

## **Abstract**

Title of Document: THE BRIDGE PLAN FOR ACADEMIC  
VALIDATION: A CASE STUDY AT CENTRAL  
HIGH SCHOOL

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Across the nation, we continue to see an achievement gap between African American and Hispanic students and White and Asian students. This achievement gap is demonstrated by lower test scores among African American and Hispanic students as well as a lower number of these students graduating high school. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), as its name suggests, attempts to ensure that all students are able to achieve on standardized tests by 2014. However, under NCLB, what was required of students was left to the discretion of each individual state.

Maryland's testing requirements went into effect for students who began high school in 2005 or later. With thousands of students yet to meet these requirements at the start of their senior year (2008-2009 school year), Maryland decided to create an alternate pathway for students to meet these testing requirements. This program, called The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation, allows students who are unable to pass the High School Assessment exams to complete one or more projects in order to meet the state testing requirements.

Central High School is currently one of the worst performing high schools in New Town Public Schools in New Town, Maryland and has consistently been one of the schools with the greatest participation in the Bridge Plan in the state of Maryland. Throughout my research, I explored the following three questions. First, I wanted to better understand why The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation was developed as an alternative to statewide testing requirements. Second, I wanted to understand how Bridge was implemented at Central High School. Finally, I wanted to analyze the impact of Bridge on students, particularly at Central High School. I conducted a qualitative case study using document analysis, interview and observation. I used political and symbolic frameworks, as well as a critical perspective to frame my research.

The findings from this study support the research on disparity in test scores among students as a result of differences in race, economic status, social capital and cultural capital.

THE BRIDGE PLAN FOR ACADEMIC VALIDATION: A CASE STUDY AT  
CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

by

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## **List of Acronyms**

ACT-American College Test

ALT MSA-Alternative Maryland School Assessment

APC-Advanced Professional Certification

AMO-Annual Measureable Objectives

AYP-Annual Yearly Progress

CEP-Center on Education Policy

CCSSO- Council of Chief State School Officers

CLG-Core Learning Goal

COMAR-Code of Maryland Regulations

CRT-Critical Race Theory

ELL-English Language Learner

ETS-Educational Testing Service

ESEA-Elementary and Secondary Education Act

FARMS-Free and Reduced Meal Student

HSA-High School Assessment

IEP-Individualized Education Plan

LEA-Local Education Agency

MSA-Maryland School Assessment

MSDE-Maryland State Department of Education

NAACP-National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NAEP- National Assessment for Educational Progress

NGA-National Governors Association Center for Best Practices

NCEST-National Council of Education Standards and Testing

NCLB-No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

NTPS-New Town Public Schools

SAT- Scholastic Aptitude Test

SPED-Special Education

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

### **Introduction**

A great amount of research has been conducted on the achievement gap that exists between Black and White students. One of the most common measures used to demonstrate this gap is standardized test scores. Historically, Black and Hispanic students have scored consistently lower on standardized tests than White and Asian students. In 2001, the federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which resulted in a drastic change to the face of education in the United States. The No Child Left Behind Act, as its name suggests, attempts to ensure that all students, regardless of race or income are able to achieve equally on standardized tests. With its increased emphasis on “accountability,” schools have been forced to focus on achievement on standardized tests in their attempt to show that they meet Annual Yearly Progress or AYP. NCLB required states to demonstrate AYP in order to receive federal dollars. As a result, standardized testing has become the focus of many schools’ instruction.

Maryland currently requires that students pass High School Assessments in three subject areas in order to graduate: Algebra I, Biology and English II. Prior to 2011 students also had to pass a High School Assessment in Government as well. Despite the fact that the High School Assessments were first used in the 2001-2002 school year, students did not actually have to pass the tests until the 2008-2009 school year. Facing the possibility that thousands of students would not graduate as a result of the new HSA requirements, the state developed several alternatives to these testing requirements. One way the state of Maryland allows students to meet these requirements is through the

Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. The Maryland State Department of Education gives the following description of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation:

MSDE recognizes that there will be some students who will struggle on the HSAs, even after they take the tests several times and take advantage of academic remediation. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation is an instructional intervention which provides students who are having difficulty on the HSAs an alternative means to meet the graduation requirement. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation offers students the opportunity to complete an Academic Validation Project package that is selected to help the student demonstrate the content and skills related to one or more HSAs that the student has failed to pass after at least two attempts. Participation in the Bridge Plan is voluntary. (<http://www.hsaexam.org>)

In essence, students complete anywhere from 1-7 “project packages” per subject area in place of actually passing the exam. A student’s score on the exam is used to determine the amount of projects they will have to complete. The vast majority of students that have participated in the Bridge Plan are African American students from poor, inner city neighborhoods.

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research is to better understand The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation and what impact the Bridge Plan has had on Central High School students as a representative population of African American students in underperforming schools across New Town. Central High School, which is located in New Town, Maryland has an over 97% African American population and is consistently one of the schools with the worst High School Assessment scores in New Town. My goal is to gain a deeper understanding of how the change in state requirements has affected students at Central High School. The year the Bridge Plan began, Central students required and completed more projects than students in any other school in New Town or the state of Maryland. Because completing Bridge Projects allows students to meet HSA requirements without

actually passing the tests and meet state graduation requirements, this arrangement allows the state to report a high graduation rate and keep federal funds, however it may do little to actually change the achievement gap.

### **Research Questions**

The research addresses the following research questions:

1. Why was the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation developed?

I use the political framework of policy analysis theory to better understand how and why Bridge was developed as an alternative to the state HSA testing requirements. The political framework asserts that policy is developed in response to political motivations and to maintain institutional legitimacy. I attempt to understand to what extent this is true for Maryland's Bridge Plan for Academic Validation.

2. What has been the process of implementation of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation at Central High School? How does Bridge function at Central High School? What are students' experiences with the Bridge Plan at Central High School?

3. What is the impact of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation on students at Central High School?

I use the symbolic framework of policy analysis theory to better understand the extent to which Bridge allows students to master content knowledge and serves to prepare them for post-secondary education. The symbolic framework asserts that policy is concerned not with actual change but rather the perception that change has occurred. Through my research I hope to understand to what extent this is true of the Bridge Plan.

## **Overview of Study**

Chapter two provides a review of literature related to Current Issues in Urban Education, Urban Education Policy, Critical Race Theory, Cultural Capital Theory, and Social Capital Theory. It also contains information on the theoretical frameworks and research orientation used in the study. It provides an overview of the Critical framework, the Political framework and the Symbolic framework.

Chapter three describes the methodology of the paper, explaining the case study approach used in this dissertation. It explains the rationale for the selection of the case and provides information on the data sources, data analysis and possible limitations of the study.

Chapter four describes the case and participant profiles. It provides an overview of New Town as well as information on the current state of New Town placing particular emphasis on the state of education. This chapter also details the interviewees who participated in this study.

Chapter five gives in-depth information on the development of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. It provides information on the meetings of two separate task forces that were convened to develop an alternative for students who could not pass the HSA. This chapter also explores The Maryland State Department of Education's motivation for creating the Bridge Plan. It cites responses from interviews of students, teachers and administrators involved in the Bridge Plan.

Chapter six addresses the implementation of the Bridge Plan at Central High School. It provides information on the structure of the Bridge Plan at Central High School as well as anecdotal evidence from students, teachers and administrators regarding the success of

Central High School's Bridge Plan. This chapter also explains the scoring process and explores the obstacles faced in scoring the first few years. It also provides detailed information on the yearly performance of students on Bridge Projects at Central High School.

