I just feel like this school is awesome” and Erika, a female African American senior said “it's not like we can't relate to our teachers like we can't talk to our teachers because it's like, that's one thing that I love here. It's just like, it's like a family. Like you don't feel like, you don't feel like you don't know anyone or anything or like no one cares about you.” Even those that hesitated about how positive they felt about this school could point to some relationship. For example, Leslie, a senior African American female said “but the only teacher, and the only teacher that I've actually had a really good relationship with, like all my four years of high school, would be Mr. D., he's always like been...oh, and Miss H. and Miss R. Okay, I just said only.”

While there had been some progress here with regard to academic success for our African American students as the data chart later in this report shows, there was and still is a gap in achievement at this high school for African American students even though they have access to the same resources as other students. One male African American assistant principal, Mr. Sylvester, expressed his frustration:

I am very frustrated here because there are so few African Americans and I would think if there's a place that if we could fix the achievement gap, I think that would be a place like this, where we have so few where you could, where it's not a matter of resources but attention you could put on those kids that struggle.... I think we have a lot of supports from staff, from monies, from our teachers. I think to fail at (this school) now you have to actively do it.

As described in the introduction this high school is located in a town near a large urban area. A few of our African American students refer to this town in their comments about our school. Corey stated:

I think that like at the high school that there are some barriers, but I think that a lot of times, the barriers come from outside of the school, you know, in the community, when you know people don't expect African Americans to step up and be a part of a community like this that is predominately White, and you can see that in the faces that you may get when you walk into a business and like someone may blow up because they are surprised that you walked in their business and you want to do business with this individual. You can see it with the public safety officials.

An African American female student, Jessica, explained to me:

You have Black (part of town) and White (part of town), and I can point those out for you, like you know when I say north (town), it is Black people, and when you say the other side of town, it's White people. And so we're in this community with each other. We don't know, half the time, people don't even branch out of their community. They don't communicate with White people. When a White person moves on my street, we're like, 'Wow. I wonder if they're going to be ready for what goes on in this side of town.' Like that just happened probably two days ago, my mom and I had this conversation. Like, 'Oh, my goodness. They live on our street. They better lock their doors. They can't keep their blinds open over here.'

Another African American female student, Candace, who lived in the large urban area and took a 40-minute bus ride each morning to attend this high school as a voluntary transfer student explained her perception of where she lived:

Oh well, I do live in the city where there's predominantly Black people and I've had my bad run-ins with, like, people just, you know, for no reason calling me a n----r or a monkey, but I don't really, you know, pay too much attention to it because... It really... it bothers me, but at the same time, I have really tough skin, like, I just... don't let it bother me.

All these students came through our doors each day and we were responsible as a high school to help them be successful and break down any barriers to their success. Dr. Buesse, a central office administrator, explained that there was a history here in this town of closing the pool in the 1960's rather than letting African American residents use it and other discriminatory actions over the years:

People that are alive today experienced it and can tell this story and their kids hear that story, and they watch for things. I'm not saying that things don't happen, but I think there's still that distrust ... some of these people have got to be still alive if I'm alive, so some of that's been carried on.

Another central office administrator, Mr. Bradford, explained:

I know we we've work to do, we still have work to do because I know there's still some distrust, amongst families living in north (town), of the school district. We've had district wide committees forever that have dealt with social justice, achievement, sponsoring things like the MLK Walk, having the back-to-school picnic and (Community) Run (named for an African American resident). It's hard

to put a finger on specific things... That's why I was struggling with formulating an answer because I was thinking resources and I was thinking parental involvement and I was thinking, you know, things along those lines... but I don't know that we necessarily have the issues that they have in some (other) school districts or inner-city school districts. And that's what makes me wonder... you know it's a systemic issue.

Administrators Interviewed: Experience of Race, Motivation and Collaboration

The criteria I used for selecting administrators to be interviewed included being either high school or central office administrators and being willing to participate. In addition, a requirement was that the administrator either worked with students in the Challenge initiative or was very familiar with the initiative. Seven administrators agreed to be interviewed. At the time of the interviews the high school administrators consisted of a Black male and female, a White female, and the principal who is a White male. Central Office administrators consisted of two White males and the Superintendent who was a White female. I am a White male and since my role and longevity of 27 years at this site gave me the benefit of historical perspective and familiarity with the setting and culture of this high school, I understood my obligation to report other's views accurately without bias while at the same time contributing my insights into this issue.

Dr. Lockwood, the principal, described himself and his motivation for assisting African American students:

First of all, I grew up in a small farm town where my family never really talked about race. It was an all-White community and there certainly wasn't much race discussed and what my grandparents did discuss was probably more in a negative

tone. My first 7 years of teaching was in a rural area again. It was mostly White and there really wasn't much race discussed at all. It really wasn't needed. This is my 20th year at (this) high school which is 25% minority students, and I will admit that it was probably a shock for me first coming to Webster Groves High School, but it was probably the best thing for me overall because of the things I've learned, I discovered not just my passion as an educator but my passion for helping students, and I think it's the best thing for me being in (this community) because I have a chance to make positive influences for all students. I'm lucky to be at (this) school district because really, when I was here 20 years ago, they were starting to have discussions about the achievement gap and there were committee wide achievement gap committees in the district, and we started working on social justice probably 15 years ago, and that's t been going on, really ongoing for the past ... since I've been here. It's really made me realize and look at the gap that exists between our African American students and Caucasian students. That I feel like, I guess I've learned the importance of developing relationships with students, and with all students. But I felt like I have had more success developing relationships with African American students because I feel like they are more open to develop relationships with me, and I've learned that there are some cases they are looking for help, and I feel like I'm closer to African American students.

All the White administrators who were interviewed grew up in mostly segregated areas and attended schools that were primarily White. For the most part, it was not until they got into education and in some cases until they arrived at this high school that they were challenged to address the issue of African American students. Mrs. Swon, who was

a White female assistant principal at this high school, grew up in a rural, primarily White area. She discussed how her motivation and her passion for assisting Black students developed:

I personally fell in love with a Black male who I'm married to now, so I am in an interracial marriage and have biracial children. National Council for Educating Black Children, the NCEBC, which was eye opening and the reality came to my world probably for the first time. It was a great conference and just made me really start thinking of the role that I could have as an educator, as a change agent... So that was really a first time that I started considering things that could be changed to make things more equitable for all students.

Others discussed how events in their personal lives or a particular conference or workshop made an impact on them. Dr. Buesse, our superintendent, shared:

I'm almost going to call it my hidden piece of information, my sister is married to an African American, so three of my nieces and nephews are mixed race, and quite honestly, growing up in an all-White small farming community that was a rather huge deal. It was monumental, actually, in our family, I regret it was that big, but as a middle schooler at the time, it was a huge deal.

Dr. Buesse went on to share that a turning point for her was participating in a conference where she traveled to inner city school and reflected on her experiences there, especially the safety issues and lack of resources. She said that this had an impact on her motivation to work with students impacted by poverty and race. Mr. Bradford, a White central office administrator relayed a similar experience of growing up in a White area and that his family was part of the White flight as African Americans began to move into their area.

He shared an experience of going as a varsity basketball player to a school that had mostly Black students. He said: “I guess they were nervous or scared. I don’t know if something had gone on or if this was their normal thing. It was my first year on varsity, and they wanted us walked off the bus, one coach led us and the other coach was at the end and we all had to stay in like a single file line.” He said he later reflected on these experiences in his social justice training offered by this school district. Dr. Mason, another central office administrator, described his experiences growing up in an upper class community and attending a private school that is primarily White students. He explained: “Following that I went to University ... where my world kind of exploded, and I realized that all the richness of diversity that was in the world, and the people that didn’t look like me, and it didn’t take long for me to understand, although I couldn’t speak to the concept of White privilege until it was labeled for me later in life.” He went on to explain his contacts with African American friends there helped deepen his understanding and sensitivity to the issue. As other administrators in this district, he at least partially associated his motivation to provide equitable access for African American students with attending social justice training in his previous district which continued when he came to this district. He explained “so again the passion and the desire and the need continued to deepen... (with a) similar commitment to all kids and helping an affluent school system where the community largely sees it as... a really great school, recognizing there are populations that don’t see the same because their children haven’t been as successful with the system, some of them.” I interviewed two African American administrators, one male and one female. Their motivation also came out of personal experiences where they experienced directly racial bias. Mr. Sylvester, an African

American male assistant principal described himself and his motivation to help African American students to be successful:

I am the product of and bare the baggage of two parents who were raised in the South from the 20s, 30s, 40s through Jim Crow...tend to see things (good, bad, or indifferent) thru a race perspective. Sometimes it is my own bias that it takes me some time to kind of own and realize... I had five friends I grew up with. We were all of color. We all had mothers and fathers who were together for long times, everybody worked; there was nothing like you see on TV of the expectation that they were single parent families. That being said, we all went to black churches in the city, which I view as something that really solidified in my core ... It was drilled into us about how we were supposed to go out and represent and do well. I always loved education. I'm a product of this district... I'm very proud of being an educator and very proud of being an educator of color living in the district. I take a lot of pride in being a role model. Sometimes, I am relentless of my expectations for kids, but I think nonetheless I think that is a great example. I think I'm a product of what education can do for you, and I don't think I was pushed or worked very hard. So my goal is to have any child who comes through who is a kid of color to at least acknowledge that they knew now how important this was.

In my experiences in talking and working with him for over 12 years I knew he believed in holding students to high expectations, got frustrated when he saw other adults who have lower expectations for Black students, and he pushed students to behave and be successful. I believe he was in a tough spot because as one student explains later, he got

some push back on this from these same students. However, his philosophy seen in his statements above had a big impact on how the purpose and goals of the Challenge initiative developed.

Another important administrator with whom the principal strongly collaborated and who had a big impact on the development and implementation of the Challenge initiative is Dr. Joy, the African American female assistant principal. She described some of her experiences below that had an impact on her motivation to make this high school a better place for African American students. Below she described some of her experiences when she was a high school student herself:

I just recall a couple incidents with first of all students, White students, who were not accustomed to going to school with Black kids. They would have a lot of questions, which you know looking back now, I probably understand that they didn't understand but as a child, as a seventh grader I kind of thought they were trying to be funny. You know there were all kinds of questions about my hair, about skin, and about what I like to eat, where was it I was from, what we do there, kind of like it was a totally different place. I did see that the teachers who were in seventh and eighth grade if I remember correctly, all White, were not anywhere near what we have now as far as being able to relate or have any relevant type teaching. The White teachers assumed that Black students were less capable; they were not as inviting; they didn't push in my opinion, myself, and other African American students, and I can say that I've come in from the public school systems where I have been making straight A's since kindergarten, and then I came this west county school and those A's quickly turned into C's and

D's. So I think it was a part of the teachers and their lack of knowledge, but then also the environment of being bussed from the city to the county. So then in high school, I just found it to be pretty much of the same. And not so much as, you know by the time you got high school you knew the kids so not so much with the kids, but still with the teachers not believing that you are adequate enough to be in certain classes. I think at that particular time at (my) high school which I graduated in 1990...you could just as the student put your hand on racism as far as there were no African American girls on the cheerleading team, there were no African-Americans on student council, no African-American queen or kings or on court or anything of that nature. I actually recall a couple parents complaining, a couple African American parents, complaining about those issues; my mom being one... and my mom pushed so hard that like by my senior year they like literally gave me a spot on the cheer team. It was so funny, but I turned it down! So it was just a lot going on early; didn't see much racism at far as with the boys because boys always seem to be able to adapt more because boys were sport oriented so from basketball to football to track, it seemed like the boys always had a little easier time. Looking back then, even suspensions seemed to be off. Student of color or African American students were sent out of class quickly, they were suspended quickly. I remember this one instance there was a food fighting in the cafeteria, which I did not participate in, there was a food fight in the cafeteria and it was friends of mine, who actually lived on West side, and I really don't remember how it started. We laugh about it today about food going everywhere where they were, the black kids, were all suspended and the white kids were not.

And those parents came up, and I remember that being a big deal, and I remember one of the administrators saying “the Black you have another school to go to” so thing was we were considered visitors at (my high school) and that was their stance on not suspending the White kids because they would not have another school to go to, that they had to stay in school. And if the Black kids were suspended they were going to write something or that basically, they could go back to the city. So at the time I didn't understand that but I definitely, definitely, remember the comment saying that the Black kids have another school to go to.

As we looked at the Challenge initiative, it was obvious how her experiences and motivations, and her bringing these to her collaboration with the principal and other administrators, helped shape the Challenge. She contributed to their motivation to develop such positive relationships with so many of our African American students. Almost every student interviewed mentioned her as someone with whom they made an important connection. Her own motivation to get in education was in part the result of her connection with a teacher early on in her schooling: “I’ve wanted to be a teacher since the 3rd grade and this was due to my third-grade teacher who was also an African American female in my neighborhood.

Students Interviewed

While a focus of this investigation was on administrative processes, the perceptions of students, in addition to administrators, were very important in evaluating the effectiveness of these processes in bringing about equitable access to education and in developing new strategies to address this issue.

My inclusion criteria for students for in-depth interviews included that they were African American and presented a balance of academic achievement. This included a proportionate number of students with a GPA below a 2.0, between a 2.0 and 3.0 and above a 3.0. I asked Dr. Joy, who was a key facilitator of the Challenge initiative to identify current seniors and recently graduated students she believed were a true representation of those that had participated in the initiative and those that she believed would be willing to be interviewed based on her knowledge of the students. She was very familiar with the achievement levels of the participants because they regularly tracked their progress. She identified approximately 40 students and after reviewing their GPA and grouping them by this and by gender, I randomly chose students equally from each group. I sent each of them a letter to their home. I did not follow up with these students in order not to put pressure on them to participate. Thirteen seniors volunteered to be interviewed. Of these, six were males and seven were females. Two were not in the Challenge. One male and two females were Voluntary Transfer Students for the large urban area. In addition, three former students responded and were interviewed. Two were females. One female did not participate in the Challenge Initiative. In addition, I led a discussion in two social studies classrooms consisting of juniors and seniors. I started the class by putting on the chalkboard “equitable access to education for African American students, do we have this at this school?” The demographics of the students in these two classrooms were close to representing the demographics of the school with 25% African American, about 70% White and five percent other. Through these interviews I was able to get the perspective of African American students as well as those who were not African American. However, there appeared to be a different dynamic than

individual interviews as African American students seemed more intense to make their points to their peers.

I believed that conducting both individual and group interviews allowed me to obtain reliable information because there were consistent themes in both type of interviews.

Vision

Dr. Joy, an assistant principal and key collaborator with Dr. Lockwood, the principal, described her motivation in developing the Challenge initiative, and in implementing it, which stems from both her own experiences as a Black female when she was in high school and her experiences at this high school:

I know Dr. Lockwood (the principal) has his story about how it came about for him, but my story's a little different. Maybe my second year here, I had several African American students come to me, and I was the A Plus coordinator (so I don't know why they were coming to me) but they came to me and asked me if I can get them out of their Honor's classes, and I was like "Why would I do that?" And they were like "Well, you know, I'm the only Black, and I really don't like being in there." So I would ask them, "Is the teacher saying something to you or are the kids being mean to you, and they said "No, the teacher's fine, no, the kids are fine; I just don't feel comfortable being only black person in class..." And she said "it's hard some days." I said "Really?" And she said "Yeah, especially since we are watching a slave movie, and they are all looking at me, and then they want to apologize to me after class and say I'm sorry for everything." And this is a Black student who has a lot of White friends and she's like "I've never been a

slave, so I'm not really sure why they're apologizing to me.” I said “they feel a sense of guilt, they are not trying to be funny, they are sincerely your friends, and you know” and she said “The movie’s on and they want to ask me a question, and I don’t know the answers all the time” and she doesn’t. So that's how it came about for me. So I went to Dr. Lockwood and told him what I was experiencing and what some of the African American kids were saying to me because I experienced (when I was in high school), so I knew exactly how it felt to be the only Black person in the class so my thought was to take the students who were spread out in these top tier classes, African American students, and put them all together in a cohort, and then they will follow each other, not to be friends, but just to have someone in the class that looked like them. So I said we should do some special scheduling. There should not be an Honors AP with only one black person in the class. So that’s how it started for me. So when I said that to Dr. Lockwood, he said “Let’s do it for everybody.” I was like “Oh, okay.” So we did that for a while, and that’s kind of how it started. We made sure that there was at least one other that looked like them in the class.

