Many educational leaders dream of the opportunity to begin a new school. New schools provide opportunities for innovation, change, and creativity, which most educators believe is needed to improve current middle school practice. This study follows the process of planning for and opening a new and innovative middle school program designed to offer a unique educational experience for middle school students.

This study was conducted as a unique case study that examined the experiences of the school principal and staff members during a two-year period of opening a new school. The researcher serves as a participant in the creation of the Academy and the principal of the school. His experience provides insight into the planning and implementation processes that were utilized to accomplish effective creation and implementation of the school. Other staff members share their perspective on the challenges encountered, and adjustments made, during the opening two years of the program. Participants also provide recommendations on continuing to improve the Academy and ideas about what processes are relevant to other school leaders.

The findings of this study reveal that it is essential to clearly establish and communicate the vision when creating new schools. In addition, it provides specific practices found to be beneficial such as empowering teachers as leaders, providing unique training opportunities, and establishing small schools. This research is beneficial to school leaders or districts interested in creating an innovative middle school program to meet the social and academic needs of adolescents.

THE CREATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A DREAM:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM A UNIQUE CASE STUDY

by

Kevin Wheat

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the Faculty of The Graduate School at
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Approved by

Ulrich C. Reitzug
Committee Chair

This work is dedicated to those who are bold enough to pursue their dreams.
To the educators who commit daily to the challenge of helping young people experience
success in an increasingly complex world. To my wife, Kris, who is one of those
educators. And to all those who believe in the possibility that exists in each new day and
are willing to persist in the face of adversity for the good of others.
I am grateful to serve alongside each of you.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Kevin Wheat, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.
>
> –Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ask the parent of a typical adolescent how they feel about their child's middle school experience and you are likely to receive a response expressing confusion, frustration, and a lack of excitement. Parents are not sure what their middle school student is learning, what they actually do during the day, or why their middle school experience does not look like the junior high familiarities that parents hold in memory. Ask a typical middle school student the same question and you will be fortunate to receive anything more enthusiastic than, "It's fine." Instead, you are more likely to hear responses that communicate boredom, monotony, and a lack of enjoyment about the learning opportunities experienced in traditional middle schools today.

What would cause parents and students to express such dissatisfaction with the middle school experience? Although education experienced a transformation of the junior high model in recent decades to address the specific needs of adolescents, most students and families have failed to receive the promise of the middle school model. Instead, parents complain of a lack of academic rigor in the middle school. Students express dissatisfaction with the social construction of their school or lack of options for exploring areas of personal interest. Even educators argue that the model never delivered

on several of the fundamental components that were acclaimed to bring great academic and social success for adolescent learners.

From 1970 to 2009, the number of middle schools in America increased from 4,884 to 13,277 (McEwin & Greene, 2011). Phasing out the junior high movement, middle schools were seen as a developmentally appropriate response to needs of America's early adolescents. Despite the dramatic increase in middle school programs, doubt still exists among many scholars whether the majority of these schools have authentically implemented the essential characteristics of an effective middle school program (Lounsbury, 1991).

Although a junior high/middle school movement has existed for a century, many schools still do not provide the structure and support necessary for young adolescents to experience success. The former principal of Central Park East in New York, Deborah Meier, describes the ineffective structure provided for middle school aged students at many schools that consider themselves to be middle schools. "If we set out to design a school totally inappropriate for the development of young adolescents, we could not find a better example than most middle/junior high schools" (Lewis, 1990, p. 19). Unfortunately, little progress has been made in the middle school movement over the past 25 years. Middle schools remain, primarily, as designed in the early 1980s.

It does not have to be this way! Innovative middle schools can be constructed to provide appropriate academic challenge and support to students while allowing them to develop socially into young leaders, capable of excelling in today's fast-paced, competitive world. Not only that, we can do it in a manner that allows students to enjoy

the process and share responses to questions about their experience that express enthusiasm, satisfaction, and passion for what they are learning. Further, educators do not have to scrap the middle school model in order to create dynamic schools. Instead, utilizing the research and experiences from programs that are experiencing success, school leaders can implement specific instructional practices and social constructs that are proven to yield engagement and success for today's middle level learners.

So what constitutes an innovative and effective middle school program? How can educational leaders, many of whom have no official middle school training, ensure that their schools are more than merely high schools for smaller people? What are the fundamental characteristics that are critical to providing innovative educational and social structures for students who are transitioning from childhood to young adults? Follow along as this study investigates and provides lessons learned from those who chose to pursue innovation at the middle school level.

Rationale and Perspective of the Researcher

In the fall of 2008, a large urban school district in the southeast hired a new superintendent with expectations of increasing academic excellence for students. After conducting a listening and learning tour of the district, the superintendent presented a progressive strategic plan to the board of education for review and approval. Among the eight areas of the 50-page document was the goal of improving academic achievement. One of the strategies listed within this goal was to increase choice options for families in the district at the middle school level. Although the district had established itself as a

leader of magnet programming for elementary and high school students, middle school options were scarce and were the focus for this particular strategy.

> **Area I: Improving Academic Achievement, Strategy I.25: Expand choice options for students and families**
> - The district will open a middle school that provides extended learning time and other options such a single-sex classrooms and innovative instructional practices to help students succeed. Students achieving their personal best and improving the academic achievement of at-risk preteens, will characterize the philosophy of the school. (Strategic Plan, 2012)

Two weeks after board approval of the district's strategic plan, I was appointed to serve as chair of the Advantage Model Middle School Project Team, an unofficial name that was provided to identify the strategy and assigned members responsible for ensuring the project completion.

At the time of this appointment, I had served as a middle school principal for the past nine years at two middle schools within the same district. Prior to those assignments, I was an assistant principal and teacher at two other middle schools within the district. In each of these assignments, I served students and families from a variety of socio-economic and racial backgrounds. Students in my classroom demonstrated success in standardized assessments as well as in social growth as demonstrated by parent and administrative feedback. Each of my administrative responsibilities was in Title 1 middle schools that demonstrated significant academic and cultural improvement during my tenure as well. In each of these assignments, I strived to incorporate my experiences and knowledge of the middle school movement obtained in my undergraduate work in Middle Grades Education.

These experiences combined with the assignment of chair of the advantage model project team provided an excellent opportunity and challenge to identify innovative academic and social practices and incorporate them into a model that would serve middle school students in my district. Over the next two years, I led project team meetings, visited successful middle school programs, recruited additional team members, and invested myself in the effort to create an innovative middle school program. When the principalship for the program was posted, I determined that I had too much invested not to apply and pursue the opportunity to lead this school. I was selected for interview, nominated, and approved to serve as principal of my third and most challenging principal assignment.

As leader of the project team and now principal of the school, I provide a unique perspective on both the creation and implementation of an innovative project designed to challenge and support at-risk preteens at the middle school level. I have participated in the design and construction of the physical structure of the school during the project. I have served to recruit, identify, and select personnel for the program. I have worked with prospective parents and community members to develop procedures and practices during the creation of the program. I have also served as an ongoing liaison between the efforts of the project team, school staff, and board of education. These experiences provide me with a unique and important perspective to share as the researcher for this study.

Table 1

Timeline of Study and Academy Opening

Date	Event
Fall 2009	School district announces innovative magnet school initiative
Fall 2010	Wheat appointed project chair of Advantage Model project
Spring 2011	Project team visits Ron Clark Academy
Fall 2011	Wheat and team members visit KIPP Charter program in New York City
Summer 2012	Wheat participates in Freedom School Training in Knoxville, Tennessee
Fall 2012	Wheat presents project team recommendations for school design to district board of education
Fall 2012	Board of Education approves for opening of Advantage Model Middle School in August of 2013
Spring 2013	Wheat named as principal of program; named changed to Academy
Summer 2013	Inaugural staff hired and training completed
August 2013	Academy opens with 100 fifth-grade scholars
June 2014	Academy moves to permanent location and adds additional cohort of scholars
Summer 2015	Study concludes after Academy's second year of operation

The Problem

The attack on public education is in full force. If you browse the table of contents of a contemporary educational magazine, casually follow the newspaper, or subscribe to an education blog, it is obvious that critics believe that public education must change and do so with deliberate speed. Educational leaders across the nation agree with the need to improve public education. Principals acknowledge concerns related to student dropout

rates, safety issues that result in high suspensions, low test scores, and questions about the rigorous instruction that students are receiving. Business leaders, politicians, and community activists are pounding the drum for educational reform and for good reason. In a 2009 address to the Teachers College at Columbia University, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan proclaimed, "when 25% of our students—and almost 40% of our black and Hispanic students—fail to graduate high school on time, we know that too many of our schools are failing to offer their students a world class education."

The public also perceives that schools are failing due to media reports that American students are outperformed by students in foreign countries in science and math (Schmidt, 2000). Meanwhile, the majority of our schools fail to make adequate yearly progress as defined by our federal government. Business leaders champion charter schools as they answer to public education and politicians advocate for vouchers and other reform efforts to address what is believed to be underperforming public schools. The call for stronger test scores, higher graduation rates, and more institutions identified as schools of excellence can be heard clearly in local, state, and national forums.

School districts across the country are adopting a variety of approaches aimed at increasing proficiency for successful schools and drastically reducing the number of low performing schools. Districts such as New York City and Washington D.C. have implemented mayoral control of schools and have hired reform-minded thinkers tasked with improving schools by any means necessary. Other movements of reform support strategies of decentralizing large districts, empowering principals to have local control of funding, staffing, and programming decisions. Often times, a district recognizes success

after fully embracing a variety of strategies. Unfortunately, it remains very difficult to identify the specific initiatives that have proven effective, preventing the reform efforts from gaining the support necessary in going to scale.

Unfortunately, no singular innovative effort aimed at improving middle schools has risen to the top of the reform discussions or yielded significant impact on the practice of public middle school programs. The successes of charter school networks and private academies are often dismissed and attributed to intentional selection of students, availability of funds, or unaccountability of academic performance standards. Although multiple attempts have been aimed at improving middle grades education, educators do not understand the process, challenges, and benefits of creating and implementing innovative middle schools based on the successes of existing programs, both public and private. However, if public school and district leaders can better understand these issues, perhaps a model for effective middle schools may emerge that will improve student learning and fulfillment during the middle school years.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to learn from the experience of opening an innovative middle school in a large urban school district. With such great variety of reform efforts, instructional models, and support structures to choose from, school leaders must research and identify the most innovative and effective methods available when tasked with the opportunity to create new schools and implement successful middle school programs. This study will examine the process of creating an innovative middle school program and implementing that vision through the second year of existence. The school identified for

the study is considered to be innovative in its use of instructional practices, extended calendar, extended school days, and focus on social development for middle school students.

This study will provide stories of critical incidents that occurred during the process of identifying the elements that would identify the program as innovative, structuring those components in a framework that clearly defined the school purpose, and implementing the program during the first two years. Specific lessons learned from meetings, trainings, and professional development sessions will share insight for other administrators to utilize in their own planning and implementation. Ultimately, it is my desire to impact the culture and practice of middle schools throughout the country. I would like to see principals have data and stories to support what they likely already believe to be true in their hearts, that middle schools can be engaging, exciting environments that stimulate preteens to think, dream, and achieve excellence and that implementing such as school can be a reality.

As any school leader will recognize, creating a program with a purpose of being innovative will encounter multiple challenges. An attempt to organize the process of schooling children in a different manner will certainly bring about critique, obstacles, and frustrations when working within an established context of how schools should educate children. This study will follow the process and the stories of the individuals that encountered such challenges and share insight related to their experiences in overcoming and adjusting in the process of creating and implementing an innovative program for students.

Overview of the Study

This study will examine the process of both creating and implementing an innovative middle school in a large urban school district. It will utilize the perspectives of teachers during the opening years of the school and administrative reflection on the challenges encountered. The study will provide a descriptive narrative of how the program was implemented and adjusted during the year of planning, the opening year, and second year of operation.

This study will be conducted as a unique case study in which I served as a participant observer. Similar to a narrative analysis (Lichtman, 2010, p. 88), this approach incorporates first-person accounts in story form of a particular event or set of occurrences. As both principal and researcher of the school, I have unique perspective, access, and insight into the process for planning and implementing the program. The study will consist of an analysis of teacher and administrative experiences during the creation process of identifying the core elements of the program, as well as the experiences of opening a specific middle school program. The implications of the study will further serve to inform program adjustments and practices in the subsequent years of implementation.

Significance

Three years ago, an urban school district opened an Advantage Model Middle School designed to provide increased rigor and opportunity for students in grades 5-8. Modeled after best practices from the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter school network and the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, this middle school offers

extended hours, extended calendar, integration of the arts, and a college bound theme as the foundation for recruitment and implementation. This program was expected to draw significant positive press and hype in local and state media; the program opened as the first public school of its kind in the region and hoped to provide a model for other middle school programs to follow. Further, it served as another example of the district's belief that school choice and alternative programs are beneficial for students, and the district is committed to moving forward through a variety of reform initiatives.

This study provides data from a multi-year process of designing an innovative school with a team of individuals committed to identifying social and academic best practices from successful programs. Data was collected from the process of implementing this innovative program from the perspective of teachers involved in both aspects of the process. Participants were asked to share their experiences of the planning process, opening phase of the school, adjustments made during the process, and challenges encountered. The analysis and implications of this study served to assist school leaders and practitioners in the process of designing a new school and implementing the program with a desire to be innovative in nature. The researcher investigated the following research questions:

1. What processes were used in creating and implementing this innovative middle school? Which were effective and which were not? Why or why not?

2. What were the challenges and obstacles that were faced during the creation process? What challenges were encountered in the implementation process?

3. What adjustments and changes did administrators need to make in the process

    of implementing the vision for the school?

Although the study focuses extensively on the perspectives of the teachers involved in the creation and implementation of this innovative school, the researcher participated in an extensive period of individual study and exploration prior to additional participant involvement. Further, the researcher's role of primary participant yields a unique story or identifying and selecting staff that would in turn be participants in subsequent phases of creation and implementation. Therefore, Chapter IV provides an overview of the researcher's account of the development and implementation of the school to ensure context and clarity for the reader. Chapter V shares the stories of implementation through the responses of each participant and Chapter VI provides analysis and interpretation of the data.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

What is Innovation?

If educational leaders are to create middle school programs that can effectively serve students in the 21st century, they must understand the nature of implementing innovation, the history of the middle school movement, the rationale for creating programs specific for the needs of young adolescents, and characteristics necessary for such schools to succeed. This review of the literature is designed to provide insight in each of these critical areas as well as highlight many of the current innovative models that are experiencing success at the middle school level.

The Implementation Process of Educational Innovation

In *Successful School Reform* (1992), Michael Fullan describes innovation as a new or revised curriculum, structure, policy, or idea that people encounter for the first time. "Dealing with an innovation effectively means alterations in behaviors and beliefs. Changes in behaviors—new skills, activities, and practices—and changes in beliefs, new understandings, and commitments—are at the core of implementation" (p. 22). These changes in behaviors and beliefs are essential for any innovation to be effectively implemented. This process of implementing change is referred to as implementation perspective and describes both the content and process of dealing with new ideas. Fullan's work identifies teacher development as a fundamental core concept for

successful implementation on any innovation in the classroom or school level. Practices such as in-service sessions to train teachers in new ideas, techniques and practices are found to be a critical factor in successful implementation. Fullan indicates that the process of implementing change has a substantial impact on how people's behaviors and beliefs are impacted.

Fullan provides four critical insights into this process for effective change.

1. Active initiation and participation

2. Pressure and support

3. Changes in behavior and beliefs

4. The overriding problem of ownership

It is difficult to imagine large scale involvement and participation at the initiation stage could be beneficial or even possible. Instead, the impetus for change is more often conceptualized within a small group of individuals who build momentum for the initiative. However, active initiation of the reform effort is essential in the implementation process. Fullan (1992) contends that pressure and support work in unison to move the change effort forward. "Pressure without support leads to resistance and alienation; support without pressure leads to drift or waste of resources" (p. 25).

Changes in behavior and beliefs occur most often after an individual has already begun participation in an implementation effort. According to Fullan, most individuals experience a change in behavior prior to a change in beliefs and often experience and "implementation dip" (p. 25) as they wrestle with the meaning and skills necessary for the behavioral change. However, this is an essential experience in the change process

that allows individuals to construct meaning and understanding that impact their own beliefs about a particular initiative.

The fourth important aspect of the change process is the importance of developing ownership among large numbers of people in an effort to ensure sustainability. Even when individuals may be in support of a particular change, they may still not fully own it due to lack of clarity or skill development. "True ownership is not something that occurs magically at the beginning, but rather is something that comes out the other end of a successful change process" (p. 26). Ownership grows during the implementation process as more individuals develop the skills and attitudes necessary to effectively implement the innovation within the organization.

Why Do Innovations Fail?

According to Cohen and Ball (2007), educational innovations experience significant challenge in realizing success due to a variety of reasons. Even if they are successful in the initial effort, they struggle to advance the innovation to scale despite educators' best attempts to implement these innovations with fidelity. One reason provides is that innovations are badly designed. These reforms fit poorly with the currently instructional practices within an organization, do not provide opportunity for teachers to fully implement them, or fail to give teaches the adequate training necessary to fully implement them. The design flaws ultimately lead to the unsuccessful implementation of an innovation that was considered to be beneficial for students.

In a second rationale for innovation failure, Cohen and Ball (2007) explain that "Schools are the villains and innovations are the victims" (p. 21). In this explanation,

schools do not provide any incentive for change, time for change to be implemented and monitored, and do not provide enough support for the change to be implemented. Therefore, a highly-acclaimed innovation falls victim to the conditions within a school or district and stifles advancement. Additionally, many innovations do not address problems that seriously concern practitioners. Teachers that are expected to implement innovations must recognize the significance of a reform initiative in order to fully support it. When innovations do not provide a clear rationale for an important matter that effects a teacher's ability to teach students to mastery, these efforts are cast aside, neglected, and fail to reach a level of implementation that can even be measured.

Finally, the educational environment prohibits the effective implementation of innovational ideas due to the openness for multiple reform efforts being considered simultaneously. The concurrent implementation of educational reforms causes teachers, building administrators, and districts to experience frustration and lack of clarity with the nature of each innovation. The "consistency of adoption and implementation" (p. 21) has created an environment in which teachers are unable to maintain the pace of skill development and practice adjustment necessary to meet the demands of each innovation.

Jim Shelton, Assistant Deputy Secretary at U.S. Department of Education, recognizes this failure to implement educational innovation and the need to address it. When speaking at the Education Innovation Summit at Arizona State University in 2013 he stated,

> Why do educational innovations fail? There are three common reasons. The first is a failure of knowledge. We don't know or we don't use what we don't know. The second is a failure of design and engineering. Unfortunately, education

products are very often much more kludgy than products in other industries. We need to change this. The third is a failure of adoption. Few or no people actually use it.

The Role of Principals

Much research points to the critical role of the school principal in the implementation of educational innovation efforts at the school level. According to Fullan (2001), the success of these efforts depends on the principal taking an active role in the implementation process. Principals can take a directive or supportive approach in their participation but cannot leave the process of implementation solely to teachers. They must also be knowledgeable about the process of implementation and have the ability to provide access to resources necessary for teachers to experience both the support and pressure necessary to implement identified reforms.

Specific practices that principals may participate in to demonstrate an active role in the implementation process include

- Attend initial and follow up in-service

- Provide and protect user planning time during early implementation

- Interact with teachers and participate in problem solving discussions

- Provide latitude for risk-taking, errors and gradual mastery of new practices

- Protect teachers from undue demands

- Hold users accountable for implementing the change

- Recognizing and rewarding teachers for effective implementation. (Fullan, 2001, p. 49)

What are We Trying to Change?

The remaining literature review provides a summary of the middle school movement in the United States, areas for celebration and implementation success, and an acknowledgement of failures that need to be address. The programs reviewed in this section are implementation successes and have served as model institutions for the development of the Academy utilized in this study.

History of the Middle School Movement

RAND Education's research provides a comprehensive review of the history of the middle school movement in Focus on the Wonder Years, 2004. By 1900, the primary configuration for schooling in the United States was an "Eight-Four" approach with students attending primary school for eight years and progressing to the secondary school for four years. Authors of this study indicate that there was significant societal pressure to reorganize this model at the turn of the century. Increased immigration provided significantly higher numbers of elementary aged students needing education. Industrialization was increasing at a rapid pace and therefore required a better prepared workforce with factory knowledge and skills (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004).

The work of human development researchers and psychologists also provided sound reasoning for reorganizing the current configuration of schools. In 1905, child psychologist, Stanley Hall, published his classic book*, Adolescence*, describing the unique developmental characteristics and needs that emerge during the time that young people reach puberty. His work argued that specific environmental conditions would be

most advantageous to supporting the development of adolescents during this period. In

1899, the National Education Association (NEA) published a report recommending that

secondary education begin at the seventh-grade level as opposed to the current ninth-

grade model. It stated,

> The seventh grade, rather than ninth, is the natural turning point in the pupil's life, as the age of adolescence demands new methods and wiser direction. The transition from elementary to the secondary period may be natural and easy by changing gradually from the one-teacher regimen to the system of special teachers, thus avoiding the violent shock now commonly felt on entering the high school. (NEA, 1899, p. 10)

The work of John Dewey in the early 1900s provided a "natural school" that was

child centered and provided a climate of positivism (Wiles & Bondi, 2001). Dewey

combined the knowledge of developmental stages of human growth with curriculum and

instructional designs matched for this group. He proposed that there were three

conditions necessary for growth in children that included (a) freedom to investigate, (b)

choice in school experiences, and (c) the ability to meet and solve problems that would be

confronted later in life. He called this process the "growing consciousness" on the part of

the child.

Based on the works of these educators, psychologists, and organizations, the first

junior-high schools with grades grade configurations of 7-9 and 6-8 began to emerge in

the early 1910s (Wiles & Bondi, 1981). According to Juvonen et al. (2004), junior high

schools served to meet various societal needs such as rapidly increasing adolescent

populations in urban areas, health care needs such as showers and immunizations, and the

development of Americanization programs to help children assimilate culturally. Leaders

in the junior high movement such as Gruhn and Douglas (1947) developed six basic

functions of the junior high school in the 1940s.

- Function 1: Integration. To help student use the skills, attitudes, and understanding previously acquire and integrate them into an effective and wholesome behavior.

- Function 2: Exploration. To allow student the opportunity to explore particular interest so that they can make better choices, both vocational and academic. To help students develop a wide range of cultural, civic, social, and recreational interests.

- Function 3: Guidance. To help students make better decisions about vocational and recreational activities and help students make satisfactory social, emotional, and academic adjustments toward mature personalities.

- Function 4: Differentiation. To provide differential educational opportunities and facilities in accord with varying backgrounds, personalities, and other individual differences so that each pupil can achieve economically and completely the ultimate aims of education.

- Function 5: Socialization. To furnish learning experiences intended to prepare students for effective and satisfying participation in a complex social order as well as for future changes in the social order.

- Function 6: Articulation. To provide for the gradual transition from preadolescent education to an education program suited to the needs of adolescent girls and boys.

According to Wiles and Bondi (2001),

> These six functions—to integrate learning, to encourage exploration, to guide development, to individualize the learning experience, to promote healthy social development, and to bridge learning from the elementary years to the high school years- would all become part of the middle school rationale. (p. 9)

Brough (1995) indicates that despite the efforts of the junior high movement to meet the needs of society, only about one-third of students in public school made it to the 9th grade in 1911. He reports several factors that led to the failure of students to progress to the secondary level. "Abrupt transition . . . irrelevance of the curriculum to the everyday lives of youth . . . strict instruction . . . the practice of retaining students when they did not meet the rigid requirements" (Juvonen et al., 2004, p. 11) all pointed to reasons that the junior high movement was not successfully meeting the needs of American students.

Between 1922 and 1938, the number of junior high schools in the United States increased six-fold despite their apparent failure to effectively prepare and transition students to high school programs (Bossing & Cramer, 1965). Intended to be a developmentally responsive and academically appropriate educational structure, the junior high school movement faced many challenges and was in obvious need of reform despite any plausible alternatives. The rapid growth of high schools after World War I is one cause for the failure in junior high schools to successfully launch. According to Wiles and Bondi (2001), the growth of high schools, the onset of the Great Depression, and the years of World War II caused educational reform and advancement in the United States to stall considerably for a 20-year period.

The inclusion of ninth graders in the junior high program is another cause for the inability to develop a curriculum that could effectively serve the preadolescent. These students were "tied to graduation requirements established in the 1890s and were required to have fixed courses with fixed time requirements. Once the ninth graders were scheduled, little flexibility remained for 7th and 8th grade students" (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 10).

In the 1960s, an alternative emerged known as the middle school. Dr. William M. Alexander is given official credit for proposing the middle school and is often referred to as the "father of the American middle school." Alexander's middle school concept would differ from the junior high in one significant way. As a humanist, Alexander believed that the middle school program should be focused on the student, specifically the preadolescent. In contrast, the junior high program had been focused too heavily on subject matter content. "This philosophic watershed would be important in the basic organizational decisions such as the curriculum offerings, schedules, hiring teachers, and even building construction" (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 10).

Alexander proposed a shift in the organization of the middle schools to a 6-8 or 5-8 model. This allowed the middle school to focus on preadolescents that were in the developmental onset of puberty and as such, held common characteristics, needs, and challenges. He recommended a broad curriculum that would embrace many of the previous functions of the junior high including exploration, social competence, mastery of basic skills, and personal development. In 1966, American scholar, Donald Eichhorn wrote,

A special program is needed for the 10- to 14-year old child going through the unique "transescent" period in his growth and development. The widest range of differences in terms of physical, social, and intellectual growth is found in the middle school youngster. Such a wide range of differences calls for an individualized program that is lacking most junior high schools. The middle school provides for individual differences with programs tailored to fit each child. (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 13).

The launch of a new middle school program came at a time when America was eager for change. In the mid-60s, there was general dissatisfaction with American education in general and the junior high schools took the brunt of the criticism as assessment results indicated that American students were not performing at comparable levels in math and science as students overseas. The successful Russian launch of Sputnik was a tremendous breakthrough in science that challenged America to consider how it would contend with the advancements of foreign countries. Coupled with a population explosion of baby boomers now arriving at high school age in what was deemed as a peaceful world, enrollment in schools skyrocketed and facilities could not be built quickly enough. Each of these factors allowed Alexander's recommendation for reorganizing the structure of schools to be well received in American culture. The middle school had been born.

Emergence of a Middle School Concept

By the 1970s, the middle school movement was well underway. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) was formed and provided journal articles, research, and curriculum studies for educators and teaching universities. In 1981, Paul George and Dr. William Alexander and published what is considered to be a landmark book in the middle school movement titled, *The Exemplary Middle School*. This resource provided a

new philosophy of how middle schools should work building on the foundations of student centeredness and exploration. The text serves as a how-to guide for an educational unit seeking to join the middle school movement and create an effective program designed around the needs of 10- to 14-year-olds. Topics such as developing the home school partnership, curriculum planning, guidance and counseling at the middle school level, Advisor-Advisee programs, interdisciplinary team organization, scheduling, and mainstreaming of exceptional students jump off the page as if they were written in an issue of the *Middle School Journal* in 2014!

Although critics of the middle schools argued that the ambiguity of the general curriculum left students without mastery of any scientific and mathematical concepts, the professional dedication to the movement overwhelmed those voices as progressive studies and research provided greater focus and detail for educational leaders to utilize. "By 1995, only 13 percent of all intermediate schools were still grade seven through nine junior high schools in the United States" (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 12).

Critique of the middle school movement continues in the opening decades of the 21st century. Increased accountability and assessment systems provide educational reformers with plenty of firepower to assert that middle schools are not working and actually encourage mediocrity in return for civility during years of puberty. One such critic, Cheri Pierson Yecke, stated, "American middle schools have become the places where academic achievement goes to die" (as cited in Meyer, 2011, p. 42). Yet those committed to the design of middle level education as an entity that can support preadolescents during years of tremendous change while challenging them to excel

academically are active in the reform efforts as well. However, they contend that a commitment to the foundational beliefs of middle level education can be blended with a curriculum design that is rigorous and relevant in a post-modern society.

> If the new middle school of the 21st century is to succeed in developing an appropriate and effective learning experience for the preadolescent, administrators and teachers must understand and internalize a set of beliefs that will guide decision making on a day-to-day basis. (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 5)

The Middle School Student

The literature is rich with references to the intentional design of middle schools based on the needs of preadolescents. Physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional changes are characteristics of this time in human development. The middle school movement cites these as elements worthy of special programming. Specifically, Wiles and Bondi (2001) indicate that the middle school was designed to serve a special population of students that are extremely diverse in their development and share a common trait of passing from childhood to adolescence. They state, "the preadolescent period is unique and contains many social and emotional dimensions that affect learning. To continue as a viable school form, the American middle school must make this student the focal point of instructional decision making" (p. 18).

Between the ages of 9 and 14, boys and girls experience physical changes that include growth spurts, acne, and puberty. Many will demonstrate challenges with coordination and may become overly concerned about gaining or losing weight (Walley & Gerrick, 1999). Hormonal changes provide irregular surges of adrenalin that impact young people's ability to sit for long periods of time or remain focused on detailed tasks.

These physiological changes have a significant impact on the developing self-image of adolescents. Van Hoose and Strahan (1988) indicate that as young adolescents grow and develop physically, they perceive that others are always watching them, or that an imaginary audience is constantly analyzing their every move and word for critique.

6 feet 2 inches tall	or	4 feet 7 inches tall
Trips going up the stairs	or	Wins and Olympic gold medal with a perfect 10 in parallel bar competition
An alcoholic or drug addict	or	A Sunday School leader and Little Leaguer
Wears dental braces	or	Competes in Miss Teenage America
Looking forward to quitting school	or	Curious and enthusiastic about learning
Unable to read the comic page	or	Reads the Wall Street Journal
Has trouble with whole numbers	or	Solves geometry problems easily
A regular in juvenile court	or	An Eagle Scout
Already a mother of 2	or	Still plays with dolls

Figure 1. Portrait of a 13-Year-Old (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 36).