Chapter seven discusses the factors that influenced students' participation in the Bridge Plan at Central High School. It explores the Bridge Plan particularly in terms of students' academic preparation, motivation, reading level, race, socio economic status, social capital, and cultural capital.

Chapter eight makes comparisons between the Bridge Plan and the HSA and differences in preparedness of students that utilized each of these methods for completing the Maryland State testing requirements. Lastly it provides final comments from all interviewees regarding their perception of the Bridge Plan.

Chapter nine discusses each of the theoretical frameworks and the extent to which they fit with The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. It provides policy recommendations as well as recommendations for further studies. It also offers a conclusion and discusses the future of the Bridge Plan as we now look towards the development of Common Core assessments.

### **Significance of Study**

Because the Bridge Plan is such a recent policy, there has been little to no research on this topic. This study provides information on the development and implementation of Bridge as well as its effect on Central High School students. Although the policy was developed as a way to ensure that all students are meeting graduation requirements, no research has been conducted to examine if this is truly happening.



As other states turn toward alternative ways for students to meet graduation requirements, this research may have significance for states with policies similar to the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. Pennsylvania, for example, has recently adopted a policy nearly identical to the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (July 2009) reported that,

A student who does not pass one or more of the courses required for graduation, who has taken the course and Keystone Exam, retaken the Keystone Exam or a module or modules of the exam, met the district's attendance requirements for the course, taken and participated in supplemental educational services such as remediation, may participate in a project-based assessment similar to Maryland's Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. (p. 4)

Maryland and Pennsylvania are just two of the many states that have created alternative pathways to graduation as the No Child Left Behind deadline draws near. If the Bridge Plan is viewed as a success, it may continue to be adopted by other states.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This dissertation examines the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation using the political and symbolic frameworks from a critical perspective. It has been designed as a case study in order to better understand how the Bridge Plan has affected students at Central High School in New Town. I decided to use case study as my methodology because Central High School is a great example of a school that has been significantly impacted by Bridge. The intent of my research is to better understand the Bridge Plan, why it was created, and what effects it has had on African American students.

The political and symbolic perspectives guide this study in order to better understand both the development and the implementation of the Bridge Plan. The political perspective of policy analysis theory asserts that policy is developed as a means to regulate conflict and maintain institutional legitimacy. Malen and Knapp (1997)

explained that, “Political perspectives focus on policy as a vehicle to regulate conflict over the distribution of scarce material and symbolic resources in ways that affirm the legitimacy of the system” (p. 428). The political perspective is useful to guide my research of the development of the Bridge Plan. I attempt to understand to what extent political motivations influenced the creation of an alternative to state testing requirements.

The symbolic framework of policy analysis theory sees policy as a means to create the illusion of change whether or not change actually occurs. Malen and Knapp (1997) said that, “policy viewed from symbolic perspectives is intended to shape conceptions of institutions, the problems they face, and the work they carry out” (p. 430). I use the symbolic framework to guide my research on the impact of Bridge on Central students. I am trying to understand to what extent the Bridge Plan actually works to ensure the success of all students.

### **Personal Interest**

I have worked at Central High School since the program began in August 2008. That year, our students not only needed more Bridge projects than any other school in the city, but also exceeded the need of every other school in the state. The Bridge Plan necessitated a huge shift in resources and the creation of three “Bridge Classes” as well as Saturday and after school sessions to assist students in completing projects. I became interested to see if students who completed Bridge Projects were receiving the same preparation for post-secondary education as those students who passed the High School Assessments.

Previous to working with Bridge, I taught American Government at Central High School for four years. During the years I taught American Government, students only had to sit for the American Government HSA, but were not yet required to pass it. As the change of policy came closer I was anxious to learn what the state would do about the thousands of New Town students who had not yet passed the HSAs. I hoped the new requirements would finally force the state to provide the intensive remediation that many of our students desperately needed. However, it soon became clear to me that the promises of higher standards for all students would not come to fruition. I have seen and continue to see students who have not been served by the public school system. It is for this reason that I am interested to learn exactly how the Bridge Plan has affected students at Central High School.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **CURRENT ISSUES IN URBAN EDUCATION**

#### **Introduction**

It is doubtful that the current state of inner-city schools such as those in New Town was the goal of the Supreme Court when it overturned the separate but equal doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson and legally integrated schools. In 1954, the Supreme Court made a decision that many people thought would drastically improve educational opportunity and outcome for African American students. However, over fifty years later, African American students still constitute the majority population in poor, urban schools that are plagued by problems such as inexperienced teachers, few resources, low graduation rate and dismal test scores.

The Children's Defense Fund (2010) reports that, "American schools are resegregating: 73 percent of Black students and 78 percent of Hispanic students are in predominantly minority schools" (p. G-1). As a result, many African American students are graduating and performing at much lower levels than their white counterparts. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the achievement gap. Ansalone (2009) explained this term saying,

Studies have consistently revealed that Black, Latino, and Native American students have lower scores on standardized tests than White and Asian students. This difference in performance among races has been referred to as the achievement gap and evidence of this 'gap' can be found in just about every indicator of academic achievement including grades, test scores, educational attainment and college completion. (p. 78)

Typically, the data used to demonstrate this achievement gap are standardized test scores. Howard (2010) explained that,

The primary source used to examine current achievement outcomes across multiple spectra of student performance in U.S. public schools is data from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), also referred to as ‘the nation’s report card’...According to NAEP data, persistent gaps have existed in the educational outcomes of White and certain Asian American students in comparison to their African American, Latino, and Native American counterparts across several important indicators of school success for close to 20 years. (p. 13-14)

Unfortunately, it seems that despite the advances that came about as a result of the Brown decision there is still much to be done to improve education for African American students in this country. Gardner and Miranda (2001) summarize the current situation saying,

Despite the progress made by African Americans since the Brown decision, African Americans in poor urban school districts face challenges that place them at increased risk for academic failure. These challenges include poverty, underfunded schools, less experienced teachers, lack of parent participation, and lack of community resources. Each of these challenges can and do negatively affect the performances of students. Combinations of these challenges can lead to persistent school difficulties for children. African American students continue to face lower graduation rates, higher dropout rates, lower standardized test scores, and lower attendance rates. (p. 3)

Although some claim that the achievement gap has more to do with class than it does with race, Rothstein (2004) explained that, “The black-white gap is partly the difference between the achievement of all lower-class and middle-class students, but there is an additional gap between black and white students even when the blacks and whites come from families with similar incomes” (p. 1). Rothstein further explains that although skin color itself cannot explain the existing achievement gap, there are a variety of factors sometimes common to African American students. Everything from parents’ level of education to nutrition to mobility can affect a student’s performance in school. Rothstein (2004) said,

None of these terms, however, capture the central characteristic of lower-class families: a collection of occupational, psychological, personality, health, and economic traits that interact, predicting performance not only in schools but in other institutions as well that, on average, differs from the performance of families from higher social classes. (p. 4)

Ansalone (2009) offered evidence of students' motivation as a race related factor that affects achievement. He reported that there is,

a distinct difference in how Black and White students operationlize their aspirations. Fewer black students report following through on their articulated plans. Only a few actually made calls to college admission offices, completed applications for admission or sent for and reviewed college bulletins. In short, fewer black students took active steps and had definite plans to attend college in the immediate future. (p. 79)

Not only does race seem to predict a student's level of achievement in school, many scholars have pointed to geography as a predictor of student performance. Au (2008) talks about the "zip code effect" as he observed it during his time teaching at Berkeley High School in California. He explained the phenomenon saying, "Graduation rates, grade point averages, discipline rates, dropout rates, and standardized test scores could be relatively accurately predicted by a simple analysis of where in the city of Berkeley a particular child lived" (p. 1). Au continues, saying that this trend is not particular to Berkeley alone or even specific to California rather it represents a trend across the entire U.S. where students from poor areas tend to do worse in school than students from wealthier areas. Howard (2010) said,

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 2006 there were 36.5 million people living in poverty, and that children under the age of 18 made up approximately 35.2% of that group. Hence, close to 13 million school-aged children, or one if four of all students, come from impoverished economic backgrounds to schools each day. Even more alarming is the racial and ethnic disproportionality of the poor: Approximately 24.3% of African Americans and 20.6% of Latinos lived in poverty in 2006. (p. 47)

It has also been noted that poverty seems to be more prevalent in African American communities than among other races. Kunjufu (2002) also explained that, “The working class population represents 42 percent of the African American community. The combination of 50 percent below the poverty line and 42 percent in the working class adds up to 92 percent of African American children living either below the poverty line or in the working class community. Therefore, only 8 percent of African American children come from middle-class households earning above \$50,000” (p. 3).