When asked to describe his vision of the Challenge initiative, Dr. Lockwood, the building principal who started the Challenge initiative in 2009, stated:

We have fewer numbers now, and I’ll explain that later, but after 4 years, we had 200 students that accepted the challenge. At the time we had two student advisors that were huge supports to these 200 students. We had probably 30 individuals who were advisors to the students. The advisor’s role was to check on grades periodically and set individual goals with students and that would be every six

weeks; we would set individual goals, semester goals. We had individual rewards for students, and then we had group goals, and we also we shared the data with the students on a regular basis on students who were in the initiative versus students who were not in the initiative., and this was to keep looking at the achievement gap because the goal of the Webster Challenge initiative was to improve the achievement gap that existed in our nation by 15% by the time they graduated. And the areas (we focused on) were GPA, reduction of F's, and attendance... We need leaders in this class who want to make the change and reduce the gap.

The superintendent, Dr. Buesse, described the initiative as a way that students could motivate each other to be successful and that the first focus would be on improving grades and attendance. This followed Dr. Joy's theme of the Challenge initiative being a cohort. Dr. Buesse made a point to say that this initiative is just as much about African American students who are already doing well in school:

I think the biggest problem was to some parents thinking we were saying all kids needed this as opposed to seeing the kids can help other kids be successful and be the models for other kids. If your kid's succeeding let's put them in there because they're gonna be one of those kids we can hold up as a role model for everybody else. But we haven't put out the MAP data lately or the ACT data lately for the kids to see because this is a just about getting better grades and having better attendance and being involved in sports. It's also the end results in what graduation rates look like; are you going on to a career school or postsecondary education of some sort. It doesn't have to all be going to college by any means,

but that's creating that access, kids having everything they need in their hand to have access to the next step.

Dr. Joy confirmed that the initiative is more than providing academic assistance; it seemed that they are reaching for something else for these students:

When I talk to students and parents about the Challenge, I frame it as it is not a support for you...it's a support for a group of students, not a personal individual...I would get calls (from teachers) saying 'Hey, this kid is failing four classes. He needs to be in the Challenge.' No...he does need some support but it is not Challenge. Challenge is not about what I can do for the students, it is about What the students can do as a group...a cohort, a cause, bringing awareness and enlightening, kind of like... you know when everybody gets together at the Komen Walk, and they're all walking for a purpose and they are all going the same place, and that's kind of what the Challenge is. I want to see it as a group getting together all for a purpose heading in the same direction...it's more of an opportunity to work as a team to achieve a goal. To me, it should be seen more as teamwork.

So, she explained that the Challenge was more about teamwork and about students working together to motivate and encourage one another. The focus was not so much on getting specific instructional assistance, although that was available for all students, but rather it seemed to be more the psychological and social aspect of a cohort motivating and pushing one another to do well. There seemed to be a competitive edge to it which is consistent with the philosophy of our principal who, having been a college basketball

player, often motivated staff and students through a competitive spirit that was coupled with a supportive and caring atmosphere.

The Challenge had been open to all African American students who were willing to make a commitment to working hard and working with their African American peers to reduce the achievement gap. However, a year ago this was changed and they set a minimum grade point average. Dr. Joy stated that “last year, I think it was we decided to go one step further because we wanted to ensure that it was seen as an academic and leader type atmosphere, so then we went to the 3.0, leaders, or potential leaders.” When I asked about the concept of cohort and the possibility of students who were achieving having a positive impact on those that were not, both Dr. Lockwood and Dr. Joy said that they believed this still happened through contact with their peers in the school and neighborhoods. However, those students who asked to be in it and whose attendance, involvement and efforts appeared to indicate they were willing to work hard to the best of their ability, could still be in the Challenge. Often, when students heard about the Challenge, they wanted to be in it. Dr. Joy stated:

We have kids coming to us saying “How do I get in the Challenge? You know my friend is in it. I don’t have a 3.0, but what do I need to do?” Okay, do you really want to be in? “Okay, yeah.” So we sit down and have personal conversations with the students... what you can do, you can take your studies seriously, you can participate in activities, you can volunteer, you can be a role model, you can be a leader. That kid says “I want to be committed; I want to be a part; I want to work.” So then we take the kid. So, it’s not totally all about grades, but we kind of start that way, so we can pull kids in who really want to be there.

Student Perspective of the Vision of the Challenge

Generally, student views of the Challenge were positive and many of the statements by students regarding the purpose were consistent with those of the principal and the coordinators. Ryan, a recent male graduate, said: "I started seeing that all the African American students were joining, so I was just let me see what it is. But once I got in it, I liked the talks and discussions we had, plus the food we had, that was nice." John, a male senior, said that "sometimes the kids look at it as a way to get out of the class, but in a way, it is also helping them brighten up their future ... It's like a monthly refresher on how to stay on doing your stuff and doing your school work." Ashley, a senior, said that the Challenge really helped her with getting connected with colleges and finding a scholarship. She said: "You know just how I am able to set up a goal like what I want my GPA to be and like being awarded for that. Just like, it really boosts your confidence and it makes you really want to work hard." Kevin, a senior male emphasized that the Challenge "sets goals for them and then with those goals come a reward. And then we always come back as a group, check to see how we did as far as GPA, attendance." Diana, a senior female, echoes this by saying "the Challenge initiative really kind of focuses on you know you take charge. You set your goals. And you can do this." Candace explained:

Yeah, I do think (the Challenge) is a good idea because, like, it makes them feel like they're part of something. And when you're a part of something, you want to, like, you want to be on top of it and that's just, I guess, extra motivation for them to do better. And it gives them, like; the... it lets them know that someone cares,

like, outside of their family. That people, like, actually do care about their success and they're not just, like, trying to pass them off.

So, a focus of the Challenge was motivating students by helping them see themselves as part of a group that can, in fact, achieve. An important component of this was encouraging students to set individual and group goals by having a mentor as well as other students in the Challenge pushing them. These concepts of team or group, which is simultaneously pushing and caring, are consistent themes that almost all students say when they describe the Challenge. As one female student, Jessica, put it:

But I know for students who really are not on top of their game, it helps even more because you've got your mentor pulling you aside and being like you've got to get this together; what are you doing; why haven't you turned in these assignments? ...but a lot of the problem is a lot of students don't really have that motivation...And its students like that that you have to take and you have to say to them, look, this is all going to pay off. You know, a lot of people don't look at the bigger picture. So I feel like things like Challenge definitely helps with that. You know we do all have our different social groups but in that social group there's like one really good achieving person...So you know, you want to reach out to your friend and be like hey, like I can help you with this C because I have an A right now, so we can study together. So you know, just things like that.

Several students interviewed reinforced the importance of working as a team and helping one another. Marcus, who was a senior male said that he thinks "we need to find the students that can help the Challenge almost because I think it is easier for a student to help another student get better in school than maybe a teacher because the student

identifies with that student more so.” Another African American male student in one of the social studies classes articulated it this way:

Like no matter how good of friends I am with a White person, they can't relate to things that go on in my household because they're not in my household, they don't have to live the same life, they don't have to wear the same color that I wear every day, they don't go through the same things that I go through. There's things that we go through that a privileged White person does not go through and you can't relate, you can't have someone next to you helping you with school work, helping you with life, because that's what the Challenge does – it helps you with life – with someone that can relate to you on a day-to-day basis.

One African American female student, Erin, in one of the individual interviews, added: “Like letting other people down bothers me so if someone else sees that I want like a high grade, then I probably will try harder to get a high grade.” A former student, Tamara, explains that it is important for students to know it “is okay to be smart, it is okay to work hard, it is okay to be getting mostly A's, and that there is some type of an undercurrent that says that that isn't okay.”

However, should there be some concern about a group that is exclusive to only Black students? During a discussion in a social studies class, one White female student questioned if having a group of all Black students might be considered racist. She questioned if things were reversed and if there was a group that was exclusive to all White students if that would be considered racist. A Black female in the class responded: “Well, I don't think it's racist at all. It's just giving people a place to succeed because if you look at statistics, Black students don't do as good as Whites, so racist, I don't think

so.” A Black male in the class added to the discussion by making the point that “giving the minority students, and the students who as a race their numbers aren’t as high as another race... it makes sense to have a group that’s piloted to help those students. I don’t necessarily think it’s separating the students, I think it’s trying to help one group of students grow to achieve as high as another group of students.” The discussion went on about the history of discrimination and the Challenge trying to “level the playing field.” An African American male in this social studies class added that “they need the extra help because over time “they’ve been discriminated against and they have not been given the same opportunities that you have been given. That’s the whole purpose of the group.”

In addition to current Black students helping each other, it also included former Black students and Black members of the larger community coming back to talk with these students about their own struggles and commitment to achieve and how it has paid off for them to do this. Jessica explained:

(The Challenge) exposes us to things that I didn't get at my old school, and I think that's so cool. Like I've sat in on speakers, we had the, like the Challenge awards, and a guy who worked for the FBI came in and spoke to us, and I thought it was just the coolest thing because that's kind of what I want to do before I go into like my actual career path. I want to like, I don't know, work for the FBI just for a little bit, and so I thought that was so cool. And so I think that by inviting speakers like that or having a student from the Challenge initiative speak and be the M.C., like Cameron, he was the one who spoke the day that we had the Challenge awards. And so a lot of the times they will tell me about scholarships and stuff. Like the United Negro College Fund has a bunch of scholarships, and

they told me to apply, and I got it. Like I got the scholarship that they told me to apply for, or we went to this conference for the YWCA and I got the Young Leader award there. Therefore, it's like they're exposing Black students to things. This concept of team and sense of belonging to a group that provided resources that can help students compete with any other group and can achieve and be successful, not only in school, but beyond high school as well, appeared to be a very important focus and goal of the Challenge. Erika said: "I really appreciate what the Challenge thing stands for and what it's doing. And I know it's about closing the gap but I also believe it also brings the African-American students together, and it shows us, okay, this, this, and this is set up for you to succeed. We're here for you!" Another student, Candace, reinforced this: "And, like, having (my African American mentor), like, knowing I can go to him if, like, there's, like, anything wrong with me at home or at school, I know that I can go to him..."

Students discussed how the Challenge initiative had provided a sense of team, a sense of a cohort group. It also encouraged adult support and push, college tours, African American guest speakers at meetings, a buffet dinner for parents and students toward the beginning of the year and then awards for academic achievement, attendance and meeting the goals they set for themselves. Dr. Joy explained:

We haven't made any major adjustments. Every year, Mr. Kurk (an aide hired to be a mentor) and I, actually every semester, we sit back and say what we can do differently. I mean, we had a lot of high hopes for like we wanted to have each student to have a professional mentor; we never got that off the ground. We want every kid to have an advisor; we did get that off the ground. I wanted to do a college bus trip; we have gotten that off the ground, we've done it for couple

years. We wanted to bring in guest speakers; we've been able to do that. So now, we are trying to gear into the professional mentor piece and we don't know we could do for every student, but we definitely want to get more professionals in the building. And we want to continue to try to find ways to be inclusive which means we want not only our students who have accepted the challenge and who are part of the initiative but also our white students to be aware of, you know, what society says and what's going on as they live and work in a society and they have children and they have kids go off to colleges and universities.

Sharing the data

One of the bold decisions by this principal in starting the Challenge was to begin with sharing the data. This ended up being a very important part of the Challenge in terms of setting up the concept of team with students and both the competitiveness and support to reduce the achievement gap. It was risky. How would the school community respond to this? As one of the assistant principals at the time the Challenge was initiated, Mr. Bradford, explained:

Well, I remember when it happened, I thought it was pretty ballsy for Dr. Lockwood and Dr. Joy to go for it, cause it was coming right off of (another school district in the area) trying to do something similar. I remember them wanting to share some data about African-American student performance so as ...I remember it was a big brouhaha, I was thinking we better go cautiously with this but I think Dr. Lockwood and Dr. Joy, they just went. That's what I called courageous. It was really courageous back then, to have that conviction that they were just going to do it, that firm conviction. I know a lot of times I feel like as a

district, we're not leaders in a lot of things when it comes to that, but I think that was something we were definitely up front...

So, our principal decided to go full speed forward with this, a "courageous" decision according to Mr. Bradford and incorporate it into a component of his motivational strategies for the students. The principal explained his reason for doing this:

It was actually 7 years ago when I had two African American senior boys. And one student came to me and really challenged me and he said "Dr. Lockwood, I know you are always talking about the achievement gap in different committees, but I wish you had shared the data to me as a student earlier or with the other kids because I'm a senior student with a 2.8 or 3.0 grade point average range. I'm graduating without scholarships where I'm seeing a lot of my White friends are graduating with scholarships. I started my freshmen year off being in the gifted program and I stopped after my first semester being in the gifted program and changed classes so I could be with my social group which were African American students and basically I didn't try but I was with my friends, and my grades were not very good and now I'm seeing as a senior that a lot of my White friends getting scholarships where I should have been in that group getting scholarships."

.... So he basically challenged me at the time to share the data that existed in the achievement gap which we were not doing at that time. And to be honest, it's probably one of the best things that I've done as an administrator and as an educator.

My experience in working with this principal for almost 21 years is that listened and followed through. He could make a decision. He could put caution to the side if he

thought something is right and needed. It appeared that a huge part in making this decision was not only his collaboration with his African American administrators, but, just as important, was his listening to students. In fact, one of the first things he did as a principal was to establish a Student As Allies group. This is an advisory group of 40 students who were from all grades and were representative of the student population. I had observed him as he listened to these students and it made a difference in how he led the school. And so as he reported, when student approached him about sharing the data, he moved forward even though he knew that the way another administrator in another district did this caused him his job. Mr. Sylvester, our African American male assistant principal celebrated this decision and his collaborative role in sharing the data:

I think the Challenge initially was fantastic. It was the first time we were able to talk out loud about the discrepancies in education and not from a standpoint of these kids are bad; looking at this is an issue how to address it... We know there's a gap for a variety of reasons, but it exists. So having that plain conversation about it, you risk being judged by people who really don't have an idea why there is a gap... some of the policies that may or may not have been fully explained to people, and people will feel frustrated and there will be an inherent distrust I think of authority amongst my people for good or bad reasons. I think the more that you can be transparent about that; I think the better the opportunity you will have to actually increase the success the kids.

Student reactions to the data appear to confirm that sharing the data was motivating. Every student who mentioned the data being shared seemed to believe it was a good idea or eye opening. One female student, Erin, said she didn't realize that there was such a

difference in achievement:

...but when I first found out about it, and when the incoming freshmen found out about it, we were all like, we didn't realize there was this big gap between, you know the achievement of the African-American students and the achievement of the White students, and so I think it opened some people's eyes and they were like well I don't want to be achieving less than the White people, so they probably like started like working really hard.

The importance of sharing the gap was a consistent theme with the students as another male student, Michael, expressed:

They have meetings and they talk about like, they do talk about like the achievement gap and stuff like that so it's almost like not really a wakeup call but it's like this is what you should be doing and this is like, this is the success we've had from students before and stuff like that so it's good that they're telling us how it is and what we need to do... it was motivation and at the same time it was like wow, like this is what's happening, but it makes you want to do better and make it look a different way.

There were some who wondered why the gap was measured in grade point average, attendance and number of failing grades students received instead of more standardized test scores such as the ACT and the State achievement tests. The superintendent explained:

But we haven't put out the (State test) data lately or the ACT data lately for the kids to see because this is a just about getting better grades and having better attendance and being involved in sports. It's also the end results in what

graduation rates look like; are you going on to a career school or postsecondary education of some sort. It doesn't have to all be going to college by any means, but that's creating that access, kids having everything they need in their hand to have access to the next step.

Overall, sharing the gap had the purpose of motivating students to reduce the gap. A central office administrator, Dr. Mason, wondered if the data that should have been shared is the achievement data in individual teacher's classes. He asked the question "would it be viable for teachers to get the data to see what percent of their children of color met benchmarks, I don't want to motivate them out of fear. I know a lot of them already care a whole lot." So, the data shared focused on the students and the school but not individual teachers. The question was if the focus should more appropriately be as much on teachers in terms of their reflection on and growth in reaching out to African American students in helping them to be more successful in their classes.

Collaboration

The Challenge initiative had its roots in the efforts of the district to address the achievement gap. The superintendent had started social justice training for all administrators about 10 years ago. The principal responded to this training and believed that it should be put into action. He discussed this with various staff members and then planned it in a way that was consistent with his own operating style. As explained earlier, his leadership style was one of competition combined with support, and the vision of the Challenge is consistent with this. He knew that he could not do this alone and tapped in heavily on the support of his African American administrators. Dr. Lockwood explained that "central office was extremely supportive of this" and he remarked about

the importance of the support and collaboration he received from the superintendent:

I'd just like to say that it's the community we live in and the support we receive from our board of education, the superintendent, to helping lead this. This was a risk, as we developed it seven years ago, and if I hadn't had this support from Dr. Buesse and the board of education, and the extra staffing, this may not have been possible. And I also see our students as leaders...