Changes in physical appearance and growth tend to create social development challenges for young adolescents as well. Transescents seek to identify with other peers and seek acceptance of the larger group, attempting not to stick out or draw attention for physical or behavioral differences from the group. A common question that is cited toward the age group is that of "Who Am I?" or "Am I Normal?" as adolescents struggle to identify with others and assimilate while establishing a personal identity based on family influences, preferences, and experiences (George & Alexander, 1993). Wiles and

Bondi (2001) report that the greatest social change in this age is the attraction toward the opposite sex as it "dominates adolescents' thoughts and social actions. Any idea or piece of information is translated into an erotic or sexual reference" (p. 8).

Van Hoose and Strahan's work provides an understanding of the struggle that many adolescents have with parents and authority. Because they are in a transitional stage between childhood and young adulthood, their behaviors often fluctuate between childish and silly and an attempt to be mature and respected for their abilities and thoughts. They may often ask for advice on how to handle a situation from an adult only to reject the feedback and proceed in their own path. This shifting from dependence on adults and establishing independence from those providing guidance is indicative of the social development stage of adolescents.

Intellectually, middle school aged students begin to develop the ability to reason abstractly. Piaget's (1977) work suggests that each child passes through four distinct phases of intellectual development albeit at different times and rates. The middle school student is transitioning from "concrete" to "formal" operations. They begin to develop the ability to consider ideas and concepts in the absence of objects that can be held and manipulated. Van Hoose and Strahan add that this intellectual transition allows students to begin to use linguistic discourse as the medium for expanding thinking. Essentially, students develop the ability to think and read simultaneously, draw inferences, and reason deductively.

However, due to the significant variance in the rates of intellectual development in adolescents, Van Hoose and Strahan report that within a given grade level there may

be a 4-year span or lag between those developing first and those progressing toward formal thought at a slower pace. Based on the knowledge of significant developmental changes of the age group, William Alexander (George & Alexander, 1993) provided seven developmental task that are characteristic of middle school students.

- Becoming aware of increased physical changes

- Organizing knowledge and concepts into problem-solving strategies

- Learning new social/gender roles

- Recognizing one's identification with stereotypy

- Developing friendships with others

- Gaining a sense of independence

- Developing a sense of morality and values

Success of the Movement

In the absence of any agreed upon definition of what a middle school was and what goals the movement should strive to achieve, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) provided guidance that was widely accepted and embraced in its 1977 position paper. The presenting committee reported that they opted to creating schools that specifically met the needs of middle school students as their fundamental priority as opposed to simply creating middle schools to reorganize schooling practices and configurations. The result was five statements published in the November edition of Middle School Journal, 1977:

- Every student should be well known as a person by at least one adult in the school who accepts responsibility for his/her guidance.

- Every student should be helped to achieve optimum mastery of the skills of continued learning together with a commitment to their use and improvement.

- Every student should have ample experiences designed to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills.

- Every student should acquire a functional body of fundamental knowledge.

- Every student should have opportunities to explore and develop interest in aesthetic, leisure, career, and other aspects of life.

Further recommendations were provided by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in a landmark report titled *Turning Points* in 1989. The report acknowledged the need for middle school programs that were geared toward the developmental needs of adolescents. However, it indicated that "a volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools and the intellectual and emotional needs of young adolescents. Caught in a vortex of changing demands, the engagement of many youth in learning diminishes, and their rates of alienation, substance abuse, absenteeism, and dropping out of school begin to rise" (p. 8).

Although a unified vision for middle schools was developed and embraced, middle schools had failed to carry the vision to a reality thus causing significant concern for the movement and the youth of America. The committee's report recommended a reinvention of middle schools once again to focus on the needs of adolescents. It further acknowledged that middle schools are "potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, and help every young person thrive during early adolescence" (p. 8).

Recommendations included:

- Create small communities for learning where stable, respectful relationships with adults and peers are fundamental; use schools within schools, houses, teams of students and teachers, and small group advisories.

- Teach a core academic program that creates literate students that think critically, behave ethically, and are good citizens.

- Ensure success for all students through flexible scheduling, cooperative learning, and adequate resources for students and teachers.

- Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents.

- Reengage families in the education of young adolescents by communicating with families about the school program and providing families with opportunities to support the learning process at home.

- Connect schools with communities by identifying service opportunities in the community, establishing partnerships with health and social services and connect with constructive after-school activities in the community.

As the reader will recognize, reviewing these recommendations is similar to looking back into time when the middle school movement began to gain momentum. However, the movement had failed to reach full implementation and had lost sight of its intent. In *The New American Middle School* (2001), Wiles and Bondi attribute much of this failure to a Back to Basics movement that originated in the 1980s. With accountability legislation in 38 states, many middle schools moved away from their

original design of exploration, advocacy, and personal growth and returned to the instruction of basic skills for all students without regard to differences in development and personal needs. Where the early middle school movement had provided opportunities for introductory level courses designed to broaden the adolescents' exposure to new ideas and opportunities, the introduction of accountability caused schools to forgo those experiences and replace them with scripted curricular objectives that specified what all students must learn.

Furthermore, the "promise of the American middle school to create a caring and compassionate learning environment, an accommodating climate, just never happened" (p. 22), and the aim at providing a relevant personal guidance program for middle schoolers did not take root and has eroded drastically in the last part of the century. Dickinson (2001) refers to this failure in the middle school movement as "arrested development" (p. 4). He passionately advocates for the middle school movement and acknowledges that there is nothing wrong with the middle school concept. Unfortunately, he provides multiple causes and examples of the concepts ineffective implementation and the willingness of school leaders and teachers to accept their status as the best that middle schools can offer.

Dickenson cites causes of failed implementation such as the lack of teacher education programs and licensure that focus specifically on the middle school level. The gross lack of middle school principal preparation programs provides most school leaders with primary or secondary knowledge without even an understanding of the middle school movement. He also indicates that the inability to balance good places for young

adolescent to learn with challenging and involving work has left middle schools to choose one over the other. Dickinson also finds tremendous fault with the NMSA's lack of leadership in the middle school movement. Although recognized as the primary organization responsible for supporting middle level education, Dickinson contends that the organization has followed rather than led and has failed to provide the research necessary to further the movement.

<div align="center">**Characteristics of Exemplary Middle Schools**</div>

Over the past half century, the middle school movement has established itself as an organizational structure that has an identity unique to educating young adolescents. In searching for characteristics that make middle schools exemplary, it is common to encounter strategies and phrases that could be attributed to primary or secondary schooling practices as well. Ideas such as providing students with "engaging work" or a "relevant curriculum" are far too broad to associate with the unique identity that that middle school movement claims is necessary for reaching this age group. Instead, the items below are considered foundational in the development of middle school programs that are designed to specifically provide the conditions and opportunities necessary for transescents to succeed in school.

In its most recent position paper (2010), the National Middle School Association provides four essential attributes for creating such schools. The NMSA asserts that middle schools must be (a) Developmentally Responsive, (b) Challenging, (c) Empowering, and (d) Equitable. These four attributes yield 16 characteristics of

successful middle schools in the areas of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment;

Leadership and Organization; Culture and Community as seen in Figure 2.
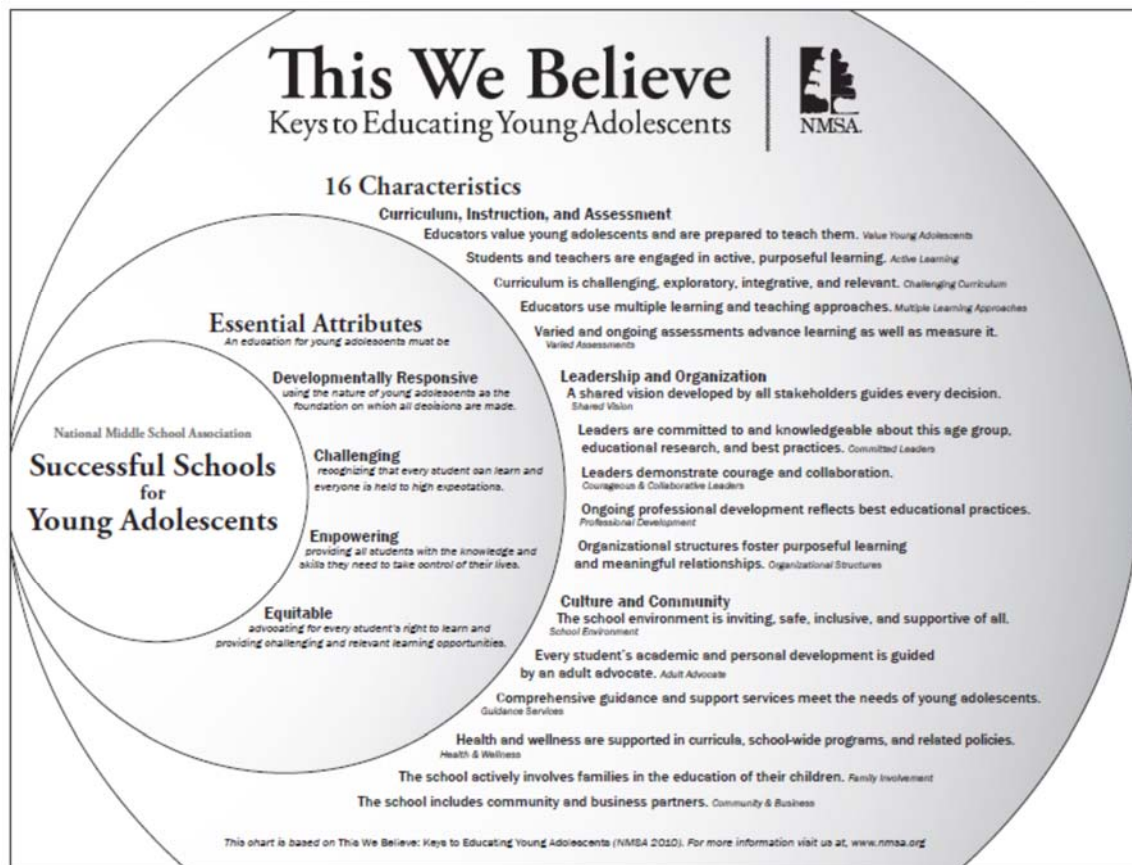
Figure 2. Sixteen Characteristics of Successful Middle Schools.

Other scholars contributing to the work of the middle school movement have

provided specific strategies that assist middle schools in creating the characteristics that

are broadly presented above. In their third edition of *The New American Middle School*

(2001), Wiles and Bondi identify key components that are critical for effective middle

schools.

Teaming

Teaming/Team Teaching is an organizational structure in which two or more teachers work closely with one another to share resources, expertise, and knowledge of students to provide a significant part of the instructional program for the same group of students. This type of structure provides students with a small number of adults that are working in collaboration with a group of students. These teams share an identity, often established and designed through a team name, and work together throughout the school year to achieve curricular and social goals. Students are able to establish meaningful relationships with these shared teachers and "this student-teacher interaction fosters students' sense of human interdependence, responsibility, and citizenship" (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 61).

Teaming often is identified with select teachers being clustered together in physical areas of the building to provide students with a common area for instruction. Wiles and Bondi (2001) identify several key advantages to utilizing the team teaching approach (2001):

- Superior teachers are shared by all students

- The effect of the poor teacher is neutralized

- Students receive more individualized attention

- Pupils have access to more than one image or role model (p. 62)

The teaming strategy lends itself to two additional strategies that are specific to middle school education. Interdisciplinary teaming is an attempt to integrate subject matter into various themes that allow students to be exposed to common learning through

various lenses. For example, team teachers may establish the theme of change over time for an interdisciplinary unit. A teacher of science would provide instructional activities centered on the ways in which society has changed as a result of immunizations or technology. A social studies unit may focus on the impact of the great depression on the changes in the federal government. An English teacher may utilize a selection such as The Outsiders to expose students to changes in culture or individuals over time which a math unit may introduce and explore slope and its impact on location or revenue.

The second strategy that yields positive results for students that is a result of teaming is common planning time. Teachers that team teach must have time established during the school day to plan collaboratively to share information relative to curriculum, instruction, and student performance. Raebeck (1992) identifies common planning time for teams as "the most essential element of school transformation" (p. 59). In order for this to occur, he contends that schools must commit to teaming as a fundamental component of the school's program and design the master schedule to provide for such a provision. Raebeck's work asserts that authentic team teaching is a critical element of transformational middle level programs. He recommends various additional structures to provide for effective teaming such as defined team zones or houses in the building, a designated team leader, and a full range of ability levels on each team.

The impact of teaming is well documented in research studies over the past two decades. Flowers and Mertens (1999) report that achievement scores are higher for students in schools that are utilizing authentic teaming with high common planning time. McEwin and Greene (2011) identify interdisciplinary team organization and common

planning time as significant contributing factors to successful middle schools in their

national studies. They provide middle school advocates with recommendations to utilize

interdisciplinary teaming along with a flexible scheduling plan that allows teams to

manage instructional time to reach academic goals. This scheduling approach provides

teams with the freedom and flexibility to adjust the length of classes without impacting

the instructional offerings of other students throughout the school. McEwin and Greene

concluded that "highly successful middle schools (HSMS)" (p. 57) utilized this approach

as well as providing increased instructional time in the core subject areas of language

arts, math, science, and social studies.

Student Advisory

A final characteristic that deserves mention in exemplary middle school programs

focuses on the concept of student advisory. Throughout the middle school movement,

leaders describe the importance of middle school students being cared for with regard to

their social and emotional needs. Clark and Clark (1994) provide a solid rationale for

student advisory programs that are designed to assist adolescents with various challenges

that arise during the middle school years. The concept asserts that "every student in the

school should have at least one adult who will serve as an advocate for them" (Clark &

Clark, 1994, p. 134). The Carnegie Task Force report agrees, stating, "small-group

advisories, homerooms, or other arrangements enable teachers or other staff to provide

guidance and actively monitor the academic and social development of students" (p. 40).

Keefe (1991) reports,

Students are asked to make many important educational, career, and personal/social decisions, generally without much guidance. In advisement, a team of professionals and paraprofessionals works together to help students on an ongoing basis—the kind of assistance counselors do not have the time to provide. (p. 161)

Although many challenges in scheduling and personnel can prevent middle schools from effectively implementing such programs for students, Clark and Clark (1994) identify the purpose, importance, and benefits of such programs. Purposes include to

- facilitate positive involvement between adults (teachers, administrators, staff) and students
- encourage communication among students, parents, and staff
- promote opportunities for social/emotional development in young adolescents (pp. 135–136)

These authors also contend that advisory programs benefit both students and teachers in a variety of ways:

- help students to effectively transition to new school environments
- gives students feelings of more control over decisions
- foster and promote an atmosphere of equality
- help students develop a positive sense of self-worth
- allows students to see teachers as people with likes and dislikes, hobbies, and interests
- contributes to a more positive overall school climate (p. 137)

So significant was the impact of student advisory programs, McEwin and Greene cited it as a recommended element in the effort to create additional HSMS.

Carefully planned student advisory programs should be a high priority component of all middle level programs and schools. Advisory groups should meet at least

twice per week, and the advisory curriculum should be carefully planned,
articulated, and implemented, and evaluated. All teacher advisory's should be
provided ongoing professional development regarding effective advisory
programs and be held responsible for their success. (p. 54)

In an additional study that seeks to uncover best practices for middle schools, The
University of Albany's report, "What Makes Middle Schools Work?" (Wilcox &
Angelis, 2007), identifies five critical elements found in highly performing middle
schools in New York state. Although very similar to the previously reviewed literature
on effective middle schools, this report highlights themes that school leaders must seek to
embed into the culture and operations of each program.

1. Trusting and respectful relationships—Relationships based on mutual trust and
   respect are essential for students to be successful, for parents to feel
   connected, and for schools to achieve success. "Nurturing these relationships
   provides the backbone for successful learning" (p. 14).

2. Students' social and emotional well-being—Middle school teachers and
   administrators must seek to remove barriers to learning that may arise due to
   emotional and social challenges. This element includes ensuring mental and
   physical safety for students, taking care to assist during transitions from
   elementary to middle school, and providing a highly-structured school
   environment where students understand expectations, consequences, and
   limits.

3. Teamwork—Consistent collaboration is essential for student success at HSMS.
   Teachers must communicate with team teachers, share instructional strategies

and resources, and seek assistance from support staff to ensure that students have everything necessary for success. "Respectful relationships encourage a sense of freedom to try out new ideas to improve practice. Teachers attribute consistent and productive collaboration with their peers to this underlying sense of trust and respect" (p. 17).

4. Evidence-based decision making—Decisions in HSMS are made based on student performance, data, and teacher experience. This element recognizes that data comes in a variety of forms including state assessments, teacher formative assessment, and student response. HSMS and districts analyze the impact of new programs, teaching methods, and resources to determine next steps for students. "Teachers report they feel empowered to make decisions based on their shared vision and what they and their fellow teachers experience in their classrooms" (p. 18).

5. Shared vision of mission and goals—HSMS has a clearly articulated and shared vision of student success that informs their practice. These schools have a shared vision of raising student achievement and utilize teams to make decisions based on implementing that vision. Leaders indicate that this vision is "clearly articulated through a plan of action, then assessed and revised through monitoring of performance measures; it is embedded in instructional practices and is guided by a 'never good enough' stance" (p. 19).

Critics Still Exist

Despite the clarifying goals and strategies established and accepted over the past two decades, critics of the middle school movement continue to assert that these programs are not successfully challenging our youth and meeting their developmental needs. In her study titled *Mayhem in the Middle* (2005), Cheri Pierson Yecke indicates that middle schools have become the places "where academic achievement goes to die" (p. 9). This type of critique which asserts that middle schools cannot effectively provide the academic rigor necessary for preparing students to be successful in the 21st century has caused many educators to consider abandoning the middle school configuration in search of something better (Meyer, 2011).

According to Meyer (2011), the popularity of the middle school movement had been tied to the "programmatic characteristics and not to student outcome measures" (p. 43). Indeed, a 1997 study by Phi Delta Kappan provided critics with plenty of firepower to support their claim of a movement that was based more on nurturing kids through puberty rather than demanding high academic output. The report found many adults that felt good about the middle school program, yet reported, "there is little quantitative information to satisfy the demands of thoughtful practitioners and policymakers for assessment of those efforts" (as cited in Meyer, 2011, p. 43). What quantitative data were presented did not help the cause. In 1995, only 28% of eighth graders in the nation scored above proficiency in reading as assessed by the NAEP. In the same year, the TIMSS assessment demonstrated that our eighth-grade students ranked 18th in the world in mathematics as compared to elementary students who ranked 12th. These scores led

Yecke to write, "The middle school movement advances the notion that academic

achievement should take a back seat to such ends as self-exploration, socialization, and

group learning" (as cited in Meyer, 2011, p. 44).

Meyer acknowledges that some middle schools do indeed work. However, he

notes that the middle schools that are succeeding in boosting achievement with low

income, minority communities are not driven by the traditional tenets of the middle

school movement. He states,

> Charter schools like the Young Women's Leadership School and those operated
> by the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), and private networks like the
> Nativity Miguel schools have proven that proper pedagogy and academic focus
> can overcome the developmental challenges of preadolescence. (p. 44)

As a result of these critiques, data and reported successes in other configurations,

Meyer's study reports that the trend is definitely away from stand-alone middle schools.

Although the 6-8 model remains the dominant configuration in the country, cities such as

Cleveland, Portland, and Baltimore have already moved away from middle schools and

are replacing the configuration with "elemiddle" schools, a term used to identify K-8

programs created to replace middle schools. Lounsbury (2000). disagrees with the trend

of blaming middle schools for the reported underperformance of America's

preadolescents.

> The purported academic failure of the middle school, it should be noted, is due to
> the fact that the tenets of the middle school have *not* been sufficiently
> implemented—not that these tenets *have been* implemented. To blame the rarely
> implemented middle school concept for unsatisfactory test scores is unfair. The
> push to bully middle schools and teachers into raising test scores, in fact, will

move us back to the very practices that made the junior high school a failure. (p. 193)

Thomas Erb's research reports contradictory findings to those used to bash middle school performance. His 2000 study indicates that middle schools that have implemented the *Turning Points* (1989) recommendations have noted improved school and classroom climates, enhanced programs for student support, and increased student achievement. He contends that much of the research that is used to "poorly designed research being carried out that includes schools that have only begun to change, or that have only made pseudo-changes, but call themselves middle schools anyway" (p. 199).

Middle school advocates such as Raymond Bandlow contend that the middle school concept is worth saving. Citing a Carnegie Foundation study, Bandlow continues,

> Substantial and coherent emotional and social support structures are vital to prevent destructive behaviors and promote good health among early adolescents. Middle school practices and support networks that attend to the emotional and social needs of adolescents should not be abandoned in a race to raise test scores. Bust such practices and networks should not be the focus of schooling at this level. This We Believe focuses excessively on the adolescent; it must be redirected toward what the adolescent ought to know and be able to do. The middle school concept can prevail if educators heed the advice of parents, critics, and reformers and move toward rigorous academic achievement. (2001, p. 72)

Do schools exist that are experiencing this type of success? Have middle school programs emerged in the 21st century that are able to effectively meet the needs of transescents while creating pedagogical structures that produce high performance results? Certainly some schools may assert that they are achieving both goals but no model has

yet to be produced. A review of the academic success of schools identified as exceeding the performance of traditional middle schools is needed.

Alternative Middle Schools Find Success

Although an abundance of research is available citing the essential characteristics of effective middle schools, full implementation in our nation's schools has not been achieved. According to McEwin and Greene (2011), "while gains have been made in some areas, the tenets of middle level education remain far from being universally implemented" (p. 56). However, some alternative middle school programs are experiencing success at higher levels by blending traditional middle school characteristics with progressive scheduling and instructional practices. One such program known as KIPP, has gained significant attention in the discussion of successful middle schools in the 21st century.

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) is considered one of the most successful educational reform movements in America. Since its beginning in 1994, KIPP has evolved from an experimental program that consisted of fifty students in one classroom to a network of charter schools that includes 99 schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia serving over 26,000 students. Created by Teach for America alumni David Levin and Mike Feinberg, KIPP was recently honored in the film, *Waiting for "Superman"* as an example of what is working in public education. Their strategic efforts to provide extraordinary educational opportunities for low income students have resulted in the largest charter school operator in the nation (Peterson, 2010).

After completing a two-year assignment in Houston Public Schools, Levin and Feinberg received permission to begin the first KIPP school after securing financial support from several key Houston businesses. The program was founded on several simple, but essential strategies for student success. Students were expected to work hard because there are no shortcuts. Students would attend school from 7:30 – 5:00 every day and would also attend on Saturdays. Summer school would be required for all students enrolled and all students would be instructed on how to be nice. Feinberg and Levin felt that the character component was the most important aspect of the program because it made all the other learning possible (Matthews, 2009). KIPP opened a second site in the South Bronx after one year in Houston, as Levin returned to his home state to expand the project. Feinberg remained in Houston and served dual roles as a math teacher and administrator of the program.

Fifteen years later, the KIPP movement has gained the attention and financial support of the most influential educational reformers and successful businesses in the country. Former Washington, DC school Chancellor Michelle Rhee supports KIPP initiatives as it proves that "it is absolutely possible for poor minority kids to achieve at the highest level" (Peterson, 2010, p. 57), citing the 90% proficiency rating of Kippsters in DC compared to the dismal 10% proficiency of public school students six blocks away. Sitting on the KIPP Board of Directors are philanthropists and benefactors such as Don and Doris Fisher, founders of GAP, Inc. and Netflix Inc. CEO, Reed Hastings. According to Matthews, successes can be attributed to the philosophy and structure of the

KIPP program, the high priority on student achievement results, and a great deal of hard work.

KIPP schools are founded on several core operating principles known as the Five Pillars. As described on the KIPP website, High Expectations, Choice & Commitment, More Time, Power to Lead, and Focus on Results provide the framework for creating successful schools. The theme of high expectations is clear to anyone remotely familiar with the KIPP movement. Students are held accountable for mastering grade level content and making wise behavioral decisions. Students are expected to complete an average of two hours of homework each evening in order to be successful at a KIPP school. Since all students, parents, and staff members choose to participate in the KIPP program, all are held to high standards for putting forth the time and effort necessary to achieve success.

"Working overtime is central to KIPP's success" (Peterson, 2010, p. 56). Students attend school nine hours each day, on Saturdays, and during the summer. Teachers provide students and parents with their personal cell phone numbers and expect students to call them with questions on homework and assignments. Providing students with this additional instructional time and support allows students to make significant gains in reading and mathematics. Instructional staff is focused on achieving results and emphasize the slogan of no excuses. Students are expected to achieve a level of performance that will enable them to succeed at the nation's best high schools and colleges.

Each of these pillars is communicated to parents, students, and teachers in a Commitment to Excellence form that is provided on the KIPP website. This compact conveys the responsibility that each party has to ensure success for each individual student. It contains teacher promises regarding being prompt and staying late each day, protecting the safety and integrity of each student, and always taking full responsibility for the learning of each individual student. Student commitment statements include components of attendance, taking responsibility for actions, following the dress code, and putting forth the necessary effort to make sure that each student can learn at KIPP. The parent's role is similar and stresses the importance of being actively involved in the learning process and communicating with teachers on a regular basis. Any party that does not meet the expectations of the commitment to excellence is subject to termination, release from the program, or school disciplinary consequences.

In order to establish the culture, KIPP schools effectively used symbols and rituals to remind students daily of the goal of college completion (Matthews, 2009). Students are given t-shirts with their college graduating class year written on the chest. Banners throughout the school reiterate the expectation that all students attend college and graduate. Instead of telling students and parents the commons slogan that all children can learn, KIPP schools post banners emphasizing that All Students *Will* Learn. This serves to communicate the high expectations for both students and teachers. Classrooms are named for local universities or schools that teachers attended. Field trips are an essential part of the program as well introducing students to schools and government agencies that students study about in the classroom.

KIPP creators Levin and Feinberg recognize that the school has to be engaging and enjoyable for students as well. After all, the KIPP model asks middle school students to give up traditional school life with extracurricular sports and trade it for nine hour days with teachers that are constantly pushing you. KIPP schools employ only high energy teachers that are effective in utilizing rhythm and movement as a means of instruction. Approximately one third of KIPP teachers and two thirds of KIPP principals are alumni of Teach for America (Peterson, 2010, p. 58). KIPP also employs the use of incentive field trips to large cities and national attractions, lunches from McDonald's, and "ganas," a reference to Jamie Escalente in Stand and Deliver, to encourage students to work hard and demonstrate good behavior. Students receive regular weekly paychecks that translate to KIPP dollars and allow students to purchase items such as candy or supplies at the school store. Students can save KIPP dollars for monetary credit toward large field trips.

As the number of KIPP schools and national acclaim has grown, so have the critics who argue that KIPP's success is misrepresented. Most of the critics argue that creaming, a selection process of only allowing the top students to attend, accounts for a large percentage of student achievement gains. Others indicate that the requirement for high parental involvement naturally eliminates many students that do not have strong parental support and are more likely to struggle. However, several key research studies have recently been conducted that discredit these arguments. KIPP's open enrollment and lottery selection procedures eliminate the possibility of only acquiring the best students. On average, KIPP schools are composed of 90% African American or Hispanic students and have free and reduced lunch populations over 80%. KIPP recently

commissioned Mathematica Policy Research to conduct a third-party study to evaluate

the overall impact of the KIPP initiative.

Several key findings from the study released in June, 2010 include: (a) KIPP does

not attract more able students compared to neighboring schools, (b) KIPP schools

typically have a statistically significant impact on student achievement, and (c) Academic

gains at many KIPP schools are large enough to substantially reduce race and income-

based achievement gaps (Tuttle et al., 2010). A policy brief for The Great Lakes Center

for Education Research & Practice also provides evidence of significant gains in reading

and math proficiencies for students enrolled in KIPP schools. Student scores in reading,

math, and writing improved dramatically, about 1.8 years per academic year. However,

researches also caution that

> It is not realistic to think that the KIPP model is a panacea for distressed systems. It is possible that only a small proportion of students and families will be able to meet the demands KIPP imposes on them; even those enthused when they begin the KIPP regimen tend to leave in high numbers. Policymakers should treat KIPP schools as potential tools that may contribute to, but not substitute for, systemic improvement. (Henig, 2008, p. 22)

KIPP founder Dave Levine indicates that his schools are creatively serving a

population of students that have been historically unsuccessful in traditionally structured

schools. Students that attend KIPP schools, parents that enroll their children, and

benefactors that contribute to them have consistently been pleased with the academic and

social outcomes from the program (Matthews, 2009).

Summary

Although the middle school movement was designed to address the academic and social needs of the nation's adolescents, both supporters and critics of the campaign recognize the failure of the initiative to take the effort to scale. Meanwhile, multiple alternative approaches have realized success in challenging and supporting transescents during the middle school years. Unfortunately, many of the strategies implemented by these successful programs have not been adopted and applied to the nation's middle school practice. Instead, these pockets of innovation and success have been acclaimed more by the private sector with the business world taking greater notice and attempting to replicate the efforts as opposed to the nation's public schools.

This study seeks to build on the research of establishing innovational programs for students and examine the process for both creating and implementing such a program in an urban school district. This research will study the account of identifying the most successful components of innovative programs and blending them into a model designed to challenge and support middle school students that are not performing to their full potential in the traditional classroom. Specifically, the study will investigate the experiences of educators attempting to implement the specific vision of an Academy and compare those experiences to other educators who have created their own innovative school programs.