Although there may be a variety of factors that influence achievement in conjunction with or even independent from race and it is difficult to pinpoint just one, what we do know for sure is that the achievement gap leads to huge disadvantages for Black students, not only in school but later on in life as well. Slavin and Madden (2006) explained that, “This gap, which appears early in elementary school, develops into differences in high school graduation rates, college attendance and completion, and ultimately, the differences in income and socioeconomic status (SES) that underlie the most critical social inequities” (p. 389). This discrepancy in income results from the correlation between schooling and income. Generally speaking, the further a student continues in their studies, the greater their earnings. Ladson-Billings (2006) said, “more schooling is associated with higher earnings; that is, high school graduates earn more money than high school dropouts, and college graduates earn more than high school graduates” (p. 6). However, the chain of events that lead to dropping out of high school is generally long and complicated. As mentioned earlier, everything from testing, to living situation, to health, to the level of education one’s parents achieve affects students. Some of these factors will be explored more in-depth below.

## **Standardized Testing**

Although standardized testing has become so ingrained in our education culture that we seldom question its purpose, Baker (2008) explained that testing should serve an important purpose which is to, “allow the teachers, students, and parents to make changes in the approaches, strategies, and materials if they are not meeting the needs of the students. Intervention is employed when it is found that the students are having difficulty attaining the goals and objectives of the program” (p. 12). In this way, standardized tests can serve as a valuable resource in gauging the effectiveness of a particular curriculum or teacher or school. However, standardized tests have been used most recently for schools to demonstrate that their students have achieved success and maintain their eligibility for federal funding.

Standardized tests follow a specific process as they are being developed. A test, “is prepared for a specific grade level and for specific skill-development levels, the test designer just has a general profile of the students who will take the test” (Baker, 2008, p. 19). According to Baker, the steps in the process of standardized test development are as follows. First, test developers should investigate the need for a new test. Second, they should identify the age or grade level of the group to be tested by the assessment. Third, test developers should solicit definitions of major terms from experts in the field to guide the development if the test covers concepts, approaches, or strategies which are new and/or unique in that content area. Finally, they are to determine if the new test will be a group test or an individual test and whether the test will be norm referenced or criterion referenced. A norm referenced test compares the results of one student to a larger group. For example, it could be said that John Doe scored 96% on a test proving that his skills or



knowledge were better than 96% of other test takers. Criterion referenced tests measure results against a pre-determined standard.

Baker (2008) explained that when an assessment is considered standardized it, “means that there is an exact way or standard by which the test is to be taken.” She continued saying that it “includes a standard time limit and same directions for all students and it has been checked for accuracy and general fairness of the questions for the students who are supposed to take the test. Students have participated in the testing of the test” (p. 4). This “testing of test” as Baker called it, is generally conducted by test designers and can typically take two or more years. It is only after a test has undergone this extensive process of validation that it should be given to students for academic credit. Further, in order to ensure a higher level of fairness the test must be field-tested in rural, urban, and suburban settings.

#### **Test reliability and validity.**

In addition, Baker (2008) contended that the test must be shown to be reliable, meaning a student would score the same score twice. Further, she explained that there are several essential elements of a fair assessment. The first element of a fair assessment is clarity of directions of both the assessment and the scoring of the assessment. The second essential element is an assessment that reflects on both research and best practices. Next the assessment must be objective in that it is devoid of personal viewpoints and contains only one correct answer. The next measure of a fair assessment is that the test has been tested and is therefore considered to be valid. Finally, the assessment must be unbiased and test the appropriate skill level and vocabulary.

Wilde (2002) tells us that there are two cornerstones of accuracy in testing which are reliability and validity. We also know that tests only indicate students' knowledge and don't directly measure it. Reliability answers the questions of, will scores be consistent? and will the same measurement give the same results every time? Long established standardized tests generally have high reliability. In addition, it has been demonstrated that standardized tests that are not multiple choice, have proven very difficult to be shown reliable. Reliability is measured from 0 to 1. A score of 0 indicates a high likelihood of error while a score of 1 generally indicates high reliability. A score of .85 or higher is said to demonstrate a reasonable amount of reliability.

While reliability looks at the consistency of test scores, the second cornerstone of accuracy in testing, validity answers the question, does a test measure what it says it does? Wilde (2002) explains that, "validity is one of the two important cornerstones in establishing the quality of a test or similar measure" (p. 88). Gronlund (2002) suggests three different approaches for measuring validity; content-related evidence, criterion-related evidence, and construct-related evidence. The first of these measures, content-related evidence is fairly straight forward. It generally lends itself to the question, "How adequately does the sample of test items represent the domain of content to be measured?" (p. 137). Criterion related evidence tries to determine how accurately a test measures present performance or predicts future performance. For example, the SAT is used to predict future success of students in college. This obviously can present problems for students who were not taught the material or skill set needed to be successful on the standardized test. As a result, "a standardized achievement test may be representative of a broad range of content but be unrepresentative of the domain of

content taught in a particular school situation” (Gronlund, 2002, p. 138). Finally, construct-related evidence relates to how well can test performance be explained in terms of psychological characteristics.

### **Standardized testing and African American students.**

Although some argue that all students could be negatively affected by standardized testing, one group that has been most dramatically impacted is African American students. It is clear that African American students are affected by school inequity in a variety of ways, but one of the most politically visible and perhaps controversial of these issues is that of test scores. Many African American students have test scores drastically lower than their White counterparts. In regards to test scores, Oswald (2008) reports that, “Overall, in many areas black and Hispanic students are still struggling to catch up to white and Asian-American students” (p. 58). Au (2008) explains this as a nation-wide issue saying, “Scores on the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress show white students outscoring African American and Latino students by 26 points in scaled reading scores, by 20 points in fourth-grade mathematics scores, by 23 points in eighth-grade reading scores, and by more than 26 points in eighth-grade reading scores” (p. 4).

Not only have African American students scored lower than White students on state-mandated exams, they have scored dramatically lower on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) as well. The SAT, which is administered by the College Board is commonly taken by high school students and used as an entrance requirement for most colleges and universities. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE) Foundation (2002) reported that, “In 1976 The College Board published an analysis of the racial differences

in scores of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). At that time, the average black score was about 240 points, or 20 percent, below the average of the white score. When The College Board next examined the racial scoring gap in the early 1990s, the gap had shrunk to 200 points” (p. 15). Unfortunately, the situation has not improved any, and has actually worsened slightly. JBHE also reports that by 2003 the black-white score gap was up to 203 points. Further, they say that, “Not only are African-American scores on the SAT far below the scores of whites and Asian Americans, but they also trail the scores of every other major ethnic group in the United States including Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans” (p. 15).