The support, especially with the additional staffing was very important as the principal hired two African American aides that worked exclusively with the Challenge initiative and were regularly reaching out to and encouraging students. These advisors would also advocate for them with their teachers as necessary. One full time person was cut as the Challenge initiative started taking off and took on a life of its own with students teaming with one another to encourage and support.

Dr. Lockwood also explained the importance of the collaboration with one of his assistant principals, and saw her as a key person in the process of starting the Challenge:

Dr. Joy, who was big in developing this and kind of having me look at things through a different lens as far as the wording in different ways, being an African American female, and for her having an African American son, that attends a school that's probably 90% Caucasian, and she's been very helpful for me in making sure that we are wording things correctly and pushing kids in the right way.

Dr. Joy still gave the credit to Dr. Lockwood "and his passion for all students." She believed that "he has provided a route that allows administrators and teachers to do what

they need to do to reach out to students to make sure that they experience some type of academic and personal success.”

A key leadership skill that Dr. Lockwood appeared to have is that he has been able to build trust, first of all with his administrative team. My experience with him after working with him for over 20 years is that he took the time to ask our opinions. He made a point to ask us what we thought about issues. He did not seem to be just patronizing us, he really wanted to know. If he did not follow our suggestion, he consistently got back to you and let you know why. Each administrative team member had expressed that they feel valued and this seemed to create a bond among all our team members. Our Black male administrator, Mr. Sylvester, stated:

I think the thing that has made it possible is that we have had a group of administrators, Black and White, who have come together and said we wanted to do better for all of our kids, and as a result of that, we started having rough conversations. Some people don't want to hear that. You have to have a lot of conversations where we cannot place blame on each other if we are going to try to move forward from just this point.

Each semester Dr. Lockwood shared with staff the progress that our African American students made in improving grades and attendance. It appeared that staff could tell he was passionate about this and so when discussing the positive things about this high school, I often heard staff comment about the Challenge.

Putting Aside the Culture of Caution

In the introduction I quoted and explained a phrase, “culture of caution” that Barth (2007, p. 213) that described a barrier to action that negatively influences many

administrators in terms of bringing about real change. As explained above, his vision, collaboration, and courage allowed this principal to be able to put this caution aside. We did a lot of talking about social justice in this district for at least a few years. However, at some point it was time to do something, start some effort or action plan. While faculty had some sense of how social justice could play out positively in their individual interactions with students, parents and each other, Dr. Lockwood was determined to begin something structural and visible. This was the Challenge. No other principal in this district or surrounding districts was doing anything like this and Dr. Lockwood knew there would be some risks involved. One risk was addressed somewhat already under the section above about sharing the data. Dr. Lockwood said that he anticipated that there could be resistance, but building on his positive trusting relationships with his administrative team, his staff, and many of the parents, he moved forward willing to face and respond to negative views of this effort. Some negative reactions were expected from our White students and their parents as well as our Black students and their parents. As our assistant principal, Dr. Joy, said “we knew that (there was) a danger in putting out there that our African-American kids aren't scoring the way the White kids are and so then why is that? And we also don't want to send the message that that's what we expect.” As was explained later in this study, there was a negative reaction by some of our African American students and parents. However, as Dr. Joy explained: “we had some White parents, one year, and you were involved in that, and they were angry and they didn't understand why one particular group would be getting things that another group would not be getting.” So, we had some negative reactions by our White students

and parents. Our White female assistant principal, Mrs. Swon, explained that one White parent came to her and said this mother wanted to know:

...why not her kid, why don't we have something for her White kid? You know to me, that all plays into that "Black Lives Matter." Like all lives matter versus black lives matter right now. I was very uncomfortable... and I tried my best (to) answer question in a positive way.

A White female student in the social studies class expressed a similar concern:

No like I understand, there's nothing wrong with the Challenge, like call it whatever, like people need help. I can totally understand that. But it's like if there was a White club, not that it's a Black club, but if there was a club that was like the demographic is White students with their help, like there would be uproar, like that would never be allowed. I think it should be more like targeted toward just like students in general that need help. And yes I understand we're trying to close the gap but it's like both, any type of student needs help, like Asian, whatever it is.

Another White female student expressed that same concern:

And like with Webster Challenge, I don't know much about it, but I mean from at least my eyes it seems like a little racist because like it's Black kids... I mean there's White kids that need help too and like you don't see a club for it... Like why don't we worry just about each student individually no matter what color? Like if a Black person isn't graduating, White person isn't graduating, same thing!

Issues regarding an initiative that is aimed at one race were somewhat expected yet there was little to no explanation of the Challenge initiative directed at White students or parents. Any formal information to White parents or students that I was aware of was in response to concerns expressed. I remembered that there was some talk of doing this, but there was some struggle with how to adequately and sensitively explain this to White parents. We did not want to reinforce any stereotypes or biases that some White students and parents had about the ability of African American students. As Mrs. Swon said, it is a little like trying to explain why you need to have a Black Lives Matter sign even though all lives do matter. So, nothing was communicated to non-African American parents or students about the Challenge initiative when it first started.

However, the most frequent negative responses came from African American students and parents. Because of the issues a neighboring school had from Black parents and students when they put out the data on the gap, it was anticipated that having this all Black cohort group with the intention of eliminating the achievement gap could bring some hostile voices about what we were trying to say. Dr. Joy explains that they were concerned that “the African-American parents would think that we thought all Black kids needed extra help or they can’t be successful and we got some of that.” A Black male senior, Terrance, got to the point when asked about possible issues starting the Challenge. He said that “it’s not that easy because like doing a lot of things for race is really a controversial topic. Like you don’t want to step on certain people’s shoes, or step on their feet, their toes, or whatever.” One senior, Erin, who did end up participating in the Challenge, said she had mixed feelings when she first heard about it:

...but then it also could be like why do I need this? Like why do I need a separate group to be good? Like I can do this by myself, I don't know, I have mixed feelings about it.

Another student, Leslie, who did not participate in the Challenge, expressed it this way:

I don't like that name. I feel like the Challenge is kind of saying it's a challenge for you to do good so we're gonna call that a Challenge. It's like...isn't that for only Black people, like for African-American students? I'm not the only person that actually said they're saying, you know, why is that called a challenge? It should be the Webster Achievement, I don't know, something different. But saying a challenge is like well we're gonna...I don't know a challenge to be smart.

Dr. Lockwood explained in detail some of the negative reactions he got from parent and from members of the community:

(Some) parents were against it because they were against it from the standpoint of they saw their child was getting a 3.4 or 4.0 grade point average and they're almost thinking that what we are doing is the wrong thing. They don't want their student in this and being associated with lower achieving African American students. So there were a handful of parents who said 'I don't want my child being a part of Webster Challenge.' We also received about 15 letters saying they did not want to be in it, and in some cases were even offended that we were even doing this. So it was not an easy start. In explaining to the parents that didn't want

to be in, we said that's fine, we understand. We tried our best to explain why we were doing it, but it was usually the top kids who were achieving.

I even recall going, cause I had a chance to go out to a number of presentations around the area, and I even felt like the first couple of years I did that, some adults, teachers from other schools that were kind of shocked by and even offended by us doing this, but most of the people during the presentation thought it was great, but there were usually two of three African American teachers were saying 'How are you doing this? I disagree completely with this.'

When I attended one of these presentations and a few teachers objected to the philosophy of the Challenge initiative, we asked them what they were doing. Basically, their response was that they had no specific program for just African American students. They would talk about available tutoring for these and all students that was provided individually to those who needed assistance. Again, our principal felt like he had to do something more. We were already helping individual students, but it did not seem to have the impact that he wanted to have. Again, he broke with the culture of caution and went for starting this initiative even though he knew there could be repercussions.

So, some students, parents, and teachers felt that this was putting down our Black students, seeing the victim as the perpetrator, promoting that Black students are not able to achieve without special help and not articulating a focus on the school and the staff in terms of their role in the gap. The principal anticipated that this could have deterred the effort and possibly had repercussions on the administration. In addressing this issue of the name and the stated purpose, one central office administrator, Dr. Mason, expressed

his concern about not having more of an articulated focus on the staff and the school rather than the students:

I feel like I don't know how much or I wonder how much staff truly internalizes the data of the challenge as theirs and not the children's. It's kind of the problem with that language of achievement gap is that it places the burden on the people where the gap exists. I am wondering if they see the gap and GPA, which again, there have been some really great gains, do they see that as their gap and their challenge or do they just see it as there are factors that are outside their control that are influencing that. I feel like the leadership of the challenge and the structure of that has really done a lot. I mean I think it has definitely shown that it has had a transformative effect in a lot of ways, but I don't know. I'd be curious to see what teachers report as seeing themselves in that.

This central office administrator's concern expressed what we have heard from other educational personnel. The focus is on the students rather than on the school. However, it is difficult to criticize something if it does not exist. This school district had a community group called Equity in Education. I did not lead this group but had attended several meetings over the last two years. It was composed largely of school staff and parents but there are other community members that are a part of this as well. This included elected city officials, spiritual leaders, and local business owners. The meetings consisted of discussing the "problem" by sharing personal experiences and the data. This data includes school discipline and academic data. Possible solutions are discussed but little action is taken. A few weeks ago, one community member raised his hand and said that discussion of the problem and possible solutions is all good, but when are we going

to do something. There was loud applause for this statement, but yet, there is still not an action plan.

Dr. Lockwood, our principal, did something. He had a plan. He took the first step. There was discussion and collaboration first but at some point he made a decision and he was able to move beyond discussion to action. There were concerns, there was some negative feedback, but he persevered and moved forward. Dr. Joy explains how moving forward, when they could have scrapped the initiative because of initial complaints, has paid off for students:

So I think there is a risk any time you isolate a group. So I think that's the risk that you take... the group you want to identify may say "We don't want it." But what's funny about this is there were three kids in particular African American kids that I remember; their parents were really mean. One girl, she was like I want to be with the Challenge so bad, so bad, and she asked me to call mom and I said 'I will not. Your mom has threatened me, she went to Dr. Lockwood and I'm not even supposed to talk to you about Challenge. If you want to talk to her you can, but I cannot.' She graduated, she went to college, and she came back, and she's went to Southeast and she was like "Oh, my gosh! Challenge is a good thing; she told me about me some things she's experiencing at Southwest Missouri State. Another lady actually, the girl (became part of the Challenge and) graduated last year, her mom was totally against it and her daughter was top-tier. She wasn't mean, but she was like 'we don't need your help, thank you.' So the times that the people have been turned off, by the time they graduate high school, they've come back and said 'Maybe, I wasn't right.' Because it's a hard thing, and

people are proud, and I'm think I'm one of the proudest people you could possibly be, and that's why I'm very careful.

Dr. Joy, along with our administrators and most of our students stated that they believed the Challenge was a good thing and that it had been having a positive impact on the school and on the success of our African American students. The stated goal of the Challenge was to reduce the achievement gap, and the “challenge” of this specific initiative appeared to be for the students themselves. However, as they explained the way it was set up with the supports for students along with supports from other initiatives such as the Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports (PBIS) and social justice training, it was not just focused on challenging the students. These other initiatives appeared to have had simultaneous impacts on areas related to the experience of African American students at this school and in the community.

Unintentional or Implicit Bias

Social justice training for our staff included becoming more aware of implicit or unintentional biases regarding race and the hope was that teachers would recognize this in themselves and better address this in the classroom when they observed this type of interaction between students. It appeared that we still had some work to do. During my interviews with students, a theme that emerged as a barrier to their success at school was the unintentional, unconscious, or implicit bias that they experienced. One African American senior, Erin, explained that when it came to her experience of racism at our school that it “comes in lots of forms. So I mean no one is blatantly, like, been like oh you can't do this because you're Black, but like there's always...I mean but it's not...a lot of people aren't consciously doing it, even if they are doing it.” So, it appeared that

White students and teachers were causing students to be uncomfortable or unaccepted without even knowing it. Another African American student, Erika, had a similar statement about racism at our school:

And sometimes the person might not even realize that they're doing it. Or that they're offending ... they don't even realize it. So I don't think anyone here purposely wants to hurt, because we have a very friendly school, honestly. There is no one here that purpose- ... I don't believe there's anyone that purposely wants to make me feel less than because I'm Black. I feel like its subtle things that they may not, they might not even mean.

When I asked students for examples of this, one student gave the example of a White geography teacher who only spent three days on Africa when she spent at least a week or more on other countries. She explained her feelings:

So she gave us the packet for Africa, the project for Africa, and she, it was titled "Disease that Plague the Continent of Africa" and I was like, you know, we spent...and it was like she said we were only going to spend two to three days on that – we spent seven days on India – and I'm like...and it was all about just the diseases, like HIV, AIDS, like all of that, that's what it was on. And I just remember being so upset because I was so excited to learn about the different countries and there's so much to learn, but we just talked about diseases. And I was just like, you know...but that, I mean I don't know if that's racism or not but I just remember that being like something that was like wow, you know.

Ashley talked about other students and parents and the mindset that they have that comes out when they talked with her:

I would say it's more like stereotypes and prejudices. So I would have White friends who their parents were not really comfortable with Black people or they didn't really like Black people. So you know we couldn't ever go over, you know, to their house because their parents didn't like me or their parents didn't want me there or you know they ask me all these questions or they like make all the jokes and it was just, like a little bit racism in there you know. Like they'd be like, oh, Allison, you can't be like full black because your hair is way too long, or Oh, Allison, you are way too smart. You can't be full Black.

A White central office administrator, Mr. Bradford, discussed his conversation with a school leader that was very disappointing to him:

We had a school leader go into (middle school) several weeks ago who was not happy with some of the behavior of the children at lunch and in the hallways and so on and just the language in which the leader shared with me about the behaviors... it just kind of surprised me, some of the language that was, not in terms of profanity but just the terminology that leader was using to reference the children of color and their behaviors and so on.

He was concerned that a district leader would explain concerns about behavior to a central office administrator in terms that would have racial overtones. Was this unconscious racism or an assumption that another White administrator would have similar thoughts? If a student picked up on this bias could it impact this student in not having a sense of belonging? Our White female high school administrator, Mrs. Swon, explained that she was having a discussion with a teacher about filtering data:

Just the other day I asked the teacher if they wanted the data based on subgroups and the response was “Well race doesn't matter. I don't want it on race. Race doesn't matter.” To me that does matter. We should be looking at that. There are things that we can do and things that we know about our Black students that can inform some of the things that we are doing differently here... I just I think it's just instead of being responsive and culturally thoughtful about how we instruct, about how we connect, about how we redirect, how we exclude, how we send students out of the classroom, I think that we're just not considering the whole picture of the story, we're not considering the race does play a piece in the climate that we have in the building.

Lower Expectations

As explained in our social justice training, implicit or unconscious bias includes lower expectations. Almost all students and some administrators talked about this during my interviews with them. Having lower expectations of African American students was a consistent theme throughout the interviews of administrators and students. Mr. Sylvester, our assistant principal, who was African American, talked about his days in elementary when blackbirds was the low reading group and Dr. Joy talked about her experience that her teachers seemed to assume that Black students were less capable and didn't push them to succeed. She told the story of her White advisor from college thinking that she would not be successful in the Master Degree program. She said that her advisor told her: “I see you graduated from (a local college with primarily African American students), and the students that come from (there) don't traditionally do as well.” Dr. Joy said she found this hurtful and the assumption angered her and made her

question him, especially since this advisor was also an administrator at local high school. A central office administrator, Mr. Bradford, lamented: "I hate to say it, but I think some of our staff has lower expectations of African-American children. I don't know; it's not across-the-board, but I think I have seen that." One of our male African American students, Corey, explained:

So people have preconceived notions about who you are before they really know who you are. I play baseball; that's a sport that is not predominantly African-American. I'm highly involved in school; I've been a vice president within our Distributive Education Clubs of America, in a leadership role with Future Business Leaders of America, ... so you know people really do have preconceived notions about you in predominantly White areas which (this city) is. If I walk into a class and the teacher may think oh, I think this kid is going to get a C, see I am going to treat him like a C student, I think that hinders the way that a student can excel because that student will then think that they're not smart enough to excel in that class to get an A in that class. So they don't go the extra mile to strive farther to go from that C to that B or that B to that A. They stay at that C and they stay stagnant and that's because they know they feel that they are inferior at that point. So I think if that notion is eliminated when the student walks in the classroom the first day, that it can really change the game.