Conceptual Framework

Throughout the process of visiting effective schools, attending project team meetings, and reviewing related research of effective programs, several critical themes of

creating innovative schools began to emerge. In each instance, there were a certain set of

processes that educators followed in attempt to create their program and bring it to

implementation. School leaders also made critical adjustments during the

implementation process based on relevant data, observations, or feedback from

stakeholders. Multiple challenges and obstacles were recognized that were specific to the

effort of creating a unique school program. Educators' responses and adjustments to

these challenges are critical to the successful implementation of the program design.

Each program also experienced a significant amount of successes as a result of its attempt

to create an innovative program to support young learners. Some of these successes will

be evident in quantitative data such as an increase in test scores while others will be

shared through personal stories of seeing students grow and hearing from families

regarding their child's success. Finally, each attempt to create a school results in a set of

surprises that administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders simply did not see coming.

Although this could be a result of poor planning or disregard for obvious data, more often

these surprises are a consequence of the inability to foresee a circumstance that school

leaders have never encountered before in the process of opening a new school program.

This conceptual framework (see Figure 3) will provide a means of comparing the

experiences of the Academy with those of others who have attempted to open an

innovative program. This study expects to encounter additional relevant experiences that

may not relate to the various elements identified in the research. The category of "Other"

will be utilized to capture those stories and analysis will be provided as to the impact of

those experiences on the creation and implementation of the innovative school.

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework.

Process—What processes were effective in creating the vision for the innovative school program? What processes were used to implement that vision?

Adjustments—What adjustments did school leaders need to make during the process of creating and implementing the school's vision?

Challenges/Obstacles—What were the major challenges/obstacles that arose from work of creating and implementing an innovative school program?

Successes—What were the stories of success that resulted from the creation and implementation of this innovative program?

Surprises—What stories or experiences were unexpected that contributed to the creation or effective implementation of the program?

Other—What other experiences were important in the creation and implementation of the school? What can school leaders learn from this experience?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Tradition

The purpose of this research was to contribute to our understanding of the development and implementation of an innovative and effective middle school. This study used qualitative research methodology and was not intended to prove or disprove previously-developed theories, or to provide procedural directions for creating a new middle school program. Instead, the study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge available by analyzing experiences gained through the process of creating a unique middle school model, implementing an innovative middle school, and adjusting to the multiple challenges that arise during the development and implementation process.

As the researcher and leader of the school being studied, I chose a case study approach to share the story of implementing an innovative middle school program in a large urban district. According to Wallace (1991), stories serve "as a lens through which leaders may see how to move schools forward. Hidden messages, thoughts, and feelings come to the surface" (p. 71), as stories are shared from experience. Also, storytelling allows leaders to "gain validation and support for the risks they take as they share the joys and pains of leadership" (p. 71). Case study provides a variety of perspectives from teachers and support staff related to their work within the school. This research aimed to

encourage other school leaders to consider taking risks toward creating innovative middle school programs.

The model for this approach was a reflection of lived experiences and actions taken during the process of implementing the school being studied. The reflections utilized data collected through project team meetings, conversations with other school leaders, and critical incidents that occurred throughout the process of planning and implementation. Barriers—both anticipated and unexpected—and successes provided an opportunity to share the rationale for making adjustments and capitalizing on accomplishments throughout the progression. It is my belief that creating an innovative school model requires great willingness, primarily on the part of the school administrator, to take substantial risk. Furthermore, sustaining innovative implementation is likely to be an area worthy of considerable analysis and recommendation. This case study is identified as unique due to my dual role as both researcher and participant.

Key Concepts and Terms

This study examined extensively the experiences of participants tasked to create and implement a middle school designed to be innovative in nature. Throughout this study, the term innovation is utilized to describe a practice, program, or belief that is encountered by an individual or collective for the first time. Although a technique or practice listed as innovative may be familiar to the reader, if it is determined not be practiced regularly or at scale throughout a program, it may be identified as such due to its fully adopted nature in the study. Further, since multiple successful programs were utilized to create the school being studied, the compilation of various instructional and

social practices may also be determined as innovative due to the collective quality and impact on the school.

The study sought to learn from three key areas of the participants' experiences: (a) the creation of the vision for the innovative school, (b) the process of implementing that vision into a reality, and (c) challenges or barriers encountered in the process. Prior to implementation, a process of creation occurred to determine the core pillars of the Academy through the use of project team and multiple program visits. As leader of the project team tasked with opening the school, team meetings, conversations, board meetings, and other experiences served to create a story for the creation of the school. Implementing strands of innovation consisted of the practice of making the decisions and efforts of the project team come to life. This facet of the study yielded greater understanding of the challenges and risks of changing the way that school is typically provided for middle school students.

This research also attempted to identify specific adjustments for which school administrators should prepare during the process of implementation. The study determined the specific moments where staff indicated changes were necessary to accomplish the goal of innovation.

Additionally, the term "scholars" is utilized to describe the individual students enrolled in the Academy. The project team determined at an early stage that students would be referred to in this nature as an indication of their promise and potential to excel both academically and socially. Staff, teachers, parents, and scholars themselves, utilize this reference when speaking about young men and women at the Academy.

Finally, the case study focused on a particular school within a large urban district as identified in the introduction. Although the school name was not utilized in this study, the researcher will refer to the school as the "Academy" to assist both the researcher and audience in identifying the focus of the study.

Definitions

Innovative—a new or revised curriculum, structure, policy, or idea that people encounter for the first time (Fullan, 1992).

Junior High—Originated in the early 1900s, the junior high movement identified a need to separate primary level education from secondary and provide schools for seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students. Common through the 1960s, the junior high school design was replaced with the current middle school program throughout the United States.

KIPP—The Knowledge is Power Program is a network of over 100 charter schools throughout the United States. As the largest charter network in the country, KIPP originated as a middle school program and has since developed primary and secondary opportunities for students. Significant achievement gains have been noted through the commitment to hard work and extended time that students receive with high expectations for success and a commitment to college preparation.

Middle School—A configuration of school design that is comprised of preadolescent students typically between the ages of 10 and 14. Middle school programs are most commonly comprised of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, although fifth-through eighth-grade programs are also held to be middle schools.

NMSA—Established in 1973, the National Middle School Association serves as the primary advocated for middle level education. Changing its name in 2011 to Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), this organization conducts research on the middle school movement, publishes monthly journals, *Middle School Journal* and *Middle Ground*, and boasts membership of over 30,000 educators.

RCA—The Ron Clark Academy is a privately funded middle school program developed by 2003 Disney Teacher of the Year, Ron Clark and 2003 National Middle School Teacher of the Year, Kim Bearden. The Academy is located in Atlanta, Georgia and serves 100 students each year in grades 5-8.

Social Construct—Any mechanism utilized to develop students' social skills or address social needs of transescents; may include activities, organizations, or ceremonies of recognition.

Transescence—The stage of development which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. Since puberty does not occur for all precisely at the same chronological age in human development, the transescence designation is based on the many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes that appear prior to the puberty cycle to the time in which the body gains a practical degree of stabilization over these complex pubescent changes (George & Alexander, 1993).

Transescent—term coined by Donald Eichhor to designate the individual in the period of development known as adolescence; a middle school student.

Setting and Participants

As described in the introduction to this study, the creation and implementation of innovative middle schools is not a prevalent occurrence or opportunity for research. In this case, a large urban school district in the southeast determined that exploring such an endeavor would be beneficial for their students and families. Therefore, the school selected for the study was followed during development, in the first year of implementation, and through the end of the second year. The perspective and stories of individuals who participated in these various aspects of the program were utilized for this research. The district determined that phased implementation would be the best course of action for a program of this nature. As such, the Academy consisted of 100 fifth-grade scholars, 100 sixth-grade scholars, eight regular classroom teachers, and a small number of support staff.

As principal of the Academy, I offered interviews to each of the regular classroom teachers and all of the full-time support personnel including a curriculum facilitator, media specialist, and social worker, for a total of 11 interviews. Participation in the study was not mandatory and was extended as an opportunity to assist in further growth and development for the Academy. Recognizing that instructional and support staff members have individual skills, preferences, and roles, I chose not to select those with greater experience or knowledge, but instead selected those who had fully participated in the creation or implementation, or both aspects of the school. Staff that joined the process during the second year of implementation contributed as additional participants in an effort to distinguish their experiences from those on staff from the inception. In addition,

I was interviewed as a participant in order to ensure that my full perspective was gained through the data collection process.

Data Collection

Data were collected for this study through interviews and in the form of electronic and hard copy documents. Agendas and minutes from project team meetings, staff meetings, professional development trainings, and other artifacts related to the school implementation were utilized. Digital media such as video and photographs are also available and were collected for the purpose of this study. Participants were interviewed using interview protocols (see Appendix A). Interviews took place in the staff member's classroom or support staff member's office area.

Prior to conducting interviews, participants were offered an opportunity to share anonymous perspectives on the rate of effective implementation of various aspects of the Academy through an electronic survey. This process provided a means of ensuring that staff were sharing honest perspectives during the interview process. Interview protocols reflected the survey results as foundations for questions regarding the implementation process. The collection of the data began with my initial appointment as the project chair of the team tasked with opening the school and continued with the first official gathering of year one staff at the Academy. Data collection continued through the end of the second year of school.

Since the researcher has an existing relationship with each study participant, minimal time was dedicated to rapport building in each interview. The interviews began with general questions related to gender, general age, years of experience in education,

current role, and other experiences in education. The interviews contained questions

related to each participant's experience in the process of preparing for the opening of the

Academy and implementation of the program goals.

The study utilized two separate interview protocols for data collection (see

Appendix A). Staff who participated in the planning of the school and inaugural year of

implementation participated with interview protocol #1. Additional team members who

joined the Academy after the first year of implementation responded to interview

protocol #2. The differing protocols account for the various roles and levels of

participation that each team member had in the Academy's creation and implementation.

Both interview protocols contain the same general set of questions and were designed to

provide both groups of participants with ample opportunity to share individual

perspectives.

Data Analysis

Through data analysis, the researcher attempts to organize the information

obtained in the study so that it is manageable and meaningful. According to Yin (1989),

the ultimate goal is to treat the evidence fairly, to produce compelling analytic

conclusions, and to rule out alternative interpretations. To accomplish this, each

interview was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed multiple times. During this process,

each participant's responses were coded and categorized to allow themes to emerge from

the data. As researcher, I anticipated encountering recurring themes related to the

process of establishing a culture based on the pillars of the Academy; a focus on the

physical environment; responses that denote engagement through movement and music in

the instructional practice investigation; and social construct implementation, including a focus on leadership and character education in student growth since those areas are key components of the Academy's model.

As Lichtman (2010) describes, conducting this type of research allows the analysis process to identify "salient stories that either emerge from the data or are constructed as composites from bits and pieces of several data sources" (p. 194). As such, the meaning derived from the research will be in the story and in the interpretation of the story by the researcher. Document analysis was also performed to determine alignment or misalignment with the story of design and implementation. As participants shared perspectives on the process of implementation, barriers, and adjustments, I sought to determine if documents and artifacts existed to support or inform those perspectives.

I also provided a narrative analysis of the process for creating and implementing the Academy. I shared personal feelings of being selected as the leader of the program, frustrations through the process, and excitement from the opportunity to create a unique and innovative middle school program. This narrative approach provided an opportunity to organize the various stories gathered in the research into pivotal events. I then searched for meaning from the stories, and provided a first-person account of the lived experiences associated with implementing the Academy model.

I shared various innovative school examples in the review of the literature. In Chapter VI, additional experiences from Geoffrey Canada and Debora Meier's school creations are utilized as well. The data analysis compared the experiences of the Academy with those other stories in regard to the administrator and teacher experiences

in opening those programs. The conceptual framework provided an opportunity to analyze our own experiences and challenges with implementing the vision of the Academy.

These practical steps assisted me in visualizing the process for examining, categorizing, and making sense of the evidence. Further, it provided a framework for how to communicate to the reader the stories that emerged through an investigative review of personal and complex data revealed throughout this study.

Subjectivity

It is critical to acknowledge my personal subjectivity within this study. As principal of the Academy, I have invested a great deal of professional and personal effort into ensuring its success. I have participated in the research of effective models and have attempted to implement such with a program designed and expected to be innovative in nature. I have strong personal feelings about the design of middle schools and the leadership needed in order to create schools that support and challenge adolescents to be engaged and successful in learning. My professional convictions and values reflect a desire to have students involved in authentic learning opportunities that spark excitement and inquiry.

During my role as chair of the project team, I was afforded the opportunity to visit many of the model schools that were producing results and utilizing innovative methods. The experience of those visits and interactions has impacted the lens by which I view innovative instruction and social structures in schools today. After being assigned as principal of the Academy, I had the opportunity to visit multiple additional classrooms in

search of quality educators in the months leading up to opening the school. This also has

impacted my view on what skills and characteristics are necessary for educators to be

effective in this model program. As part of this study, I participated in an interview

process in order to include my personal experience with the creation and implementation

of the Academy recorded in the same fashion as other participants. A practicing

administrator in the Academy's district, interviewed me for this study. Acknowledging

this subjectivity, and incorporating it into the data collection and analysis, provided

additional insight and value of the study.

The unique case study approach with me as a participant and observer provided

an opportunity for me to tell the story of the Academy's inception and initial year.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure that the data collection was trustworthy, I assured that the

interviews were conducted in a prolonged fashion, allowing the opportunity for

individuals to share additional insight into the program implementation. I expected that

participants of this study would have a heightened level of interest in participation and

reflection due to their direct contact with a unique and different approach to schooling

middle level students. Therefore, I provided questions that encouraged participants to

share insight that extended beyond the scope of the study in an effort to collect the best

responses possible from each participant.

Additionally, the participants invited to participate in interviews were selected

only based upon their employment with the Academy in Year 1 and Year 2. This

eliminated the concern that only specific individuals were selected based upon their

personal preference or skill within a particular area. I also used document reviews in an attempt to triangulate data about what individuals reported about the program and what was grounded in the available documents. I utilized member checking to provide participants with the opportunity to review the transcript and analysis and provide any additional insight they felt was appropriate.

Finally, I provided a set of recommendations in the analysis based on the implications of the data gathered. These recommendations provide readers and schools with a full account of the process for creating and implementing an innovative middle school from the study. Each of the audio files was stored on a password-protected hard drive and the interview transcripts were kept as hard copies in my office in a locking file cabinet.

Benefits and Risks

One of the greatest benefits of this study was the opportunity for multiple individuals who participated in the development and implementation of an innovative middle school to be able to tell their stories and perspectives. In addition, this study allowed the researcher to share additional insight and provide a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges and obstacles encountered in an effort that is not widely experienced. An opportunity to review the findings of the interviews and document analysis has inherently provided rationale for program adjustments and revisions as the Academy enters its final year of phased implementation. Therefore, there was an immediate benefit for the program, the staff, and ultimately, the students.

Although not typically a benefit of traditional studies, I believe that staff personally benefited from their participation in the research. With the selection of staff being such a critical indicator of success, participating staff were highly regarded for their professional skills that contributed to their selection for employment. The opportunity to share their own personal stories and provide information that ultimately benefited the program reaffirmed staff of their value to the Academy. It is my belief that staff enjoyed some personal benefit from their participation in this study.

Several risks were acknowledged with this study. Due to the low number of schools that are currently implementing what could be considered an innovative model for middle level learners, the school could potentially be identified in this study. Additionally, with a limited number of instructional and support staff, it is also possible that participants could be identified in this study. To protect against this, the school is referred to only as the "Academy" throughout the study and the district is not indicated. Furthermore, staff members are not named and responses are coded with pseudonyms; their true names are known only to the researcher.

One additional risk lies within the context of my role as researcher. When conducting interviews, participants may have initially felt the desire to not share any information they believed to be negative due to my positional authority. However, staff participants were assured that the intent of the case study was to give them the opportunity to tell the stories so that our staff and others may learn from them and ultimately improve the quality of education that other middle school students receive.

The use of the anonymous survey prior to interviews allowed the researcher to frame questions based on survey results rather than an individual's response.

Limitations

Several possible limitations are noted in this study. The researcher's potential bias is most notable in a unique case study. As noted throughout this process, my role as investigator, participant, principal of the school, and evaluator of many of the participants provides possibility for study limitations. However, the nature of the study was not related to determining the quality of any classroom experience within the Academy. Instead, the focus remained on the process of creating and implementing an innovative model.

Additionally, the study included an extremely small sample size due to the unique nature of the program and limited alternatives with which to compare it. The case study is intended to produce general knowledge to benefit other practicing administrators and districts in their efforts to create innovative middle school programs. Although limited in size, the benefit of studying the Academy's design and implementation provided significant value to the future of the program and its students.

Finally, the study's cultural limitations are acknowledged by the researcher. As previously mentioned, the Academy was intended to create an innovative model middle school for students deemed to be at risk. In creating such a model, the project team, staff, and researcher sought to identify and incorporate specific strategies and programs believed to engage, inspire, and elevate students who had not previously experienced success or maximum growth in the traditional classroom setting. Any attempt to utilize

the implications and recommendations of this study as a broad and general

recommendation to replicate all middle schools is not intended or supported by this study.

CHAPTER IV

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION: PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

In the spring of 2009, I was nominated to serve as project team coordinator for an Advantage Model Middle School in our district. The Advantage Model title was utilized to describe the desire to begin a school that would be academically and socially relevant for middle school students and would utilize innovative instructional methods to engage learners. Since the specific innovation strategies, school location, instructional practices, and basically every other component that would identify this school were not provided to the team, our job was to create them and ensure they were implemented.

This chapter is designed to share my personal perspective on the process of planning for and designing the Academy. It includes my experiences of coordinating the project team, conducting research visits on effective schools, and planning for initial meetings with new staff members.

Assembling a Project Team

We began by assembling a project team that included individuals from various departments and experiences throughout the district. Representatives from curriculum and instruction, magnet programs, equity and inclusion, facilities, technology, and transportation were invited to participate in the process of creating the model school. I also invited community members, several additional middle school principals, and

university instructors to lend additional insight to the effort. The result was a 22-member team that met eleven times over the next 39 months.

With limited guidance regarding the specifics of the program, the team quickly decided that extensive on-site research at various successful programs should be conducted to generate ideas for consideration. As a middle school principal working on an education leadership license, I was very familiar with multiple innovative programs that I encouraged a closer look at. During my participation in a school reform course, I was introduced to various charter school networks that were experiencing success in largely urban areas. I was also inclined to recommend that our team consider the practices utilized at the Ron Clark Academy due to his noted success as a New York City school teacher and now school leader.

Visiting Successful Schools

Atlanta, Georgia

In one of our first project team meetings, we determined that it would be wise to schedule visitations to several of the innovative programs that demonstrated success in academic and social gains for middle school age children. The Ron Clark Academy (RCA) in Atlanta, Georgia is a small, private school consisting of 100 students operated by Cofounders Kim Bearden and Ron Clark. Both Ron and Kim were recognized as Teachers of the Year by Disney and the National Middle School Association, respectively. A group of four team members chose to visit the Academy to determine what instructional, social, and cultural strategies were utilized to produce the tremendous success acclaimed nationwide at RCA.

As we walked across the parking lot from an abandoned factory in downtown Atlanta to the gates of RCA, it was obvious that we were visiting a special place. Uniformed students greeted us with hugs, firm handshakes, and greetings that inquired about our travel, occupations, and rationale for visiting. As we entered the facility, music was pumping, students were dancing, and other visitors were bouncing on a large trampoline in the center of an open air, two-story library. The walls were bright with murals, faculty members were singing and dancing with students, and other students greeted us, engaged us in conversation, and shared their experiences of being a student at the Ron Clark Academy.

Our visit continued with an opportunity to visit classrooms during instruction to observe Ron, Kim, and other RCA staff in action. By the end of the day, we had visited four classrooms, taken part in a professional development session focusing on the use of music in the classroom, and participated in a lecture with Ron as he shared his vision for the Academy. Our team took time to debrief before leaving for the day to share reflections and determine what ideas may be worthy of considering for our model middle school. Several themes were prevalent in each of our observations. First, the physical environment was emphasized like none other than we had previously experienced. The use of color, imagery, murals, and creative use of the facility made the school an inviting and exciting place to visit and attend school. Next, the instructional methods utilized were unique in the use of music, song, cheers, and performances. Whether it was Ron walking across classroom tables or students leading a content song they had written, the instructional presentation in those classrooms was unlike any traditional classroom.

Finally, the passion that was shared and expressed by every educator in that building was phenomenal. As seasoned educators, we know what it is like to visit that one special classroom in your building where the teacher absolutely blows you away every time you step in the door. At RCA, every teacher shared that passion and enthusiasm for learning as they captivated student interest during presentation, utilized songs and cheers to engage students, and planned activities that were beyond exciting.

New York City, New York

After reviewing the literature on the success of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) in Houston, TX and New York City, our team decided to visit several KIPP programs located in the Big Apple. We were fortunate to visit four middle school KIPP programs during our time in New York City. Different from RCA, KIPP programs are charter schools and are incorporated into the city's choice program for public education. Students and families apply to these schools and are selected by lottery for acceptance. The visits were very structured. We were escorted from classroom to classroom by the Director of Operations for each school. Students were very polite and there was an obvious commitment on the school staff to instill structure into each activity. Students were also in full uniform at each KIPP school we visited. Conversations with school staff conveyed an intentional effort to teach students manners and focus on character development with each student. Most significant, each Kippster (KIPP student) was confronted daily with the expectation that they would pursue college education upon completion of the KIPP program. The physical environment reflected this philosophy as

well with college pennants adorning the hallways and "College Bound" mottos posted in teach classroom.

We had an opportunity to visit with the Director of Middle School Programming for the KIPP Charter Network while visiting one of the schools. He had worked to open several KIPP middle schools in recent years and was open to many of the adjustments that were necessary to ensure success for students and staff. He acknowledged that their commitment to extended school days and an extended school year created some significant challenges for families participating in the program. Long school days, coupled with additional hours of homework became an early point of contention between the school and families. The extended school day along the demands of Saturday classes left teachers exhausted and unable to spend adequate time completing responsibilities as parents and spouses. Despite these challenges, this KIPP representative was adamant that additional time is essential to the success of the KIPP program.

Knoxville, Tennessee

As our district continued to search for culturally relevant programs to serve students in the area of literacy, Freedom Schools became a topic of consideration both in the district and among our project team. Freedom Schools were established through the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) as a nationally certified summer literacy program for elementary and middle school students. Training for Freedom School coordinators participate in training in Knoxville for a one week period and then return with their teams before launching their Freedom School program. I participated as the district

representative for our Freedom School initiative and was able to glean multiple innovative practices to present to the project team for consideration.

First, the CDF has an intense focus on providing leadership development for each of its participants. Scholars (participating students) are exposed to the fundamental characteristics of effective leaders and are challenged to serve in leadership capacities throughout the duration of the summer program. Secondly, Freedom Schools utilize a variety of cheers and chants to establish a culture of celebration, belonging, and unity. To this end, Freedom Schools sponsor a daily Harambe session to engage students first thing in the morning and provide moments for leadership, literacy, and celebration. Swahili for "Let's Come Together," Harambe is a hallmark of Freedom Schools that directors and participants report as one of the most powerful components of the program.

Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

In my search to identify a leadership development curriculum that would be relevant and agreeable with the other innovative aspects we were considering, I chose to take a team to visit a "Lighthouse School" as identified in the Leader in Me program through FranklinCovey. Leader in Me schools utilized research from Dr. Stephen Covey's 1989 best seller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, to create an elementary and middle school aged curriculum to instill leadership in young people. This Lighthouse School had achieved recognition for demonstrating excellence in the process of implementing the leadership development curriculum.

Upon arrival at the school, guests were greeted by young students who served to welcome us and provide a tour of the school. Students used key phrases to describe their

leadership journey and were able to illustrate their leadership skills with connections to each of the habits they had been taught to practice. The physical environment also displayed significant attention to the aspects of leadership with road signs in hallways such as "Proactive Way" and "First Things First Lane." Teachers and staff at the school were eager to shift as many leadership roles and responsibilities to the students as possible.

Representatives from the school shared several core paradigms that were the foundation for the Leader in Me process. These paradigms, illustrated in Figure 4, were the guiding force for establishing the vision that each staff member would be asked to embrace. This leadership development model and establishment of vision for what we believe would be essential in creating an innovative middle school that all stakeholders could clearly understand and embrace.

Figure 4. *Leader in Me* Core Paradigms.

Identifying Successful Components

Recognizing that our school district was neither interested in, nor able to, establish a replica of any of these programs, the project team determined the best course

of action was to identify successful components shared by each of these programs and blend them into a unique model for our district. The result was a recommendation to create a preparatory academy to serve fifth- through eighth-grade students focused on five key pillars.

1. *Character and Service*—The Academy would be intentional in helping young people to develop strong character and manners. With an intense focus on serving others, scholars would be challenged regularly to consider opportunities to participate in service-learning projects, demonstrate manners and etiquette, and learn about individuals who are consistently modeling strong character.

2. *Academic Challenge*—A commitment to teaching and holding scholars accountable for learning at a very high level was a must. While we recognize that many scholars will come to the Academy with a lack of basic skills necessary to access grade level curriculum, we committed to challenging each student by providing a rigorous approach that requires a significant level of planning, skill, and work from both students and staff.

3. *Innovative Instruction*—The team recognized that the delivery of instruction would likely be the most innovative component of the Academy. The utilization of music, cheers, chants, and other engagement strategies would be utilized to create an instructional environment that was appropriate for the middle school aged student. Staff would receive specific training on the implementation of innovative instruction.

4. *Leadership Development*—Communicating to each student their worth and value was a consistently them in each discussion and activity of the project team. The decision to utilize the Leader in Me curriculum as a starting point to instilling leadership in young people was the beginning point. A further commitment to creating a culture of leadership in every aspect of the school was essential in establishing an innovative environment to encourage and challenge each scholar.

5. *Effort and Commitment*—The project team realized that asking scholars and their families to commit to an extended school day and an extended school calendar would not be easy. Further, scholars were going to be challenged to respond to high expectations of character and service toward others, unlike the normal school environment. Staff would also need to commit to the additional hours, demand for high-energy instruction, and be willing to push themselves and be pushed toward instructional innovation.

In support of these pillars, the school would operate on an extended day schedule. Scholars would attend school for an additional one hour per day to allow time to emphasize literacy instruction and focus on leadership development. The preparatory academy would also implement an extended school year calendar providing an additional twenty days of instruction for a total of 200 school days. Teachers would be taught to utilize cheers and chants in the classroom and the selection of a specific leadership development curriculum was recommended. The school would be tasked with

establishing a set of behavioral and social expectations that reflect a commitment to strong character and manners.

Further, the school would adopt a college bound theme to include a dedication to visiting college campuses and exposing scholars to the possibility of post high school education while utilizing specific instructional practices to help put students on the pathway to college. Scholars would gather daily each morning for rally, an opportunity to participate in activities, experience leadership moments, and interact with others in a positive social manner. The school would also work to create a uniform policy that enhances scholarship, provides equity, and establishes a culture focused on school pride and structure. Figure 5 represents the Framework for Excellence designed to help the project team and staff visualize the Academy's vision.
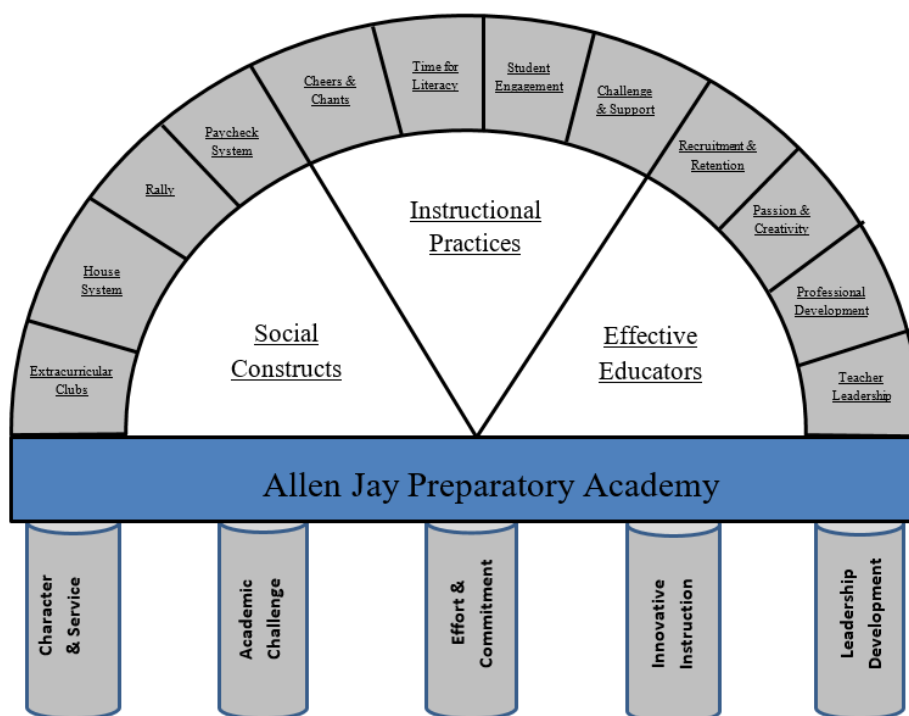
Figure 5. Framework for Excellence.

Securing Funding

Before presenting this recommendation to the Board of Education for approval to proceed, the project team considered the financial challenges associated with this school design. Employing teachers for an additional twenty hours per month and an additional month of employment per year would not be cheap. Further, the cost associated with additional days of transportation, child nutrition services, and securing additional programming for the leadership development curriculum, college bound focus, and professional development necessary to ensure that staff was well-trained on the instructional model would be enormous.

We decided to reach out to members of a local organization devoted to improving the economic and educational opportunities for families in the downtown area. We pitched our school program recommendation to them and invited them to participate in an additional visit to the Ron Clark Academy and a local KIPP school that had emerged in the southeast. With the support and encouragement of the district superintendent, one member of that organization chose to allocate one million dollars from his foundation toward the operational genesis and expansion of the preparatory academy. We had successfully developed a model for recommendation, secured support from community agencies, and addressed the financial challenges that could have created a failure to launch verdict from the Board of Education.