The JBHE Foundation points to many reasons for why Blacks are not scoring at the same level as other races. The first reason, they argue has to do with family income level. They explain, “For both blacks and whites, as income goes up, so do test scores. Some 28 percent of all black SAT test takers came from families with annual incomes below \$20,000. Only 5 percent of white test takers came from low-income families. At the other extreme, 5 percent of all black test takers came from families with incomes of more than \$100,000. The comparable figure for white test takers is 24 percent” (p. 15). Ladson-Billings (2006) reports that, “Whites make up 88% of wealthy investor households, while Blacks and Latina/os make up only 3%” (p. 9). With SAT prep courses costing hundreds and sometimes even thousands of dollars it is easy to see why higher income would lead to higher scores.

In addition, not only are Black students typically from lower-income families, they are also often times exposed to less rigorous coursework in school. For example,

In higher level mathematics courses such as trigonometry and calculus, whites hold a large lead. In 2002, 47 percent of white SAT test takers had taken

trigonometry in high school compared to 38 percent of black test takers. Only 14 percent of black students had taken calculus, about one half as many as whites. (JBHE Foundation, 2002, p. 16)

The same trend shown in mathematics courses can also be seen with English courses.

The JBHE Foundations says that, “Nearly three quarters of whites, but only 55 percent of blacks, had taken high school courses in composition” (p. 16).

### **Standardized Testing and Maryland.**

The nation-wide situation described above is not quite so drastic in Maryland secondary schools. In 2009, throughout the state of Maryland there were 848,412 students enrolled in public education. Of those, 321,650 were African American while 385,782 were White. The 2010 Maryland Report Card shows that in 2009, 99.9% of Maryland 12<sup>th</sup> graders met High School Assessment requirements. While 100% of white students met requirements, 99.7% of African American students met requirements. In New Town, 82,866 students were enrolled. 72,783 students were African American and 6,492 were White. In New Town, 99.7% of all 12<sup>th</sup> graders met HSA requirements. As in the Maryland state statistic, while 100% of white students met requirements, 99.7% of African American students met requirements.

### **Alternatives to standardized testing.**

Although there are certainly no shortage of critiques on standardized testing, Phelps (2005) makes the point that critics of standardized testing do not compare it to alternatives simply to an impossible standard of testing perfection. However, one alternative that has been discussed at length is scrapping standardized testing and replacing it with authentic or alternative assessment. Some argue that there is no way for standardized tests to accurately measure student knowledge. Many are in favor of

authentic assessment which assesses students in the completion of real world tasks. Proponents of authentic assessment will often use the example of a pilot's test to press their point. "After all, who would want to be a passenger in an airplane piloted by someone who had never before flown a plane, but had done very well on a paper-and-pencil exam about piloting?" (Phelps, 2005, p. 62).

Rather than assessing a narrow group of topics one time, authentic assessment focuses on a formative approach that drives instruction and improves learning. Many states such as Connecticut and Rhode Island have already begun to demonstrate success through the use of alternative assessment. Arguments against authentic assessment contend that it is more expensive, more time is needed to conduct the assessment, and that it is difficult to implement on a large scale.

### **Graduation Rate**

The gap that exists between Black and White students in test scores has contributed to a lower graduation rate for Black students as well. According to the Maryland State Department of Education, the graduation rate is defined as "the percentage of students who receive a Maryland high school diploma during the reported school year, on a state level as well as the district and school level. This is calculated by dividing the number of high school graduates by the sum of the dropouts for grades 9 through 12, in consecutive years, plus the number of high school graduates" (Maryland Report Card, 2010). Because graduation rate is used to calculate AYP, a school can 'make' AYP simply by improving the graduation rate .01 from the previous year. Not only is the graduation rate used to determine a state's AYP, the Alliance For Excellent Education reports that, "Graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of whether or not

the nation's public school system is doing what it is intended to do: enroll, engage, and educate youth to be productive members of society" (Understanding High School Graduation Rates in Maryland, 2009).

According to Swanson's 2009 report, "Cities in Crisis," nationwide, white students graduate at a rate of 77.6% while the rate for black students is only 55.3%. In 2009, the graduation rate overall for the state of Maryland was 85.24% (Maryland Report Card, 2009). This is broken down to 90.02% of White students graduating while only 79.05% of African American students graduated. Swanson (2009) highlights a situation in New Town even more bleak with a city-wide graduation rate of only 41.5%. Meanwhile, MSDE reports that the 2009 graduation rate for students in New Town at 62.69%. MSDE also reports that while White students graduated at a rate of 66.2%, African American students had a slightly lower rate of 62.22%.

Although Maryland State reported a graduation rate of 85% for 2009, the U.S. Department of Education came up with an 80% graduation rate for Maryland in 2009. The Alliance for Excellent Education reports this can happen because, "Although the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires states to use a particular graduation rate calculation, poor definitions and inconsistent implementation have resulted in a range of confusing graduation rate calculations that do not provide the accurate measurement intended by the law" (Understanding High School Graduation Rates in Maryland, 2009).

Not only is there a significant gap between the graduation rates of Black and White students, evidence shows that there is also a significant difference in the graduation rates of urban and suburban students. Swanson explains that New Town shows the second greatest gap nationwide between the graduation rates in urban and

suburban schools. The statistics show that suburban schools have a 39.2% higher graduation rate than urban schools in New Town.

In direct correlation to the graduation rate is the dropout rate. The dropout rate in Maryland is computed by dividing the number of dropouts by the total number of students in grades 9-12 served by the school. A dropout is defined as any student who leave school for any reason, except death, before graduation or completion of a Maryland approved educational program and who are not known to enroll in another school or state-approved program during the current school year. The year is defined as July through June and includes students dropping out over the summer and students dropping out of evening high school and other alternative programs. Students who reenter school during the same year in which they dropped out of school are not counted as dropouts (Maryland Report Card, 2010).

The Children's Defense Fund (2010) report explains the severity of the dropout problem especially for African American students saying, "46 percent of Black high school students, 39 percent of Hispanic and 11 percent of White students attend the 2,000 'dropout factories' across our country, where less than 60 percent of the freshman class will graduate in four years with a regular diploma" (p. G-1). The 2010 Maryland report shows that overall, the state of Maryland had a 2.8% dropout rate. The statistic for White students was 2.16% while African American students dropped out at a rate of 3.62%. In New Town the overall dropout rate is reported as 6.2% with 4.92% for White students and 6.39% for African American students.

In addition to having an adverse effect on the student's lifetime earnings, The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that dropouts can be extremely costly for states



as well. “Dropouts from the class of 2008 will cost Maryland almost \$5.6 billion in lost wages over their lifetimes” (Understanding High School Graduation Rates in Maryland, 2008).

### **Attendance**

It is easy to see the correlation between test scores and attendance. Students who have good attendance, and therefore are present for more instruction time are much more likely to achieve success on standardized tests, than are students who are frequently absent. The Maryland State Department of Education calculates the average daily attendance rate by dividing the total number of students who are present each day during the school year by the total number of students enrolled during the year (Maryland Report Card, 2010). Sundius and Farneth (2008) explain the effect attendance can have on achievement saying, “students who miss school are losing out on critical academic and social learning opportunities. And as they fall behind, students disengage from school and become much less likely to graduate” (p. 01).

Rothstein (2004) explained the connection between social class and students’ attendance saying, “The growing unaffordability of adequate housing for low-income families is another social class characteristic that has a demonstrable effect on average achievement. Children whose families have difficulty finding stable housing are more likely to be mobile, and student mobility is an important cause of low student achievement” (p. 2). Another issue that causes extended absence for students is suspension or disciplinary action. “Black students are than three times as likely as White of Asian/Pacific Islander and twice as likely as Hispanic students to be suspended from

school” (p. G-1). In the state of Maryland, 8.176% of Black students were suspended in 2006 while only 5.760% of White students were suspended the same year. (p. G-11).