So, Corey made the point that some students' academic success was impacted by teachers' lower expectations. Perhaps it was a lowered confidence or just being offended by the teacher in a way that reduced motivation for academic success. Ashley explained:

But I'm pretty sure that teachers definitely treat Black students differently than

they do White students, and that can be in a good way and in a bad way. Because it's just kind of like you already have, everybody has a bias of everything. You already have that in your head, like maybe this Black student may need more attention than this White student because they don't necessarily get that at home and sometimes that is the case but sometimes it's not. So if it's not the case that can be a little offensive, you know.

Another student, Jonathon, stated that it is not only in the classroom that teachers might have lower expectations it had to do with behavior as well:

And passing periods, some of the Black kids like to stand in the hallways during it and in some of the really chronic and congested areas and I see or at least once I saw a bunch of staff just, they were just kind of walking towards the situation, even though there was no situation going. It was just the African American students just going and having fun and doing other stuff. I just felt like two or three actual teachers walked towards the situation. They didn't say anything; they didn't do anything; they were just walking towards it and you could feel like they were assuming that something was going to happen.

Jessica explained how you have to work hard to break this stereotype that teachers and other students might have of them. She explained: "but I feel like here at (this school) Black girls kind of have a reputation of being loud and ghetto and uneducated." She explained that she had to work harder to break that stereotype and to be seen as an individual to be respected as someone who can achieve academically. A former student who was an African American female, Tamara, who graduated a few years ago, talked about these assumptions based on race when she had been talking with her roommate on

the phone before they met:

I definitely experienced that when I was in college and I had conversations with my roommate before I met her and then I came to school and it was like oh, this is who you are. So that's been a constant throughout my life. Also people assuming that I'm going to behave in a certain way or that I don't have family support based on being Black and how that is in life, and then having to tell people 'I don't know who you think you're talking to sometimes, like I'm not gonna deal with some of this.

Peer Assumptions

This statement by this graduate of our school led into another theme related to lower expectations and assumptions. A significant theme, even more so than lower expectations of teachers, was the frustration of assumptions by peers, both White and Black peers. Ashley explained her disappointment and hurt feelings regarding her peers and their expectations and assumptions about African Americans:

Once we all started growing up and changing and paying more attention to things, especially when the entire Michael Brown situation happened and on the indictment of the officer. We would have class discussions about it, and the White students, oh my God; they were just so ignorant, they were like I don't get what the big deal is. I don't understand why we are talking about this. Like I don't understand why it is that big of a deal, like he shouldn't have been doing this. It's just like it just really hurt, to hear somebody that you have been so close with in the 8th grade, to hear them say such horrible things. To like, be like, you know, Black people shoot Black people every day and you don't see that being a

big deal. And you know that really hurt, and it just really opens your eyes to like certain things that White people do, and you realize that they're making fun of your culture, so when they like mock the dances that we like do and originate, or you know, a lot of cultural appropriation, it's really just mocking my culture, and I hate it. Like the whole, I want a full afro or I want a really big butt and things like that. It's like stick to who you are!

Marcus explained his concerns about his peers. As many of those that I had interviewed, although they were concerned about the assumptions of some teachers, Marcus put the focus more on the assumptions or views of other students:

I don't want to talk negatively about other students but I think there definitely students who don't like African-American students and I think part of it's just because they see them in the hallway and maybe they are, you know, talking really loud or kind of more outgoing. I think it's...the students don't understand each other as well as we should.

Erika also seemed to want to take the focus off the school or the teachers and put it on the students themselves:

It's really just an inner student problem, it's the student problem. It's not really a school problem. We have great classes; we have great teachers. It's more like the school itself is good. It's more so the students and the students interacting with each other and the social groups that the students have already set up.

Crystal added to the importance of being seen as an individual and the tendency of other students to put her in a category or make assumptions about her. She wished that other

students could get to know her better if there weren't the barriers caused by the assumptions:

I mean I feel like for me as far as why as many kids probably ain't like communicating with me is because I was probably like loud and that's kind of like a stereotype with Black people is that we're loud and obnoxious or whatever but that's the only thing that I could truly think of. I feel like people who didn't try to get to know a Black person or a certain Black person in the school that they would never try to is because they already just associate them with the category that's in their head of being a loud Black person. And I mean I feel like that's wrong because I mean like me, personally, if you meet me I'm a nice person but I didn't get a lot into that so I didn't run across that many people like just judging me.

So, for some of these students it appeared to make them want to pull away from White students and makes them want to play into the stereotypes. Could this have impacted their academic performance? Another student, Erin, continued this theme of stereotypes of African Americans and the anger that it brought out in our African American students:

Oh yeah, I get called an Oreo all the time because of how I, they say I'm White on the inside but I'm Black on the outside. I hate it. I hate it so much because I'm just like sorry I talk how I talk. It's just because of how I talk and I'm into musical theater... and I, like, I'm still Black, my whole family's Black, I'm Black, I just...maybe I just defy the African-American stereotype but I mean it...the stereotype's so dumb anyway because I know...it's just...there's...

This theme of lower expectations or assumptions by peers and the impact that it had on our African American students continued to be mentioned in almost every conversation that I had with these students. One African American male student, Kevin, talked about perceptions people have of him because of his race and size, rather than seeing him as an individual and getting to know him first:

... But with my size and color combined I do tend to give a bad first impression to people and I do tend to scare people because of those two factors. But once people really get to know me and meet me, I think that kind of goes out the door and they see me for who I really am. But from first impression, you know, people are scared of me. And, you know, I'm not anything to be scared of. I'm always friendly, always have been friendly... You know, people, you know, they kind of talk under their breath and I can hear it and I can see it. And, you know, it kind of hurts and it's disappointing, but I mean there's not much you can really change about that. But it does happen all the time though-though... I guess people base it off the stigma of all people of color are alike, which isn't true at all, you know. I think what they base it off of is like what you see in movies and hear on the news and they think everybody is like that, which isn't true at all.

So, the frustration of not being treated as an individual but instead being judged and viewed by your group or category was a feeling that most students interviewed expressed. Ashley complained:

So I would have White friends who their parents were not really comfortable with Black people or they didn't really like Black people. So you know we couldn't ever go over, you know, to their house because their parents didn't like me or their

parents didn't want me there or you know they ask me all these questions or they like make all the jokes and it was just, like a little bit racism in there you know. Like they'd be like, oh, GA, you can't be like full Black because your hair is way too long, or Oh, GA, you are way too smart. You can't be full Black. You know when I participated in the YWCA program this summer and a part of that, we would have panels every morning and one of the panels was like a girl empowerment panel and one of the ladies was like, look, you are who you are supposed to be. Don't try to be anybody else. God created you in that body and that way with your abilities and your flaws, and stick to that. Don't try to be like her or don't try to be like anybody else. Just stick to what you are and use it for your advantage. And especially with race, the problem is, you want to be so much like other people to be accepted in this society. So, for example, if a Black girl doesn't have a big enough butt, she's worried cause she's like, crap, I need that because that's what the males in our society look at. Or like if a dark skinned girl wants to get into a really good college, she's worried she won't because she's not light skinned, because it's been seen that light skinned are favored way more over dark skinned people, even since like slave times because the lighter skinned slaves were in the house as the dark skinned slaves were out on the plantation doing all the work. And that's just been an inter racism problem that I've been dealing with since I was little. That inter racism problem has been around for so long, so you've got White on Black racism and you've got Black on Black intermediate racism within that, and then it all just gets into the complicated thing that's like why can't we just see eye to eye.

So, these lower expectations or assumptions brought about frustration and anger. Yet these expectations were not just from White students but also from other Black students as well. A theme in lower expectations by peers was that some Black students had lower expectations of themselves and other Black students when it came to academics. A former student, Tamara, explained:

Yeah. There is an underlying idea that if you are smart, then you are...you think you're better than other people, or you're selling out. Yeah, you kind of, especially in the beginning, when I was a freshman, I had a lot of pushback, well a lot of my life I did, even elementary and middle school, pushback from other black students because I was smart and "oh, she's stuck-up" or "thinks she's better than everybody else." And it sets you, now in you're in a different group; you're in classes with other people.

A Black female student in one of the social studies classes explained that she was one of those students who confidently raised her hand in class. She said she often felt "like other Black students kind of look at (her) funny, like oh, here she goes again." Jessica, another African American female, continued this theme "and so they minimize you and make jokes about you in classes when you raise your hand, or they say that you're talking or acting White when you're speaking proper English or being intellectual." Erika reinforced this theme when she said:

There's always going to be those, that group of students that's just not, they're not into it. Um, I know a few boys, especially boys that have so much potential. They have so much. They're so smart, but they let other things, and trying to please other people affect them, succeeding, and it will always confuse me, but I know

that there's so ... excuse me ... there's so many boys that they're too busy worried about being cool.

So, how did all these assumptions and lower expectations from other Black students as well as White students impact academic achievement? Alicia went on to explain how these mindsets impacted her in a class:

I'm going back to Honors U.S. studies class, I was in a group with, it was like three or four of us, and everything that I said to this, she was a White girl, she said, "No. I don't think that's right. I don't think that's right" like she shot down every single thing that I put out for like the right answer. We were doing group work, and everything, she said, "No. I don't think that's right." Or no, not even giving us a chance. And then one of the other girls was like, "No. That is right." You know? So it's just some things like that. It's like, okay, why are my, all my answers wrong?

While a frequently recurring theme and a focus of the interviews with students had to do with barriers that peers put up, it was not without some concerns about assumptions and lower expectations of teachers.

Teachers and Staff: Barriers

Like I remember I was, I keep going back and forth, sorry, but I remember when I was in Coach's class and one of the kids came up to me and asked me for an iPhone charger and he was like, oops, wait, you probably can't afford an iPhone, afford one, and then everybody laughs, including the teacher. So it's like really, like come on, you're a teacher, you shouldn't be like saying things like that.

This statement above by an African American female student, Leslie, expressed her feelings regarding a circumstance where she perceived a teacher contributing to racist assumptions made by her peers. Most of the concerns about teachers seemed to be more about unconscious bias rather than any blatant racism. Erin, an African American female, explained it this way:

...so I don't get a lot of these things because, you know, the way I talk, people say I talk White, which really bothers me because I just, I speak in sentences, you know what I mean, like I have correct grammar, but the thing is like I've seen like certain students, they may talk a certain way and teachers kind of like, you know, they repeat what they say but kind of like make fun of them but not consciously, you know, and it's just like that kind of bothers me too. I don't have that problem but I've seen it happen to people. I don't know, it just like, yeah.

Several students felt like teachers treated them in a different way. Some students said that they thought that some teachers were afraid of African American students. When pressed, it appeared that this fear may be as much about being labeled by students as a racist as it was about any physical danger. Terrance talked about his observations of teachers at this school which was consistent with what I had heard from other African American students:

But I have had like situations where a teacher's expectations were different for me than they were to like another student who was White. Whereas they'd - I don't know, like they feel more comfortable speaking with the White. Say if I'm talking and he's talking, like the way they address both of us is different. They address me as if they don't - like they're afraid to like tell me what to do. It's just

like the teachers they seem like - I don't know, I think they kind of think that African Americans comes with like the arguing, being disrespectful whole idea so they don't really want to address me in a certain way to avoid conflict.

It was apparent in these interviews that students saw relationships and interactions with teachers as having an impact on how successful they would be. Corey explained:

Once I got to high school, who were my advocates and who can I go to talk about, can you help me with this or you've been here for a while so can you explain to me the layout of this teacher or the layout of this class or how it works so that I have, so I know, kind of what I have to do going in, and I think that's what's helped me to excel, and I think the difference between that and, you know, maybe some other students, some other African-American students, is that, you know, once they hit that front door of walking into that class on the first day, and the teacher makes a preconceived notion, they think that because that teacher thinks that, that's what they have to think. So they don't go the extra mile to strive farther to go from that C to that B or that B to that A. They stay at that C and they stay stagnant and that's because they know they feel that they are inferior at that point. So I think if that notion is eliminated when the student walks in the classroom the first day, that it can really change the game.

So, these student-teacher relationships were viewed as extremely important.

While there were concerns that some teachers had lower expectation of African American students, the most consistent and predominant theme in my interviews with these students was that a good relationship with a teacher who pushed them to do better was an

extremely important factor in their success at school. This actually was a more common theme than the negative experience of lower expectations.

Teachers: Caring, Challenging and Positive Relationships with Students

Having a teacher who had a positive, caring and challenging relationship with students was the most dominant theme in my interviews with these students. A major component of the Challenge initiative was promoting positive connections between staff and students. Our principal initially hired two African American staff full time to facilitate the initiative and to be advisors to the students in the Challenge. In addition to their direct contact with students, they also assigned a faculty advisor and a faculty mentor to each of the students. So, in addition to the principal's belief that we needed to challenge and push students, he also felt strongly that students needed that relationship and support. It is important to note that the principal not only promoted this for the Challenge initiative but this was systemic. At almost every faculty meeting he reinforced the importance of developing relationships with students and when he hired new staff it was important for the interview committee to discern if this attribute was a present in the candidate. As I interviewed students, it was loud and clear that connections with staff were very important to them in their success. Each student, with no exceptions, was able to describe a caring relationship that they have with a teacher or other staff member that made a difference to them. This was a pervasive and constant theme in each interview. The combination of caring and pushing was also a dominant theme.

A central office administrator, Dr. Mason, talked about how important positive student-teacher relationships are to removing barriers to student success. He said "if you don't feel connected, if you don't see it as a place for who you are instead of who you are

not, then you are less likely to go there, less apt to access resources from there.” Another central office administrator, Mr. Bradford, confirmed this when asked about what breaks down barriers to student success. He explained that “it comes down to the relationship you can develop with kids. I think if you have that trusting caring relationship with the child that goes along way.”

A female African American student, Crystal, expressed it this way:

And it’s like teachers they just never know how much of an impact that they have on people and on students as well and they should kind of like sit back and think about that. Because you don’t know what’s going on in our homes and us coming to school, y’all could just probably change our day or our whole lives.

Student after student expressed that they found teachers here that made a difference to them, either teachers or mentors assigned to them through the Challenge initiative or just teachers who have made a point to connect with them. Cameron expressed it this way when asked about the Challenge initiative and the faculty support that he received:

I think that its’ really helped me, like I said, realize who that support system is and have those people in place to be able to go to them and talk about anything, not even just classroom work but just outside the classroom, something that I may not want to go to my friends about and I may not want to go to my parents, but I can go to Coach, who was my Challenge advisor, or go to Dr. Joy that really has piloted the program...

A recent male graduate, Kevin, emphasized in the interview how important his relationship with a teacher was to him. He said that “without the help of a teacher, I wouldn’t have made it through high school, I feel like, without her, yes, that was a big

part.” A female recent graduate, Crystal, expressed how important a teacher was to her: Ms. R, who never gave up on me...I found Ms. R and she was just one of those teachers that even though she knew I could get distracted real easy or I didn't want to do my work all the time, she knew that, you know, I could do it. I just need somebody to actually say Crystal like get it together, buckle down, you need to do it and she never gave up on me. So like I tell the students that, you know, go here now that like if you find a teacher that you can connect with and that's always pushing you and constantly pushing you regardless of if y'all got into it or anything, just stick next to that teacher. Like I didn't have the encouragement - like I love my mom but it was a struggle for my mom to teach me. She didn't understand why it was so hard for me to learn certain things and all that other stuff.... it was like I have this teacher here who wants me to succeed so I'm going to do my hardest to try to and with her here it motivated me. Anybody needs that one person in their life just to motivate them and she was just that one person who got me through high school because I believed that if I did not have a person in my life to motivate me to continue and to do good in high school, I would probably still be here trying to graduate.

I used Crystal's statement in its entirety because it provided a student's summary of almost all of the students I interviewed. The elements of a teacher caring, never giving up on her, and pushing and challenging contributed to her success and her graduating. Other African American students expressed similar feelings. Ashley talked about her Challenge mentor challenging students and “pulling (students) aside and being like you've got to get this together; what are you doing; why haven't you turned in these

assignments? This is not you!”

This theme of persistent caring and pushing continued in each interview.

Michael, a male student said: “Like I used to have a problem with completing homework and motivation in her class and she would just like, she didn’t stop, like she would always be on me and she would always like...in a good way.” Tamara, a female graduate, again confirmed this when she says: “I think knowing that if I didn’t do my best, my teachers would know and would call me out on it, and not in a negative way but just saying hey, you know, what’s going on and actually showing that they care about my progress.”

Students perceiving that this pushing is about caring about them is consistently reported as important.

Sometimes finding that balance in what we communicate to students with our pushing is not easy. Our African American assistant principal, Mr. Sylvester, explained how he responded about his pushing and challenging relationship with students when he was questioned about why he is so strict on students, especially African American students:

When I work with kids I am very hard about what the expectations are.... And my response was “I think that my response was I'm showing him more love than I think you are, and I'm also loving him enough to challenge what he thinks is the right behavior.”