Selecting a Facility

Although the Board of Education voiced several concerns regarding the use of extended time and program sustainability with funding and leadership, they provided the

approval to move forward with the design and implementation of the preparatory academy model for our district. The project team was then tasked with the challenge of identifying a facility that could support the program in an economically feasible manner. From our earlier visits, we recognized quickly that we did not have the financial capital to recreate the RCA facility with donors such as Panasonic, Coca Cola, and US Air. We were also hesitant to adopt the KIPP and Freedom School method of borrowing facilities from churches, businesses, or other non-profit agencies.

The project team worked with our district facility department to identify a vacant school building that was included in a recent bond referendum that would allow money to renovate the campus for a 400-student capacity program. Although the project would not be complete until 2014, one year after the BOE approved the program to begin, we decided to select this facility for the Academy permanent location and seek temporary possibilities to launch until construction was complete. Project team members began visiting other district facilities that were vacant or under-utilized for possible startup locations. After reviewing multiple locations, the team agreed to recommend that the preparatory academy begin inside of another middle school within the region with a decreasing population. This school had developed a poor reputation for low test scores and an unhealthy school culture. These challenges, coupled with the district's policy to allow families to opt out if their neighborhood school did not meet expectations for performance, had resulted in a school facility that was currently operating at less than half capacity.

Calling All Scholars

After presenting these recommendations to the Board of Education for final review, the Preparatory Academy was given a green light to open in seven months from the night of approval. In addition, the board determined that opening a fifth- to eighth-grade magnet middle school inside of another middle school that was already struggling would likely lead to increased exodus from the neighborhood population. Thus, they approved a phased implementation of the program over the next four years with the addition of one grade level each year until reaching full capacity in the fall of 2016. With this directive, it was time to recruit rising fifth grade students and families to apply for an opportunity to attend a brand new, innovative model middle school without its own facility and without a history of data to demonstrate its positive effect on academic and social performance.

After board approval, I was asked to serve as principal of the Preparatory Academy. I left my post as principal of a large traditional middle school in February and had five months to recruit students to fill the program, hire teachers and staff to support the vision, plan and implement professional development aligned with the core pillars, and work with the district maintenance department to transform the temporary classrooms and hallways into an environmentally stimulating venue that would attract and inspire both quality educators and families. Further, textbooks had to be secured, furniture identified and relocated, curriculum materials order, and technology purchased for each classroom. We didn't have a logo, a mascot, school colors, or even a banner and it was time to invite families to apply.

The Magnet Fair

Our district hosted a magnet fair in late February of 2013. Families from throughout the county were invited to learn more about the 55 magnet school options that are available in the district. Most of these programs are at the elementary and high school level so there was some interest in a middle school option that was touted as innovative and new. As I stood solo at my booth with a small poster and handing out flyers, I couldn't help to think to myself, "What have I done?" At the end of the fair, I had spoken to approximately twenty interested families and received four applications. Further, I was beginning to feel that my project team members felt their duty had been served and the burden of taking vision to reality felt very heavy upon my shoulders.

I partnered with district relations to begin a media campaign to spread the word about the prospect of the new school. I conducted newspaper interviews, television interviews, and visited local churches and community centers to tell the story of the new and exciting opportunity available for families in the community. I utilized the district phone call distribution software to send personalize phone calls to all fourth-grade families in the surrounding area. We created a small mailer, purchased one thousand stamps and began to make contact with families who were willing to hear more about the prospect of attending the Academy. Although recruiting students was a full-time endeavor, I had to turn my attention to recruiting and securing a phenomenal group of educators that could deliver the vision in the classroom.

Seeking the Best

The Academy was beginning to generate some hype in the district. Teachers from my previous school were eager to apply and several other educators in the district began to reach out and inquire about opportunities. The Human Resources department allowed me to send out an open invitation for applications to qualified teachers currently working in the district as an attachment to the transfer notification for qualifying employees.

> AAA School District is launching an Advantage Model Middle School in August 2013 for students in grades 5-8. This magnet school will open on the campus of North Middle School in Urbania while construction is completed on the permanent site of 1200 East Road in Urbania. The school is designed to provide innovative instruction in a highly supportive environment focused on college preparedness, and will operate on an extended day, extended year calendar. The school will open with approximately 100 students in fifth grade, adding sixth, seventh and eighth grade in consecutive years. Kevin Wheat, principal of the Academy, will begin the process of staffing the school. If you are interested in being considered for a position at "The Academy," please select the site as one of your "site preferences."

The notice generated a significant amount of interest and communication from teachers and support staff members across the district. Direct emails were sent to me and phone calls from teachers inside and outside of the district were received daily. The transfer list provided eighty-eight names of individuals currently working in the district that were interested in one of the nine licensed positions that I would staff in the first year of operation. Determining how to proceed required significant thought and planning since interviewing each of those interested parties would be impossible.

Visiting Teacher Candidates

Recognizing the importance of finding passionate, engaging, and energetic teachers for this school, I decided to visit a selected group of candidates in their own classrooms to observe them teach before scheduling any interviews. Many candidates were hesitant with this process and eliminated themselves from consideration. However, a large percentage welcomed the opportunity. I contacted each of their principals and asked for permission to observe "their" teacher on site. This process served to help screen for skills and dispositions that may not have been observable in a traditional interview. I was able to see firsthand how they interacted with students, their ability to carry the classroom, and their use of instructional strategies. I met with each candidate after the observation and expressed my gratitude for allowing me to visit. For several of them, I asked for an opportunity to schedule a more formal interview to discuss the prospect of joining the team at the Academy.

Securing quality teachers for the Academy was more challenging that I had originally predicted. Great teachers seemed a bit hesitant to leave the comfort of their traditional school for a program that had yet to be established. Many expressed concern about the additional hours and additional days and the impact that would have on responsibilities for child care and other commitments. However, I was fortunate to find a small number of energetic educators who expressed a deep desire to be part of the creation of something new. They understood what we were attempting to establish with the Academy and recognized the unique opportunity that existed within the inception of

this program. By May of 2013, a full staff was secured and it was time to begin the next

phase of facility preparation and vision unification.

One-day Orientation

By the time summer arrived, I had multiple concerns regarding the successful

creation of the Academy scheduled to open the first week in August. We were still

recruiting students to fill our 100 available seats, we had an enormous challenge of

flipping a set of classrooms inside a traditional school to create the physical environment

we were seeking, and I needed to ensure that this group of quality teachers fully

understood the vision for the instructional and social culture that we were attempting to

establish. Further complicating the matter, each of them had just completed a tenuous

school year and were in need of a few weeks of vacation. I decided to pull the team

together for a one day orientation before they left for summer break and utilized the

following agenda:

Prep Academy Staff Orientation   **June 14, 2013**
1. Breakfast   8:00-8:30
2. Get-to-know-you activity   30 minutes
- Work with a partner-spend about 5 minutes getting to know each other
- Choose a prop/instrument and use it to introduce your partner
3. Building a foundation   45 minutes
- Introduce 5 pillars-quick list
- Carousel brainstorm-what might each look like, feel like, be like at the Academy
- Back to home poster-summarize and present to group
4. Components of the program-what will each of these look like with kids?
- College prep
- Music
- Movement
- Literacy block
  Placemat activity-

➢ In groups of 4, brainstorm and put ideas on sticky notes-put into appropriate category on placemat (individually).   5 minutes

➢ Divide whole group into 4 groups- each group gets all sticky notes from one of the four categories and process. Come up with a way (graphic organizer, mind map, skit, commercial, game) to present findings to entire group.   40 minutes

5. Break   20 minutes
6. Professional Development   30 minutes
• Teach Like a Champion
• Leader in Me
• Ron Clark Academy
7. Facilities-expectations   30-40 minutes
• Tour of Current Facility
• Prep Academy floor plan
• Creating the environment-what are your thoughts/dreams for your classroom theme?
8. Instructional Presentation-expert groups   30 minutes
• Balancing high energy, structure-characteristics/challenges/solutions
• Overview of lesson plan template-review and feedback
• Making morning meetings relevant-review and feedback
• Teacher/student interactions-Scholar $ Paycheck system
9. Final activity   15 minutes
• Vanity plate-create a license plate that represents your idea/concept of the Prep Academy.

This orientation was packed with information pertaining to the instructional approach the Academy would utilize, the social structure desired for scholars, and the unique components of the schedule that would address the core pillars of the program. Although it provided an overwhelming amount of information to digest in one day, my challenge to the team was to introduce them to the task ahead and encourage them to wrestle with it over the next four weeks when they were scheduled to return to work. Each of them was asked to create a themed physical environment to implement in their classroom upon return. They were challenged to create at least one call and response

chant to engage and direct scholars in their classrooms. Finally, they were tasked with

preparing themselves physically and mentally for an extremely demanding three weeks

leading up to opening day August 7.

When staff returned, all the hallways and classrooms had been painted in bright

colors, technology was installed in classrooms and furniture was secured and placed in

each teaching area. Signage adorned the entrance and interior halls, and it was obvious

that the Academy was launching soon. I issued each instructional staff member a budget

for purchasing supplies and materials to create their vision in classrooms. I conducted

additional staff development utilizing the text *Teach Like A Champion: 49 Techniques

That Put Students on the Path to College*, by Doug Lemov. Each staff member

participated in leadership development training provided by the FranklinCovey

Foundation. Finally, I contracted with a teacher from the Ron Clark Academy to provide

a three-day training on student engagement and rigor in the classroom. Each of these

opportunities brought us closer as a team and served to unify the vision for what we were

seeking to create at the Academy.

Rolling Out the Red Carpet!

Classrooms were decorated, staff was in place, and enrollment had hit the 100

mark! We were ready to open doors at the Academy and welcome scholars and families

to the beginning of a new program. Open house was an exciting evening of students

meeting teachers for the first time, interacting with students they had never met before,

and taking part in creative activities with face painting, a caricature artist, and a comedic

clown. Students received schedules that evening and final preparations were made to

transportation arrangements and opening day activities. When scholars arrived the first day of school, the Academy staff welcomed each of them to the red carpet with paparazzi, music, and cheers and chants.

Figure 6. Image of Staff Welcomes Scholars into the Academy.

Figure 7. Open House Was Well Attended as Year 1 is Staged to Open.

Experiential Learning

The school year was off to what appeared to be a fabulous start. The superintendent had visited the Academy on multiple occasions and was pleased with initial progress, seats were full with a few students on the waiting list, and parents seemed to be appreciative of all the hard work that had been concentrated on preparing the facility and creating a unique program for students. In order to kick the year off with a bang, I decided to take all students and staff to an experiential learning facility located about twenty miles from campus. Sponsored by a local university, this outdoor facility offered exercises in team building, group trust, and individual challenge courses. I utilized some of our donated dollars to provide each scholar with the opportunity to attend free of charge.

When we arrived to the facility, students were quickly blown away with the outdoor challenge course which consisted of high ropes, rappelling walls, and zip lines. Since we had focused on instilling the desired culture with our students in the first week of school, our kids were constantly cheering and chanting in unison every time a camp leader called for their attention or greeted them. Camp directors and staff were thoroughly impressed with the level of energy, focus, and respect that our scholars demonstrated during each activity. Our young people were shining and it was obvious that the majority of our students had never had the opportunity to experience such activities.

What I had not considered was that many of our students' lack of opportunity to experience these engaging and challenging activities may manifest itself in fear and

complete shutdown. One of our scholars who I connected with during the recruitment and enrollment period was exceptionally large for his age. He was over six feet tall and had giant sized hands. He was a very quiet boy, shy, and was being raised by his aunt. He was courageous enough to climb the cargo net to reach the first platform, but when he saw the high wire course that lay ahead of him, he crouched into a ball and refused to move. We worked with him for over two hours, even raising his lunch to him but he refused to move or speak. Finally, after spending much of the day with him on the platform, he finally agreed to go back down the cargo net to ground level. This experience reminded me quickly that our scholars had a variety of previous experiences, individual needs, and skills that would require careful consideration as we attempted to implement the Academy's vision for each of them.

Figure 8. Scholars at Experiential Learning Campus in Year 1.

Reading Scores Deliver a Message

Due to a newly implemented reading assessment in our state the previous year, scores were withheld until many weeks into the new school year. While we recognized that many of our scholars struggled with grade level text, our plan for delivering personalized fluency and comprehension services to our scholars was altered when those scores were released to schools. Of the one hundred students that were enrolled with us at the Academy, only thirty-three of them were proficient in reading according to the new state standard. More importantly, over 40 of our scholars had scored a level one on the reading assessment indicating that they were significantly behind grade level. The task of providing academic challenge to students that were scoring in the bottom ten percentile would need to be a critical area of focus for our staff.

In addition, the release of assessment data showed some extreme polarity in the level of our students' reading ability. Of the 33 scholars who were proficient in reading, over twenty of those students scored in the 80th percentile or higher on the same assessment. Utilizing a lottery system to select students for participation in the Academy was obviously the most equitable system available for our use. However, without the use of a performance based application, interview process, or any other qualification criteria, the program that was designed to provide additional support and challenge to struggling students also appealed to a collection of families that were looking for additional opportunities for their already successful students. I quickly recognized the challenge of providing appropriate services to such a wide variety of scholar needs with a limited number of staff at the Academy.

Creating a Literacy Plan

To address these concerns, we quickly formulated a daily literacy block that would provide students with direct literacy instruction for forty-five minutes per day based on their individual needs. My curriculum facilitator, special education teacher, English Language Arts teacher, and school librarian would work with the students that had the strongest needs in small groups of four to six students. At the same time, every other licensed staff member began working with our higher-level students to conduct literacy circles, extension activities, and additional vocabulary and writing instruction to challenge their growth in much higher class sizes. We created a daytime class that met in lieu of an elective to provide additional remediation in reading and math skills for students in need. We quickly organized our after-school tutoring program to provide yet more services to address our most highly impacted students' needs.

Staff were working feverishly to plan core academic lessons, literacy block activities based on the level of students they were assigned, and to prepare after school tutoring lessons. Coupled with that, I had asked staff to incorporate our leadership development curriculum, utilize cheers and chants in the classroom, and to consistently be prepared for guests who regularly ask for opportunities to visit classrooms and witness the engaging activities and performances that our schools were participating in. It was beginning to show. It was early October and although staff were consistently present and working diligently to deliver all the services were had committed to, I could recognize the signs of frustration from many of them. However, it was time for our first college

visit so we pressed on and loaded the buses to travel to a local university who was willing to open its doors to a group of fifth graders who were interested in college.

Visiting the University

The excitement of our first trip to a local university was evident on the bus. Scholars were dressed to impress, were singing content songs their teachers had taught them, and were smiling from ear to ear upon arrival. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm became unbridled as we toured the campus and visited the dining hall. We had kids running down the sidewalks, jumping over natural areas, whipping through college students in the lunch line, and behaving in a manner that was far from scholarly. As we returned to school, I chose to gather all students and staff in the auditorium and have a time of sharing of what seemed to be going well and where we had to make some improvements. This meeting was followed by an open discussion with staff about how they were holding up as we approached the close of the first quarter. Many of them shared that they were struggling to consistently integrate all the many components of the Academy on a consistent basis. They felt as if they had to constantly utilize a song or chant every time a visitor came in or I slipped into class to observe.

Responding to Concerns

Student behavior was also beginning to become an issue. Despite the intense focus on manners, respect, and etiquette in the classroom, we experienced multiple fights after the opening weeks of school. Bus drivers were consistently voicing concerns about student behavior on the bus, teachers were beginning to write multiple discipline referrals

for class disruptions, and I had to open up an In-School Suspension classroom in my office. It was time to re-evaluate how we were implementing the vision.

As a result of these events, I made some adjustments to alleviate many of the teacher concerns. I began using morning rally as a time of character focus and leadership moments. These lessons and activities set the stage for the day's events and allowed teachers to incorporate the daily lesson into their classroom without having to focus solely on that content. I set restrictions on the number of visitors allowed and the frequency of their visits, limited it to one time per month. Additionally, I held conferences with each certified instructional staff member and encouraged them to simplify their approach, and release themselves from the burden of feeling like they had to sing, dance, and walk on tables all day every day.

A Special Visitor

Shortly after making these adjustments, I received a request from a philanthropic foundation in the city that had heard about our innovative approach to engage and inspire young people. The Executive Director of the Phillips Foundation indicated that she had heard of our program from a friend that had invested in our initial effort to open the school. I invited her for a visit and she gladly accepted. Upon arrival, I was surprised to see that she had multiple additional guests with her. She quickly informed me that these were acting board members of the Foundation and hoped it was acceptable that they join in on the visit. We graciously welcomed them to the Academy and I turned the introductions and tour over to two of my sharpest scholars what at this time had become very well-versed in sharing the Academy's vision with guests.

As we entered classrooms together, scholars came and welcomed each of them into the classroom and offered them a place to sit to observe. Teachers had planned very engaging lessons much like any other day, but they also had prepared several performance opportunities to help our guests understand the unique method of content delivery and student engagement that is a part of daily instruction at the Academy. Scholars proceeded to chant multiplication facts, sing about different types of text structure, and dance on tables to a beat from a djembe drum in a science classroom. The guests were blown away with the enthusiasm of both the scholars and the staff who were performing and teaching throughout the entire visit.

We gathered in a makeshift conference room after class visitation and I began to share more about the vision for the Academy in moving forward. I explained that we were very fortunate to have a local bond referendum that was being utilized to renovate a school facility for our permanent home. Our school would become part of the district's one-to-one tablet initiative the following school year providing each scholar an opportunity to receive personalized learning services in and out of the classroom. However, our greatest need existed not in fixed assets or infrastructure upgrades. We needed additional human resources to provide intense academic tutoring services during the day, after school hours, and on the weekends. Based on the board's experience in witnessing the tremendous levels of engagement and academic rigor in the classrooms, the Foundation agreed to provide a $500,000 grant specifically for the Academy in the upcoming school year. Figure 9 is an excerpt of the media release regarding the donation.

Academy Receives $500,000 Donation
Phillips Foundation funding will help expand magnet school, add innovation

Urbania. – The Phillips Foundation has continued its generosity toward Urbania County Schools (UCS). At last night's State of Our Schools event, the district announced that the foundation had pledged $500,000 to help support and expand the Academyin Urbania. The school was part of the 2012 Strategic Plan, and opened in the fall of 2013 with its first class of 110 fifth-graders. The Academy combines a strong emphasis on leadership and college readiness with a high-energy teaching style using music and movement to keep students engaged.

"The donation from the Phillips Foundation will allow additional scholars to experience the unique, innovative instructional model at the Academy," says Principal Kevin Wheat. "Additional support structures and academic services will be used to accelerate students toward academic excellence."

The school will expand next year to serve fifth- and sixth-grade students. Interested students from anywhere in Urbania County can apply starting tomorrow at the UCS Magnet Fair, from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Greensboro Coliseum Pavilion. The program is one of 54 magnet opportunities in UCS, all of which will be sharing information at the fair. Parking and admission are free.

In addition to the Phillips Foundation's donation to support the Academy, the foundation also donated more than $2 million to jump-start a new UCS partnership with Teach For America. To learn how you can help UCS rise, click here

Figure 9. Excerpt from Media Release.

Gearing Up for Year 2

Shortly after a much-needed winter break, we turned our attention to the recruitment and enrollment of the second cohort of the Academy. Unlike last year, I now had a staff to join me at the district magnet fair, I had purchased promotional display boards and professional literature to market the Academy, and we had scholars and families to share the story of the Academy at each of our recruitment events. Although our new campus was far from completion, we opened our doors for Magnet Monday's and invited prospective scholars and families to the school to see what instruction was

like at the Academy. We held evening open house events and allowed scholars to perform and answer questions that parents had regarding their experiences. Parents were eager to assist and helped to recruit families they knew in the community with rising fifth graders as well.

At the end of our application period, we had filled eighty-two of our one hundred available seats for rising fifth graders and had a waiting list of over 50 students for our sixth-grade program. With less time needing to be devoted to actively recruiting and sharing our message in the community, I was able to focus on the recruitment of our new cohort of staff members. In the process of adding a grade, the Academy was allotted an additional five instructional positions for the upcoming year. As applications and resumes began to pour in, I once again scheduled classroom observations of prospective staff in their current settings. I took along one of my instructional leaders to these visits, and we invited multiple candidates to the school for visitation and interviews.

In the meantime, I was focusing much of my time and attention on the building advisory team progress with the new facility. Recognizing that the physical design and look of the new facility would be extremely important, I began to choose elaborate colors for each hallway floor and wall. I contacted one of our donors and asked for permission to use some of his initial investment to create some unique facility features that would be critical in establishing the culture of leadership and challenge in the building. After receiving his blessing, I worked to secure a 20-foot tall rock climbing wall that would be installed in the morning rally location at the new facility. I also contracted with a local artist to create leadership murals in the building, paint inspiring quotes, and produce

multiple large portraits of selected leaders that would hang in an area of the building we would refer to as Leadership Lane. Finally, I invited a local sculptor to the campus during construction and described to him the vision of the Academy and invited him to contribute. Together, we designed a Leadership and Knowledge bench that consisted of multiple quotes of various leaders laser cut into steel book pages and suspended above a circular bench on a marble pillar.

But Are They Learning?

By the time we returned from spring break, it looked as though the building was going to be ready in time for our team to move in just after students left for their short summer break. After reviewing the most recent interim assessment data, I continued to have grave concerns related to our scholars' growth in reading and mathematics. With only 7 weeks until the end of grade assessments, it was evident that we had to do everything possible to give our students a final boost to prepare them to perform at the highest level possible. Although each of our families had chosen to return for the following year, enrollment was strong for the second cohort of students, and we were beginning to establish a name for ourselves around the district, none of that would matter if our students did not perform at high levels and demonstrate that the Academy's combination of innovative instructional delivery and intense focus on leadership development was successful.

In the final quarter of the school year, the Academy chose to create an additional math impact class to reinforce grade level content while providing additional support in basic math skills. Over twenty percent of our students participated in this course that was

taught in lieu of an encore class by our curriculum specialist. We also doubled our after-school tutoring efforts by adding additional days during the week. Finally, the school leadership team decided to create an end of grade school-wide review campaign that would restructure our school schedule to provide small group review sessions. Every licensed staff member in the building taught a class. As school principal, I chose to work with my low-level math students. After rally each morning, we broke into our review groups and went at it hard and heavy for the first two hours of the day. We ran these review sessions all the way until the week of testing. We had done all we could do and now needed our scholars to demonstrate all they had learned.

As assessment data began to trickle in, there were multiple bright spots to celebrate across the school. Many of our students that were level one had grown by double digit scale points but still remained a level one or low level two. Several students had crossed the proficiency barrier in reading, math, or both! Each of our proficient students had remained proficient and many of them achieved growth about the average rate across the district. Unfortunately, our science scores were dismal. In our state, every fifth-grade student is required to take an end of grade assessment in reading, math, and science. The science assessment is a cumulative assessment that covers content that students should have been exposed to in grades three through five. Our students had not performed well. In turn, our school did not make the overall growth necessary to be recognized in a positive light. Despite a proficiency increase of 13% in reading and 18% in math, our science proficiency of 32% negatively affected our overall data and cast a heavy weight of disappointment on each of our staff.

Creating Changes for Year 2

The Academy team had effectively birthed a new and innovative approach to teaching and learning for middle school students. Yet, the majority of the work lay ahead. This chapter has described the creation and first year of the school from my perspective. However, the shared experiences of the instructional and support staff during the inaugural year and the perspectives of new staff members provide valuable insight to any school administrator or district office staff that desire to implement educational innovation at the middle school level. The combined experiences and stories of staff members is critical to understanding what processes worked, what needs went unmet, and what can be done to provide additional support as we take the Academy to full realization in the years ahead. These experiences and stories will be the focus of Chapter 5.

CHAPTER V

IMPLEMENTATION: PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

Opening the Academy was a strategic goal of the district to provide additional choice and opportunity to families of middle school students. It became much more as individuals were selected to accomplish this task for the district. It quickly became a chance to participate in a dream opportunity of creating and implementing a unique educational program from the ground up. Staff members became involved at various points along the way but each has a unique perspective regarding their participation in the endeavor. The responses of each participant provided valuable insight as to the process, challenges, and adjustments that were utilized in order to effectively accomplish this task. Throughout this chapter, I will use the words of the participants to share their stories of implementing the dream of the Academy.

Organization of the Data

In this unique case study, all participants have direct experience with the creation and implementation of the Academy. Seven participants are referred to as "year one" educators indicating that they took part in the initial process of creation in similar levels. Most of them were hired in the spring prior to opening the Academy. This gives them a unique perspective into all of the initial discussions, meetings, and professional development that were employed prior to launch in August of 2013. One of the year one

staff, Mrs. Perkins, also participated as a member of the district project team who met over a 12-month period prior to launching the Academy and has additional perspectives into the process utilized in the creation of the program. Additionally, as the primary researcher and participant, I was interviewed to capture my experiences throughout the entire creation and implementation process. My responses will be utilized to provide additional context and depth to other participant responses.

Additionally, five other educators were interviewed as "year two" participants. Each of these educators joined the Academy prior to the beginning of the second year of implementation. Their stories share valuable insight into the process of moving the vision forward, expansion of the program, and support structures that were utilized to ensure success during the Academy's growth. Last, recognizing that the primary researcher was the direct supervisor of each participant, an anonymous survey was distributed to each participant to gather as much additional insight as possible from them.

Processes in Implementation of the School

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences during the creation and implementation of the Academy. Most were able to share specific examples of processes—activities, meetings, or experiences—that they believed were effective in helping to create the structure necessary for the Academy's success. These processes included:

- Visits to other schools,

- Processes related to establishing the vision,

- Trainings and other growth experiences,

- Morning Rally,

- Leaders' Creed,

- Proactive energy and enthusiasm,

- Staff selection processes,

- The "Best First Day of School Ever" campaign,

- Regular field trips

- An enhanced physical environment, and

- Visitation Day

In the pages that follow, these processes are described.

Visits to Other Schools

As the project team began its work on identifying what this innovative school would look like, I had an opportunity to travel to New York City to visit a few KIPP Charter Network schools that had demonstrated success. Although I didn't know if I would eventually lead the Academy or not, I chose to invite an individual, Mr. Vince, who was currently serving as my student support specialist at the school I was leading. He had a strong sense of what our students' needs were and was very loyal to my leadership and ideas about innovation. He joined me and two other project team members on the journey to determine how KIPP might fit into the Academy's vision. Mr. Vince reflected on that experience and how it impacted his understanding of our work to create a new school.

I think the KIPP Academy visit was initially a very pivotal moment in this process because it showed us the structure that was needed. There were several schools

> inside the one building that we visited and you could see the difference in how KIPP operated. And we ended up opening the Academy inside of another school just like that so it was neat to see. Seeing that school in action made me like, ok, I see how this is different and we can do something like this. (Mr. Vince, interview)

We visited four KIPP schools during our time in New York. We had an opportunity to speak with the middle school director of the KIPP program and he shared valuable insight into the process of establishing the KIPP philosophy in each program he operated. The foundation for KIPP rests in their pillars, or principles the organization ascribes to about teaching and learning. Although I had read about KIPP's program prior to the visit, this experience anchored my understanding of the significance of creating a strong foundation for what the Academy would be about. Another staff member shared in the survey response about the value of the research and visits that occurred prior to launch.

> A lot of work was involved in researching innovative approaches to education. Mr. Wheat visited other schools, read about successful models, and solicited input from a team of highly energetic, smart, motivated educators. All of these thigs allowed the Academy to develop a model unique to our own scholars. We are a public, magnet school. We are not private, like many innovative school models. We have taken the best of all of these models and made them work in a unique, public school setting. There is no school like it in the country. (Anonymous Survey Response)

Establishing the Vision

Both year one and year two participants referred to the establishment of the five pillars of the Academy as an important process in establishing the vision of the Academy. These pillars were discussed in the project team as the school design was being

established. The pillars were similar in nature to the KIPP Charter Network's use of core

values designed to identify the purpose of the program and are illustrated in Figure 10.

THE PROGRAM WILL BE BASED ON FIVE PILLARS:

Character & Service. The school will instill in students the character traits of integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, self-discipline, kindness, respect and responsibility. These traits will result in a commitment of service to the community.

Academic Challenge. The program will provide challenging instruction at an accelerated pace designed to prepare students for college.

Innovative Instruction. Teachers will provide engaging instruction designed to inspire and motivate students toward independent learning. Strategies will incorporate movement, music, individual technology and the arts to provide students with the most exciting educational experience offered in a public school.

Leadership Development. Participating students will be trained for current and future leadership roles. Students will have individual and collective responsibility for their behavior, service and learning. Opportunities to host visitors, act as mentors and serve as ambassadors for the program will be available and expected for all students.

Effort & Commitment. The Allen Jay program is not for everyone; students must commit to the challenge of working hard to achieve success. Parents are expected to be active partners by both holding their student accountable and serving in the school program.

Figure 10. Use of Pillars to Describe the Purpose of the Program.

In one survey response, a staff member indicated

The 5 pillars of the Academy have been thoroughly explained and utilized
throughout rally, Lit Block, core instruction and during encore instruction. All
members of staff actively participate to keep the culture of the Academy going
and the pillars have been effective in helping us to do that. (Anonymous Survey
Response)

Another staff member indicated that the principles of the Academy were

communicated clearly at the beginning and assisted in establishing the vision for the

program.

> I believe that the principles of our program were communicated very clearly to the staff from the very beginning. We discussed not only what the principles of our program are but also what they will look like when we launch. Staff training was effectively designed and implemented so that we all would have a common understanding and a common language before the students stepped through the door. (Anonymous Survey Response)

It was important to give staff members an opportunity to be exposed to the founding principles by which the school was designed.