However, not only are students absent from school simply because of illness or suspension, a variety of other factors may come into play. Sundius and Farneth (2008) explained, “Nationwide, students are absent from school in large numbers and for a myriad of well-known reasons, including illness, suspension, and truancy. But they also miss school for less obvious reasons, such as poor transportation, fears of personal safety, disengagement, unwelcoming schools, school policies that push them out, and family or work related responsibilities” (p. 01).

In 2009, the attendance rate for all of Maryland was 92.1%, and 82.6% for New Town. Sundius and Farneth (2008) said that, “Among districts in Maryland, New Town has the lowest average daily attendance and highest truancy rate” (p. 1).

### **Tracking**

Another issue many urban African American students face is that of over-representation in Special Education and underrepresentation in advanced courses. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* required schools to desegregate, segregation continued in many schools in the form of tracking. Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) reported that, “tracking reproduces a form of de facto segregation by placing White and Asian students in the highest academic tracks, and African American and Latino students in lower tracks” (p. 28). Oakes (2005) reported, “Evidence that the nation’s schooling history was replete with ‘scientific’ arguments for, and philosophical defenses of, racism was not news. That children of color were consigned to lower-ability classes was obvious to anyone who had ever stepped into racially mixed school” (p. ix).

This continued for many years until the 1990s. Oakes (2005) explained the progression of tracking, “By the early 1990s, policymakers and national opinion leaders were responding to the growing concern about and evidence of tracking’s harms by recommending that schools abolish it” (p. ix). Many argued that tracking showed no benefits for neither higher-level nor lower-level students. Oakes (2005) said, “We can be fairly confident that bright students are *not* held back when they are in mixed classrooms. And we can be quite certain that the deficiencies of slower students are *not* more easily remediated when they are grouped together” (p. 7). In addition, there seem to be some very serious negative effects for students who are tracked. Oakes (2005) reported that, “Low-track students have been found to participate less in extracurricular activities at school, to exhibit more school and classroom misconduct, and to be involved more often in delinquent behavior outside of school. Lower-track students are more alienated from school and have higher drop-out rates” (p. 9). Although some schools did stop tracking in the traditional sense, African American students continue to be over-represented in lower-level classes. Oakes (2005) said,

Many high schools have eliminated the dead-end, general track, and some now have multiple levels of classes that serve students bound for more and less selective types of colleges, allowing schools to claim that all of their students are college prep. In almost all schools, choice has become an increasingly salient factor in placing students into tracks, shifting the responsibility for differentiated opportunities, resources, and expectations from the school to the students. With choice, students in lower-level classes have only themselves to blame...Low-income students and students of color still suffer disproportionately from these negative effects, both because they are tracked disproportionately into the lowest classes in racially mixed schools and also because they are more likely to attend racially isolated schools where lower-level classes predominate. Thus, through tracking, schools continue to replicate existing inequality along lines of race and social class and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of social and economic inequality. (p. x)

Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) reiterated this saying, “Significant research has shown that tracking has detrimental effects on students, especially those in the low academic tracks, because lower-level courses offer a much less challenging curriculum, and their pedagogy emphasizes basic skills rather than higher-order thinking and critical reasoning” (p. 27).

Not only are African American students over-represented in lower-level classes, they are also over-represented in Special Education as well. Brooks and Johnson (2007) elaborated on this saying, “Nationally, African-American students are over-represented in 9 of 13 disability categories and, in mental retardation and developmental delay, constitute more than twice their share of the overall student population” (p.18). African American children in particular are overrepresented in the special education categories of mental retardation and behavior disorders. Gardner and Miranda (2001) explained that “African American students are more likely to be placed in classes for persons that are mildly mentally retarded (MMR) or have serious emotional disturbances (SED), and less likely to be placed in gifted education classes than are European American students” (p. 241). African Americans are about 16% of the school-age population yet are 34% of children receiving services under the SED and MMR developmental delay categories, respectively (Office of Special Education Programs, 2000). Further, nationally 1.3% of African American school-age children are labeled as having behavior disorders, a rate twice that of their European American peers (Office of Special Education Programs, 2000).

In the state of Maryland there were 10.3% of students receiving special education services in 2009 while in New Town 14.7% received services. In regards to the cause of

this over-representation in special education some cite test bias while Brooks and Johnson (2007) explain that, “several non-testing factors- such as cultural bias, school politics, the quality of instruction in the regular-education classroom, the power imbalance between parents and school personnel on the evaluation team, and the classroom-management skills of the referring teacher” as other possible factors (p. 18).

### **Teachers**

One correlation that is easy to see is that between teacher quality and funding. We can clearly see the relationship between wealthier schools and more qualified teachers. We know that, “In Maryland, 85 percent of classes in wealthy schools are taught by highly qualified teachers, versus just 58 percent of classes in poor schools” (Brooks and Johnson, 2007, p. 5). According to the 2010 Maryland Report Card, only 8.3% of classes across the state of Maryland are taught by teachers who are not highly qualified. In New Town the figure jumps to 30.5%. In addition, while 59.8% of teachers throughout Maryland State have an Advanced Professional Certification, only 41.9% of teachers in New Town have earned an APC. Further, 5.1% of teachers in New Town are only conditionally certified which means they have taken no coursework in education while only 1.9% of teachers in all of Maryland have conditional certification.

In addition to differences in qualifications, there are also huge differences in years of teaching experience. Brooks and Johnson (2007) also report that, “Twenty percent of teachers in poor schools have three or fewer years of teaching experience, compared with 11 percent of teachers in affluent schools” (p. 6). Disparity in teacher quality is a problem that continues to plague inner-city, predominately African American schools and seems to hit minority students the hardest. Brooks and Johnson continue saying, “Classes

in high poverty schools are 77 percent more likely to be assigned to an out-of-field teacher than classes in low-poverty schools” (p. 5). Finally, Brooks and Johnson say that, “Before the No Child Left Behind Act demanded stronger teacher qualifications, 22 percent of all core academic secondary classes in Maryland were taught by teachers without a major- or even a minor- in the subject they taught. In high-minority schools, the number of teachers teaching out-of-field jumped to 35 percent” (p. 5).

Not only do many city schools struggle to find qualified teachers, but they also struggle to keep them there. Many teachers leave after the first couple of months, not being able to handle the added stress of teaching in a city school with limited resources. Brooks and Johnson (2007) reported that, “Poor schools lose more than one-fifth of their faculty each year” (p. 6). It is not uncommon to see classrooms without any teacher at all or one that must be taught by a substitute. Barton and Coley (2009) explain that, “The gap in the percentage of teachers who leave before the end of the school year is very large... In 2007, 52 percent of Black and 44 percent of Hispanic eighth graders had a teacher who left before the end of the school year, compared with 28 percent of White eighth graders” (p. 14). This means that, on average, White students are receiving more instructional time than Black or Hispanic students.

Another issue that may hinder students’ achievement is teachers’ lack of experience and knowledge in working with minority students. Kinjufu (2010) explained that, “The future of the African American population primarily lies in the hands of White female teachers. Ninety-three percent of the American teaching staff is White. Eighty-three percent of elementary school teachers are White females; the percentage of White males increases in junior and senior high schools” (p. 17). Many argue that White

teachers are less able to relate to their Black students therefore, putting those students at a disadvantage. Howard (2010) reported that, “One of the more pressing issues that requires further analysis is the degree to which teachers who are largely White, middle class, monolingual, and female are effectively prepared to teach in diverse settings” (p. 41). Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) elaborated on this phenomenon saying, “in the approximately 55 years since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, African American students have been taught primarily by White teachers” (p. 61).