One student, Ashley, commented on this African American assistant principal and the perception that some students have of him when he pushed hard and was strict with them:

Well, I know African-American students don’t like Mr. Sylvester. Is he going to hear this? They call him the Uncle Tom of (this school) because he is so hard on

the Black students. They don't realize that he's being hard on them so that they can get it together. I see that. I know what he's doing. I know he's being really hard on them so that they can be better than what they are. But they see it as him being racist. They think he doesn't like Black people and I'm like, no, he just wants you guys to get it together.

I have had a number of conversations with Mr. Sylvester over the more than 12 years that I have worked with him. He was consistent in articulating that the reason that he was strict with African American students was because he believed that this is the way that he showed them his love and that this was the right thing for them, to have high expectations and to push. African American students had consistently communicated to me in my interviews with them that the combination of both the caring and the pushing was important to them. However, sometimes they were not feeling both. Was this even more difficult for an African American assistant principal than for a White assistant principal? Was it more likely to be interpreted as internalized racism as some students have expressed to Ashley?

Diana talked to the theme of the importance of the combination of persistent caring and pushing. Students seemed to feel that the pushing was equivalent to high expectations, that the teacher actually believed and expected them to do well. She described her relationship with a teacher:

She has like really been pushing me and making sure that I'm doing well in school. Even though she's not my teacher any more, I had her my sophomore year, and she still checks on me, asks me how my grades are going, how's school and everything, and I feel like she pushes me to do better and she expects me to

do better. And I really appreciate that because it's like to know that somebody is actually like looking out for you and expecting you to do better, and they know that you can do better, it motivates you a lot.

Tamara summarized by saying that she thinks “it’s important for especially Black students to know that you do care. It’s not that you’re checking in on them so that you can just get them in trouble; that you’re checking because you really care about how they’re doing and that you have expectations of them.” Almost every student I interviewed was able to point to at least one teacher who made a difference for them in their academic success and was able to say in their own way what Jessica expressed: “That person is the reason that I tried so hard. That person is the reason that I believed in myself because they believed in me.”

The Importance of African American Staff

It is important to note that when African American students identified teachers who made a difference for them, who cared for them and challenged them, most teachers were White. Certainly a part of the reason for this is that most teachers at this high school are White. White teachers and counselors composed 94% of our faculty in a school that has 25% of students who are African American. However, it established that White teachers could and did build important relationships with their African American students. Yet, several students said that it might be easier to go to an African American staff member because as Candace explained, a Black teacher “would know the struggle or, like, whatever it is that I'm, like, going through. Like he would probably understand more and that's why I feel like I would be able to go to him.” Corey explained that “a lot of times, African Americans won’t open up to people who are not like them.” Jonathon

reflected on his relationships with African American staff members saying that supports he had found here “would most likely be some of the teachers who are also African American.” He said he knows “that a lot of students like to hang out in their rooms, before school or actually like to talk to that teacher who is also African American.” Marcus also stated that he thought “African-American students, just other students in general, tend to build relationships with teachers who they can most identify with.”

This school does not have an African American staff that is even close to the proportion of African American students with less than six percent of certified teachers being African American. Erin explained this in her words:

And like I remember having Miss C., who used to be the English teacher, she was like my favorite teacher but then she left, but I like having, you know, Black faculty members and I feel like (this school) lacks in those.... Well for me...my mom used to always like get upset about how there weren't a lot of Black faculty (here) but I mean I've had Black teachers that weren't good and I've had White teachers that weren't good so just as long as they're good teachers, you know, I'm not upset about it, but I know there are many qualified African-American teachers out there and it would be nice to see more... So that's something that's important I think because I know, you know, like Coach, I know a lot of the guys go to talk to Coach about stuff and like I used to talk to Miss C. I probably would make the races for the students and the faculty like the same ratio. So like if one-fourth of our population, our student population is African-American, I would try to make it so one-fourth of the faculty is... Yeah, because I just, I think it's important to have Black mentors for the Black students. I mean I'm not saying that I wouldn't

have a White mentor because I look up to a lot of great white people but it's just, you know, they probably understand more what it's like to be an African-American in the United States.

So, in several of the interviews, students discussed the importance of having and retaining a Black faculty. It was important to them that they had someone to talk to who looked like them, who understood their struggle and who they could identify with as a role model. As Erika summarized it is important “to be able to see people in authority that is... that's Black, and we are able to relate to, and they're setting a good example for us.”

Importance of Racial Cohort

When speaking of the Challenge initiative another theme of the interviews was the importance of being part of a group. This was an intention of Dr. Joy when she helped to form the initiative and was out of her experience of being in a cohort when she was working toward her doctorate. Erika explained that she knew the Challenge was about closing the gap but she said: “I also believe it also brings the African-American students together, and it shows us, okay, this, this, and this is set up for you to succeed. We're here for you.” Candace explained that “it makes them feel like they're part of something. And when you're a part of something, you want to, like, you want to be on top of it and that's just, I guess, extra motivation for them to do better.” She added that “it lets them know that someone cares, like, outside of their family.” Diana described the importance of a cohort and having a sense of belonging and supporting one another to achieve:

Like sticking together, and it's just like they need the right peers around them because the right peers will tell you it is cool to do your homework. It's cool to

graduate. And it's cool to accomplish school and do better in school. Not to just be a flunky. And I feel like its more stuff like a cool aspect for certain people.

Erin said: "I hate letting people down but letting myself down is like something that's like okay, but like letting other people down bothers me so... I probably will try harder to get a high grade."

This positive peer interaction was important to the vision of this initiative and it was picked up on by those students that I interviewed. They saw this group as a support for them in having similar goals for achievement and doing contracts together to improve their grades. The principal also arranged for senior students to talk at meetings about the importance of working hard and doing their best on their academics. This was powerful for some students. Jessica explained:

Like Corey, he was the one who spoke the day that we had the Challenge awards...Like that's so amazing. That's so cool. And I could hear other students like "Ooh, I want to do that next year." And so I'm thinking like, "Wow, like he's motivating other students and doesn't even know it.

This activity of African American students seeing other African American students being successful and then working together to make this happen for more and more students was very important. Our superintendent, Dr. Buesse explained:

I think that's one of the most powerful things we do is have them see each other get awards, and not see the one African-American student in the line of 30 get an award; seeing 30 African-American students get an award. I think that's huge in defining what it means to be African-American. I think opening up those leadership opportunities for kids, African-American student council presidents, on

the principal's advisory group, being leaders and spokespersons to other African-American students and otherwise students and even organizing the MLK celebration but fostering leadership of African-American kids, I think, gives them greater ownership to the school and they see they are respected by the adults and by their peers in the school and I think says something.

Need to Work Harder

Another theme that developed as I interviewed administrators and students was that African Americans needed to work harder than their peers. One emphasis of the Challenge, as the name implied, was to challenge the African American students to work harder, to compete if you will, with the White students in the school to close the achievement gap. As was indicated above, this challenge came with supports and encouragement, but also with pushing and high expectations. Our African American assistant principal, Mr. Sylvester, explained his view of African Americans having to work harder:

The system, I was always was kind of taught, was rigged against us so the expectation was that you would find things that were unfair, that were racist, was to be expected, so it wasn't a shock. It was kind of that same old thing; you just try to work your way past it and try to be like they always say, try to be twice as good to get not as far.

Corey gave a student perspective on this. He explained it this way:

You have to work that much harder to prove yourself, that you know I can do this work, and I can succeed and excel in the classroom...but I think that you have to realize that people, there are certain people and certain officials that aren't going

to be on your side, so when you talk about barriers, it's just that sometimes, African Americans have to work that much harder to get to where their Caucasian classmate or peer may already be.... So either you accept the fact that you're never going to be as good as that person next to you, or you work harder than that person next to you to be better than them. It's just something that you have to do... I just think that it's a stigma that's slapped on you from birth, and it's something that you have to work through, and it doesn't go away.

This theme of having to work harder as an African American student developed with the majority of the interviews. Ashley told me: "I can't slack...I have to be practical, I have to get a good job." An African American male in a social studies class explained that African American students "have to work harder to achieve goals and to get those opportunities that we deserve but don't necessarily get based upon things that are already set in place, societal norms that are already in place." Jessica echoed this feeling when she says:

So I decided, well, I have a problem with this thing called "the system," then I'm going to do what I need to change it which is going to school and getting straight As and working my butt off in the classroom to prove to people that just because I'm Black does not mean I can't be intellectual.

While the name of this initiative, the Challenge, had been criticized because it seemed to put the focus on the students rather than the system, it is important to recognize that this component of the Challenge, the pushing to work harder, was the result of the principal listening to his two African American assistant principals, along with applying his own work ethic and competitive nature that he developed as a college

athlete. It should also be noted again, as indicated earlier, that the African American students verbalized that they appreciated the pushing and saw this in the context of caring and believing in them.

Equitable Discipline

The most dramatic data that we had since we fully implemented the Challenge initiative was the reduction in discipline referrals and suspensions of African American students. While the referrals and suspensions were still disproportional in terms of percentage of referrals compared with percentage of African American students, the trend data showed a significant reduction in referrals and suspensions for African American students.

When asked about discipline at this school, there were different perspectives. Mrs. Swon, an assistant principal, said that she thought this is an area that we “could continue to grow in” and she was glad that we changed the student handbook to make it less gender and race biased. She said she thought “taking the word ‘sagging’ out of our planner, our handbook... was a big thing because nine and half times out of 10 we’re talking about a Black male student. Ashley said that she was pretty sure that “teachers definitely treat Black students differently than they do White students, and that can be in a good way and in a bad way. Because it’s just kind of like you already have, everybody has a bias of everything.” An African American female student in a social studies class said that she felt “as far as discipline goes... that’s definitely a different kind of subject. I do think that White kids get the upper hand as far as discipline goes.” I have also heard White students complain that Black students are loud and get away with things. As was mentioned by Terrance earlier, some students felt that teachers are afraid of Black

students either because they do not want to get into a conflict with them or because they do not want to be called racist because they are correcting them.

Leslie said that sometimes principals act like they are policemen, like they “have a badge on.” She explained that they should get to know the students and be more like a counselor:

So I feel like the administrators should, yes, enforce the rules but also it's like a parenting job, like they're in charge of things so they should also feel comfortable with all of the students and have the students feel comfortable with them, so don't always have a badge on, like have the attitude of having a badge and I'm the administrator and you're a student, but also be like a counselor where I can talk to you, you can always come to me.

Several students said they felt that staff treats students fairly. One student, Crystal, complimented me in the interview by saying:

I feel like I lucked up with a good principal, let's just say that by far, because I can't really speak on any other principals that I didn't come into contact with. But from my experience with you, you treated everybody fairly. You gave everybody a chance. It was no different from me to any other student that would have did the same offense as I did. I mean like yes I have been in detention a couple of times but that was probably because I wanted to. You didn't really want me to, you usually just wanted me to go talk to them and apologize and that's the only thing that I can honestly say and remember about you is that you didn't want to discipline us. You wanted to teach us how to, you know,

sometimes just bite the bullet and just do what needs to be done. And I feel like that helped a lot.

An important change that occurred simultaneously with the Challenge initiative was the implementation of the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) program. While there were many components to this program, the principal saw this as important in changing the climate of the school to being more positive and focusing more on positive relationships and restorative justice. This switch in philosophy from a focus on offenses and punishment to a focus on support, positive expectations and restorative justice was seen by the principal as having an impact on the reduction of referrals and suspensions.

Student and Administrator Views on Successes and Quantitative Data

Dr. Lockwood shared data that indicated some success in his goals of improving the attendance and GPA and reducing the percentage of F's of African American students. Below is the table that Dr. Lockwood developed to show progress for attendance rates. Attendance rates improved for all students but at a greater rate for African American students. Although the principal lists the data for Challenge students, he believed that if he could create a climate where some African American students would make a commitment to do better and be supported in this, it would impact all African American students. As you can see from the table, African American students improved their rate of attendance by more than 4 percentage points. When I interviewed Dr. Lockwood at the end of last year he was very proud of the improvement in attendance:

Attendance is something I’m really proud of overall. In the 6 years, we’ve really seen an improvement, significant improvement in the area of attendance. When we analyze the data, we don’t just look at the data by the African American students that are in the Webster Challenge Initiative. We compare the data to all the African American kids. And our data for attendance has been 65% reduction of the gap compared to where it started 6 years ago.

Attendance--Challenge Students

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	97.39	95.81							96.60
Class of 2018	98.01	97.37	97.16	95.66					97.05
Class of 2017	97.32	97.24	97.31	95.61	96.06	94.91			96.41
Class of 2016	96.22	95.75	96.71	93.90	95.04	94.12	92.06	91.34	94.39
Class of 2015	96.19	96.80	96.79	96.05	96.11	96.26	95.45	95.21	96.11
Class of 2014	95.76	93.10	94.94	93.45	94.58	94.49	95.06	91.81	94.15
Class of 2013	94.94	93.88	94.12	91.76	93.60	91.46	90.22	89.68	92.46
Class of 2012	97.00	95.29	96.19	94.95	94.40	93.28	94.13	91.49	94.59
Class of 2011									
Class of 2010									
Class of 2009									
Class of 2008									

Attendance—Non-Challenge Students

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	94.48	94.66							94.57
Class of 2018	93.88	94.52	94.53	92.70					93.91
Class of 2017	93.04	92.25	94.27	91.87	93.16	92.11			92.78
Class of 2016	96.54	92.62	93.71	91.05	91.78	92.09	91.22	91.72	92.59
Class of 2015	94.39	91.98	93.97	92.67	93.59	91.93	92.35	88.26	92.39

Class of 2014	94.35	90.74	92.31	89.46	88.04	87.76	87.06	87.78	89.69
Class of 2013	92.12	90.33	91.56	86.66	92.45	89.22	87.38	87.39	89.64
Class of 2012	93.02	91.94	87.17	86.39	89.85	87.55	87.27	87.24	88.80
Class of 2011									
Class of 2010									
Class of 2009									
Class of 2008									

Attendance--Total African American

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	95.28	94.98							95.13
Class of 2018	95.68	95.75	95.93	94.10					95.37
Class of 2017	94.23	93.77	95.48	92.83	94.17	93.12			93.93
Class of 2016	96.06	94.68	95.40	92.81	93.65	93.17	91.78	90.94	93.56
Class of 2015	95.00	93.98	93.59	93.94	94.84	93.40	93.75	90.43	93.62
Class of 2014	94.86	91.68	93.49	91.51	91.06	90.96	90.88	89.45	91.74
Class of 2013	93.59	92.06	92.82	89.90	93.35	91.06	89.83	88.06	91.33
Class of 2012	94.18	92.39	92.85	92.18	92.87	91.48	91.65	90.06	92.21
Class of 2011	94.30	91.41	91.28	89.97	93.77	93.10	91.69	89.54	91.88
Class of 2010	94.46	92.24	93.80	91.19	91.28	89.55	90.15	89.44	91.51
Class of 2009	93.84	91.33	91.75	90.02	90.26	88.40	89.90	89.98	90.69
Class of 2008	94.22	90.40	92.29	90.16	90.74	89.87	89.93	90.04	90.96

Attendance--Total Caucasian

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	96.97	96.24							96.61
Class of 2018	97.09	95.97	96.46	95.77					96.32
Class of 2017	96.90	95.77	95.71	94.28	95.30	94.92			95.48
Class of 2016	97.16	95.48	95.80	95.37	95.31	94.04	95.15	94.19	95.31
Class of 2015	96.27	95.19	96.01	94.77	94.92	94.40	94.43	92.68	94.83
Class of 2014	95.89	95.77	95.74	94.41	95.93	95.01	94.86	93.59	95.15
Class of 2013	95.03	94.69	94.63	93.78	94.76	93.48	93.56	92.89	94.10
Class of 2012	96.68	95.62	95.39	95.37	94.45	93.33	94.40	93.46	94.84
Class of 2011	96.28	93.88	94.45	93.83	94.16	93.46	93.41	91.57	93.88
Class of 2010	96.64	95.32	95.31	93.97	94.45	93.48	93.05	92.73	94.37
Class of 2009	96.53	94.54	95.99	95.12	95.57	93.12	93.97	92.07	94.61
Class of 2008	97.32	95.58	96.64	95.66	95.91	93.31	93.63	92.19	95.03

Attendance--Overall School

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	96.69	96.06							96.38
Class of 2018	96.72	95.92	96.35	95.41					96.10

Class of 2017	96.31	95.31	95.63	94.10	95.14	94.60			95.18
Class of 2016	96.94	95.30	95.73	94.74	94.78	93.93	94.42	93.43	94.91
Class of 2015	95.98	94.76	95.42	94.54	95.01	94.15	94.27	92.11	94.53
Class of 2014	95.61	94.69	95.23	93.79	94.88	94.09	93.96	92.63	94.36
Class of 2013	94.69	93.97	94.17	92.78	94.45	92.84	92.67	91.71	93.41
Class of 2012	96.03	94.79	94.83	94.68	94.17	93.01	93.74	92.74	94.25
Class of 2011	95.70	93.18	93.69	92.85	94.06	93.38	92.94	90.90	93.34
Class of 2010	96.10	94.55	94.97	93.31	93.69	92.54	92.41	91.98	93.69
Class of 2009	95.81	93.71	94.84	93.70	94.17	91.81	92.80	91.55	93.55
Class of 2008	96.41	94.26	95.52	94.22	94.74	92.56	92.94	91.82	94.06

Another goal of this initiative was to improve the GPA of African American students. As can be seen below in the table, the GPA of African American students did improve. In the first four years listed before the Challenge was fully implemented in all four grades, the average GPA for African American students was 2.36. However, in the last four years after the Challenge had been fully implemented for 7 years, the average GPA was 2.67. So, there was a significant increase in the GPA of African American students during the time the Challenge was implemented. The goal was to reduce the gap, but this was not reduced as much as was hoped since White students also made some gains in their average GPA, but it should be note that the increase in the GPA of African American students was at a greater rate than White students during this period of time. The average GPA of White students during the first four years of the implementation of the Challenge was 3.29 and the last four years was 3.44. This was about a 0.15 increase for White students versus a 0.31 increase for African American students. So, in terms of decreasing the gap, the gap in the first four years before the initiative was fully implemented was 0.93 but after the initiative has been in place for more than 7 years, the gap had been reduced to a 0.77. This was not as much of a decrease in the gap as was hoped for but was still at 17% decrease in the gap.