Succinctly communicating the vision. After the program was presented to the project team for final consideration, I had the opportunity to share the final vision with the Board of Education for approval before moving forward. Ensuring that the approved version of the Academy was presented to staff was important as the school leader and from the district's perspective. I created a one-page document that outlined the key pillars of the program and other characteristics that explained the vision of the Academy (see Figure 11).

Mr. Blackwood, a Year 1 teacher, commented on the impact of that document.

> I'll never forget that one pager kind of help me, kind of wrapped my mind around the process of what the school is going to look like and where we were trying to take the school from the very first day of implementation. We knew Allen Jay was going to be in different place. We're going to teach differently and we're going to reach the kids. This is what we're going to do. We didn't have to really guess what that was going to be. We were able to look at the kind of the pillars that you had set in front of us and jut begin discussing how to make those things happen. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

The establishment of the pillars and documents that articulated the program's vision served to assist Year 1 staff in bringing the program to life. Early trainings and

meetings frequently referred back to these important elements to ensure that the

implementation was aligned to the vision.

WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT?

How we teach. Allen Jay Middle will use specific student engagement strategies to enhance student performance. Music and movement, for example, will be a part of the classroom experience on a daily basis, helping to energize students. The use of one-to-one technology and personalized learning opportunities will stimulate active learning.

What we teach. The curriculum will follow Common Core State Standards, but Allen Jay Middle will include a literacy block designed to increase time reading and hold students accountable for what they read. The entire school will enter literacy block at a common time. Instruction will emphasize real-world scenarios and community awareness.

When we teach. The school will have extended school days and will have an extended school year.

WHAT WILL THE SCHOOL PROVIDE?

High Structure, High Praise. The school will establish a culture of high expectations for academic and behavioral performance. Students will earn bucks for weekly incentives and be allowed to spend or bank for purchases in school store.

Regular House Meetings. Allen Jay Middle will utilize a House program to create smaller environments to enhance student success. Houses will meet daily to receive school goals, hear from community and guest speakers and celebrate successes weekly in House meetings.

College Bound. Allen Jay Middle is committed to preparing each student to be successful in college. College names and mascots will be used for various activities to emphasize the expectation that students should be college-ready. Students will hear from guest speakers from the academic and business communities and participate in field trips to local universities.

Work Hard, Be Nice. Modeled after the KIPP philosophy, Allen Jay Middle will provide intensive training on character, manners and professional conduct. Students will have opportunities to greet guests, practice interviews and participate in leadership development. The expectation of hard work permeates everything Allen Jay Middle will do.

Figure 11. One Page Flyer to Communicate the Vision.

Prospective teacher visits. As for Year 2 staff, many of them had an opportunity

to come and visit the school in action before interviewing or being selected to join the

Academy. Mr. May describes his experience in recognizing the vision of the Academy

on a scheduled visit.

I did come over and walked around and listened to you and saw kind of the academy working before I put my hat into the ring I guess. And I saw immediately a different vision than what I was a part of a regular school. And very apparent that the vision was to socially change kids, not just academically so it was a two-part process to me when I first came out and watched this, I said this is different. It's not just about academics, it's not just about getting kids elevated academically it's also about social teachings, leadership teachings that was something that was very apparent when I first saw it. (Mr. May, interview)

Staff members joining the Academy in year two were able to experience the vision in action both in visits and also in trainings. Opportunities were provided at the beginning of the second year for new staff to learn from other staff members who participated in establishing the program in the previous year. According to Ms. Scott, the vision was clearly provided in a manner that assisted new staff in successfully implementing the expectations.

I think one major advantage was we (Year 2 staff) got a lot of background, I guess, so to speak, for what kind of instruction we were expected to present or what the teaching styles are expected here. And they're all different but it was just pretty much to one common goal and it was all student centered. Here, you want your instruction to be student centered and personalized with lots of energy and that was clearly presented in our initial meetings. (Ms. Scott, interview)

Experiential learning experience. Several staff members also commented on the beginning of year staff development that was offered and its impact on establishing the vision of the Academy. Although we met with staff briefly before summer began, all Year 1 staff were asked to gather at an experiential learning camp in late July for our first official staff development. This program, run by a local university, provided staff with opportunity for team building, personal challenge, and problem solving activities with

new peers. Each of us took turns climbing challenge poles, crossing high ropes courses,

and zip lining through the forest in the heat of the summer.

> I remember going to Piney Lake on the first day and I was like, whoa, this is going to be totally different than anything I've ever done before. This school is going to be about taking risks and doing things outside the box if this is how we are getting to know each other day one. (Mr. Vince, interview)

Another year one teacher who was fresh out of college commented on the impact

of beginning the school year with this type of training. Although first year teachers are

typically expected to have high energy and need very little motivation to get excited

about teaching, this experience assisted Ms. Jordan in helping her to acclimate to a new a

staff and form valuable relationships that would benefit her throughout the year.

> I remember going to the higher ropes course and that was also, I just think those moments are things that I would never give up just because in a program like this, it's so demanding you need those people cheering you on. I think more so than any other program or life experience I've had, that opening day helped me to grow as a teacher and a person. I'm for the most part a pretty shy person like when I don't know people, so coming in and being a first-year teacher and not having any experience and not knowing anybody and being with the staff that a lot of them had worked together before, for me it just kind of made me feel respected and I felt like the staff was welcoming me with open arms. Even though there was everybody's first year at the Academy, I didn't feel so much like the newbie anymore. I think it was cool to see people out of their comfort zone and have different people lifting you up. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

Kicking off our staff development at this type of venue with activities that few, if

any, had ever participated in was exciting for me as the leader. I knew the vision that I

had for the school but it was not one that I could implement without the enthusiasm and

skill of multiple other educators. Conversations spurred from that experience regarding

the risk-taking characteristic that is needed to be a successful teacher at the Academy and the willingness to work together in trusting relationships. As we returned to the school building the following day, staff were eager to share their ideas about how to make the Academy come alive. One teacher, Ms. Worthy, was an experienced teacher with great instructional presentation skills. She commented on the collaborative nature of making the vision become real in those opening days.

> It was a team effort. I mean, I think we all made it happen together without any one individual deciding what it was going to look like. We all had input and we all created that vision. We say that you had your vision and we just kind of added our own experiences and ideas in order to enhance the vision based on what we knew it should look like. (Ms. Worthy, interview)

Vision casting in interviews. Participating in each of these experiences assisted me in clarifying my own vision for the Academy as well. Although I was fortunate to have all key staff members in place at the first training, my ability to talk about the Academy strengthened each time I spoke about the school with interested teachers or shared updates with district leaders. I moved from simply sharing the concept of the Academy and the five pillars to a more detailed explanation of what these concepts looked like in action. As I interviewed new staff members for the second year of implementation, I began to give specific examples of instructional practices that were utilized in the classroom and leadership development opportunities that scholars were experiencing. Other staff participated in the interviews as a way to provide them a chance to share their experiences and have increased ownership of the program as well.

One Year 2 staff member described how that interview process helped to cement her

understanding on what is expected at the Academy.

> You fully prepared me for what I was getting into. You know and that is
> something like that I really appreciated. I was told that it was going to be a lot of
> work, and we go above and beyond and we often stay after putting our extra time
> for what is going to work best for our kids. That meant a lot to me. Also the fact
> that we interview with the leadership team, like you care about your staff to
> include them in the process and get their opinions. After that interview I knew
> exactly what was expected and I was excited about what the Academy was doing.
> (Ms. Ellington, interview)

Establishing the vision for the Academy was critical to ensuring cohesion among

staff and ultimately success for the program. Staff members must be able to articulate the

vision of the school first if they are going to be effective in implementing it in the

classroom. Although the foundation of the Academy was provided through the project

team and the documents it produced, much of the work of helping teachers to gain the

skills necessary to implement the vision came through the initial trainings that were

offered to new and returning staff members.

Trainings and Other Experiences

Beginning of the year trainings with the principal. Participants in this study

were asked to consider any experiences or specific trainings considered valuable in the

creation and implementation process. The Academy was provided some additional

funding for staff development and I chose to use some of those dollars to bring staff in

two weeks prior to students arriving in August. Although many sessions were provided

the give staff the tools necessary to implement the vision of the Academy, several were

recognized to have considerable impact in providing staff opportunities to adequately

prepare for student arrival and continued improvement throughout the school year. In the

survey response, one staff member commented on the training sessions offered at the

beginning of the school year.

> The trainings led by Mr. Wheat were very beneficial in understanding the type of culture that he envisions for our school. Those sessions allowed us as a staff to get on the same page about our program before the school year began. We discussed how we might implement some of the leadership themes in our classroom, we wrote some cheers and chants together, and talked about the type of instruction we were going to utilize in the school. (Anonymous Survey Response)

"Leader in Me" Covey training. Since one of the foundational pillars of the

Academy was aimed at leadership development, I contracted with the Covey Foundation

to provide a full staff training on the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. This three-day

training was a comprehensive look at Dr. Covey's work and the implications of living a

life devoted to self-improvement and collaboration with other people. The goal of this

training was to provide a springboard of ideas and strategies that could be used to

effectively develop leaders within the Academy. The Covey Foundation's premier

product is a process entitled, The Leader in Me (LIM), which guides interested schools

through a journey of school improvement and renewal. For us, we were seeking establish

a framework for developing leaders and recognized the rich history and research that the

program could offer the Academy. Mr. Blackwood discusses the impact of the 7 Habits

training on himself and the Academy.

> I think for the character aspect, you know building character and developing leaders was our big focus. We focus a lot of time on that here in the Academy. And so, the seven habits training was huge. Having him come and talk to us as a staff about the seven habits and, go through those and really peeled back some

onion layers on our own personal life. It made me be able to become a better educator for the staff around me and for the students. I thought that was huge and that gave us insight on what we were looking for and what the program was looking for in leadership and character. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Contracting with Covey also allowed us to have access to a variety of resources for teachers and for parents. As we shared the vision of the Academy with guests, interested educators, or prospective families, we were able to provide some concrete examples of how we teach leadership development and discuss the curriculum that LIM provides. Although the initial investment was substantial from a financial and time commitment, the return was worth it based on the impact it had on our staff and the Academy moving forward.

Ron Clark Academy training with Adam Dovico. These opening trainings provided an extremely valuable resource to educators trying to establish innovation. Time. During the provided time, teachers shared dialogue and exchanged ideas about how to make the vision of the Academy come alive as soon as students stepped off that school bus for day one. During the planning phase of the school, I had met an individual that taught multiple subjects at the Ron Clark Academy (RCA) in Atlanta. One of his responsibilities at RCA included providing professional development and consultation to schools or districts interested in innovation. Adam Dovico agreed to spend some time at the Academy with us as we prepared to open the doors with a new program. Prior to his arrival, Adam and I discussed the Academy's vision and the planning process that had led us to establish the school. I asked him to join me in helping develop the necessary skills

and dispositions in staff to accomplish our goals. Multiple staff members commented on

the impact of Adam's work in their survey responses.

> The training with Adam Dovico has been very beneficial in implementing the vision for AJ prep. (Anonymous Survey Response)
>
> The trainings with Adam Dovico were wonderful. His experience at RCA really helped the staff to pull in the aspects of music, chants, and high energy to our program. (Anonymous Survey Response)
>
> The best training received was from Adam Dovico, a teacher from the Ron Clark Academy. He offered real scenarios, solutions, and provided real tips that could immediately be used in the classroom. He taught classes and demonstrated how to get kids motivated to learn. (Anonymous Survey Response)

Participants also shared during interviews about the staff development that Adam

offered. Mrs. Jamison, a Year 1 staff member, participated in the trainings and

commented on Adam's ability to help staff visualize the culture we wanted to create.

> Probably the most impactful training for me personally was when Mr. Dovico came from the Ron Clark Academy. He came in and not only gave us instructions on how we could implement the culture that we wanted. He wasn't trying to make us Ron Clark, but he kind of listened to what we wanted to do and he helped us with our culture. He demonstrated and modeled for us what it would look like. And he didn't just do it in, you know, one little small workshop. He stayed with us all day and showed us what kind of energy it would take because when you look at what they do at the Ron Clark Academy, you're automatically thinking well, are they doing this for us? How do the teachers really have this kind of energy? Can they really sustain this energy on an entire day? And yes, they can. So I think that that was the most meaningful training that we had. I think that once we had that training, it allowed us to believe that this is possible. We can do this, you know. (Mrs. Jamison, interview)

Adam's training was so beneficial that I continue to bring him back at the

beginning of each school year. He works with new staff but I offer the opportunity to

every Academy staff member and most of them return to participate in his training. One

Year 2 staff member, Mr. May, felt that Adam's presentation really helped him to

acclimate to the culture that the school had established.

> I was very anxious about coming because I was questioning, do I have what it takes to be able to fit into this environment do the things that these teachers are doing. I felt like I did but I wasn't real sure until those trainings at the beginning of the year. Having Adam come and even bring one of his former students made me realize that the things he was talking about and the Academy was doing was really making a difference. (Mr. May, interview)

Mr. Dovico and I continued to stay in touch as the year progressed. He had taken

a keen interest in the Academy due to living in close proximity and his desire to become

a school administrator at some point in his career. I provided him with regular updates as

to the success of the Academy and some of the challenges that we encountered in our

attempt to implement the vision. Recognizing that the staff had established a favorable

view of his work and appreciated his contributions, I requested that he return around mid-

year to conduct some observations with me and even demonstrate some model lessons

with our own students. Adam's return was a shot in the arm and had a considerable

impact on many staff.

> I think having Adam come was key because we know that one part, we hear about what they do at the RCA and while we could take some folks there just to see it for a day, to have Adam come and actually do it with us to do some of those model lessons with our actual kids, and then come back and watch our teachers with feedback I think was key. There were a lot of times when you go to a training and it's done. You go to a day, and it's done. With him, he came— trained for a few days, did some stuff, and then we implemented it, and he came back and gave us feedback. That was on a powerful thing. I think that continuous profession development with him has been very beneficial, because he's on the

same page as we are, and he can show us what it should look like. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

Ron Clark Academy visit. Having visited the Ron Clark Academy during the planning phase, I recognized the value in trying to get all staff to experience the school for themselves. Our initial trainings and Adam's assistance had helped staff to create classroom environments that demonstrated high energy, use of music and movement, and ample student leadership opportunities. However, I was determined to make a full staff visit to the Academy a priority during the opening year. After gaining approval from district leaders, I utilized some of my initial startup funds to book a van, reserve a host of rooms at the Holiday Inn in Atlanta, and register the staff for a two-day experience at the Ron Clark Academy in February of the first year. Ms. Jordan describes how that experience impacted her continued effort to be innovative in her classroom.

> Visiting RCA was the number one experience of the entire year as far as training and all of that. I think it was really cool to see our vision in reality like actually see like this is what we're working towards. These are what we want our students the expectation that we want our students to have. Even seeing how the classrooms and the bathrooms and the hallways were decorated and just how the staff all related to each other. That experience was priceless, it was so valuable and I think when we came back it was at a perfect time of the year because it was I think right after Christmas break. So we were kind of rejuvenated and it just gave us a good kick to really work through and push through the last half of the year. Because it's, I think I've said this it's a demanding program and so any little bit of like rejuvenation that we can get was needed at that point. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

Although we had discussed our desire for our physical environment to be engaging and for teachers to incorporate music and cheers at a high level, seeing it in action spurred an increased awareness of what could be possible at the Academy. Ms.

Ellington's comments during her interview clearly describe the emotion and enthusiasm

that was stirred after her visit to RCA.

> I was so blown away with the artwork and photographs and crazy paint colors all
> over the walls at RCA. I mean, one teacher had a beetle in her room (Volkswagen
> Bug) and Ron had this red button that made the lights go nuts with music playing.
> I thought I was doing some cool stuff in my classroom but seeing what they were
> doing really fired me up. I definitely understand more, it's like it just clicked and
> just seeing how well it really works for the kids. It's undeniable. You can't even
> say that this is not the way that kids learn best. (Ms. Ellington, interview)

As the school leader, I felt that this was perhaps the most beneficial training

opportunity for staff. Not just because they were able to see RCA in action, but because

it was a full growth experience that involved getting to leave town together, huddle

together in a tight van for five hours one way, and participate in an interactive training

together in Atlanta. The dinner conversation after the training and the van ride home

were jammed full of ideas. Teachers wanted to paint certain parts of the school. They

wanted to teach students how to write song lyrics similar to the way a science teacher

taught them at RCA, and I wanted to install a rock climbing wall in our new facility.

After all, Ron had a blue slide. Why couldn't I have a rock wall for our scholars?

The impact of that first staff trip cannot be overstated. Staff members continued

to talk about the experience of seeing Ron teaching in his classroom and recalling the

high expectations that were evident in each of the classrooms. The experience challenged

me to think even more creatively about how we wanted our new environment to look.

Since we had begun the Academy inside of an existing school, the opening year included

an opportunity to participate in a building program to establish our permanent home. We

had implemented various components similar to RCA but now we had a chance to create the physical environment that we desired as well. After that trip, our school leadership team decided that new staff members should participate in visiting the Ron Clark Academy during their first year, and we continue to plan an annual trip to Atlanta based on its value.

Ongoing professional learning community meetings. Another valuable experience that participants shared are the regular professional learning community meetings (PLC) that were held at the Academy. I established on day each week that staff would gather during planning periods to discuss best practices, review assessment data, and plan instructional and social projects for our scholars. I also chose to implement book studies during our regular PLC meetings. During my research of effective schools and visit to KIPP, I had come across Doug Lemov's book, *Teach Like a Champion*. Since the Academy had a strong focus on preparing students for college, his text seemed like a nicely aligned resourced for helping our teachers engage and challenge our students. Lemov's research essentially outlines forty-nine strategies that he asserts champion teachers regularly utilize in classrooms that achieve results. I decided to take that text and break it down into a weekly dialogue of how these strategies may integrate with what we were implementing at the Academy.

> I think I picked up bits and pieces that really stuck with me from that book. Like there was the entry routine strategy where it was talking about students lining up and you shaking their hands before they come in the door to provide structure. I think one of them was about putting like X's on the floor so when students leave the room looks exactly like it was when you walked in. I still use some of those strategies and reading through them with the rest of the staff helped us to all be on

the same page with what we were doing in our classrooms. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

I choses to share most of the strategies initially then asked other staff members to begin presenting. Staff would effectively model the strategy and provide opportunities for teachers to ask questions and share ideas about how to implement it in their own classroom. This process helped all staff to establish a common language regarding our instructional strategies at the Academy. Topics ranged from effective planning, to motivating and engaging students, to utilizing formative assessments to improve learning outcomes. Mr. Blackwood also viewed the book studies as a beneficial training experience and included some of the additional topics that were covered in our PLC meetings.

> During PLCs you would share strategies with us or give us an article piece on whatever we would be talking about. So, like we've done teach like a champion and we would walk through that text for a few months taking the best of those strategies to use for the Academy. I thought that was huge because that just gives extra resources for you to go and to unify the staff. Then, we read an article about how African-American males achieved and the rate of poverty that is happening in our country. Since most of our population is African-American and come from poverty it helped provide some fact and just allowed us to talk about what we were seeing in our classes. And just things like that really help because an educator help you always should be aware of the research that's around you, and also how you can, you know, bend into your daily lessons and make sure that you're giving this out to the kids and you're reaching them. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Dialogue during PLC meetings was received well by all staff members in the inaugural year of the Academy. After returning from RCA, I decided to implement a peer visitation process to give each of our classroom teachers and instructional support staff an opportunity to learn from one another and become accustomed to having visitors

in their classrooms. Building off the power of visiting the Ron Clark Academy and

teachers' willingness to share about instruction in their own classrooms, I schedule each

teacher on staff to observe two other classrooms for scheduled visitations. Teachers

knew when their visitors were coming and had an opportunity to plan their best

instruction and activities for the assigned observation. Afterwards, teachers were asked

to bring their observations to PLC meetings for sharing of best practices and other

reflections. Multiple teachers commented on the impact of this experience during their

interviews.

> We had a chance to participate in a professional development where we
> conducted classroom rounds to see what others were doing in their classrooms.
> That helped me to implement some additional innovative things in my classroom.
> (Anonymous Survey Response)

Ms. Jordan shared how this experience provided her with additional ideas that she

could implement in her classroom. As a first-year teacher, she was attempting to

establish a classroom management system while incorporating many of the innovative

practices that were witnessed at RCA, discussed in our PLC's, and incorporated into the

pillars of the Academy.

> I really enjoyed when we got to go and see other people's classrooms because
> before that I think it was a challenge not knowing what people were doing and not
> being able to support them because you just really have no idea what was going
> on. As far as people go coming in to see me teach, it's always good to get
> feedback from teachers that I respect and teachers that know a lot more about this
> than I do. I think you have to have a really good relationship with all people on
> staff in order for that to be a positive thing. You want people to come in who
> have your best interests at heart and want to see you do well so they can come in
> and they can give you feedback and you feel like yeah I'm going to fix that. So
> it's just really encouraging when you feel like you're not doing good enough and

you have another teacher come in and sit there and watch and participate in your lesson and they're like wow that was really impressive, that is like just a ton of motivation. It was really encouraging and when we went into other classrooms I picked up so many things from other people. Even if they were doing the same thing like number talks, like Mr. Felton does number talks, but he does them completely different. I didn't even think about a different way to do it and so it's always good to go into those in other classrooms and pick up new ideas. Overall, I just think it builds community, that's something really impacted me that first year. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

Peer visitation process. Participating in this activity helped teachers to build cohesion across the staff with honest, positive feedback about how others were doing in their classrooms. My experience is that teachers often feel that their instructional presentation is very personal and they can be easily offended if feedback from peers appears negative or is presented in a less than constructive manner. However, this process was intentionally created to be positive and the build confidence in both the hosting and visiting teacher. Mr. Blackwood also recognized the importance of this activity.

When you provided us opportunities during our planning to go and visit other classrooms and give feedback it was in a very non-threatening way. It was like, you know, this is what you are doing and it is awesome. How can I do this in my class or hey, I had a question about how you do this. It wasn't you're not doing this right and I think it helps our culture and the school climate. It creates this commonality among the staff and I think we've done a great job this year of being able to go into different classrooms and see what other people do and take from that. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Mrs. Perkins also recognized the benefit of the peer visitation experience. She indicated that teachers continued to participate in conversations about their visits and it

reinforced the previous staff development of working with Adam to receive feedback and

engage in dialogue.

> Something else that we did this year that I thought was really good, was allow the teachers to go and see other teachers in the building. Because while we do have open doors and while we do plan together, I think it's beneficial for them to see other people doing things, and I know that the conversations that took place after that, it was amazing. The 5th grade teachers were like, "Yeah, I want to do that." Then they went back and found a way that they could start doing some of that stuff in their 5th grade classroom, so I think that was good. That kind of goes along with the whole observation and the teaching and things like Adam did with us. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

Staff members were able to build off the strengths of other staff members through

this process as well. If a teacher were struggling to implement any particular aspect of

the Academy albeit use of music, movement and dance in the classroom, or the

leadership component, they could witness a strong staff member in action and adopt those

same strategies. Mrs. Jamison served as a mentor to a new teacher on staff and

recognized how powerful this experience was in his development.

> I think that we did a good job of being the family, being close and helping each other, wanting to see each other succeed and visiting classrooms, you know, we've always been encouraged to go and stop and visit classrooms. I love seeing teachers embracing their other coworkers as they come into the classrooms. I know that I was a mentor to a teacher and he was experiencing difficulty in his classroom. I told him who to go and visit. This is your best professional development that you could have. Go and visit these classrooms, they are doing amazing things in the classrooms. You won't believe what's happening if you don't ever go and visit. And he was able to go and you can mimic what other people are doing or make it your own. And I think that we are our own best professional development, you know, this is a phenomenal staff. (Mrs. Jamison, interview)

Ongoing dialogue with other teachers. As a participant in this journey, I recognized an increase in the amount of dialogue that teachers were having freely outside of PLC meetings. Teachers independently met during their planning to share ideas and talk through creative measures to teacher particular concepts. Relationships that were established early in the year during our staff development trainings and off campus excursions were nurtured and strengthened through a level of trust and collaboration that developed. Mr. May, a Year 2 staff member spoke about how his development was enhanced through ongoing dialogue with his colleagues at the Academy.

> Ultimately it was the staff that was here that helped me acclimate because I asked a million questions of Mr. Blackwood and Ms. Jordan and all those folks. So I always felt comfortable to come approach people. I felt comfortable to approach you, ask questions. I think it was more so those conversations then a specific training, it was those little interactions that you have a hundred of in a daytime that helped me acclimate to the program. (Mr. May, interview)

Another year two staff member, Ms. Scott, commented on the impact of having open dialogue with other teachers on staff. Staff members became accustomed to having an open door for others to visit at any time to get ideas, observe specific practices, or just interact as part of the lesson.

> My mentor has been huge. I know we're supposed to meet a certain amount of time, I know we exceeded that, in and out in my room. She would just come in sometimes to drop in and seeing me when I was teaching and talk to me about what she liked that I did. I wasn't use to that. She would offer some suggestions on what I can do next time to make things smoother. Also seeing Mr. Blackwood teach really helped me know what to do. I've seen how he interacts with our kids and relationships he's formed. His door is always open and I can go ask him any questions about just the way the school was run or just ideas that I had. He was so supportive and you were so supportive. It's like, sure try it, let's see what happens. Let's talk about it later. In the beginning we were kind of front loaded with all of

this stuff and just having Ms. McDuffie and having you, it was so helpful just to be able to have constant conversations and ask questions when I felt lost. I remember you guys telling me, we can give you all this stuff, but the best way to do it is just to do it and talk to us along the way. (Ms. Scott, interview)

Each of these training opportunities and experiences played a significant role in the process of creating and implementing the Academy. These trainings were deemed to be effective and were continued in subsequent years as new staff members were added during the Academy's expansion. Other activities became part of the school culture and also contributed to the implementation of the Academy's vision. The practices that follow are considered to be consistent occurrences at the Academy that staff assert are critical to daily operation and the positive culture that exists for scholars each day.

Morning Rally

During the planning phase of the Academy I was fortunate to visit a Freedom School training in Memphis, Tennessee. Our district planned to implement a Freedom School site on the campus of a local university as a summer program so I participated in the site visits and trainings for program coordinators. One of the most striking components of the program is referred to as "Harambee." This term is derived from the African language Kiswahili and is interpreted in English as "Let's Pull Together." Harambee is a gathering of students and staff in the Freedom School culture and consists of various rituals including the singing of the Hallelujah Chorus, the invitation of community readers, cheers and chants, and announcements.

Harambee's impact was critical in the success of Freedom School implementation. The training stressed the importance of offering Harambee daily and

incorporating those particular aspects as a way of developing the cultural norms that the program seeks to establish. In fact, witnessing Harambee in action moved me to include a variation of the program in the development of the Academy. Although it has been called multiple things (morning meeting, morning rally, pep it up meeting…), rally has become a significant practice at the Academy that staff, scholars, and parents identify as powerful and significant. One staff member wrote,

> Morning rally is also an effective part of our program. This allows students to obtain a leadership piece each and every day and I think that rally is a great part of our program. Our program offers an alternate to many scholars, and, in my opinion not only is it done well each day by the principal and staff, but the parents and community response speaks volumes. (Anonymous Survey Response)

Rally meets daily and includes the entire student population and all instructional and support staff. Scholars begin filtering in around 7:30 in the morning before buses arrive and all scholars are in rally position at 7:55. With this built into the master schedule, the planning team created a structure and listed various components that serves to guide the daily meeting. Figure 12 illustrates the framework for morning rally at the Academy.

Rally is planned with weekly themes and delivered to students and staff concurrently. Motivational videos, read alouds from inspirational text, and student performances all share the character education and leadership development concepts that we are seeking to instill in Academy members. Ms. Jordan recognized the importance of rally as a consistent practice at the Academy for both teachers and scholars.

Morning Rally@ the Academy

When scholars arrive on AJ Prep Academy campus at 7:40, they will be directed to the Rock Gym for morning rally. Scholars will have an opportunity to take part in select activities upon arrival until 7:55 when morning meeting officially begins. When directed, scholars will gather in Houses and prepare themselves for the day.

Purpose-

Scholars will participate in an informal time of sharing and connecting with Academy staff and other scholars. Morning meeting is energetic and positive and serves to create a culture of celebration each morning as scholars arrive. Energy and activity yields to focus and reflection before dismissal.

Rally Components-

- Read Aloud- Various staff members, scholars, and guests will provide a brief real aloud from a select story. If the reader is a guest, student leaders may introduce, provide opportunities for questions, and/or lead the audience in appropriate recognition of the guest.
- Cheers/Chants- Morning meeting involves energy and enthusiasm. Scholars may arrive to GOOD MORNING chant, take part in the GOOD JOB chant, or respond to the "Academy Call… How are you doing this morning?"
- Leadership Moment- As a leadership development school, each morning will consist of a brief leadership moment. This may be a story, discussion on a particular habit, or relevant video.
- Recognitions- Staff and scholars have opportunity to acknowledge the contributions or accomplishments of others in morning meeting. Anyone interested may announce… "I have a recognition" to which the audience would respond, "Recognize"!
- Pledge- Appropriate honor and respect through the pledge of allegiance or presentation of National Anthem.
- Leaders' Creed- "As a scholar at AJ Prep…"
- Moment of Silence- Scholars are challenged to reflect upon the day, set individual goals, and prepare themselves mentally to put forth their best effort.
- Announcements- Any information that needs to be shared before dismissal.

Opportunities for Scholar Leadership-

- Greeter
- Music coordinator
- Microphone runner
- Chant leader
- Wheel spinner

Impact-

- How does Morning Meeting serve to create the culture at AJ Prep?
- What aspects of Morning Rally would you change or add?

Figure 12. Framework for Morning Rally at the Academy.