Because the majority of people going into the teaching profession continue to be White females, some say teaching preparation classes should incorporate topics such as cultural sensitivity. Howard (2010) suggested that, “Both the traditional means of preparing teachers-- which frequently utilize superficial ways of addressing diversity—and discussions incorporating issues such as race and culture in the classroom must be significantly improved if teachers are to be more effective with today’s diverse student population” (p. 43). Despite, these recommendations, it seems that cultural training continues to fall by the wayside. Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) explained, “President Obama’s proposed education policy is designed to better prepare teachers for their jobs. However, nowhere in the plan is it mentioned how the issue of preparing teachers culturally will be addressed. It is clear that the concept of developing teachers with deeper, authentic cultural understanding of minority groups is still an issue that needs to be brought to the attention of schools, administrators, and policymakers” (p. 7).

Kinjufu (2002) also emphasizes an additional consideration in regards to teachers’ race which is class. He believes that middle-class teachers may have a difficult time relating to low-income students. He said, “One of the major conflicts between middle-

class values and low-income values is the dichotomy between ‘we’ and ‘me.’ Middle-class values encourage individuals to separate themselves from the group to pursue their personal aspirations” (p. 5). This difference can have important implications for how teachers present curriculum and view their students.

Although there is research to support that notion that race and class do play a role in students’ success, Kinjufu (2002) said that, “I believe that the most important factor impacting the academic achievement of African American children is not the race or gender of the teacher but the teacher’s expectations” (p. 17). In addition to high expectations, Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) say that it is also important for teachers of African American students to, “teach to create an atmosphere that is more conducive to learning by building on their students’ cultural values and beliefs, engage students in learning from materials in which they see themselves reflected in the text, and focus on antiracist curricula that empower African American children and their families” (p. 75). Finally, students must know that their teachers care about them, no matter what their race. Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) explained that, “we want to emphasize that White teachers who care about African American students also can support their school success and literacy achievement” (p. 62).

## **Funding**

So what accounts for such drastic differences in resources, teachers, and ultimately test scores? School funding is one of the most prominent areas of inequity in schools. This stems mostly from the fact that property taxes constitute a major source of funding for schools. Jonathan Kozol (1991) offers comparisons of schools in neighboring areas that show as much as a \$6,000 difference in per pupil spending. For



example, “Average expenditures per pupil in the city of New York in 1987 were some \$5,500. In the highest spending suburbs of New York (Great Neck or Manhasset, for example, on Long Island) funding levels rose above \$11,000, with the highest districts in the state at \$15,000” (p. 83). Not only can funding vary greatly within the state, there are often times discrepancies within an individual city as well. Ansalone (2009) reported that,

many children living in inner-cities attend public schools in districts where tax assessments have been eroded by an exodus of middle-class families to the suburbs. For decades, Americans have funded schools through property taxes. Since poorer districts have an abundance of less-expensive real estate, which results in lower property assessments, these districts receive less state funding. Because of this practice, schools in economically advantaged areas have greater resources to provide better schools and higher paid teachers for their students. (p. 12)

This means that students with the most need are often times receiving the worst services. Ladson-Billings (2006) explains that, “In present-day dollars, the funding disparities between urban schools and their suburban counterparts present a telling story about the value we place on the education of different groups” (p. 6).

However, many claim the achievement gap has nothing to do with money and that the government has more than adequately funded all schools. Ansalone (2009) explains that, “This faith in education has led our nation to allocate over \$600 billion dollars each year to develop one of the most extensive educational systems in the world” (p. 3).

According to the U.S. Census, Maryland is currently one of the richest states in the U.S. with an annual median household income of over \$70,482 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Maryland also ranks as having one of the lowest poverty rates in the nation—8.2% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

The U.S. Department of Education Budget Service (2008) reported that “2009 Budget Good News for Maryland’s Children.” They report that Federal Education funding in Maryland is up 70.5% since President Bush took office. Furthermore, they claim that much of the funding is aimed to help Maryland’s neediest children with Title I funding up \$64.9 million dollars compared to 2001 levels. Finally, Federal Special Education funding in Maryland has also risen \$84.7 million since 2001. Currently, Maryland ranks 11<sup>th</sup> in per pupil expenditures with an average of \$10,909 spent between 2005-2006 (State of America’s Children, 2010, p. G-9).

Although Maryland has made huge gains in equitable funding, the situation was not always so positive. In 2002, The Maryland General Assembly passed the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act also known as the Thornton law. The 2002 Act stipulated that the state ensure that every school district has the funds to provide an adequate education based on cost studies. Additionally, school districts must include programs for at-risk students. This act not only set in motion more equitable finance for Maryland school students, but it also served as an example for many other states. The approved measures made Maryland one of “only a few states that has adopted a modern, standards-based education finance system, that is, one built on a cost analysis of the resources needed to ensure the capacity of schools to help students meet state academic standards.” (Hunter, 2002). The bipartisan Thornton Commission analyzed Maryland’s education system and proposed a large infusion on new money into the highest-poverty districts. These recommendations garnered broad support and are being implemented.” It was clear that the Act had an impact on school funding as the State Department of

Education funding climbed from \$40,985,327 in 1995 to \$62,394,444 in 2000 to \$79,238,168 in 2003.

Although the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act did mean a huge victory for school finance reform advocates, there were still many problems yet to come. The state's low income, high-minority districts, namely New Town continued to struggle. The Education Trust reported that 2003 education funding in Maryland showed an average of \$8,033 per-pupil funding in the lowest-poverty districts with only \$7,221 being spent per-pupil in the highest-poverty districts. This left high-poverty districts with an \$812 per-pupil funding gap. In addition per-pupil funding in low-minority districts surpassed that of high-minority districts by \$322.

One problem that has clearly led to decreased funds for New Town students is the widespread corruption it has faced through the years. Not only is the New Town budget inadequate to handle all of its problems, recent headlines regarding the New Town Public School System point to the fact that the money may not be ending up in the right hands. In one case a former facilities supervisor for the system is currently serving time for the role he played in a long-running scheme to steal from the school system. A New Town newspaper reported that the supervisor demanded money and perks from various contractors in exchange for doing business with the school system. Unfortunately, he was not alone in scamming the system. Countless other incidents of misappropriation of city school funds have surfaced over the years. Even though many lawmakers have fought to ensure equitable school finance, these incidents of misappropriation mean slower progress for city students.

## **Health**

Even with highly qualified teachers, small class sizes and a variety of resources, students plagued by chronic health issues will have a hard time excelling academically. Rothstein (2004) explains saying, “Many social and economic manifestations of social class also have important implications for learning. Health differences are among them. Lower-class children, on average, have poorer vision than middle-class children, partly because of prenatal conditions, partly because of how their eyes are trained as infants. They have poorer oral hygiene, more lead poisoning, more asthma, poorer nutrition, less adequate pediatric care, more exposure to smoke, and a host of other problems” (p. 3). Many children, who face health concerns early on in life, have a difficult time overcoming them to become successful in school. The State of America’s Children report (2010) reports, “Without a healthy start in life, a child can fall behind developmentally and have trouble catching up, socially, emotionally and academically” (p. E-1).

Like so many other obstacles to success, health problems are much more likely to occur in African American children. The State of America’s Children (2010) reports several startling statistics. For example, “Black babies are about twice as likely as White or Hispanic babies to be born at low birth weight and more than twice as likely as White babies to die before their first birthday” (p. E-1). Further, “there have been more than three and a half times as many cases of AIDS in Black children under 13 as among White children of the same age” (p. E-1). Finally, “Black teens are 26 percent more likely and Hispanic teens 32 percent more likely than White teens to be overweight or obese” (p. E-1).