GPA-- Challenge Students

**GPA--Total
African-American**

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	2.60	2.58							2.59
Class of 2018	2.65	2.85	3.06	2.97					2.88
Class of 2017	2.45	2.46	2.53	2.41	2.64	2.68			2.53
Class of 2016	2.66	2.50	2.66	2.56	2.67	2.65	2.75	2.79	2.66
Class of 2015	2.63	2.52	2.77	2.69	2.72	2.74	2.63	2.67	2.67
Class of 2014	2.46	2.33	2.69	2.66	2.51	2.44	2.72	2.78	2.57
Class of 2013	2.42	2.36	2.51	2.53	2.61	2.53	2.70	2.59	2.53
Class of 2012	2.40	2.39	2.41	2.50	2.61	2.57	2.67	2.61	2.52
Class of 2011	2.40	2.33	2.38	2.42	2.40	2.50	2.67	2.69	2.47
Class of 2010	2.35	2.22	2.17	2.16	2.30	2.15	2.57	2.66	2.32
Class of 2009	2.22	2.15	2.15	2.15	2.18	2.30	2.64	2.56	2.29
Class of 2008	2.21	2.14	2.30	2.27	2.35	2.31	2.68	2.72	2.37

**GPA--Total
Caucasian**

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	3.48	3.45							3.47
Class of 2018	3.39	3.37	3.52	3.48					3.44
Class of 2017	3.34	3.29	3.37	3.31	3.37	3.36			3.34
Class of 2016	3.53	3.42	3.54	3.49	3.43	3.44	3.51	3.54	3.49
Class of 2015	3.37	3.34	3.43	3.35	3.31	3.34	3.42	3.41	3.37
Class of 2014	3.43	3.39	3.44	3.40	3.33	3.36	3.46	3.44	3.41
Class of 2013	3.31	3.23	3.22	3.22	3.30	3.31	3.49	3.41	3.31
Class of 2012	3.31	3.26	3.32	3.29	3.26	3.24	3.47	3.46	3.33
Class of 2011	3.24	3.22	3.23	3.18	3.22	3.24	3.40	3.40	3.27
Class of 2010	3.35	3.27	3.22	3.21	3.19	3.19	3.44	3.43	3.29

Class of 2018	0.13	0.06	0.11	0.03					0.08
Class of 2017	0.13	0.11	0.08	0.28	0.20	0.24			0.17
Class of 2016	0.48	0.46	0.58	0.36	0.37	0.32	0.38	0.20	0.39
Class of 2015	0.16	0.41	0.16	0.20	0.23	0.16	0.21	0.06	0.20
Class of 2014	0.44	0.33	0.28	0.27	0.68	0.54	0.26	0.16	0.37
Class of 2013	0.21	0.15	0.37	0.32	0.16	0.33	0.33	0.25	0.27
Class of 2012	0.34	0.24	0.28	0.21	0.22	0.38	0.19	0.16	0.25
Class of 2011									
Class of 2010									
Class of 2009									
Class of 2008									

Number of Fs Per Student—Non-Challenge Students

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	0.86	0.72							0.79
Class of 2018	1.20	0.72	0.53	0.82					0.82
Class of 2017	0.85	0.95	0.88	1.02	0.44	0.58			0.79
Class of 2016	0.35	1.00	0.71	1.17	0.70	0.94	0.45	0.21	0.69
Class of 2015	0.88	0.75	0.64	0.57	0.63	0.46	0.72	0.48	0.64
Class of 2014	0.90	1.15	0.37	0.71	0.53	0.98	0.34	0.41	0.67
Class of 2013	1.16	1.14	0.97	0.78	0.61	0.59	0.39	0.58	0.78
Class of 2012	1.05	0.86	1.76	1.24	0.73	0.48	0.52	0.33	0.87
Class of 2011									
Class of 2010									
Class of 2009									
Class of 2008									

Number of Fs Per Student--Total African-American

Graduation	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
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Year									
Class of 2019	0.71	0.52							0.62
Class of 2018	0.77	0.43	0.29	0.40					0.47
Class of 2017	0.62	0.67	0.61	0.77	0.49	0.45			0.60
Class of 2016	0.44	0.64	0.61	0.67	0.51	0.61	0.51	0.20	0.52
Class of 2015	0.66	0.61	0.44	0.40	0.46	0.33	0.49	0.31	0.46
Class of 2014	0.70	0.83	0.35	0.41	0.61	0.77	0.30	0.28	0.53
Class of 2013	0.65	0.61	0.60	0.49	0.32	0.40	0.35	0.36	0.47
Class of 2012	0.70	0.54	0.77	0.56	0.38	0.39	0.35	0.21	0.49
Class of 2011	0.76	0.73	0.70	0.72	0.56	0.34	0.44	0.19	0.56
Class of 2010	0.67	0.84	0.85	0.95	0.78	0.88	0.51	0.19	0.71
Class of 2009	0.80	0.95	0.74	1.14	0.88	0.77	0.34	0.21	0.73
Class of 2008	0.89	1.31	0.72	0.84	0.64	0.74	0.38	0.29	0.73

Number of Fs Per Student--Total Caucasian

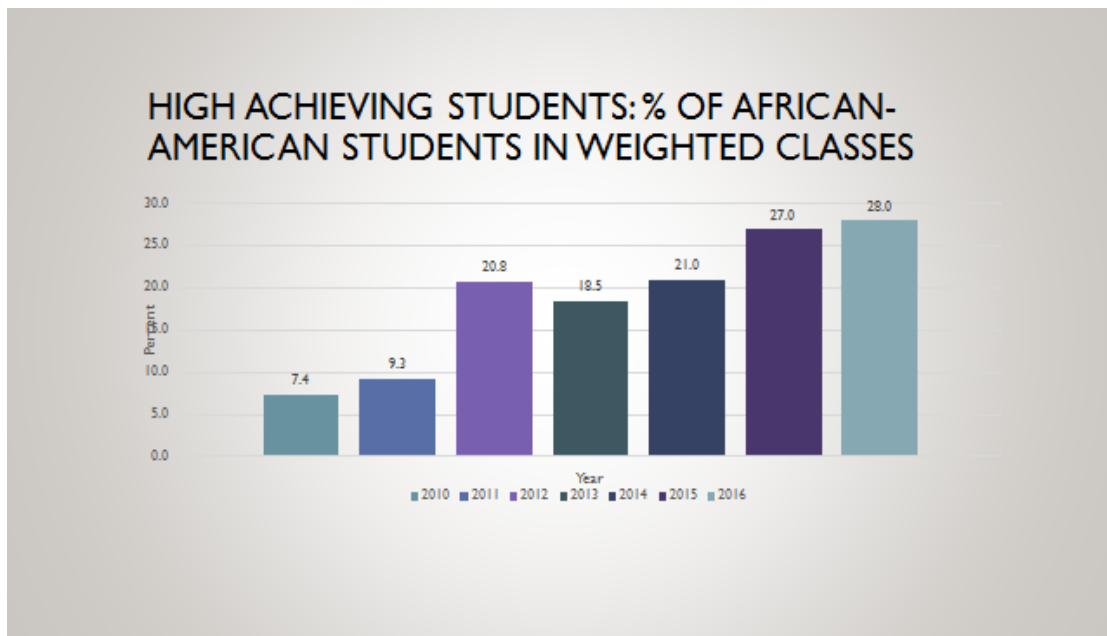
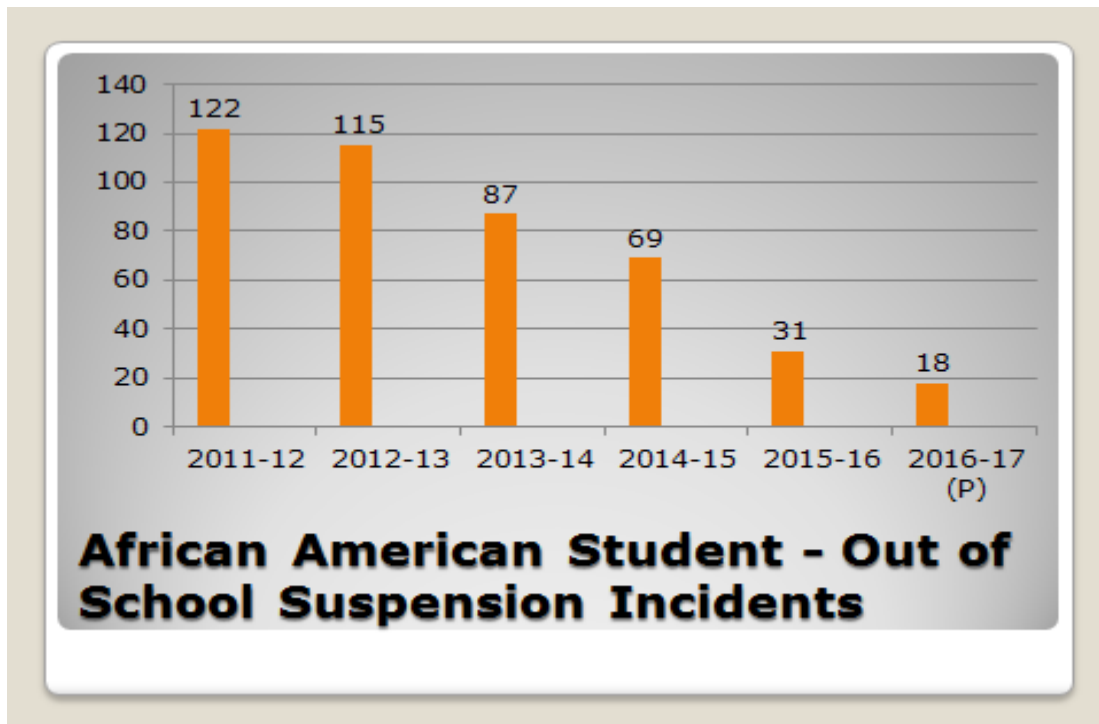
Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	0.10	0.11							0.11
Class of 2018	0.20	0.20	0.11	0.09					0.15
Class of 2017	0.13	0.18	0.10	0.20	0.18	0.18			0.16
Class of 2016	0.07	0.14	0.11	0.10	0.15	0.12	0.12	0.07	0.11
Class of 2015	0.14	0.20	0.13	0.16	0.21	0.18	0.16	0.13	0.16
Class of 2014	0.04	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.12	0.11	0.13	0.16	0.10
Class of 2013	0.17	0.17	0.16	0.17	0.11	0.14	0.10	0.12	0.14
Class of 2012	0.15	0.17	0.13	0.15	0.26	0.27	0.14	0.13	0.18
Class of 2011	0.17	0.23	0.15	0.21	0.21	0.17	0.17	0.11	0.18
Class of 2010	0.13	0.15	0.19	0.21	0.28	0.22	0.12	0.08	0.17
Class of 2009	0.11	0.17	0.13	0.17	0.21	0.18	0.16	0.10	0.15
Class of 2008	0.06	0.13	0.08	0.13	0.11	0.19	0.15	0.15	0.13

Number of Fs Per Student--Overall School

Graduation Year	Sem1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6	Sem7	Sem8	Overall
Class of 2019	0.20	0.18							0.19
Class of 2018	0.32	0.24	0.15	0.15					0.22
Class of 2017	0.25	0.29	0.21	0.32	0.24	0.23			0.26
Class of 2016	0.15	0.25	0.22	0.23	0.22	0.22	0.20	0.10	0.20
Class of 2015	0.29	0.33	0.29	0.22	0.28	0.21	0.25	0.18	0.26
Class of 2014	0.22	0.29	0.15	0.16	0.22	0.28	0.15	0.20	0.21
Class of 2013	0.32	0.31	0.28	0.26	0.18	0.21	0.19	0.18	0.24
Class of 2012	0.29	0.27	0.28	0.24	0.28	0.29	0.20	0.14	0.25
Class of 2011	0.33	0.37	0.27	0.34	0.31	0.21	0.25	0.14	0.28
Class of 2010	0.27	0.33	0.34	0.40	0.40	0.38	0.21	0.11	0.31
Class of 2009	0.31	0.78	0.39	0.44	0.42	0.35	0.22	0.13	0.38
Class of 2008	0.27	0.45	0.24	0.31	0.47	0.33	0.20	0.18	0.31

Even though suspension reduction and increase in the number of African American students in weighted or accelerated classes were not identified as a specific goal of the Challenge initiative to be measured, it should be noted that these were the most dramatic reductions after this initiative was implemented. So, for a period of 6 years there was a projected reduction of suspensions of 85% for African American students. This was an incremental reduction for each of these 6 years. In addition, the percent of African American students in weighted or accelerated classes also increased dramatically from 7.4% to 28%. So, a greater percent of African American students were spending more time in the classroom and more time in accelerated classes. It would

seem that this provided for less isolation in these accelerated classes as well as a more welcoming environment in this school.



Students who participated in the Challenge and administrators who were interviewed felt that the Challenge had made a difference and helped African American students to be

more successful at this school. Dr. Lockwood saw the decrease in discipline referrals and suspensions, along with the improved attendance and GPA, as an indication of a positive school climate change. In his words:

I'm also starting to see a kind of a climate change overall at (this) High School. You know, we do lots of things working with all students as far as work in PBIS; we have a great staff, and a great support staff that's always there helping kids. We have the Challenge mentors and advisors, but I'm starting to see a little shift, just in the things we've done at (this) High School in the last 8 to 10 years where it's a much more positive place for all students to learn...our staff has changed on wanting to be a mentor, knowing about the initiative, looking at African American kids and how they teach kids and looking at the curriculum that they're teaching and I do believe they are thinking about 'What can I do differently in my class to make sure that all students are learning.'

Dr. Joy talked about individual students on whom she thought it had a positive impact. She explained that for some of her seniors, it allowed them to be in a leadership role as they spoke to younger students about the importance of working hard and studying. She said that one of our Challenge students started a Challenge at her college. Dr. Lockwood said "the African-American graduation rate actually exceeded the White students when they put these things in place in earnest with the real focused effort which was interesting." Corey talked about how it really helped him and was something that "pushed (him) forward" and provided a "support system" for him. Our superintendent felt it provided a sense of "belonging on campus." Ryan, a graduate, said he felt like it "helped (him) a lot...especially the meetings with all the African American students."

He said he thought he was doing well in college and attributed it to his “good experience” at this high school.

Another assistant principal, Mrs. Swon, when discussing the successes of the Challenge said that she really thought “it's the relationship and trusting relationships, it's feeling a part of the community, it's feeling like they have a voice, like their interests are valued.” Jonathon said that he thinks “the school does a good job of making minorities accepted and helping them polish their talents into that diploma.” Another male senior, Michael, told me that: “you guys do a good job. I like this school. It's a good school.”