I think Rally is always good but I think like the second half of the year (Year 1) Rally has just been like on point. I think it constantly is keeping those character pieces like just in their ear and so they're constantly hearing it, they constantly are knowing that's our expectation. Leader's creed even if it gets said every single day but they are hearing the vision of what we have for them every single day. It gives teachers something to refer back to that we know all the students have heard because obviously if we do something on our own in class, we don't know if every kid heard it. But with rally, it just builds a sense of unity and community with us all. I think it is just a good way to start the day for kids and teachers. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

Since rally is created to be interactive, I attempt to utilize students as much as possible in the planning and daily implementation. Students are able to write chants, modify announcements to present them in a way that will engage their peers, and lead spontaneous dances or choral responses during their time of sharing. Another teacher commented on how she believes students perceive rally and its overall impact.

I think rally is great, I think just the leadership lessons, it's like the counseling part of the day. It's the seed planting portion of the day where they all get it, and they all get it every day. The expectation is set for students and then it is held. Teachers and students know that the expectation is held tight, every single day. It's needed and you can't like not have it now. And then when it was switched up and they had gender based rally, they loved it. I mean they look forward to that just as much as they look forward to what is my teacher going to do today. I mean that's how school should be every day and it is with rally. (Ms. Worthy, interview)

In planning for rally, I attempt to incorporate the same innovative instructional strategies that teachers at the Academy are asked to utilize. I will often incorporate some type of technology and allow scholars to respond to polls. I will teach a cheer or chant, or use a musical selection to highlight the leadership concept for the day. I regularly involve other teachers and ask them to share stories or examples of the leadership

concept. Whatever the concept, we continue to cycle back through a list of expectations

that we believe are essential for success as a scholar leader at the Academy. Doing so

sets the stage for student learning and reinforces what teachers are doing in the

classroom. Mr. Blackwood refers to the impact on teachers.

> I think morning rally is a perfect example of what we do at Allen Jay on a daily basis. Because, you know, you always offer staff members an opportunity to be involved however they want to be. Whether it's with the game or staff challenge or if they want to lead, or if they want to do a book talk. And, so morning rally has this component of somebody is talking, scholars are tracking, and staff is supporting the structure by being right there with scholars. We've highlighted so many different things in the past two years of this program. That kids—I personally don't think would have gotten anywhere else. Um, and so just two years' worth of that on them is huge. And we're able to take that into our classroom. And I think the high energy of the staff challenges, and the house challenges carry over into the classroom. Also, saying the leader's creed to build that pride in to the school, and then of course the pledge of allegiance every single day to take honor into our country and that something that we're all very passionate about as well. But I think that 35 minutes is a glimpse into what happens on a daily basis. And I think that that shares the kids the vision for the what program really offers. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Rally also offers opportunities for teachers, staff, and scholars to connect and

build relationships on a daily basis. Staff is expected to be present as scholars begin

arriving at rally each morning. I stand and greet every scholar as they enter the building

and staff continue the greetings during the moments that scholars have to interact prior to

the official start time of rally. It's loud at the beginning of rally, the energy level is high,

music is playing and there are typically several videos that encourage dancing and

shouting in the moments prior to the opening greeting. This type of environment is non-

traditional in a middle school setting. During my fifteen years of administrative

experience, I have come to realize that most educators feel very uncomfortable in such a

setting due to the chaotic nature of high numbers of students with limited control by staff.

But it works. Scholars are hype, teachers are right there with them, but with a call on the

microphone, the entire auditorium will be seated and ready for rally to begin within thirty

seconds. One veteran staff member addresses the significance of this daily practice.

> Well, I personally think rally is a very important component because it gets
> everybody on the same page at the very beginning of the day. It's not just an
> announcement that comes on the intercom. It's not just a teacher making
> announcements and telling kids things in the classroom. Everybody hears it from
> the same source, and the leadership lesson I think is so important because, I mean,
> I know personally when you teach something, the leadership lesson that goes on
> in rally, that when I go into a classroom to teach or assist, I try my best to work in
> that leadership lesson. I've seen teachers doing that too. It puts everybody on the
> same page, and it is that constant push so that what we think is important is
> conveyed to everybody at the same time in the same way. I think we're all on the
> same page too. I think rally is critical to what we're doing. (Mrs. Perkins,
> interview)

Teachers expressed a sense of satisfaction when asked about the practice of rally.

As the school leaders, it provides me an opportunity to personally greet them each

morning. They also have a few minutes to connect with other staff members and discuss

lessons, activities, or just chat with staff they may not see regularly during the day due to

schedules or assigned locations in the building. A Year 2 teacher was invited to visit the

Academy before she accepted the position and noticed the significance of rally on her

initial visit.

> I mean from a teacher's standard I think rally is huge because it gives as an
> opportunity to see all the kids in their social setting. We like to see our students
> and how they are like with some freedom around their peers. When I stepped in
> the rally the first time I could really tell how different the school was because
> other staff were hanging out with kids and each other and the relationships were
> obvious. It's really engaging and fun and it makes you want to show up for work

because you get that time with your kids and other staff. For the kids and the vision of the school, I think rally is hugely important because the leadership lessons that we teach are major, like these are things that you strived for and truly believed in as an adult. We teach them how to be successful and how to grow as leaders. We want to obviously breed success here and have a good wholesome class of kids. I think those lessons are top notch and I know for most of our kids it really sinks in. Also just giving them leadership opportunities in rally to volunteer with leader's creed, or to stand up and say the pledge, or hold the microphone in their hand and give a recognition, or to join the (student news team) and have to speak and address the crowd, those things grow kids. And I think it is what makes us so great plus it's a stoked way to come in at school every day. They run off the bus and are like, yeah, we're ready to go. (Ms. Ellington, interview)

Another Year 2 staff member who initially had some concerns about being able to manage the high-energy instruction and student-led activities with the necessary structure to be successful commented on how rally assisted him in his own classroom.

I believe the Rally kind of sets the tone for the entire day, so I try to take whatever the learning is from Rally leadership moment and apply it the rest of the day and keep talking about that. You guys remember what Mr. Wheat said in Rally today. How does this apply here? So having that and seeing the little bit of the crazy, the high energy accompanied with a leadership very serious moment where we're actually coming back from high energy to we're all tracking we're all listening, seeing that that's exactly what we need to do in the classroom. So extremely important so usually really cool to see that. (Mr. May, interview)

Leaders' Creed

Another practice that teachers and staff considered significant is the daily presentation of Leader's Creed. During the initial year of implementation, staff were busy teaching a variety of leadership components and characteristics. I provided regular instruction on the 7 Habits as described in the Leader in Me program, we taught leadership lessons using the cornerstones of good character that were adopted by our

district. We also utilized a high number of guest speakers to share their stories about leadership through their athletic careers, musical talents, and other experiences. I approached staff with the idea of creating a creed that we could utilize to share what we believe about leadership at the Academy. Doing so would unify our understanding of what we are hoping to accomplish and clarify our presentation of those concepts to guests and prospective families. One staff members stepped up and volunteered to work with me on the creation of our Leader's Creed.

Mrs. Scott worked with me at a previous school and is a high flyer in the classroom and across the school. The two of us met for about thirty minutes one afternoon and hashed out some core concepts that we knew had to be included in this proclamation of leadership. She was insistent on a reference to elevating oneself and the civic responsibility of elevating others. I was steadfast on a component of service being represented in the creed. It did not take long. After a few revisions, we presented the staff with the Academy's Leader's Creed (see Figure 13).

Mrs. Scott noted,

> I love seeing kids get up in front of rally and recite leader's creed every morning. All the other scholars are just dialed in on them and they are silently saying it along with them almost like they are encouraging that kid who was selected to say it. It is great for teachers too because we get to refer back to it every time we need to reference something about leadership or intervene in a situation. We all know it by hear and use it almost every day. But saying it in rally as we close out the lesson, that is really important to what we do every day. (Mrs. Scott, interview)
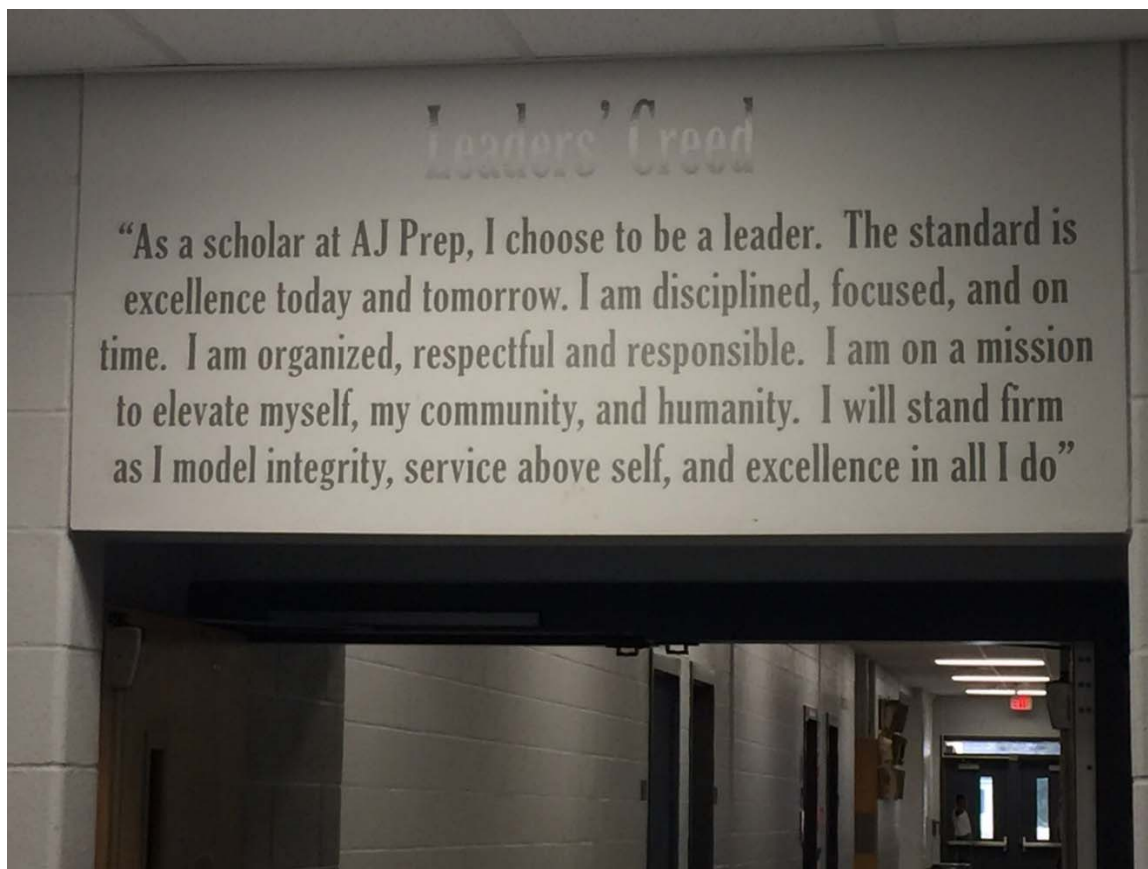
Figure 13. Leader's Creed as Represented on the Header as You Enter a Core

Instructional Hall at the Academy.

I recognized the significance of Leader's Creed quickly and moved to capitalize

on its power. We gave out t-shirts the next month to every scholar with our leadership

statement printed across the back. I created new promotional boards for upcoming

magnet events and had the creed embedded in pictures of our students engaged in

learning. Each time we have parents in the building, we always begin the presentation

with a scholar reciting the creed while projecting it behind them. There is no shortage of

volunteers to share Leader's Creed either. Scholars are consistently asking me when they

arrive each morning if they can share the creed in rally, another indicator of the power of this particular practice.

Proactive Energy and Enthusiasm

If you visit the Academy, you are likely to comment on the level of enthusiasm evident in both scholars and staff. Teachers and staff members indicate that this level of energy, displayed both orally and through movement, is an essential practice in the program. Our framework for excellence uses terms such as passion, engagement, and energetic educators to describe our commitment to enthusiasm. Our belief is that engagement is critical to student learning and it is most likely to occur when teachers display a high level of enthusiasm in their instructional presentation. In turn, scholars are asked to return that level of energy in their cheers, songs, and classroom work.

Participants describe how this energy impacts the students and staff.

I think that the innovative and high-energy instruction model has been not only taught well, but implemented well throughout the building. The enthusiasm of the Academy staff is what drives scholars to buy in as well. They love the positive encouragement and the teamwork shown all over campus. (Anonymous Survey Response)

Another staff member indicates, "We use energetic songs that involve content information to give scholars a life-long connection to the content and it gives those with different learning styles an opportunity to learn in a different way" (Anonymous Survey Response).

Students enjoy the use of music in the classroom and project based learning opportunities that are utilized regularly in the Academy. These strategies raise the level

of engagement and are also responsive to the cultural experiences of our students. Ms.

Ellington describes what that level of energy and enthusiasm looks like in the classroom.

> Well you trust us to make the executive decisions as teachers on things that we need to do with the curriculum to engage kids. We are obviously teaching the core curriculum and using those standards and making standard base lessons but were not having the kids sit and read textbooks and do worksheets. Instead we make sure that we are using and teaching the standards but we are doing outstanding things like hands on learning and building moments and experiences rather than just drilling information into their heads. When my kids can be taught through the music and movement, they just latch on completely. (Ms. Ellington, interview)

It is not out of the ordinary to hear students singing as you walk down the hall of

the Academy. Scholars regularly participate in scavenger hunts across campus, use

tablets to take pictures for slide presentations, make music videos, and participate in

outdoor learning experiences as a means of enthusiastic instruction. When I provide

lesson plan feedback or conduct post observation conferences with teachers, we regularly

discuss ideas on how to bring a higher level of enthusiasm into the classroom in order to

more effectively engage scholars.

Staff Selection Processes

Not all practicing educators are comfortable with this high level of enthusiasm. In

fact, teachers at the Academy recognize the need for recruiting and retaining talented

staff who can deliver this level of energy on a consistent basis. Mr. May recognized that

certain skills and a high level of commitment are necessary to be a successful teacher at

the Academy.

> Staff selection is critical and not anyone can do it. I don't know that I can write you a list of everything that they would have to have to be able to do here but they have to be able to be flexible. They have to be able to be able to work with others, they have to be able to feel comfortable looking silly and open to try new things. If you are a person that rely on the same lessons every year because it always worked and you don't want to try something new, then you're not the person to be here. You've got to be able to try something else. It might not work but just try and see what happens and be open to these kind of things. So ultimately it's very important to have the right fit. That's a challenge to be able to get that impression from the interview or brief visits with people. (Mr. May, interview)

It certainly is a challenge to discern an individual's full potential only from an interview. One practice that I implanted at the Academy to ensure that we were selecting the correct applicants for the position was to visit prospective teachers in their current classrooms. This made some teachers a bit uneasy because they had to notify their current principal that they had a visitor from another school coming to watch them teach. Some also felt anxious like they were auditioning for a position in an upcoming performance. However, I found it to be an excellent means of determining the skills and dispositions of applicants by watching them teach and interact with students in their own classrooms. I regularly took Academy staff with me on these visits and discussed our observations to determine who to invite to the next level of candidate consideration. Mrs. Perkins reflected on her experience in visiting prospective teachers.

> Before candidates even made it to the process to be interviewed, we were able to watch them teach and know whether they had characteristics that would match what we were looking for. They had to show some innovative instruction and some great energy in their classroom. I think that was a good thing. Once we saw the right people and got them on board, we were able to blend all that talent together and help each teacher use their skills to be innovative at the Academy. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

Each year the Academy expanded, I continued the practice of visiting prospective teachers in their current classrooms. Often I would leave a note of appreciation for the opportunity to observe and wish them the best of luck because they simply did not have the characteristics that were searching for at the Academy. But for every fifteen or so that I visited, I was able to find that one that had the "it" factor. They were full of energy, they knew their content, they engaged students with a variety of techniques, and demonstrated relationships that were healthy and positive with their students. The careful selection of incoming staff remains a critical practice to ensure success at the Academy.

The "Best First Day of School" Campaign

In one of our earliest trainings with Year 1 staff, I challenged them to think differently about how school could be. We discussed ways that we could make an immediate statement to students when they stepped off the school bus on day one that let them know the Academy was a different place. It is a place that is exciting, full of life, and only about two notches shy of crazy! In order to accomplish this our staff decided to implement a "best first day of school ever" campaign for our scholars. We only had a few days to pull of our initial idea but we landed on a red carpet theme. We notified all parents to tell students to wear sunglasses on the first day of school and come ready! We had a staff member serving as a photographer, media reporter, and DJ as students approached the red carpet leading into the school. Mr. Blackwood reflects on the impact of the first day of school in its opening year.

> I remember our planning discussion about the first day of school and how we wanted to make it the best thing that these kids have every experienced. It just started with an idea about what we wanted school to be and teachers started

coming up with great ideas that were over the top. We bought these Oscar award statues and put them on the sidewalk, teachers were wearing sunglasses and cheering as kids walked the red carpet, we had a DJ and someone was interviewing the kids. It was great! (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

This campaign caught significant attention and parents commented heavily on how excited their students were when they came home from school on the first day. Teachers believe that this simple innovative strategy served to establish the culture of the Academy. Ms. Ellington joined the Academy before the start of the second year and took part in planning the first day of school in year two.

I think one of the coolest things here is the way the staff will go above and beyond to make the first day of school and absolute blast. I remember my first year here was the Mardi Gras theme and everyone had on beads with masks and crazy clothes. When the kids got off the bus they were totally blown away. They loved seeing their teachers in such a positive way and I remember playing games with them as they arrived. That spill over into the classroom and it builds excitement about what else we are going to do or what the first day is going to look like next year. (Ms. Ellington, interview)

Figure 14. Scholar Arrives on Red Carpet for Best First Day of School Ever!

In an attempt to go bigger and better each year, the leadership team at the Academy decided take every student off campus on day one the following year to a local trampoline park. As principal of the school, I recognize this significance of this practice and the impact it has on the innovative reputation of the school. Parents regularly ask me what the next first day will look like and share additional ideas about taking our efforts to the next level.

Figure 15. Principal Wheat and Year 2 Staff Welcome Scholars for First Day of School Battle of the Bands.

Regular Field Trips

Another practice that participants noted as significant is the regular use of field trips at the Academy. During the opening year, scholars had an opportunity to visit four

local universities, attend various plays off campus, travel to musicals and plays and visit historic venues. The project team discussed the utilization of frequent field trips as a strategy to expose scholars to additional real world experiences and broaden their awareness of the communities they live in. To date, scholars have visited twelve colleges and universities. They have traveled to Washington, DC, Atlanta, Charleston, and Charlotte. Each of these trips included the opportunity to visit historic landmarks, experience the culture of the city, and take part in experiential learning opportunities.

Mr. May, a Year 2 staff member, commented on the impact that field trips had on his ability to engage with scholars. "I came from a school where field trips didn't really happen. We started taking trips almost the first month that we were in school at the Academy and that gave me a chance to bond with my scholars early in the year" (Mr. May, interview). Building those relationships with scholars is an important aspect in developing a strong and positive school culture. Not only do field trips give our staff important opportunities to bond with students, they also provided experiences that a large percentage of our students have never been afforded. Mr. Blackwood addresses this sentiment in his interview.

> I've always believed that once you take a kid outside of the school building that's where learning really happens. In the first two years we took those kids to DC and Charleston and those have been pivotal moments in their life because up to that point, I don't think most of our kids had ever been outside of the city. Seeing our students experience the changing of the guard at Arlington or climb on the battleship in Charleston, man that was cool to see how engaged they were in the stuff that we were trying to teach them. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Students within the Academy bond with others as a result of these trips as well. Mr. Noel is a Year 2 staff member who commented on the relational impact of field trips at the Academy. "When we took those kids to Piney Lake, they were doing a lot of team building activities and didn't even know it. They were working together to cross the high ropes, helping each other with harnesses, and lifting each other up. I saw a lot of relationships form during that trip that continued when we got back to the building" (Mr. Noel, interview). See Figure 16.

Figure 16. Scholars Bond at Piney Lake Experiential Learning Campus.

The Academy continues to utilize multiple field trips each year to provide social and academic experiences for scholars. Since many of our families would experience

tremendous hardship if asked to fund these trips, donors provide scholarships and make these opportunities available to scholars. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) at the Academy also assists with various fundraisers and allows scholars to earn dollars directly to their individual field trip account. Although off campus trips require scholars to miss instructional time in the classroom, the school leadership team consistently advocates for continuing this practice of creating learning opportunities for scholars through field trips.

Enhanced Physical Environment

When you enter the Academy's front doors, you are greeted by two large, full-bodied stickers of scholars from the first cohort. These images are bright and welcoming to guests and visitors. The visual representation of the school culture does not stop at the front entrance. Instead, you will notice artwork and images throughout the entire facility. The practice of decorating the facility is intentional and began with the opening of the Academy. The project team and initial staff members wanted scholars to be inspired by the physical environment of their school. Although we began the Academy in a small hallway with only a few classrooms inside an existing school, we wanted to ensure that it was unique and any visitor clearly recognized when they were entering the Academy.

To begin this process, I spent several days visiting costume shops, picking up furniture from our district's warehouse, and searching for unique artifacts that would create a model classroom for teachers to experience. I asked our district maintenance team to paint my classrooms yellow, green, and bright red. Although they typically did not honor these types of requests, the project team supported this initiative so the color went on the walls. When staff arrived for our opening meeting, they entered a classroom

with funny mirrors, a ticket booth, and various circus animal artifacts with a bulletin

board that read, "Welcome to the Greatest Show on Earth." I challenged staff to create

their own them for their classroom and gave them a $300 budget to pull it off.

Figure 17. Model Classroom Designed to Challenge Staff to Decorate the Facility.

Ms. Jordan commented on the impact of decorating the facility at the Academy.

Since her first year, she has helped to design multiple other teachers' classroom spaces

and assisted with school common area decoration as well.

> I was so excited when you told us that we could decorate our classroom walls and paint using different colors. I spent hours painting a treasure map on my wall. It was great to be able to go shop for creative things to put in my classroom. Mrs. Perkins helped me make all those flags that I strung across my ceiling and you helped me build that pirate ship out of the stage in my room. And all of that goes into instruction. You can't have a boring classroom in a room that just so inviting and engaging. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

The Streetcar. Mr. Blackwood taught language arts during the opening year of the Academy. He asked for one of the coolest artifacts that I had purchased from a local party store vendor. "The Streetcar," as it came to be called, was a large wooden structure that was previously used as a photo booth prop (see Figure 18). He and I worked to place that large, rickety structure into his classroom and he transformed it into an independent reading zone for kids. "My kids loved that streetcar! Some of my most reluctant readers beg me to let them get in the streetcar to fill out their reading log." (Mr. Blackwood)

Figure 18. Mr. Blackwood and a Board of Education Member Enjoy a Moment in the Streetcar Used as an Independent Reading Area.

Rock climbing wall. The rock wall is an indicator of challenge and support at the

Academy. Scholars are challenged on their first day of arrival to strap in and attempt the

conquer the wall (see Figure 19). Although very few are able to accomplish this task,

staff members cheer their efforts and remind them that multiple opportunities are

provided throughout the year to meet this challenge.

Figure 19. Rock Climbing Wall Installed at the Academy.

Adding the rock climbing wall was not easy. First I had to convince one of our

largest donors to allow me to utilize a substantial amount of his money to purchase and

install something that was clearly not directly tied to instruction. After receiving his

blessing, I had to overcome the challenge of getting my board of education to approve the

expenditure even though it was against the guidance of our insurance provider. I

developed a student waiver, signed an agreement indicating that I would adequately train

all staff and monitor all users, and contracted with a local extreme sports vendor to obtain

yearly inspections to verify safety. The impact of the wall is significant from my

perspective. Although it falls in the same category of decorating the facility, I see it as a

far greater indicator of the overall innovative nature of the Academy.

Leadership Lane. The final physical feature of the Academy that is worthy of

noting is the area of the facility known as Leadership Lane (see Figure 20). When I

walked the facility with contractors, I tried to envision the way that students would travel

to classrooms and how certain spaces could be used as canvases to express our themes.

One corridor stood out as an area that something significant could be displayed. I

contacted a local artist and shared an idea about honoring some of the world's greatest

leaders through portraits in this area. Again, I approached my donor who graciously

approved for another significant financial expenditure but the outcome is phenomenal.

> I think leadership lane is the coolest place on campus. Kids travel through there
> every day and look at those murals and read all the quotes. It just gives our
> school a museum-type feel and reminds scholars of what we are trying to do here.
> That picture of Dr. King standing at the Lincoln Memorial just makes me stop and
> stare even though I walk by it multiple times every day. We have so many great
> murals, pictures, and works of art hanging in the building. It's just a great place
> for kids to go to school and learn. (Mr. Felton, interview)

Mr. Noel visited the Academy during its opening year and transitioned to the staff

as a Year 2 member. He assisted with the physical move from the first facility to the new

building that was renovated and ready for occupation the summer prior to the second

year. He noted the impact of the decoration of the physical environment at the new

facility.

> One of the big components this year was the new facility and going from a site last year where we shared a space to having our own space has freed us up even more to be creative. I also think it has added a sense of pride and ownership among both the kids and the staff and they recognize that this is home for the Academy now. When people come in to visit us they always comment on how unique and creative the hallways and classrooms are. And when they see the rock climbing wall in the gym that are just blown away that a school could have something like that. (Mr. Noel, interview)

Figure 20. Leadership Lane Corridor at the Academy.

Visitation day. One final practice that participating staff identify as significant is visitation day. There was a great deal of hype about the opening of the Academy from district officials and donors. They were eager to see what type of learning environment was created and how scholars were responding to the instructional presentation. After just a few weeks into the first year, our district superintendent notified me that he would be bringing a team of cabinet members along with one of our largest donors for a visit and tour. This provided our staff with a tremendous opportunity to highlight some of the great things that were happening at the Academy. From this visit came another. Then another. Then requests from other teachers and districts. The result was Visitation Day, a phrase commonly used among Academy staff to describe a day when guests of all types get to observe rally, tour the facility and visit classrooms.

> I like visitation days for a couple of reasons. Number one, it gives the kids a chance to show what they've been learning and how we're different. It also gives them the opportunity to get up in front of somebody that they don't know and share about the school. A lot of kids have stepped out of their comfort zones, and we've really seen them come out of their shell I think because of the opportunity that comes with having visitors. The other reason I think they are important is because it gets our vision out to other people, and it allows people to see what we are all about. They are not just hearing about the Academy, they can come and see. Then that gets what we are trying to do out so that maybe some of the things we are doing good for kids can go beyond our walls and boundaries. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

Ms. Worthy also described visitation days as something that is beneficial for the students at the Academy. She also indicated that allowing visitors to see what is happening has a positive impact on the community's support of the program.

I think that having visitors in our building is good for community buy in. It is also good for student to put into practice all the things they've learned like knowing how to introduce themselves to someone that they have never met before. They also need to know how to articulate what they are learning in the classroom. When visitors come in the room it gives our kids a chance to show that they know what they are learning and they can articulate that learning and give it to someone else. (Ms. Worthy, interview)

Visitation days also have an impact on the participating staff. As a team, we discussed that it requires a great deal of courage to open your classroom doors to a group of strangers and allow them to see you and your work. Teaching is very personal and is a form of art and many teachers can be quite apprehensive about allowing others to observe them at their craft.

I love visitation day. It's just cool to turn things over to the kids and give them opportunities to interact with adults outside of Academy staff. As a teacher it allows you to see all of your hard work in action in just five minutes. I think the kids really enjoy having visitors in our classrooms also. I've had really positive things from other teachers and visitors that have come in. They sometimes will leave me notes in my box asking for different resources or ideas on how to incorporate some music or songs into their lessons. It really feels good to get that feedback from people you don't even know and have a chance to share stuff with other people. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

Another teacher also commented on the impact of having other people visit your classroom to observe what you are doing with kids.

It is powerful because it humbles you to know like wow, these people really like what we are doing and want to learn how to do it. It makes you realize how unique we are and it makes kids really excited as well. They realize that something special is happening here with all these visitors coming to shake their hands and watch them in class. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Figure 21. First Visitation Day with Donors and District Leaders.

The social worker at the Academy also recognized the significance of visitation days. He carries multiple roles but one of which is to help ensure that the vision for the Academy is shared with families of students who may be interested in attending in the upcoming years.

> Visitation has been one of the most significant pieces of the program. In the sense that, some people hear about the Academy and they hear the songs and the chants and they are kind of reluctant to engage in that. But once they come in and they experience scholars speaking to them the way and adult would speak to them, it makes them really believe and want that for their kid. Visitation in itself has been a key factor in us attaining the membership or enrollment number that we need to hit each year. When it comes to getting the word out, and people actually seeing that it can be done and it is not a dog and pony show but it's actually real. And they can see that we do have scholars that struggle in the classroom. But visitors also see how we work with our scholars and give them what they need to be successful. (Mr. Vince, interview).

Figure 22. Visitation Day with Then NC Attorney General Roy Cooper.

These practices have been consistently implemented since the Academy opened. Each summer the school leadership team reviews each of them and determines if any changes or tweaks need to be made in order to increase their effectiveness. Although the Academy has experienced tremendous success in both academic and social growth with regard to student performance, there are many factors that staff identified as challenging during the inaugural and second year of operation.

Challenges and Obstacles Encountered

Although the project team was strategic in making sure that involvement from correct stakeholders was secured, the Academy encountered a variety of challenges

during the creation and implementation phases of the program. These challenges

included:

- o Balancing engagement and instruction

- o Lack of proficiency in engagement strategies

- o Scholar resistance

- o Staff frustration with slow progress

- o Student transportation challenges

- o Parent involvement challenges

- o The Paycheck System

- o Demands on staff

- o Finding committed staff, and

- o Financial sustainability.

Some of these challenges were foreseeable and others were surprising to me as the school

leader. Several of the challenges were unknown to the instructional and support staff

primarily because I addressed them with our district's regional support team. However,

participants were asked to reflect on the challenges that they experienced during their

effort to effectively implement the vision of the Academy.