Even though obesity is more common in African American teens than in White teens, African American students are also more likely to suffer from poor nutrition. Barton and Coley (2009) explain that, “The U.S. Department of Agriculture conducts regular surveys of food insecurity. Households are classified as ‘food insecurity’ and ‘very low food security among children.’ In 2005, 29 percent and 24 percent, respectively, of Black and Hispanic children were food insecure, compared with 12 percent of White children” (p. 25). They further explain that there is much research that shows a correlation between poor nutrition and low test scores.

Another issue that has had a particularly devastating effect on African American students and in particular those in New Town is that of lead poisoning. Barton and Coley report that, “Children in minority and low-income families have a higher risk of exposure to lead from living in old houses or around old industrial areas with contaminated buildings and soil” (p. 23). Elevated lead levels lead to serious behavior problems as well as learning disabilities that have a direct effect on students’ performance in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

With so many of the most devastating issues more common among African American students, it is easy to see why the achievement gap persists. A typical African American child is more likely to be born at a low birth weight, have poor nutrition, move frequently between schools, be taught by someone who is not highly qualified, and attend a school with fewer resources. We see then how all of this translates into poor attendance, low test scores, and a smaller chance of graduating. However, schools are not simply charged with the task of figuring out the cause of a problem, but also how to

solve it. It is clear that if we aim to close the achievement gap between black and white students, there are a variety of issues that must be addressed.

## **THEORIES USED TO EXAMINE THE CURRENT ISSUES IN URBAN EDUCATION**

### **Introduction**

Although budget differences may contribute in part to the achievement gap that persists between black and white students, many have argued that social and cultural differences also play a role. Ansalone (2009) explained that, “although educational opportunities have become more equally distributed, social inequalities persist” (p. 4). So why exactly is it that some students consistently achieve academic success while others do not? Gordon (2006) describes eight different types of capital which all contribute to a child’s success in school. This list includes health (physical developmental integrity, health and nutritional condition), financial (income, wealth, family, community, and societal economic resources available for education), human (social competence, tacit knowledge, and other education-derived abilities as personal or family assets), social (social network relationships, social norms, cultural styles and values), polity (societal membership, social concern, public commitment, political economy), personal (disposition, attitudes, aspirations, efficacy, sense of power), institutional (quality of and access to educational and socializing institutions), and finally pedagogical (supports for appropriate educational treatment in family, school and community). Ansalone (2009) offered further support for the notion of social and cultural capital as primary determinants of students’ success saying, “school facilities did

not play an important role in the development of academic achievement. Rather, the most important determinants of school success were family background and individual student attitude. Children's social environment including the attitudes and behaviors of family members and their willingness to participate in the education of their children figured much more significantly in how well the child achieved" (p. 43).

Three theories which include some of the different kinds of the capital discussed above have been instrumental in shaping the dialogue surrounding student achievement and the gap that exists between black and white students. These theories are Social Capital Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Cultural Capital Theory. Social Capital Theory looks at the link between social capital (relationships, family structure, social circle) and achievement while Critical Race Theory analyzes the various ways in which racial inequity effects society. Finally, Cultural Capital Theory looks at the connection between culture (usually elite culture) and achievement. All three theories have been useful in helping to explain many of the issues that contribute to the achievement gap.

### **Social Capital Theory**

Social Capital Theory, in its infancy was discussed primarily by James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu and later expanded upon by others such as Lareau and Dika. Stanton-Salazar also continued this work by developing a framework for studying racial minorities and mainstream institutions. Portes (1998) explains that, Social Capital Theory asserts that, "membership in certain groups provides resources and that social capital eventually amounts to economic capital." (p. 4). Ansalone (2009) reiterated the importance of social capital saying,

From the very beginning of life, families play a critical role in the socialization of their children and are essentially responsible for their evolving personality and

identity. Families monitor behavior, transmit values and take an active part in the development of language. They provide affectionate and loving relationships and have a dramatic impact on aspiration, self-efficacy and motivation. By so doing, they provide the child with resiliency to adversity as well as the inner belief that one can achieve academically. Without the support of family, children may begin to doubt their ability to succeed or even fail to perceive education as a vehicle for advancement. (p. 63)

Although social capital is not tangible, it represents a potential network of relationships that can provide invaluable opportunities. In this way, social capital depends on others rather than self for success. W.E. Baker defined the concept as, “a resource that actors derive from specific social structures and then use to pursue their interest” (Portes, 1998, p. 6). Lin (2006) describes how social capital can benefit a person, “For one, it facilitates the flow of information. In the usual imperfect market situations, social ties located in certain strategic locations and/or hierarchical positions (and thus better informed about market needs and demands) can provide an individual with useful information about opportunities and choices otherwise not available” (p. 7). This network of information can be extremely valuable not only later in life, as a person searches for employment but also as a student navigates through their education.

### **Social Capital Theory and education.**

Although Social Capital Theory began as a sociological theory, Lareau applied Social Capital Theory to schooling saying that schools can serve to either accept or decline an individual’s social and cultural capital. Dika and Singh (2002), explain the shift in Social Capital Theory saying that, “it is increasingly proposed by political and educational leaders as a solution to persistent educational and social problems” (p. 32). Ansalone (2009) explained the importance of social capital on education saying, “school failure in Black and minority children was probably caused by the social environment—



their families, their culture. Schools could do little to reduce the ever increasing gap between White and Black student achievement” (p. 47). Dika and Singh highlight the relationship between social capital and educational attainment. They cite the following factors as having the greatest influence on school performance: nontraditional family structure, number of siblings, parental expectations and aspirations, parent monitoring, number of moves, church attendance, involvement in other activities, parent communication with school, intergenerational closure, number of friends known by parent, parent involvement in the school, seeing close friends weekly, and friends’ educational expectations. Ansalone (2009) said, “simply stated, it stresses the belief that social networks have value and that these networks can increase the productivity of students” (p. 69).

In addition to economic benefits, Portes (1998) claims that social capital can work, “as a predictor of, among others, school attrition and academic performance, children’s intellectual development, sources of employment and occupational attainment, juvenile delinquency and its prevention, and immigrant and ethnic enterprise” (p. 9). As a result, a student’s social capital has often times been used as a predictor for their success in school. Portes explains the connection social capital has to education saying this can affect students from low income families in two ways. The first of these ways is, “the inherited poverty of black parents, which would be transmitted to their children in the form of lower material resources and educational opportunities; second, the poorer connections of young black workers to the labor market and their lack of information about opportunities” (p. 4). Rothstein (2004) gives an additional example saying, “parents of different social classes often have different styles of childrearing, different

ways of disciplining their children, different ways of communicating expectations, and even different ways of reading to their children” (p. 2).

Portes (1998) asserts that there are three functions of social capital. These three functions are; as a source of social control, as a source of family support, and as a source of benefits through extra familial networks. He explains the difference a two parent family can make on a child saying, “Intact families and those where one parent has the primary task of rearing children possess more of this form of social capital than do single-parent families or those where both parents work” (p. 10). Portes continues saying that single-parent families (where less social capital is present) are more likely to occur in African American families than in white families. “Such networks are much feebler in the case of black youth because of the scarcity in the adult generation. Thrown back on their own resources, black adolescents are seldom able to compete successfully for good regular jobs; thus they become available for alternative forms of income earning” (p. 14).

It is not hard to see then, how African American students, already at a social capital disadvantage do not perform as well as their white counterparts in school.