Suggestions for Improvement of the Challenge and the School

In my experience of being at this school for a long time, the feeling in the halls and in the classroom definitely appeared to have improved for the better. However, suggestions were made for continued improvements. Administrators and students offered their suggestions and a number of these suggestions were integrated throughout this chapter. Below were a few more ideas. Dr. Buesse made several suggestions regarding possible improvements:

I think it's probably just time, after (seven) years, to really try to spend some time looking at it. See what we've become lax in. One piece of it that we need to re-boost up again, I'd probably use the opportunity now to look for some additional community mentors because as we have tried to mentor more kids, we run out people power, and I think there's some community members that really would be helpful in that, and be more than happy to do that. I think we have got to keep those African-American role models out there in front of our kids, so they know also who else they could call.

Other suggestions by administrators included looking at ways to have more African American students in AP classes. It should be noted that when our students were recommended by middle school teachers for accelerated classes at the high school, very few of these students were African American. It then tends to set them on track to take regular level classes rather than honors and AP classes. When it came to discussing more African American students in AP classes, the discussion usually led to this being a district wide issue that began in elementary school. Mrs. Swon, our female assistant principal suggested that “maybe there's a ‘Pre AP’ class. A lot of students say ‘I am not ready for this level of course’ but maybe we need to have something that's a workshop on how to be an AP student.” She lamented that there has to be something more we can do to encourage and prepare our African American students for the AP or honors classes. Several students and administrators talked about the importance of having other African American students in the AP classes so that they did not feel isolated.

Dr. Mason, a central office administrator said that we needed to work on more “culturally relevant pedagogy, helping student to find meaning and relevance in their own learning.” He believed that relevance and success in classes would affect student achievement and influence the level of classes they take. Antoine confirmed this by saying he thought that it was important to have “a teacher that doesn’t teach just by speaking at students, who doesn’t lecture as much because (he thinks) a lot of African-American students are more hands on in how they learn.” Jessica added “it's sad that when you want to learn White history or about White literature, all you have to do is come to school. All you have to do is show up.” She said that when you want “to learn about Black history, you have to take it as an elective.” She felt that Black history and

contributions to our society had to continue to be mainstreamed in our core classes. Mrs. Swon explained from her perspective the importance of all students learning African American history.

I think African history and African American history needs to be built in for all classes to hear. I think the more that our white students in particular understand the history, the great history, of Africans and of African-Americans, I think the closer we are to shifting mindset and yeah, we can teach and empower our Black students, but if we are not educating everyone on it then we are really only lifting up one particular group who is going to still be fighting against those who don't know the history. So, I think there are some curricular pieces that we can continue on as well.

Ashley suggested that professional development was needed for teachers and that “the teachers and the faculty be educated on the biases, and like one code for school discipline.”

Regarding the Challenge, Ryan, a graduate, said that he would like to “have just a few more meetings, a couple more a month. That would be good.” He had said that he enjoyed the time with his peers. Several students said they thought the school had more opportunities for students to get to know each other outside of class. Ashley said she wanted “to make a diversity club so bad.” Several students said that we needed to provide more opportunities outside the classroom for Black and White students to interact.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Purpose of the Study

Understanding the administrative processes that might lead to equitable access to educational opportunities for African American students was my primary interest and goal in this study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insights into the processes in a suburban high school, particularly those that support achievement of African American students and those that place barriers to their achievement. Through my interviews with administrators and students, I sought to identify and examine the perceptions of barriers to equitable access to education as they relate to race and the current efforts by the school's administration to break down these barriers and provide supports. A focus of this study was the "Challenge" initiative that this administrative team established about eight years ago. The stated purpose of this initiative was "to reduce the achievement gap." and included efforts to provide these students with supportive, caring relationships with faculty and their peers as well as academic encouragement and high expectations for them to be successful. This qualitative study primarily involved individual interviews with African American students and classroom discussions with African American and other students.

Research Question

What are the administrative processes present at a Midwestern high school that support or interfere with the academic achievement of African American students? This study sought to understand administrative processes through a focus on the Challenge initiative. By deconstructing the elements of this initiative through interviews with students and administrators at this school, I sought to understand better the perception of

this initiative and the barriers and supports that exist in this suburban school to equitable access to education. From this, I sought to identify the administrative processes that were used.

The research included component questions. What are the perceptions of structural supports present for these students? Specifically, what are the perceptions regarding administrative efforts and processes, particularly the Challenge initiative, to help identify and address institutional barriers and supports to academic success? What are the perceptions of the impacts of these processes? While the information gathered from these interviews is the primary focus of this research, I have also used academic achievement trend data, available to the public, to help measure the effectiveness of these administrative efforts.

Theoretical Frameworks

As noted earlier, the points in the literature review were organized around several emerging theoretical frameworks which included student identity toward academic achievement; the school's role in this identity formation; the importance of intentional and articulated efforts; student connectedness with racial peers; and the importance of a positive and caring environment. Other frameworks I anticipated that also emerged through my interviews were the administrative processes of vision and collaboration, which are two of the standards set by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 1996); and taking risks and willingness to bypass administrative caution. These frameworks were integrated into the discussion of the themes that surfaced in the qualitative data collected through the interviews.

Themes

The themes that emerged in this study centered on administrative processes and leadership, barriers to equitable access, and supports for access to education.

Those themes centering on administrative processes and leadership included the impact of the school setting within the community and building trust; the experiences of race by the administration and the impact on their motivation; the importance of vision and collaboration of the administrative team; the importance of taking risks and the importance of administrative courage to break through the culture of caution.

Themes centering on barriers experienced by students included unintentional or unconscious bias and lower expectations and assumptions by peers and staff.

Themes around supports, which often were incorporated in the Challenge initiative, included caring relationships with staff paired with pushing students to succeed; the importance of having African American staff; the importance of a positive peer cohort on identity for academic success; the realization of the need to work harder to neutralize the impact of bias. Students' experiences of discipline were mixed and related to lower expectations and assumptions as well as support in some instances.

Students and administrators made recommendations for improvement of the Challenge initiative as well as to the general environment of the school that I integrated into my discussion of the themes.

Building Trust: Leadership within the Framework of School and Community

As I reviewed the perceptions of the administrative team and students about the school and community, it seemed obvious that a leader needed to know something about the history, experiences and views of members of the school and the community who he or she leads. This principal had to try to understand the mindsets with which students, staff, parents and fellow administrators entered the building. African American students and parents walked in our doors coming from a significantly segregated community with a history that included experiences that were not always inclusive and welcoming. It seemed that a principal must analyze how these experiences were passed on to students and how this might have impacted their trust. Several administrators discussed that there was still some distrust and one central office administrator stated her view that people are alive today that experienced segregated schools, pool, and community businesses and “can tell this story and their kids hear this story and they watch for things.” One African American student talked about her amazement when a White person moved into her neighborhood, like Whites do not get it, they don’t understand African Americans and what goes on.

In spite of some distrust, most students talked about positive experiences at this school and one described her experience here as “like a family.” Most had positive experiences with at least a few teachers and one student, although he said this does not apply to every teacher, said that in general we have “great, great teachers here who really do care.”

As was reported we have made some progress in reducing the gap but there is still work to do. Was distrust still affecting the achievement of our African American

students? Our male African American principal expressed frustration because he thought “if we could fix the achievement gap...it would be a place like this.” However, building trust appeared to be a process. It seemed that once students began to trust staff, the word spread. It seemed administrators and staff were not only building trust with individual students but were also hoping that the word gets out so they can trust staff and that this helps create a climate of trust. These connections were made between students and teachers, and as discussed later, this has been the most frequent theme in my discussions with students and these connections had an impact. The process orientation of Teilhard de Chardin (1968) which I explained in the introduction still has an impact on my optimism and passion regarding the possibilities of continuing to improve the academic achievement of our African American students. We need to focus on the direction we want to go and the progress we have made. Perhaps the principal’s statement: “I have learned that every day I have more to learn” was the most encouraging. This principal understood that he did not have all the answers. To achieve a goal of building trust, principals must be seen as someone who did not claim to have all the answers, but rather someone who listened, observed and reflected. Staff should be able to realize that they do have an impact on the principal and that he does listen to them. The principal showing he values staff input builds trust and models for staff how to build trust. Building trust is a process and the principal’s job is to get everyone involved in that process.

Reflecting on Race and Developing Motivation

I found it interesting but perhaps not surprising that almost all the administrators grew up in communities that were primarily their own race. I tried to find some common

thread in their development of a motivation to work to improve African American success. For the White administrators, it was usually some turning point that caused reflection on a situation where they were thrust into an experience with African Americans. Many explained the importance of a social justice training when they were challenged to analyze their assumptions and ignorance regarding the African American experience. It appeared that these trainings can be effective and should be considered for education personnel.

For the African American administrators, it was their own experience of being the victims of racism and bias. They were able to relate with the experience of our African American students and parents. Both discussed the leadership of the principal and the importance of the collaboration.

The White principal at our school seemed to have been motivated by his connections with African American students at this school, his caring nature, and his connections and collaboration with his team, particularly his respect for our African American assistant principals whom he listened to, trusted, and worked with to achieve his goals.

Developing a Vision and Collaborating to Fulfill It

The principal's vision was at least in part formed by listening, observing and collaborating. Dr. Joy, our African American female assistant principal, explained that she went to Dr. Lockwood and told him about her concern about the isolation that several Black students were feeling in honors and AP classes. When she talked to him about these individual students, and drawing also on his participation in the district social justice training, he saw a bigger picture and said he wanted to do something for all the

African American students. So, by collaborating with the African American assistant principals, he developed the vision of a way to improve African American academic success and developed the Challenge initiative. In addition, knowing this principal, some components of the vision were based on his own experiences and his personal approach to things. The stated vision was to reduce the achievement gap. The success of this vision was to be measured by determining if the grades and attendance of African American students improved and number of F's were reduced. However, consistent with the personal approach of the principal, a key element of this initiative is for the students to make a commitment to accept the Challenge, almost in a competitive sense, and to work hard to reduce the achievement gap. This element resulted in a major criticism of this initiative because it had been seen by many as putting the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the students, who most see as the victims of the inequity of the school system. However, when examining how his vision was formed, and most likely the vision of any principal, it gave one insight into the principal himself as well as his collaboration with his team. A high school and college basketball standout, the principal had a competitive spirit and a strong work ethic. These are traits he wanted to see in his students. In addition, one of the key collaborators in this vision, Mr. Sylvester, spoke of his high expectations for African American students, and in other conversations with him he had often spoken about the need for African Americans to work harder than their White peers to get the same place. The vision was continually influenced and fueled by the principal's big heart and desire to support students. As a basketball player, he also had developed a strong sense of team, and in collaboration with Dr. Joy, that vision led to

developing the cohort or sense of team. As our superintendent said at the time, it was a way for students to motivate one another.

So, it appeared that a principal's development of a vision for the school had several components. Vision was informed by the character of this principal himself, his education and training, his ability to listen to those around him, his willingness and ability to collaborate, his genuine caring for the students involved in this issue, and ability to communicate in a way that was understood by the school community. While the Challenge initiative had supportive components that might have been more readily accepted by the school community, the focus on the commitment and responsibility of the students as it was initially communicated caused some concerns by the stakeholders. There were some adjustments in the articulation as the initiative developed. However, in spite of the bumps in the road, the initiative continued. The reason for this was most likely because the principal had been at the school for several years and had formed positive relationships with his staff, parents and students that allowed him have a chance to succeed. As Dr. Joy used as an analogy in speaking about the Challenge, the principal creating a vision is like "when everybody gets together at the Komen Walk, and they're all walking for a purpose and they are all going the same place." So, even though the "walk" shifted a bit in the implementation of the Challenge initiative, the connectedness and trust the principal had developed with key staff, parents and students allowed them to continue. As discussed later, carrying out and fulfilling a vision also required courage and perseverance.

Taking Risks and Breaking through a Culture of Caution

Having been an administrator for 23 years and having worked in an educational setting for over 40 years, I have seen that fear of making a mistake, being criticized by others, getting fired, or opening yourself to liability will stifle progress. Many actions result in little risk, but making major changes that might result in substantial progress that benefit students may more often come with significant risk. Carter (2008) and Hennen (2005) discussed the importance of being intentional and deliberate about your intentions and in articulating the efforts to assist African American students. This principal wanted to address the achievement gap and improve the academic success of African American students and he was deliberate about it. He talked specifically about African American students and our responsibility to address achievement issues with our African American students. Mica Pollock, in her field study, (Pollock, 2004) discussed the tendency for leaders to use “de-raced words” (p.75) as they address the issues and tend to talk about helping all students. She discussed the tendency to not want to disaggregate the data.

This principal addressed the concerns about the academic achievement of African American students head on and articulated the importance of doing this by sharing the achievement gap data. Mr. Bradford, a White central office administrator described this as “ballsy” since another district in the area had recently done this and there was a big “brouhaha” about it. He described moving forward with this as very “courageous.” As explained in the literature review, Barth (2001) believed that there was a “culture of caution” (p.213) in education. He explained how this can be a barrier to improving education.

How did this principal break through this barrier of a culture of caution? First,

from the interviews it seemed that this principal connected himself with the students and listened to them. He had his ear to the rail. This principal explained that the primary reason for sharing the data was that he was encouraged by students to share it. Principals need to talk with students, listen to them, and value their ideas and concerns. A principal's leadership should be informed by those he leads. Students, as well as staff, will help leaders lead them.

A principal needs to be able to make a decision. A principal can go back and forth, as he considers all the alternatives and the possible consequences. At some point, the principal needs to go with it or nothing will happen. In working with this principal for so many years, I have found that he could make a decision and he would take responsibility for it. A survivor for 11 years of brain cancer and multiple chemotherapy treatments, surgeries, and radiation, he had shown he was courageous in and out of the school system. He could make a decision not only because he had his ear to the rail but also was courageous and brave enough to accept the consequence of a mistake if the risk might make a difference for kids. He could put caution to the side if he thought something was right and needed. So, listening and being courageous are elements of a good decision maker. Other huge elements in this principal making decisions, particularly in starting this initiative, was his collaboration with his African American administrators, and his positive and strong relationships and good communications with staff and parents that created a trust in him. Nunnally (2012) spoke of the empowerment that can come when a person is considered trustworthy. This principal's relationships actually served as a protective factor for any misunderstandings or disagreements students, staff and parents had. He had been principal for several years before he started

this initiative and he had built these relationships and had fostered a climate of trust. In the interviews with his administrative team, it is obvious that they respected him and trusted him. In addition, as students discussed their relationships with staff, as discussed later, these relationships help foster a general climate of trust. It appeared that this trust would allow a principal to take risks and make some mistakes. People are more likely to be patient and see what happens. Therefore, as he reports, when students approached him about sharing the data, he moved forward even though he knew that the way another administrator in another district did this caused him his job.

Therefore, a principal having a vision for creating initiatives for improving student achievement has to include listening, collaboration, building trust, taking risks, and being courageous.

Leadership in Identifying Barriers

Leaders in this district provided staff training in social justice that included becoming more aware of implicit or unintentional biases regarding race. Howard (2008) explained that “manifestations of individual and institutional racism are not always blatant, overt, and easy to observe” (p 973). This came out very clear in my interviews with students and our African American administrators. They were able to share specific experiences of this bias and the frustration that it produced. Students like Erin and Erika seemed to believe that people are often not consciously doing it. It was interesting how they excused this behavior, saying it was not intentional or someone trying to hurt them. However, it was still upsetting and interfered with their excitement to learn, whether it was a geography teacher who only talks about diseases in Africa, or fellow White students whose parents didn’t seem to want them over their houses, or a White student

who did not value their contribution in a collaborative learning group at school, or other students who thought they were complimenting them when they said a Black student was too smart to be full Black.

Staff and peers having lower expectations of African American students was a consistent theme throughout the interviews of administrators and students. Our African American assistant principals described when they were in school being in the lower reading group called blackbirds or teachers who assumed that Black students were less capable and didn't seem to push them to succeed. It was something they had to work through and overcome. As Corey explained these lower expectations could hinder the way a student can excel because either Black students start thinking they are not smart enough and it reduces their motivation, or they have to be determined to work even harder to overcome the bias against them. Tamara, a former student, talked about her anger about assumptions that people make about how she would behave or talk, or the family support she had, simply based on her race. Jessica also expressed her negative experiences and frustration with assumptions and lower expectations. She lamented that African American students had to work harder to break this stereotype that teachers and other students might have of them.

I was a bit surprised during my interviews that most students wanted to focus on peers rather than teachers or administrators. Often, when I thought of institutional barriers I thought of administrators, staff and policies. However, in a school community, students themselves, along with their parents might be considered part of the institution. A significant theme, even more so than lower expectations or assumptions by teachers, was the frustration with assumptions by peers, both White and Black peers. It seems that

in our efforts to break down the barriers that exist, we have to address the biases that students come with to school and are reinforced in this space.