Academic and Social

Balancing engagement and instruction. The expectation for engaging

instruction is clearly communicated to all staff and is evident in a variety of ways at the

Academy. Classroom engagement can be enhanced through the use of music,

technology, storytelling, or other instructional strategies (see Figure 23). Several

participants indicated a challenge in balancing the expectation for high level engagement

with an adequate level of instruction to meet the academic needs of our students.

> My initial challenge was I think balancing instruction and engagement with like the songs and cheers component. I wasn't sure what the balance was supposed to be, how much time I should be spending with teaching through song and how much I should have direct instruction. I felt like when the first year started I tried to go really heavy on building the culture that we were looking for and I used a lot of cheers and chants and songs in my class but then I felt like I was falling really behind on the instructional side of things. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

Figure 23. Scholars Engaged in Content Song Performance in Classroom.

Lack of proficiency in engagement strategies. Other teachers indicated similar challenges such as not feeling competent with the use of some engagement strategies. Song writing is used at a relatively high level among Academy teachers but not all felt as though they were effective with this strategy.

> I'm not a gifted song writer. So I always felt like I wasn't pulling my weight in that regard so I tried to do little things. I ended up learning more of the cheers and chants and other call and response strategies in my class. I just didn't feel really confident and I knew that was something that we were really trying to do here. I asked Mr. Blackwood to send me some of his students that he taught last year and they actually taught my kids some songs in my class so that was cool. But there are ways around those things that make you uncomfortable. (Mr. May, interview)

Scholar resistance. Some staff also reported that some scholars were initially resistant to the strategies and expectations that staff had for them. We ask our scholars to operate by a set of All-Star Expectations that include elements of good character such as holding doors for other people and using mam and sir when responding to an adult.

> We are trying to help these kids really understand how to stand out and be a leader but some of them still struggle with the consistency of doing things like standing up to speak or use yes mam when answering a teacher. They come from a lot of different backgrounds so not all of them are accustomed to the level of expectations that we are challenging them with but I know they can get it. (Mr. Vince, interview)

Staff frustration with slow progress. There was a sense among staff that all scholars should be immediately responsive to the level of expectations in and out of the classroom. After all, the school was designed to be engaging, to let kids have some fun and freedom, and in response to that all kids should come our way and gobble the

academic lessons and leadership characteristics that we are teaching them. One of my

strongest student advocates recognized this and addressed this feeling of disappointment

that was expressed by staff.

> I think the knee-jerk reaction is to say that with all that we are doing for these kids, taking them on field trips, giving them opportunities to beat on drums in the classroom, letting them dance on tables… You know, all the things kids say they want to do in school. But when it comes down to it, they are still just kids. And I think that sometimes, we forget that through it all, these are just kids and that can get kind of frustrating for some people at times. You want the kids to always be successful but not all of them are going to grow at the same rate and we have to allow them to be kids. (Mrs. Jamison, interview)

Another staff member reflected on his frustration that some of the scholars were

slow in adopting many of the rigorous expectations that we have set for them in and out

of the classroom.

> I can be frustrating on some days but at the end of the day, I think back to what you said to me last year when one of our kids was not coming around. This is a four-year program for a lot of our kids. They may not socially change from the way they were in fifth grade until their eighth-grade year. It might take four years to really get them where they need to be. That can be frustrating but at the same time, it's what keeps bringing you back in the building because you want to work for that change. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Implementation Challenges

Student transportation challenges. The Academy promises a lot for scholars

and families. Scholars should expect their teachers to bring a high level of energy each

day. Families are provided with door to door transportation despite where they may live

in relation to the Academy. Scholars have opportunities to earn blazers through our

school positive behavior support program and scholars and families are supported

financially through universal free breakfast, lunch, and snack programs and scholarships

for those in need of assistance with field trips or other school fees. Each of these

provisions are quite lofty when written or communicated orally but even greater when it

comes to implementation. Following are some key areas that have presented challenges

to the staff in attempt to bring the vision of the Academy to life.

Approximately 85% of scholars attending the Academy utilize bus transportation

to and from school. Scholars may live anywhere in the district and be approved for this

transportation in a manner that does not include the use of hubs or sharing of buses with

other schools. This causes many of our scholars to have bus rides in excess of ninety

minutes per day. The Academy school social worker identified this issue as significant

when speaking with parents.

> They ask me about how it will impact their kid being on the bus one or two hours
> in the morning before school and then again in the afternoon. That's a long time
> for anyone to be on the bus especially a 10- or 11-year-old kid. (Mr. Vince,
> interview)

Although it is identified as a challenge, we have never had a family leave the

Academy due to concerns with long bus rides. Mr. May indicated the same,

> I would think I would get more complaints because I had some kids in my class
> that had 90-minute bus rides. And I even said to those kids you are bus that long,
> yeah, and they never complained about it so that's a testament to the program
> right there. (Mr. May, interview)

Parent involvement challenges. The long bus rides are indicative of families living a significant distance from the school. This geographic distance has created a challenge of achieving high level parental involvement across the Academy's families.

> At my previous school everyone lived right in the community. I felt like I had much closer relationship with the kids and their parents because I was with them all day long plus with their parents. I visited parents quite often in the neighborhood and I would go to their football games and baseball games because everyone was right there. (Mr. May, interview)

Other participants also commented on the distance created challenge of getting parents involved at a high level. The Academy also established a parent commitment form that requested volunteer hours at the school and participation in daytime and evening parent opportunities. Those expectations have not been achieved and staff has struggled with ways to hold parents accountable for meeting them.

> When we were planning the school I wanted this program to be a huge rally of parents that are at the school regularly. At first I thought that they just wanted their kids to have all these advantages but didn't want the additional commitment on their part, but the more I get to know our families they are just not able to get to the school as much as we would like, or they are working two jobs, or they don't have good transportation. (Ms. Jordan, interview)

Mrs. Perkins serves as the Academy's Title 1 coordinator and works to provide parental involvement opportunities that are valuable. She recommends that the school think of ways to do a better job of communicating those expectations to families at the beginning of the year instead of just sending home the parental contract to be signed. She also recognizes the distance factor and is considering ways to overcome this challenge.

I do think it prevents them sometimes from coming out. I know we've tried hard this year to do things at different times in the evening and keep kids after school so they don't have to go home on the bus and then come back out to school with their parents. As far as parents being involved, I think if they do have to drive to get here then we need to have things that make it worth their while like provide them with dinner and include a scholar performance or presentation. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

The paycheck system. The school paycheck system was designed to provide

scholars with important feedback on their academic and social behavior and to keep

parents informed of their student's daily performance. Adopted from the KIPP model,

the Academy refers to this as the Scholar Dollar Paycheck and trains teachers at the

beginning of the year about how to utilize the incentive based system in their classroom.

Teachers have flexibility to give or deduct up to five scholar dollars for any given

interaction, positive or negative. Scholars bank their dollars at the end of each week and

receive a paystub indicating their progress for parents to review. Scholar dollar averages

are used to provide special recognitions at the end of the quarter and are factored into

qualifications for earning an Academy blazer. Multiple staff members commented about

the implementation of the Scholar Dollar Paycheck on the survey.

I think scholar dollars have the potential to be great. We just have to all get on the same page for how many we give to kids for certain things or how many we take. It doesn't really work if I take $2 for a kid being disrespectful to a staff member but someone else gives that same kid $5 for answering a question correctly in class. (Anonymous Survey Response)

Another staff member wrote, "I think the scholar dollar system is a bit hazy

among staff members. We should go back over how to use it so we can be on the same

page." (Anonymous Survey Response). One staff member indicated in her interview that

the system is burdensome to implement for classroom teachers. "If we could find a way to make the paycheck system electronic, that would be so helpful. I teach about 50 kids and that's a lot of paychecks to write on and tally up at the end of the week" (Ms. Ellington). The implementation of the paycheck system does require a significant amount of time and consistency. As the staff grows in consecutive years, it is essential that training is provided and all staff members can remain clear on the purpose and implementation expectations of the program if it is to remain successful.

Demands on staff. Teaching at the Academy requires a high level of knowledge, specific skills, and disposition that is determined to see young people be successful at any costs. It is also extremely demanding. Participants noted that keeping the energy level high is a challenge among staff. As a participant and leader of the Academy, I certainly agree. Teaching rally each day, responding to the needs of the district leaders, communicating effectively with our parents, and striving to serve our teachers at a high level can be extremely demanding. One staff member's survey response indicated the same. "Maintaining enthusiasm with the Academy teaching style can be challenging. You don't always feel like walking on a table or doing a chant with your kids but you have to bring it every day" (Anonymous Survey Response). Another teacher commented,

> It is a demanding program and you have to be very committed in order to be successful here. I come on the weekends to try to get ready for all the activities that will occur in the upcoming week. I find myself in the evenings searching for additional resources and even writing little rhymes for my kids because we want to be innovative and I want every lesson to be great. That can take a lot out of you and you have to be able to handle that type of challenge. (Ms. Worthy, interview)

Finding committed staff. Finding teachers who can commit at that level can be challenging as well. When conducting interviews or visiting teachers who are interested in the Academy, I try to ascertain the level of commitment that individuals have at their current school. I also attempt to share the vision for the school and have current Academy teachers share their experiences and level of involvement.

Financial sustainability. A final challenge that surfaced during the implementation of the Academy is establishing a recurring budget to sustain the innovative strategies that the Academy utilizes. Although very few participants made any reference to budget in their interviews or survey responses, I certainly recognize financial sustainability as a challenge to the Academy. As indicated earlier, the Academy was fortunate to receive substantial contributions from philanthropists who identified their donations as seed capital, or dollars to be used to establish an initiative, but not to sustain it. Over the past two years, I have worked with each of them to express the Academy's desire to continue growing and serving scholars and families at a high level. Although much in favor of the progress and accolades the Academy has received, securing additional funding was not successful.

Recognizing that many of the practices identified as significant above require recurring funding, I reached out to our district to seek assistance in replacing those dollars lost from donor contributions. One significant expense was the additional salaries that were provided to teachers for working additional days and hours throughout the year. If this component of the Academy is to be maintained, the district will need to provide compensation to a growing number of teachers since the Academy is growing in size up

to a capacity of 400 scholars in grades five through eight. Fortunately, district officials

recognized the value in the extended year and extended day model at the Academy and

wrote those salary dollars into its operating budget at the end of the second year.

Pivotal Moments

Sticky Note Activity

Study participants identified several key experiences that had a significant impact

on the creation and implementation of the Academy. Some of these moments occurred as

a result of planned opportunities for staff to learn and grow through interactions with

others while some occurred unexpectedly. About half way through the first year I

recognized that teachers were struggling some with the balancing of instruction and high

engaging songs and chants. Further, they seemed to be overwhelmed with the multiple

activities and additional initiatives that we were pursuing at the Academy. I capitalized

on a teacher workday to structure a time for staff to discuss our current progress and

goals for the remainder of the year. I began the meeting by acknowledging my

observations of teachers' feelings of challenge and frustration with the previously

mentioned program elements. I then challenged each of them to take as many sticky

notes as need and record an element of the Academy that they were currently

implementing or assisting with. In my own interview, I described this activity:

> I remember the semester break at the first year, call a staff meeting and we came
> and I just had them, with sticky notes write what we're doing. List of things that
> you are currently trying to do in your classroom and there were over like 100
> things that those non-staff members generated, you know, that they were just
> putting sticky notes together. And so what we did is we took them we began to
> categorize them. Where does this fit in the model and if we found something that
> really fit we got rid of it. If we found things that overlap we combine them and

they were able to create what we call them structural framework that really just focused on three key areas. One of them was going to be the innovative instruction model and we found all these things that fell in to innovative instruction. We found a lot of stuff that we were doing that fell into title bit social constructs which is things that we're doing to try to help kids be more successful socially. And then the last piece was, this is an effective educator construct, and these are things that we're doing for staff to be able to help them be more successful. And so we took these things and actually put it into a visual, we put it into a framework and we've provided that to staff and now we review it regularly so that we can stay focused on the things that we know we're supposed to be doing. And any time we try to start something new, if it doesn't fall into that we just push it to the side, because we can't do everything that is good for kids all across the country. We had to pick just the things that we felt like we can be successful at and not overload out staff. (Mr. Wheat, interview)

This activity was certainly a pivotal moment for Year 1 staff. We realized together that we could not possible continue the pace and level of implementation that we were practicing nor should we. Things that did not align with the framework for excellence were eliminated and teachers gained a clearer vision for how we were going to achieve the goals that we had established at the beginning of the school year.

Adam Dovico Return Visit

Previously I shared the impact of Mr. Dovico's beginning of the year training that was conducted with Year 1 staff members. I coordinated a return visit with Adam shortly after the winter break during the first year. Ms. Worthy commented on the impact of his return visit.

I think the biggest turning point was when Adam Dovico came in at the middle of the year and many of us were struggling to keep the high engagement and high energy level. Adam came in and he did these model lessons with our kids and we got to watch as he interacted with our kids in our classrooms. This came at just the right time because he held our kids to really high expectations and we started to have more conversations about our own expectations from our kids. It was almost like we went back to the drawing board after Adam came and we all felt

ready to move forward as a team after watching him teach our kids. (Ms. Worthy, interview)

Adam's return was such a valuable investment in the progress of our teachers and the Academy. At just the right time, his modeling and encouragement served to rejuvenate a group of educators who were working tirelessly yet becoming increasingly frustrated. The weeks that followed began to demonstrate an increase in momentum with higher expectations in the classroom, a clearer focus on our instructional practices, and a brighter outlook toward a successful completion to the school year. Early in the Spring of that first year, the district offered a variety of opportunities for prospective parents to visit magnet schools and receive information on the district choice options at fairs.

Magnet Fair Year 2

Although I stood by myself the previous year with a piece of poster board and a one page flyer, this year was significantly different. Magnet funds had made it possible to purchase a visual display board that highlighted the elements of the Academy. I had a variety of young scholars who were eager to share their experiences and represent the Academy as ambassadors at the magnet fair. Mr. Blackwood spoke about the significance of this event in his interview.

> We were really excited when it was time to go to the Coliseum for the magnet fair. We had a good number of kids who wanted to go with us and tell everybody about what the Academy was all about. I remember getting there early that morning and unloading all our gear. Most of our teachers and staff showed up to assist and our kids started rolling in before the doors opened for visitors. I was really surprised when our parents started coming in and saying they were going to help so we had a ton of people there. Our kids stared singing cheers and chants and by the time they opened the doors everyone was flocking to our booth. We

handed out tons of applications and brochures and I must have talked to hundreds of parents that day. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

The magnet fair was followed by three separate visitation days at the Academy which provided parents an opportunity to see our classrooms in action. We experienced very high numbers at each visit and the number or applications skyrocketed. Compared to the previous year, we easily exceeded the number of applications needed to fill the one hundred seats at the Academy for the upcoming school year. Having a tangible product to display with a new facility scheduled to be completed in the months ahead made the Academy a highly attractable option for families in the community. See Figure 24.

Figure 24. Scholars Represent the Academy at the District Magnet Fair.

Impact of a New Facility

The Academy was designed to be a small, middle school magnet option for families that would serve approximately 400 students. The district had decided to renovate a campus and provide upgrades with regard to new classrooms, new technology, and some new construction (see Figures 25 and 26). I served as a member of the project team for the new facility and selected a few staff members to participate in many of the meetings. In the Spring of the first year we began conducting walk-throughs of the new facility and choosing colors for the classrooms and common areas. Staff excitement began to grow as the building campaign became closer to completion. One staff member commented on the pivotal nature of the new facility.

> I remember meeting the staff for the first time at the site visit when things were first under construction. We walked the campus that day and talked about our vision for how things would look and feel through the school. We picked out some colors, talked about some ideas for leadership lane, and everyone was really pumped about moving into the new facility. It was cool because I had visited the Academy before at the previous school and everything was a little dark and dungeon like but this got me really excited because I could tell everything was brand new and it was going to be great! (Mr. May, interview)

The new facility gave life to the Academy well before we ever occupied it. Teachers were becoming increasingly excited, the community was talking about the building project, and prospective families were enthusiastic about the idea of their child attending an innovative school inside a new facility.

Figure 25. Renovation Begins.

Figure 26. New Construction Continues at the Academy.

Say Yes at the Academy

Our school district decided to apply to become the next Say Yes district in the nation. Say Yes is an organization that partners with various districts to provide wrap around services for students, helps raise dollars to assist with college scholarships for students, and promises last dollar tuition to any student who graduates from that district and gains acceptance to a college or university affiliated with Say Yes. During the application period, a gentleman named Jacques Steinberg visited the district and asked to see some schools in action. Mr. Steinberg serves on the Say Yes national committee and provides recommendations to the national board on which districts should be granted acceptance into the Say Yes campaign.

Mr. Steinberg was very excited with his visit to the Academy. Scholars served as ambassadors and provided a tour. He witnessed high levels of engagement in classrooms and commented on the instructional practices that were used to teach content at a high level. As a result of Mr. Steinberg's visit, he asked me if he could send a film crew to the Academy to spend a few days shooting a promotional video to present to one of their largest contributors, the Ford Foundation. After gaining the appropriate permissions, Say Yes National spent two days shooting a documentary that would later be narrated by Jane Pauley that illustrated the advantages that the Academy was providing for its scholars. You can catch it here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6Lw4rQRxrYbc2NWUXgtNFVCbGs/view

Later that fall, the Academy was asked to perform at the announcement that our district had been selected as the next Say Yes community. Thousands of people filled the

auditorium and George Weiss, founder of Say Yes, was the keynote speaker. When Mr. Weiss announced the district's receipt, our scholars from the Academy performed an original choreographed dance and song that demonstrated the district's acceptance of such a welcomed opportunity for thousands of students. This served as another pivotal moment in the life of the Academy. Current scholars and staff, prospective families, and district officials recognized that the Academy's achievements were making waves in at least the local pond of education.

Figure 27. Scholars Perform at the Say Yes Announcement Ceremony.

Adjustments during Implementation

The previously discussed processes and practices served to enhance the Academy's vision for innovation and creativity. Scholars and families were excited about the notoriety of being highlighted and offered opportunities to perform at the district's largest functions. Progress and advancement of the Academy seemed to be at an all-time high. However, this study also seeks to identify what adjustments were made along the path as a result of teacher observation, circumstance, or district involvement. These adjustments included:

- o Tweaking the schedule/shifting instructional time

- o Increasing tutoring

- o Enhancing energy and instructional innovation.

As a participant, I can clearly share that the initial vision for the Academy and its current status are not identical due to the need to make adjustments throughout the process to ensure quality service and opportunities for our scholars and families.

Tweaking the Schedule/Shifting Instructional Time

The school leadership team spent time prior to the opening of the first year reviewing the master schedule, activity calendar, and plan for incorporating elective course offerings into the school day. As a small school, we did not receive funding for multiple full-time support staff to provide foreign language, guidance support, or other arts-based courses due to our lower enrollment in the opening year. Multiple things that the team believed would be beneficial were not. Several things that we never considered

became quite clear that they were needed. Mrs. Perkins serves on the leadership team

and commented on the various changes that were made during the opening year.

> We did a lot of tweaking to the schedule. We used to hold breakfast before rally in the morning and that was a mess so we switch up to have kids go straight to rally from the bus. We had a House in Order program that had all kids coming back together at the end of each day but that seemed like a huge waste of time after we tried it for several weeks so we made an adjustment to put that time back into the core class. Our encore schedule was pretty difficult also because we had a lot of rotating staff. We finally decided to just offer foreign language, music, and PE to everyone instead of trying to run a normal middle school schedule and give kids choices on their classes. We just didn't have the staff to pull that off. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

In my own interview, I noted how changes in the instructional time had to be

managed with teachers. My goal was to give teachers freedom with the allotted core time

in order to serve students according to their needs. What I recognized was that more

structure and guidance was needed to ensure that scholars were receiving the adequate

instructional opportunities needed to be successful in each content.

> I think the structure of the instructional day was a major change that had to be addressed because we had given a lot of flexibility and freedom with regard to how teachers were managing their core time. Mainly it was driven for a master schedule that was very open that gave them a two-and-a-half-hour block to kind of use as they wish. But when we got data back at the end of the first year and we had significant growth in some areas and very low performance in some other areas, I had to make some shifts to the instructional schedule. For example, our science scores were horrendous. I mean, they were in the low 30s and it totally killed our overall composite scores. It was time to change the schedule to be sure that science was being taught at specific times. (Mr. Wheat, interview)

Increasing Tutoring

The leadership team also had to make some adjustments to the level of services that our scholars received. After a review of the interim assessment data, the team realized that despite our best efforts, we simply were not getting the growth that was necessary in our lowest achieving students. Although we had implemented a tutoring program that met one day per week after school, the team decided to ramp it up. Mr. Noel identified the areas that the team decided to focus on.

> I remember in the fall when we noticed that many of our kids weren't doing well we decided to move to two days each week for tutoring and start running a Saturday program once per month. We put several Saturday Academies on the calendar and stated calling parents and telling them that they needed to have their kids there because we believed we could help them even more if they could come on the weekends. We knew that we couldn't do it every Saturday because it would burn our teachers out but our kids needed it so we added another day of tutoring after school during the week and one Saturday each month which most of our kids came to. (Mr. Noel, interview)

Enhancing Energy and Instructional Innovation

While administration and the leadership team were making adjustments to the schedule for classes and the time that services were delivered, staff began making changes to their own instructional process as a result of their personal growth and experiences with students. Ms. Worthy described the changes that she experienced in her instructional delivery as a result of being at the Academy.

> I really enjoy the fact that our classrooms are different. At my previous school, all of the teachers stand at the front of the classroom and tell kids what they need to know. We were really good at telling and showing them but there was no ownership on the kids' part. I've really changed in the sense that now I am

moving throughout the classroom more, I'm standing on desks, I'm leading cheers for my kids and they are really getting it. (Ms. Worthy, interview)

Mrs. Perkins serves as a curriculum facilitator at the Academy and has worked directly with many teachers as they grow to adopt the instructional model.

I've seen teachers take more ownership in the innovative instruction pillar too. The writing of songs and allowing kids to write content songs of their own and take part in chants in the classroom has really taken off. The teachers are allowing kids to do more. I've really seen them start to enhance the leadership themes in their classrooms also. It isn't just in their teacher but it is how they interact with the scholars that shows me the leadership changes they are making. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

Mrs. Scott joined the Academy in year two. She has experience at a previous middle school and was trained by a local university in elementary education.

I thought I was really energetic before. I have to be on pretty much every single minute of every day at the Academy and it can be exhausting. But it helps to have Ms. Jordan across the hall. I can hear her kids singing songs and doing chants and I'm like, I got to bring it too. Before I came here I was a lot less structured too. I did a lot of project based learning and allowed kids to just figure things out for themselves. That's good but here, you have to be on point and be sure you know what kids need to know and make sure they learn it. Ensuring the structure that is expected here and just the level of excellence that is expected here has been a challenge for me. (Mrs. Scott, interview)

Teachers also commented about specific changes that they made to their instructional delivery based on several of the trainings that were offered. Both Adam Dovico's training and the Ron Clark experience led multiple teachers to make adjustments to their physical posture in the classroom, their use of music in the room, and

their interaction with scholars. Ms. Ellington reflected on her instructional changes as a result of teaching at the Academy.

> I learned a lot of things at the Ron Clark Academy. Like having your hands higher when you are teaching and using them to interact with kids while you talk. I change my voice inflection a lot so kids can connect with the key points that I am sharing and to provide some narrator moments in my class. Just in general, I thought I was a great teacher before but I'm like completely different. This school just kind of opened my eyes to more of what kids need and as a teacher I'm constantly reflecting on what I can do to make their experience that much better. I'm thinking of ways that they can retain information better if I write it into a chant or use a song to teach some content or engage them. I just use a totally different set of strategies than I did before. (Ms. Ellington, interview)

The most significant change that I have noticed in the instructional delivery at the Academy is the consistency at which innovative methods are utilized. Even in my own instruction during rally, I have developed a pattern of incorporating chants with the entire student body, utilizing scholars for demonstration lessons, and creating object lessons that are designed to capture the imagination of those in attendance. Teachers have increased their frequency and consistency with these strategies as well. Instructional strategies that we studied as a staff and made efforts to implement in our classrooms have become embedded into the daily culture of teaching and learning at the Academy. No longer are these techniques being used only for special lessons or during times of intentional planning. Instead, they are routinely implemented by staff and accepted by scholars throughout the Academy.

Moving Forward

Although significant changes were made during planning and implementation process, other needs remain in order for the Academy to remain effective and to fully

accomplish the vision. Participants were asked to consider any additional changes or shifts that could benefit scholars or the program as a whole. They recommended the following:

- o Reinforce and revisit the vision;

- o Activities to increase staff unity;

- o Additional time to train new teachers; and,

- o Take the Academy model to others.

Reinforce and revisit the vision. Multiple staff members recognized the need to continually reinforce the vision as the Academy grows in size and staff.

> I think that one thing that we can still continue to work on is the implementation of our pillars. You know, we talked at our leadership meeting recently that every 28 days the vision of an organization needs to be shared again. I just think as we bring in new staff members and more students we need to continue going back to those pillars and be sure that all members of the team know what we are all about. The last think any of us want is to see this just become another middle school. (Mr. Blackwood, interview)

Putting the vision back in front of current staff members is essential for staying focused on what the Academy is attempting to accomplish. Each year new scholars and families join the Academy and have an opportunity to experience the vision fresh for themselves. Staff must be able to articulate the vision to new students, new staff members joining the team, and to families visiting the Academy for the first time. Mr. Vince recommends taking time in our PLC meetings to reinforce the vision through role play and activity.

> I would recommend possibly on a weekly or at least monthly basis we give opportunity for staff to just collaborate, talk about some songs or chants they are using in their classes, or review expectations that we have for our scholars. I like how we do the new staff orientation but we could have a refresher for everybody. Just like, today we are going to talk about the seven habits, or what we are going to do to maintain consistency in the classroom, or let's do some songs and chants to keep it fresh. (Mr. Vince, interview)

Mrs. Perkins serves as the curriculum facilitator at the Academy and also serves as the chair of the school leadership team. She also served on the original project team and has a unique perspective about carrying through the vision of the Academy. When asked to reflect on changes that need to be made in order to continue successfully implementing the Academy she commented on the willingness to reflect and make change when needed.

> I think the whole process, you particularly and leading us to do the same, we're constantly reflecting. That is a good thing, and it allows us to make needed changes. You can't be afraid to make changes midstream, and I think that's a good think too because it it's not working, we don't need to just finish up the year because what good is that? We make the changes that need to be made. We have to be careful though and always go back and ask the question that we did in the original project team. Is this change going to support our original vision? I think that needs to be the constant question, always. (Mrs. Perkins, interview)

Activities to increase staff unity. Other staff members highlighted a recommendation that I did not expect to encounter. Over the past several years I have worked to establish a collegial environment where educators feel valued, empowered, and challenged to perform their work with a high level of creativity and passion. Throughout that process, a family-type culture has been established that participants indicate they value greatly and desire to enhance.

I think finding ways to keep staff unity high is really important and we can do that by having fun together. Coming up with different ideas like playing volleyball together or going off campus to the park with everyone or maybe take the staff bowling. That kind of stuff is really important because we spend a lot of time here working together and we need to be able to work well with the people on the team. For me it's just really important that we have those interactions together because it brings us close and keeps us on the same page with what we are trying to do for kids. (Mr. May, interview)

Ms. Ellington also commented on this topic when asked about recommended changes in moving forward.

As the school grows and everyone's planning time is different and we don't get to see each other in the halls every day I think we need to have some more outside bonding type things without like having meetings. I mean meetings are good but with new staff coming in I want to be sure we stay close as a staff and help them to get connected as well. (Ms. Ellington, interview)

Train new teachers. New staff members certainly need to feel connected when they join the Academy. They are joining a team of hard working and devoted teachers who already understand the culture and climate that has been established. However, another recommendation for consideration indicated that providing additional time for new teachers at the beginning of the year would be beneficial. Mr. Felton is a Year 2 staff member. He visited the Academy in the spring of the first year then joined the staff at the summer training just days before scholars arrived for their first day of school.

I would say a couple of things are needed like a djembe 101 class so we can all understand the methods and ways to use the drum creatively in your class. That is something that is routine and embedded for kids but as a new staff I had that drum in my class and didn't know what to do with it. Same thing with cheers and chants, its just something you want to be able to demonstrate and just show off. There was a lot of, "Oh, you'll get it" during the opening meetings and obviously I did get it

but it would be great to have some more time to learn those things and feel more comfortable with them before kids show up. (Mr. Felton, interview)

Take the Academy model to others. Staff members feel very strongly that the model that the Academy is implementing is effective and significant. Multiple participants indicated that their recommendation in moving forward is to consider ways to move the Academy outside of the walls to have a larger impact on the surrounding world of education. In a survey response, one participant wrote, "I would love to have the opportunity to take what we do at the Academy and have other schools in the district see and hear how we implement certain things" (Anonymous Survey Response). Another response indicated the same: "I feel like this school can be a model for others because we are public and we face the same constraints that other public school face. We should really work toward getting more teachers to come and see us in action" (Anonymous Survey Response).

The process used in planning for and implementing the Academy was certainly complex and required a considerable amount of time. The adding of new participants each year required an intentional effort to maintain a focus on the original vision and ensure that adequate training was provided for new and returning staff. The process was not without considerable obstacles and challenges that required adjustments during the opening two years. However, staff members, parents, and scholars consistently express their desire to continue with their participation in the Academy due to the unique environment and its overall impact on student achievement.

CHAPTER VI

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of a group of educators participating in creating and implementing an innovative middle school for a large, urban school district. In Chapter IV, I told the story of creation and my experiences serving as the project team chair for a strategic plan initiative to address academic achievement. This position led to being named as principal of the new Academy which gave me greater access and exposure to the story of creation and implementation. Chapter IV allowed me to share the multi-year planning process from the perspective of a participant who engaged at a high level with every facet of program design and implementation. Sharing my story in this manner allowed me to pull back the curtain of my experiences and repeatedly examine my memories that could be missed if only captured as an interview of another participant. My unique perspective as a former middle school teacher and seasoned middle school administrator allowed me to utilize my professional knowledge of how middle schools were originally envisioned combined with my investigative experiences of visiting successful schools across the county to develop the Academy.

Although I served as a participant with a unique perspective, I attempted to tell the story of creation through the words of teachers who joined the effort to establish the Academy. Many of the participants were identified as Year 1 staff that were part of the

Academy's inception at various levels. Other participants joined the Academy after the first year was completed. Their stories were captured and shared in Chapter V as Year 2 staff members. Although capturing the stories of each of these participants is worthy of research, the greater purpose was to determine what we can learn from the process of creating a new school designed to be innovative and to share that knowledge with aspiring school districts and leaders seeking to implement such innovative measures.

Why This Research is Important

When I was selected to serve as the project team chair and later as principal of the Academy, there was little information to work with. There was no blueprint for how the school would be constructed, what grade level span would be served, or even a clear vision for the instructional and social focus of the Academy. Although my school district had selected a few influences that would guide the development of the Academy, there was little research on fully implementing an innovative model with characteristics from multiple models. As I scoured for research to support the desire for innovation in urban settings I am grateful for the work of Paul Tough who documented Geoffrey Canada's work to establish the Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem, NY. Canada's goals and experiences, although significantly different, gave great insight into his heart and passion for doing things differently to achieve results for students in his old neighborhood. I drew great inspiration from his story especially since I had been selected to open the Academy in the exact neighborhood that I grew up in just 20 years prior.

In addition to Tough's work, Jay Matthews chronicled the story of two Teach for America graduates who opened the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) with no money,

no facility of their own, and very little experience. Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin's

creative spirit and passionate approach to working with highly impacted student

populations also served to inspire and challenge my thinking during the planning process

of the Academy. From the parent contract to the scholar dollar paycheck, the KIPP

influence is easily recognizable at the Academy for anyone who is familiar with their

story.

      Further, the work of Deborah Meier was inspirational and more helpful

structurally, as a means of identifying what a dedicated and veteran educator believes

made her schools successful in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Harlem. In her self-

authored account, *The Power of Their Ideas*, she indicates that when given the

opportunity to set up a new public school in 1974, she focused on how to create the

optimum conditions for making teaching as interesting to others as it had been to her

while establishing a respectful culture where students and adults could thrive. Where one

might begin with establishing instructional techniques and curriculum to ensure success,

Deborah reflects on what ultimate made her school successful despite considerable

obstacles.

> The long-term influence of the school was largely due to three things: the
> relationships the kids built with both their peers and the adults, the school's
> respect and nourishing of their own personal interests and passions, and finally
> the strong ties that the school maintained with their families. (Meier, 2002, p.
> 127)

      Unfortunately, that is where most of the available research ends. Although school

districts around the country are searching for educational reform initiatives that help

deliver their goals of increasing student achievement and creating just and caring

communities, there is little documentation that would allow interested parties to replicate

their efforts. For example, over 2,000 educators visit the Ron Clark Academy every year

for a one-day professional development that consists of classroom visits, opportunities to

interact with his students, and professional development sessions designed to encourage

teacher creativity in the classroom. At a participant cost of over $400 per teacher, there is

obviously a significant desire to reform traditional classrooms into innovative and

passionate learning environments for students. Yet, there is no chronicled account of

Ron Clark and Kim Bearden's work to design and implement the Academy and no

current desire on either to replicate or expand the Academy that serves less than 130

students per year.

Thus, this research served to provide a current account of a school district's effort

to create such a school that could possibly expand and offer a middle school reform

framework. Further, it details the experiences of a dedicated group of educators who

were willing to be risk-takers, leaving their currently successful classrooms for the

challenge of innovation, inspiration, and adventure. The lessons learned from these

experiences are provided in this chapter.

Revisiting the Research Questions

In order to share the lessons learned from each participant's experience at the

Academy, this study asked the following questions.

1. What processes were used in creating and implementing this innovative

    middle school? Which were effective and which were not? Why or why not?

2. What challenges and obstacles were faced during the creation process? What challenges were encountered in the implementation process?

3. What adjustments and changes did administrators need to make in the process of implementing the vision for the school?

Two interview protocols were used in order to differentiate between Year 1 and Year 2 staff members. The rationale in doing so was to account for the different experiences of both groups of participants. Year 1 staff members experienced a different set of planning sessions and challenges than Year 2 participants. The three primary research questions were the same for both groups of participants. However, additional questions were provided to glean Year 2 staff members' perspectives on themes such as staff training and additional assistance that would support their work. In the sections that follow, I summarize what was learned in response to each research question.

Research Question 1

What processes were used in creating and implementing this innovative middle school? Which were effective and which were not? Why or why not?

In our quest to create and implement an innovative school, I believe considerable significance exists in the processes utilized with staff and students. The conceptual framework for this study identifies the process as a contributing factor to the successful implementation of the Academy's vision. Both Year 1 and Year 2 staff were asked to reflect on their memories of trainings, school visits, and other experiences that they believed to be beneficial in the creation and implementation process. As a follow-up question, I asked them to consider practices that are in place to support their work in

implementing the Academy's vision. Multiple similarities are evident in participant responses to Research Question 1.

Clearly establish the vision. Participants shared responses that indicate clearly establishing a vision for the Academy during the beginning process was essential. Articulating that vision in the form of the five core pillars of the Academy was shared as beneficial in helping staff to understand the foundation for the instructional and social focus within the school.   Teachers expressed that whether they participated in the development of the pillars or encountered them at their initial interview, the pillars served to communicate the vision of the Academy clearly and in a unique fashion. Staff also expressed that the research into programs that were working assisted in clarifying the Academy's vision. Both Year 1 and Year 2 staff members included their personal experience of interviewing for the Academy as assisting them in understanding the school's vision. Further, the development of a one page informational flyer was effective in communicating what the project team and Year 1 staff identified as important components of the program.

The off-campus trainings served to assist staff in understanding the Academy's vision for innovation and creativity. Multiple staff described their memories of climbing high ropes with colleagues, rappelling down high walls, and zip lining through the forest. Participants reported that these experiences served to increase staff unity and allowed staff members to experience the vision for the Academy in an innovative manner.

Specific trainings. Research Question 1 also solicited comments regarding specific trainings that staff members viewed as beneficial. The opening staff meetings

that I conducted, the "Leader in Me" trainings provided through the Covey Foundation, and Mr. Dovico's training sponsored through the Ron Clark Academy all served to assist staff members in understanding how to implement the vision of the Academy. Book studies such as the Teach Like a Champion text and articles on topics of equitable classroom practices served to provide a common language for instructional strategies and build a culture of high expectations throughout the building.

Participating in the peer visitation process assisted staff in effectively understanding and implementing the vision. This training allowed teachers to see other teachers in action in planned visits. Teachers shared feedback with one another and identified specific practices that could be replicated in their own classrooms. This training helped to build confidence in many of our teachers while encouraging some of our Year 2 staff to try new strategies with their scholars. We utilized a process similar to the experience at the Ron Clark Academy. Participants identified this opportunity as the most effective training for teachers at the Academy.

Critical practices. Staff members also identified multiple key practices that serve to accomplish the goal of implementing the Academy's vision. Morning rallies at the Academy serve to communicate and reinforce the vision for the Academy for both scholars and staff members. Rallies are energetic, well planned, fast-paced, and deliver a curriculum that supports the leadership development of all participants. Teachers indicate that they remain excited about rally each day and the messages that are conveyed during these gatherings permeate classrooms for the remainder of the day and week. Rallies also served to connect staff members with students outside of the traditional

classroom. Staff assist in greeting scholars as they exit the bus or enter rally. They have conversations, participate in games and challenges, and sit together for videos and discussions. The closing of rally with Leader's Creed each day also serves to focus the entire audience on the goal of leadership development and service toward others.

Another practice that participants identified as significant is the regular scheduling of visitation days at the Academy. Originally implemented in response to a donor's request to see the new Academy in action, visitation days have become opportunities for staff and scholars to show off their best practices. Scholars serve as ambassadors to greet guests, student performances occur in each classroom visited, and teachers appreciate the positive feedback they receive from guests who recognize the innovative nature of our classrooms. Visitation days are limited to once per month. Schedules are altered on visitation days but the impact they have far outweighs the inconvenience. Scholars and staff have an opportunity to shine and receive feedback. Visitors also leave and tell the story of the innovative approach to education that occurs at the Academy.

Planning for the best first day of school ever each year is also a practice that clearly articulates the innovative nature of the Academy. Teachers purpose ideas that often cause strain on our budget or require others to dress in questionable garb. However, when students get off the bus and are greeted by their teachers in festive dress, music blaring, drum lines playing, and multiple activities to participate in, they go wild. Each year scholars begin asking early in the spring what the next first day of school is

going to look like. This practice has become a tradition and now is designed by committee, with a budget, and increases in creativity each year.

The final practice that teachers articulated in large number is the physical decoration of the school space. Teachers spend considerable time each summer redesigning their classrooms and purchasing new artifacts to transform their space. As the school administrator, I transform one common area of the building each summer by installing fatheads of our students on classroom doors, hiring an artist to create new murals, or scripting new quotes on sheetrock walls throughout the hallways. When scholars arrive at Open House in August, they run through the building visiting every classroom to see what themes exists on each hallway.

These practices were identified by staff members as having a considerable impact on the effective implementation of the Academy's vision. Other practices such as the consistent use of music and dance in the classroom to support instruction, the consistent field trips to college campus and other venues, and staff challenges to write new cheers and chants to perform in rally were also noted as playing a substantial role in accomplishing the Academy's vision.

Research Question 2

What challenges and obstacles were faced during the creation process? What challenges were encountered in the implementation process?

At the beginning of this chapter I identified several stories that are similar to the quest of creating and implementing a new and innovative school. The two Teach for America graduates who began the work of KIPP schools encountered multiple challenges

and obstacles during their efforts to launch a new program. KIPP founders shared their

story of struggling to find funding, recruiting students and teachers to enroll in the new

program, and the challenge of replicating as they launched from one school in Houston to

a second school in New York. Deborah Meier shares many of her struggles and

challenges in the form of journal entries that were recorded during her work in opening

Central Park East.

In one entry dated February 3, she comments on a staff development session that

she led on the topic of racism and the reaction that her staff had to this activity.   During

her role play designed to expose bias and raise awareness of different perspectives, she

recognized that discussions on race were a challenge in her school. As a white female

educator, leading a predominantly African American student population, race and more

importantly, dialogue about race, was a challenge. In another postdated January 29,

Meier reflects on the challenge of responding to data requests from those who are seeking

to quantify her school's success with achievement figures instead of all the stories of

changed lives from within her school walls.

Canada's struggles and obstacles were similar related to test scores. In the

opening years, the Harlem Children's Zone had a few major donors that contributed

significantly to the implementation of Canada's dream. However, test scores did not

immediately reflect the great work and struggle to change lives of students that were

living in difficult circumstances and adapting to the HCZ culture slower than anticipated.

Coupled with the struggle to produce results, Geoffrey Canada regularly attended

funerals of his children and their families. As he Tough (2008) describes it, the HCZ

model was one of "contamination" (p. 162). Canada's goal was to completed revamp an entire community through the school instead of only impacting the students who enrolled.

Documenting these challenges and obstacles is significant because we learn so much from encountering adversity. If every idea we had or strategy we implemented worked, we would not gain the insight into other possibilities and would likely become complacent with replicating the same strategy in uncommon circumstances. Further, sharing our challenges and obstacles with others allows us to reflect upon our own experiences while assisting others who may be seeking solutions to similar problems. Research Question 2 seeks to determine how participants at the Academy recognized challenges during the creation and implementation process.

Academic and social challenges. Year 1 and Year 2 staff recognized significant academic and social challenges at the Academy. Staff members at the Academy were energized and passionate about the instructional model that includes the use of music, movement, cheers and chants to engage students. However, multiple staff indicated that finding a balance between the engagement strategies and instructional delivery was difficult. Teachers wanted their classrooms to properly reflect the innovative instruction pillar, but ensuring that content is learned caused many teachers to be concerned about the balance. Considerable time was required to teach students a content song, or to develop role play activities, or to flip classrooms with themed lessons. Finding a healthy balance that allowed teachers to continually engage students while maintaining an effective pace that challenged and supported students required staff to plan and modify instruction consistently.

Scholars enrolled into the Academy from a variety neighborhoods with diverse backgrounds. Many of our scholars demonstrated that the values the Academy teaches and expects vary significantly from those in their previous school or home. This variance was identified by multiple staff members who indicate that holding students to high expectations is increasingly challenging when the same level of expectations is not expected in the home. Parents are informed at the enrollment session for the Academy about the expectations for students and parents. However, not all of the elements in that parent compact are upheld by parents and little, to no, accountability exists to encourage that they are.

Staff frustrations. This led to some initial frustrations by staff when progress toward establishing the culture of leadership and character seemed to progress at a disappointing rate. Some students actively resisted the strategies in place to help realize the Academy's vision. Academic progress for many scholars was below expectations despite staff members' best efforts to utilize the instructional strategies we identified to be effective. Support staff and teaches continued to push and even increased the amount of services that were offered to scholars with after-school programming and Saturday school options. These challenges and increased efforts by staff caused many staff members to feel somewhat overwhelmed with the program. A common expression of "we are doing too much" existed as a result of these challenges.

Managing the academy. Additional challenges exist in my administrative responsibilities. Although not readily recognized by teachers or other participants in this study, the Academy requires a great deal of marketing, public relations, and excessive

reporting to individuals and departments both inside and outside of the district. While I am always grateful for the philanthropic donations from outside agencies, those dollars do come with a fair amount of tracking and justification. Maintaining the dollars in consecutive years remains challenging as well. As one of my donors shared after I submitted a proposal to continue our partnership, her organization is more interested in seed capital. That is, the foundation prefers to sponsor the launch of innovative programs with the expectation that other public and private dollars can be generated to continue the work once initial dollars are expended.

There is no district representative assigned to monitor or support the Academy directly. Although touted as one of the district's strongest initiatives in the strategic plan, the Academy exists and performs primarily based on the work of the administrative, support, and instructional staff. After the initial year of implementation, the Chief Academic Officer for the district who served on the project team and helped oversee the planning process transferred from the district and much of the Academy's connection to district leadership diminished as a result. During day to day operations, this does not create any significant challenge. In fact, some school leaders might identify the lack of district supervision as a positive and liberating characteristic that many principals would welcome. While I tend to agree, the challenge exists when department leaders apply district wide strategies and have limited to no knowledge about the unique nature of our program.

The challenge of distance. The Academy is a full-district magnet school. Students from any geographic region of the 658-square-mile district are eligible to apply

for the lottery selection process. While the decision to include the entire district in the eligibility field is reasonable with regard to equity and access, it does create an additional challenge. Students endure bus rides in excess of ninety minutes one way to and from school in the morning and afternoons. Coupled with an extended day schedule, many students leave their homes at 5:30 AM and do not return until 6:00 PM. The distance also impacts the availability of parents to connect with school programming. The Academy staff worked to overcome many of these obstacles but it is evident in the research that many participants see the geographical distance between school and home as a considerable challenge.

Research Question 3

What adjustments and changes did administrators need to make in the process of implementing the vision for the school?

Every school in America faces challenges. Ask any school principal and she can quickly suggest a handful of obstacles that prevent her school from achieving at the maximum rate. You can expect to hear answers on the topics of classroom size, poverty, family factors, limited technology, bullying, student attitudes and behaviors, parental involvement, or funding. Although each of these are factors worthy of consideration, they are also relatively common characteristics of public school which educators must be willing to overcome in the quest to create great schools. If we see these as opportunities to serve, instead of challenges that prevent, we are approaching these concepts with the correct mindset.

Research Question 3 sought to identify what adjustments the Academy implemented in response to challenges encountered during the planning and implementation of the school. Further, this question provides participants with an opportunity to make recommendations to improve the Academy in future years. During the opening year of the Academy, I appointed every staff member to the leadership team. With a staff of only eleven, I wanted everyone to be involved at the highest level possible. They participated in a variety of activities that identified challenges we were experiencing and recommended adjustments to address those concerns.

Significant shifts. Study participants commented on procedural shifts such as the schedule being adjusted, rally lessons moving toward a more thematic focus, and individual adjustments to their own instructional delivery. However, one adjustment that I believe to be a major contributing factor the success of the Academy during the second year is the decision to align Year 1 staff with Year 2 recruits.

At the conclusion of year one, the Academy was gearing up to double in size and bring in multiple new staff members to join the program. I was concerned that the initial staff members had far greater knowledge and awareness of the Academy's vision than incoming staff had, or possibly could have, after only a few days of training before the school year began. I made a decision to shift my initial staff to new team assignments, pairing a new staff member with an incoming staff member in order to ensure that the vision was represented on each team and department. The shift of staff members was a significant adjustment in the organizational structure of the Academy. This process

ensured that a teacher leader, who had participated in all of the Year 1 experience, was present on each team.

Another significant shift occurred because of the lack of parent connection that staff members recognized during the opening year. As discussed previously, parents are not close in proximity to the Academy and that distance creates some challenges with the goal of high parental involvement. Finding a way to get parents involved at a high level became very important to the Academy. As the school principal, I began developing an email distribution list to include all parents and established a consistent communication plan to share announcements and opportunities to engage each Monday evening. The Academy increased our social media efforts and began broadcasting rally on Facebook Live each morning so parents can watch the lesson and reinforce those ideas with their students on a consistent basis. We also began offering parent nights in which our scholars remained on campus after school instead of going home and returning. Parents were encouraged to meet us at the school after work to enjoy dinner with student performances and curriculum connections. These adjustments served to better connect our parents and build a culture of community among Academy participants.

Recommended adjustments from participants. A final portion of Research Question 3 provided participants with an opportunity to share recommendations for any further adjustments that should be considered to successfully implement the vision of the Academy. Academy teachers want additional time to bond with other staff members during the school year. They see their work as significant, and the people they are working with are significant to their work. Teachers recommended that staff trainings be

developed around bowling, hiking, and other adventurous excursions. These

opportunities establish and reinforce staff unity and serve to further the collaborative

nature of the work of creating an innovative middle school.

Other recommendations were very reaffirming. Rituals and procedures that are in

place are viewed as positive and effective and worthy of continuing. Rally is identified

as a practice that should continue. Rally is a unique component that immediately

distinguishes the Academy from most other middle school lineups. The willingness and

enthusiasm that staff have to gather every scholar in one location to begin the day is not a

common practice among middle school programs. This practice serves to reinforce the

vision and increases staff unity with all members receiving the same message from the

rally lesson and school leader each day.

Finally, the small nature of the Academy is a significant factor in the program's

success. Staff members are able to connect with each family over a period of multiple

years to support students' academic and social growth. Teachers and support staff are

able to become familiar with each family's dynamic and identify specific resources and

strategies that can benefit that student during their initial year. Staff members connect

with students off their grade level during rally time, and teachers share ideas about

students as they progress from one grade level to another.

Implications and Recommendations

This study shares the stories of a group of educators who set out to establish an

innovative school. The shared experiences of each participant serve to identify positive

practices that aspiring school districts or principals can replicate to create or modify

middle school culture. Although answering the three research questions is essential to

this study, my hope is that this work provides something more significant for practicing

educators. I have received significant inspiration from the stories of each participant. Far

greater, the scholars at the Academy have inspired me with their response to the

innovative practices at the Academy. These combined influences provide me with the

motivation to continue pursuing excellence at the Academy and share our successes with

others involved in the work of creating great middle schools. I provide these

recommendations as a result of this research and experience.

Clearly Establish and Communicate the Vision

With any new project, you must have a clear vision and purpose if you are going

to experience success. When my district superintendent asked me to serve on the team

that would establish an innovative middle school I asked him what that meant. His words

were, "I don't exactly know. That's what you are being asked to figure out." The work

to establish the vision for the Academy proved critical throughout the creation and

implementation process for the school. It remains critical today. If school leaders are

seeking to implement any element of reform, you must be able to articulate what it will

look like in action. Although we made multiple changes along the path, that vision

remains consistent in the Academy today. It is visible on the school walls, teachers can

articulate it, and all stakeholders can communicate what the Academy is all about.

I make it a practice to clearly articulate the vision for the Academy at least once

per quarter at staff meetings or PLC sessions with all members. What are the key pillars

at the Academy? What does an effective Academy teacher do consistently? What makes

the Academy different from other middle schools? I ask these and other like questions to staff to remind them of the innovative practices that we commit to at the Academy. As new team members join the program, I dare not allow them to interpret the vision for themselves. Instead, sharing our agreed upon instructional strategies explicitly, taking new staff to classrooms to see them in action, and clearly communicating the academic and social constructs of the school have been effective in ensuring the vision remains clear.

Make it Small

Small schools can be an expensive recommendation for public school districts. However, my experiences as principal of both a large traditional and small innovative middle school have convinced me that size matters. The phased implementation of the Academy allowed our staff to focus on a small group of scholars for an entire school year. Every staff member knew every scholar's family, their academic strengths, and their areas for growth. The small population also created a sense of unity and family among staff and scholars. Even as the Academy has expanded, the limited number of seats per grade level allows that family environment to continue to thrive and is a positive benefit to the students and families that we serve.

Small environments can be created out of larger ones. Practicing administrators at large schools are encouraged to consider establishing opportunities for larger populations to be connected in smaller units. Middle school practices of teaming, school within schools, and grade level House systems are examples of how larger schools can be divided into smaller units in order to effectively create their own unique culture. Similar

to the earlier recommendation, clearly articulating the vision for the team, program, or House will allow these creations to develop their own unique culture aimed at helping middle school students to connect with their teachers and other peers.

Teachers as Leaders

Throughout the planning and implementation process, I sought to empower my teachers to lead in a variety of ways. Middle school teachers are incredibly creative and determined creatures. Challenging teachers to accomplish specific tasks during the development or implementation of a new idea has proven extremely effective in my tenure. As shared in Chapter IV, the first meeting with Year 1 staff members was a great opportunity to challenge teachers to be leaders at the Academy. They participated in the vision creation, established practices that served to support that vision, and implemented those practices in their classrooms and throughout the school.

When teachers have an opportunity to lead in significant roles, they develop a strong sense of ownership for the culture they help to establish. This ownership is evident when they volunteer to lead staff trainings for new teachers, share their expertise at district meetings, and serve as tour leaders for dignitaries and other guests that visit the Academy. More importantly, the blended talents of multiple leaders in the building has created a far superior program than I ever could have created individually. Challenging and allowing teachers to express their creativity and talent in all aspects of the school positively benefits the entire program.

Get 'Em Off Campus

Taking scholars and staff off campus is a regular occurrence at the Academy. Although some trips could be deemed traditional, most are very atypical from what most students and staff experience. Taking staff to the high ropes course to start the year, off campus for an afternoon staff meeting at the local bowling alley, or hiking on a professional development day at a local park are examples of practices that helped to establish the innovative nature of the Academy. Taking kids to play outdoor laser tag, to eat lunch in college football stadiums, and getting tickets to dinner theater shows are examples of ways that we have sought to establish that same innovative culture for our students.

These types of activities have a positive impact in establishing and maintaining a culture of innovation. Teachers consistently express their feelings of connectedness toward their colleagues during these off-campus experiences. Scholars become so excited during these experiences that their parents report that they won't stop talking about them. Traditional schools take kids to museums and have staff trainings in the media center. When creating an innovative program, think bigger, take risks, and get 'em off campus.

Impact of Rally

Little did I know that establishing a morning meeting similar to what I witnessed at Freedom School would result in one of the most significant components of the Academy. The morning rallies at the Academy provide a significant opportunity to establish and reinforce the vision on a daily basis. They serve to create a culture of

family with all scholars and staff members committed to starting the day together. Rallies provide an opportunity for the school leader to clearly communicate specific content related to leadership development, character education, and other inspirational themes to all members at one time.

Visitors are offered an opportunity to observe and participate in rally and consistently remark on the innovative nature of this practice. "I can't believe you guys do that every day" or "Man, there was so much energy in that building it makes me want to come back to school" are consistent comments that visitors will share. Once educators establish what innovative approach they wish to implement within a school, implementing a consistent opportunity to share that vision in creative manner would be my strongest recommendation. At the Academy, we call it Rally!

Final Thoughts

When I began this study, I was very eager to determine what teachers and staff members felt was most effective in the creation and implementation process. Their daily work and shared stories provide valuable feedback and support for many of the Academy's efforts and clear recommendations in sustaining and improving the program. My experience in this study as researcher and participant has been extremely beneficial. Having an opportunity to reflect over a two-year process has encouraged me in my work and challenged me to improve various aspects of the school program and my own personal practice.

Throughout this process, I have learned that innovation is difficult. Thinking about creative ideas and instructional techniques is relatively easy for most practicing

educators. We have experiences about what works, we remain engaged in educational research about best practices, and we seek to make our classrooms and school building the best that they can be. The difficult nature of innovation is not in our ideas but in the consistent implementation over a sustained period of time. Staff members change, new students enter, and maintaining the energy level and focus necessary can be challenging.

However, I remain inspired daily by the consistent and talented work of so many great educators.   After teaching Rally each morning, I am fortunate to see classrooms in action. Students are engaged, there is a buzz about learning, drums are beating, and classes are chanting. Leading the Academy has provided multiple opportunities to share this story with other educators at conferences and principal meetings. The creation and implementation of this dream has not only offered great personal satisfaction. It has also improved the educational opportunities for hundreds and perhaps thousands of young people in this community. And for that I am enormously grateful.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Dissertation Proposal Interview Guide for Academy Staff in Inaugural Year

Interview will begin with a brief summary of the rationale for the research study.
I will extend a personal word of gratitude for agreement to participate in the study and
donate their valuable time necessary for the collection of this data. I will ask some
general questions related to their weekend, family well-being, or other general
conversation starters to establish a relaxed environment. These questions and answers
will not be recorded.

Researcher to Note: General age, gender, race, willingness of participant, current
assignment within the school

Demographic questions will include years of experience in education, years of
experience in current role, and any other related experience to share

Research Question 1: *What processes were used in creating and implementing this
innovative middle school? Which were effective and which were not? Why or why not?*

1. Tell me the story about your participation in the development of the Academy.

2. What do you recall about the process of developing the instructional practices
   to be used in the Academy?

3. Describe any trainings or experiences that you feel served to support you in
   achieving the Academy's vision?

4. What practices were in place to assist staff members in the effort of implementing an innovative school?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in creating or implementing the vision of the Academy?

Research Question 2: *What were the challenges and obstacles that were faced during the creation or implementation process?*

1. Describe any challenges you have encountered in attempting to implement the Academy's vision within your classroom area.

2. Can you share any obstacles that you are aware of with the Academy's attempt to create an innovative middle school?

3. Please share about any frustration, disappointment, or additional challenges related to the effort to implement innovation in the classroom or school?

4. Can you recall any pivotal moments in the process of implementing the Academy that caused a shift or change in practice?

5. Have you encountered any barriers or obstacles in your school's effort to address the social needs of your students? If so, what were they?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about challenges or obstacles you have recognized in the Academy's attempt to implement an innovative middle school?

Research Question 3: *What adjustments and changes did administrators need to make in the process of implementing the school?*

1. What changes have you made in your instructional process during your time at the Academy?

2. Describe any adjustments that have been made during the process of implementing the Academy.

3. Describe any changes that were made to address parent or student concerns within the Academy.

4. What do you believe to be the most significant adjustments that were made or need to be made to address concerns from any Academy stakeholder?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about adjustments or changes that are necessary in the process of implementing an innovative middle school?

Dissertation Proposal Interview Guide for Team Members

Beginning in Year 2 Implementation

Interview will begin with a brief summary of the rationale for the research study. I will extend a personal word of gratitude for agreement to participate in the study and donate their valuable time necessary for the collection of this data. I will ask some general questions related to their weekend, family well-being, or other general conversation starters to establish a relaxed environment. These questions and answers will not be recorded.

Researcher to Note: General age, gender, race, willingness of participant, current assignment within the district

Demographic questions will include years of experience in education, years of experience in current role, and any other related experience to share

Research Question 1: *What processes were used in creating and implementing this innovative middle school?*

1. Tell me about your experience with understanding and attempting to implement the various components of the Academy in your first year.

2. What efforts were utilized to support the use innovative instructional practices in the Academy?

3. Describe any trainings or experiences that you feel served to support you in achieving the Academy's vision?

4. What practices were in place to assist staff members in the effort of implementing an innovative school?

5. What additional support, if any, would have been beneficial to a staff member joining the Academy after its first year of implementation?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in implementing the vision of the Academy?

Research Question 2: *What were the challenges and obstacles that were faced during the implementation process?*

1. Describe any challenges you have encountered in attempting to implement the Academy's vision within your classroom area.

2. Can you share any obstacles that you are aware of with the Academy's attempt to create an innovative middle school?

3. Please describe any frustration, disappointment, or additional challenges related to the effort to implement innovation in the classroom or school?

4. What, if any, feedback have parents or other staff shared with you about challenges with components of the Academy?

5. Have you encountered any barriers or obstacles in your school's effort to address the social needs of your students? If so, what were they?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about challenges or obstacles you have recognized in the Academy's attempt to implement an innovative middle school?

Research Question 3: *What adjustments and changes did you or administrators need to make in the process of implementing the school?*

1. What changes have you made in your instructional process during your time at the Academy?

2. Describe any adjustments the Academy has made during the process of implementing the Academy.

3. Describe any changes that were made to address parent or student concerns within the Academy.

4. What do you believe to be the most significant adjustments that were made, or need to be made, to address concerns from any Academy stakeholder?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about adjustments or changes that are necessary in the process of implementing an innovative middle school?