For example, Ashley explained her disappointment and hurt feelings regarding her peers and their expectations and assumptions about African Americans. She even expressed that at times she felt like students were making fun of her culture to the point that she just wanted to amplify the stereotype. Erika described it as an inner student problem and that the problem was more about how students interacted with one another. So, for some of these students it appeared to make them want to pull away from White students and made them want to play into the stereotypes. Could this influence a student's academic performance? Could this be a deterrent for a student to take the challenge of an honors or AP course because they are not comfortable in a class with almost all White students?

A theme within the lower expectations by peers was that some Black students had lower expectations of themselves and other Black students when it came to academics. Tamara explained that she got a lot of pushback from other African American students and she sometimes felt like achieving was selling out. Jessica felt like they looked at her funny or minimized her when she participated in a class discussion. Alicia expressed regret that the African American boys were so smart but let other things and people affect them and worried more about being cool.

Administrators need to lead school personnel in addressing peer assumptions and biases, those of White students and the internalized assumptions and biases of African American students. Recently, the principal and assistant principals had visited every third hour class over a window of two weeks to discuss social justice issues, especially in

the wake of the recent election. However, other than this, we had not systemically focused on social justice training for students. This is an area that we need to target. I am currently working with the Anti-Defamation League to extend social justice training next year beyond just staff training. However, student groups such as Amnesty International, Gender Sexuality Alliance, Feminist Coalition, Black Student Union, and a newly formed Social Justice Club are very active and draw many students. Students are ready for this and administrators need to explore best ways to develop and implement a school wide initiative and curriculum.

While the focus of these students in discussing examples of implicit bias was on their peers, there was some concern expressed about teachers as well. Several students felt like teachers treated them in a different way. While I expected to hear the concerns about lower expectations, what interested me the most was the perception by both White and Black students that some teachers were afraid of Black students. It appeared that this fear might be as much about being labeled by students as a racist as it was about any physical danger. Perhaps the district conveyed the message to staff that they need to be sensitive to the needs of African American students almost to the point that they may feel paralyzed in addressing behavior that they should address in fear of coming across as racist. This would not be good, would actually come across as lower expectation, and would be detrimental to our African American students. Administrators need to articulate adequately the need for teachers to address situations that are harmful to the environment and to the students themselves while distinguishing this behavior from non-harmful cultural behaviors.

Students were consistent in saying that they did not experience blatant racism from any of their teachers. Their concerns centered more on bias, lower expectations and being treated differently in a negative way than their White peers. This year our high school had two workshops for all our teachers in implicit bias and how this might look. I believe that my sharing my interviews with staff will illustrate how students experience this bias.

Providing Supports for African American Students

As was mentioned several times earlier, African American students reported a generally positive view of this high school. It appeared that students were finding the supports, that are core to the Challenge initiative, as important to their success and positive view of the school. These supports included caring relationships with staff paired with pushing students to succeed; the importance of having African American staff; the importance of a positive peer cohort on identity for academic success; the realization of the need to work harder to overcome the impact of bias.

Encouraging Staff to Make Caring Connections with High Expectations

Having a teacher who had a positive, caring and challenging relationship with students was the most dominant theme in my interviews with these students. Each and every student was able to describe a positive relationship with a teacher or other staff member and then usually added that a part of this relationship was that this teacher pushed them to do better. As described earlier, a major component of the Challenge initiative is promoting positive connections between staff and students while also challenging students to do better. The latter was considered by some to be putting too much focus on the student rather than on the school system itself. However, when

students experienced the pushing and challenging in the context of a caring relationship, it seemed to be empowering. The high expectations of this connection with a staff member made them feel valued. The literature review supported this. Alonso et al. (2009) in their book, *Our Schools Suck*, talked about how students appreciated faculty who have pushed them to succeed. Carter (2008) also discussed the powerful impact this combination of caring adults and high expectations could have on student success. Cokley and Chapman (2008), Wildhagen (2012) and Hennen (2005) all discussed the importance of student staff relationships and a caring climate and the association of these with academic success. Graham and Anderson (2008) discussed how these relationships impact students in gaining strength and motivation to succeed. Hennen (2005) said that schools need to be deliberate about this and must carefully set out a plan to be sure that students are experiencing the caring support along with high expectations. At this high school, as was reported in the previous chapter, our students pointed to this combination of caring and pushing as a positive experience. They talked about how teachers never gave up on them, how they might not have graduated without a teacher, how a teacher was a person in their life who motivated them, and how a teacher can change students' day or their whole life.

So, how is a leader deliberate about making sure these caring and challenging relationships are being formed at his school? Our principal pointed to this expectation in almost every faculty meeting, asked about this in every interview with a potential new staff hire, had staff reflect on this in each individual's evaluation, and articulated this in his strategic plan. When we asked staff to reflect on the things they like about this high school and what made this high school a great place, almost all staff will mentioned the

relationships that we build with students. This principal was very deliberate about this with the Challenge initiative, making sure that each African American student had a mentor and an advisor assigned to them in addition to advisors hired specifically for the Challenge initiative. This was absolutely a key component and expenditure of the initiative.

Another task for a leader is to help his staff find the right balance in how they connect with and push students. If the right balance is not found, the impact of that relationship on academic success may not be as strong, or could even have a negative effect. If a teacher develops a caring relationship without the push, it can be less than a genuine belief in the ability of the student. As Pennington (2007) observed some teachers, especially White teachers, can see themselves as saving students from themselves, maintaining a dominant power balance that can be detrimental to the student.

On the other hand, if a student is experiencing the push without feeling the care, it can make a student angry and feeling like a victim rather than valued. It can be perceived as negative bias or even racism and trust can be lost. Moreover, this feeling of a staff person being racist is not just toward White staff. For example, in the previous chapter I discussed our African American assistant principal and the feelings of some students that he was racist. As I proposed earlier, being African American may be an advantage in working with African American students but there may also be a disadvantage in being perceived as someone who is giving into the system and as one who is trying to get ahead by putting himself above other African Americans. Staff needs to work hard to be sure they are frequently verbalizing their concern for and interest in the student. Students

need to see that the teacher is taking some of their time to connect with them. It seems that in some ways, an African American staff may need to do this even more.

The Importance of Hiring African American Staff

While my interviews with students confirmed that White teachers can and do build important relationships with their African American students, nevertheless, several students said that it might be easier to go to an African American staff member because they would know the struggle. Corey explained “a lot of times, African Americans won’t open up to people who are not like them.” Marcus stated that he thought “African-American students and other students in general, tend to build relationships with teachers who they can most identify with.” So, in several of the interviews, students discussed the importance of having and retaining a Black faculty. It is important to them that they had someone to talk to who looked like them, who understood their struggle and whom they could identify with as a role model. As Erika summarized it is important “to be able to see people in authority that is... that's Black, and we are able to relate to, and they're setting a good example for us.”

So, the task for a school leader is to have a diverse staff that is closer to representing the student body. In a school with 25% African American students, the leader should be doing what he can to hire African American teachers and administrators. This must be strategic and purposeful. In my experience, there are very few African American teacher applicants, and when we interview the few that do apply, they often still do not get the position. As a defense, I often hear that we need to hire the best teacher. It is important for administrators to take a few moments to reflect on this. If those participating in the hiring process are all White, is it possible that there is a cultural

bias in determining who the best candidate is?

While the Challenge initiative in itself does not have a written goal to hire more African American staff, the focus of the initiative on African American students causes the administrators involved to question constantly how things can be better for our students. The first expenditure of the Challenge was to hire two African American staff members to work with students involved in the initiative.

Providing a Racial Cohort for Academic Success

When speaking of the Challenge initiative another theme of the interviews was the importance of being part of a group. This was an intention of Dr. Joy when she helped to form the initiative and was out of her experience of being in a cohort when she was working toward her doctorate. This was an important support for her and from the interviews with the students, it is clear that this was an important support for them. It made them feel like they were a part of something and that people cared. In addition, since the two Challenge aides and two of the three administrators directly involved are Black, this also had an impact and was mentioned several times as important to them to have Black staff members that understood them and their struggle. Diana described the importance of a cohort and having a sense of belonging and supporting one another to achieve because the “right peers will tell you it is cool to do your homework. It’s cool to graduate.” This positive peer interaction was important to the vision of this initiative and they saw this group as a support for them in having similar goals for achievement and doing contracts together to improve their grades.

The importance of connectedness with racial peers was a theme in the literature review as well and was confirmed in my interviews with students. Cokley and Chapman

(2008) determined that this connectedness and positive identification with their peers was important to achievement of African American students. Graham and Anderson (2008) talked about the importance of ethnic identity that is positive, and how it can strengthen them to overcome the obstacles that they face.

As can be seen from the interviews, this establishment of a cohort composed of all African American students did not come without risks. This action was questioned by both White and Black students and parents. Whites wondered why they were excluded and questioned if there were a group exclusive to only Whites if they would be called racist. Blacks questioned if this might be sending the message that they were not capable. The principal and his administrative team had to have the courage to take this risk to form this cohort for the benefit of students. After time, this cohort and positive racial peer interaction seemed to have eventually been seen as a positive and strengthening force for these students. As Jessica explained when she observed her peer giving a talk to the cohort “that’s so cool...he’s motivating other students and doesn’t even know it.”

Being part of this cohort also involved seeing others in the group get awards for academic achievement. This activity of African American students seeing other African American students being successful and then working together to make this happen for more and more students appears to be very important.

Encouraging Hard Work

While students could identify barriers to a fully inclusive and welcoming environment at this school, generally they were positive about it and expressed a desire to achieve and be successful. This principal’s leadership in establishing the Challenge

initiative did aim to inspire students to close the achievement gap by pushing students and encouraging them to work harder. However, it had not been in the context of working harder because they had been lazy or did not have the ability to succeed. It was in the context of the bias that they had experienced in the community and in the school. They were pushed to work harder than their White peers specifically because of the bias and to overcome this bias. I would like to state again how Mr. Sylvester, an African American male assistant principal, explained his view of African Americans having to work harder because the system was rigged against African Americans and that they have to be twice as good to get not quite as far. Corey said the same thing that “you have to work that much harder to prove yourself and so either you accept the fact that you’re never going to be as good as that person next to you, or you work harder than that person next to you to be better than them. It’s just something that you have to do.”

This need to work harder was a focus of the Challenge initiative. This focus also did not come without criticism or misunderstanding. It was another risk and the decision to move forward on this took courage. I believe that the principal, working with the African American assistant principals and the African American aides, was able to get this message to students without the initiative being shut down because of the community thinking he was talking about working harder because of assumptions of lower ability. Rather, the purpose was to overcome or compensate for the marginalization of African Americans over the years. An African American male in a social studies class explained that African American students “have to work harder to achieve goals and to get those opportunities that we deserve but don’t necessarily get based upon things that are already set in place, societal norms that are already in place.” While the name of this initiative,

the Challenge, had been criticized because it seemed to put the focus on the students rather than the system, it is important to recognize that this component of the Challenge, the pushing to work harder, was the result of the principal listening to his two African American assistant principals, along with applying his own work ethic and competitive nature that he developed as a college athlete. It should also be noted again, as indicated earlier, that the African American students verbalized that they appreciated the pushing and saw this in the context of caring and believing in them.

It is important to acknowledge here that I believe that a weak point of the administrative communication about the Challenge was that the principal did not adequately articulate his simultaneous efforts to impact the staff to support students and help staff better understand their own biases, and how these biases impact their instruction and interactions with African American students. An effort to help staff members discover and confront their own biases will be extremely important because from student interviews it was apparent that these racist biases could have a strong impact on student motivation and achievement.

Conclusions and Implications

This study examined leadership processes in providing equitable access to education for African American students. Particularly, it examined a specific initiative to discern the administrative processes at a Midwestern school in identifying and addressing barriers and in providing supports to access education for African American students. The method of this study centered on interviews with students and administrators regarding their perception of administrative efforts to better understand and address the barriers to, and supports for, equitable access to education.

One of the themes that emerged on administrative processes and leadership included the importance of knowing your community and building relationships of trust. This takes time and involves making sure that leadership includes a developed reputation for listening to and valuing those you lead. This development of trust will give a leader some room for mistakes in decisions or communication regarding a new initiative.

Another theme included the importance of leaders being reflective of their experiences of race and developing a genuine concern for justice and equitable access. From interviews with leaders in this district, it appears that good social justice training can lead to better understanding the struggles related to race, and can influence motivation. In addition, collaboration and good relationships within a diverse administrative team could also have a significant impact on motivation. From this flows the next theme that was the importance of developing a vision and collaborating with others to move forward with it. From these interviews, it appeared that this principal's vision was developed by listening to and valuing those he leads, by collaboration with his team, by his own motivation and passion influenced by his life experiences and his training, and by his own personality and approach to things. All these elements could be found in his vision of this Challenge initiative. Another quality of a leader is having courage to make a decision even though there is some risk. Starting an initiative that included sharing data that articulated an achievement gap for African American students and that focused on the students themselves working hard to reduce the gap was certainly a risk as was explained above. In terms of leadership, however, if a principal has built the trust and collaborated with a diverse team, at some point, he or she needs to do something even if it could possibly fail.

Themes centering on barriers experienced by students included unintentional or unconscious bias and lower expectations and assumptions by peers and staff. Barriers that this administrative team had to address are assumptions, lower expectations academically as well as disciplinary actions, and unconscious or implicit bias of peers and staff. Supports that students found in this school which were incorporated in the Challenge initiative included caring relationships with staff paired with pushing students to succeed. This was by far the most cited support for the students. Other supports included having African American staff who might better understand their struggle and the importance of a positive African American peer cohort improving racial identity for academic success. The need to work hard because of the bias against them was also a recurring theme.

These administrative processes did lead to some improvement in the academic achievement of African American students at this school. Dr. Lockwood shared data seen in chapter four that would indicate some success in his goals of improving the attendance and GPA and reducing the percentage of F's of African American students.

As you can see from the tables in chapter four, African American students improved their rate of attendance by more than 4 percentage points. Another goal of this initiative was to improve the GPA of African American students. The GPA of African American students did improve. In the first four years listed before the Challenge was fully implemented in all four grades, the average GPA for African American students was 2.36. However, in the last four years after the Challenge had been fully implemented for 7 years, the average GPA was 2.67. The gap itself was not reduced as much as was hoped, since White students grades also improved at this time, most likely the result of

school wide initiatives such as the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports program, the establishment of alternative classes within the school and the emphasis on building relationships with students. Another area that was targeted for this initiative was a reduction in the number of F grades that African American students received. Progress was made here as well as can be seen in chapter four. Even though suspension reduction was not identified as a specific goal of the Challenge initiative, it should be noted that there was the most dramatic reduction beginning a few years after this initiative was implemented. So, for a period of the last 6 years there is a projected reduction of suspensions of 85% for African American students. This has been an incremental reduction for each of these 6 years.

Students who participated in the Challenge and administrators who were interviewed felt that the Challenge had made a difference and helped African American students to be more successful at this school. Dr. Lockwood saw the decrease in discipline referrals and suspensions, along with the improved attendance and GPA, as an indication of a positive climate change.

In my experience of being at this school for 27 years, the climate and the feeling in the halls and in the classroom definitely appeared to have improved for the better. However, we need to continue our efforts in sustaining the positive and supportive elements of the Challenge initiative along with continuing to look at ways to have more African American students in AP classes. This would involve working with the elementary and middle school staff. This is because when our students are recommended by middle school teachers for accelerated classes at the high school, very few of these students are African American and that can set them on a track where it may be harder to

move to honors or accelerated classes. We need to continue to be sure that contributions by African Americans are included in various subjects in our curriculum. We also need to continue community efforts and committees such as the Alliance for Interracial Dignity and the Committee for Equitable Access that are currently active in the community and include parents, students and community members reflecting on racism and working to make a difference.

Dr. Mason, a central office administrator at the time of this student and the current superintendent, said that we needed to continue our work on more “culturally relevant pedagogy, helping student to find meaning and relevance in their own learning.” Other Implications of this study were integrated within this discussion.

Limitations

The limitations of this research include the small research sample that is typical of qualitative studies. This research is limited to one school and one administrative team. This researcher is a member of this team and must be aware of biases that may interfere with interpretations of data. It is also important to point out that my close working relationship with the principal over more than 20 years could influence my views on his leadership.

While my role as an assistant principal may have influenced the responses of students during the individual and classroom interviews, I believe that after the first five to ten minutes, most students were feeling comfortable enough to share honestly their experience and views.

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