Kunjufu (2002) pointed to a number of issues common to African American students saying,

In 66 percent of African American households, the father is not present. The implications from an educational standpoint are numerous. Most PTA meetings of parent-staff conferences will only have the mother in attendance. If she works a shift that conflicts with the school’s schedule, the child may go without adult representation. There is only so much homework assistance that one parent can provide to several children. (p. 4)

Not only can the lack of social capital hinder children, it can also foster the creation of an alternative type of social capital that acts to further isolate its recipients from mainstream society. Portes (1998) explains that inner-city blacks in Baltimore have a very dense

social network that cuts-off the outside and supports alternative cultural lifestyles.

Although it is certainly possible to look at social capital in terms of the benefits it may provide, it is more commonly associated with the negative consequences it may bring.

Portes (1998) explains the four negative consequences of social capital which include, “exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward leveling norms” (p. 15). The fourth of these outcomes seems to be the most applicable to education. This occurs when low expectation become so embedded in a particular social group’s culture that not achieving is widely accepted and perhaps supported. Portes continues saying, “there are situations in which group solidarity is cemented by common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society...the result is downward leveling norms that operate to keep members of a downtrodden group in place and force the more ambitious to escape from it” (p. 15). Therefore, the elements that are keeping members of a “downtrodden” group from being successful become the elements they most identify with and therefore are passed on to future generations.

A common example is that of it being “uncool” or “acting white” for African American students to be successful in school. Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) explained the conflict that many African American students face saying, “The identity crisis that emanates from the acting White/acting Black phenomenon can be a real issue for many African American students. Teachers and parents may not be aware of the identity tensions that African American students struggle with on a daily basis in school, because many keep these emotions to themselves” (p. 47). Kunjufu (2002) explains the struggle saying, “I’ve also found that all African American children, regardless of

income, are susceptible to the peer group, which all too often discourages academic achievement” (p. 4). Some of what it means to “act Black” or “act White” seems to be tied up in language. Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) explained,

For these African American students, success in the academic realm means ‘acting White’ and acquiring and enacting specific behaviors, norms, and conventions that are perceived as consonant with ‘White or mainstream’ culture, while success in the community realm emanates from a close alignment to what they perceive as ‘Black culture.’ As a result, in some African American peer groups, those students who strive to succeed academically, speak ‘conventional’ English, and engage in reading and writing at school are viewed as ‘acting White,’ while those students who are popular, are disengaged from school literacy, and speak other dialects (e.g., African American English Vernacular) are perceived as ‘acting Black.’ (p. 48)

This belief, although fading in recent years, has served to keep African American students in a position of academic inferiority. The effects of this can be seen in the lower graduation rate and lower rate of those continuing on to higher education prevalent in the African American community. Dika and Singh (2002) summarize fourteen studies concerning the relationship between social capital and achievement test scores. They say that, “achievement on these tests is negatively associated with (large) family size, moving and non-traditional family structure. Achievement is usually positively related to parent-teen discussion, parents’ expectation, parent monitoring, parent-school involvement, and intergenerational closure” (p. 41). As a result, students from stable, involved families are more likely to excel academically than those that are from less stable family situations.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory was born out of Critical Legal studies, which was developed in response to events such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Viet Nam war. Taylor (2009) explains that Critical Race Theory (CRT) “is marked by a number of specific insights and observations, including society’s acceptance of racism as ordinary, the

phenomenon of white's allowing black progress when it also promotes their interests (interest convergence), the importance of understanding the historic effects of European colonialism, and the preference for the experiences of oppressed peoples (narrative) over the 'objective' opinions of whites" (p. 4). In this way CRT seeks to focus on blacks' interpretations of their own experiences rather than the re-telling of it by others.

The first of the pillars of CRT (society's acceptance of racism as ordinary) purports that not only is racism rampant and common in daily life but, "the assumptions of white superiority are so ingrained in political, legal, and educational structures that they are almost unrecognizable" (p. 4). This means that because racism has become so commonplace in daily life, it seldom warrants additional attention. In regards to the second pillar (allowing black progress only when it simultaneously serves the interest of whites) Taylor (2009) provides a startling example of this explaining the impetus behind the *Brown v. Board* ruling which outlawed segregation. He asserts that the *Brown* decision was made primarily because of heightening foreign policy concern. He explains, "The US Justice Department filed an amicus brief asserting that, because of foreign policy concerns desegregation was in the national interest" (p. 6). In addition, "Despite the dramatic heralding of *Brown's* triumph, and the public relations benefit to the US government, there was not end to segregation in education" (p. 6). Even though there was a formal end to segregation on paper, the government did little to enforce this in practice. Today, more than fifty years after the *Brown* decision, schools remain largely divided on racial lines; between blacks and whites, rich and poor, urban and suburban.

The third pillar of Critical Race Theory highlights the importance of understanding the historic effects of European colonialism and the impact the past continues to have today. One way to combat the injustices that persist is to bring more information to those in positions of superiority. Taylor (2009) explains that many white people do not even realize that a phenomenon of inequality continues to exist. “Because whites thus live in a world they do not understand, their exposure to the viewpoints of people of color can trigger powerful emotions, ranging from denial, anger, and defensiveness to shock, surprise, and sadness. Admittedly, this world was created, crafted, and globally institutionalized by their forbearers and unwittingly, unknowingly, and without express permission benefit politically, economically, and educationally” (p. 7). CRT therefore serves an important purpose in fostering the discussion which will bring awareness to all people.

The fourth pillar of Critical Race Theory (the preference for the experiences of oppressed people’s narrative over the objective opinion of whites) seeks to shed light on the perceptions of members of minority races. Taylor (2009) says that, “Critical race theory scholarship is grounded in a sense of reality that reflects the distinctive experiences of people of color” (p. 8). In order to accomplish its goal of affirming the experiences of people of color CRT relies most heavily on the use of narrative, and claims a distinctively minority voice. Further, not only is CRT grounded in minority narrative, it “embraces this subjectivity of perspective and openly acknowledges that perceptions of truth, fairness, and justice reflect the mindset of the knower” (p. 8).

Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that, “Critical Race Theory sprang up in the mid 1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell (an African American) and Alan Freeman

(white), both of whom were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (p. 20). Ladson-Billings highlights the four main tenants of CRT. She explains that: 1. Racism is a real and present part of American life, 2. CRT believes that using storytelling to highlight the experiences of the oppressed, 3. There must be sweeping change, and 4. Whites have always been the primary beneficiaries of Civil Rights legislation and most recipients of affirmative action legislation have been white women who in turn generally work to support white families. Throughout history, many laws which appear to have been made to benefit African Americans only do so coincidentally. One example Ladson-Billings (2009) cites is Arizona’s unwillingness to recognize Dr. Martin Luther King day until the NBA threatened to pull the super bowl.

#### **Critical Race Theory and education.**

Although CRT had its roots in legal studies, it has made seemingly natural progression into the field of education. The “re-segregation of most schools, and the growing racial achievement gap” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9) have raised serious questions of the role race plays in education. Because CRT is based on the narrative framework it can be used not only as a starting point for discussion and dialogue but also as a “wellspring of tools for action” (p. 9). Further, CRT has been applied to education because, “CRT scholars believe that racial analysis can be used to deepen understanding of the educational barriers for people of color, as well as exploring how these barriers are resisted and overcome” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9).

In addition, Critical Race Theory has become more prevalent as schools have become increasingly resegregated. Taylor (2009) explains this phenomenon saying, “Urban schools have seen their proud history of racial integration fade as middle class

families of all ethnicities seek a more promising future in our area's many private and parochial schools, leaving schools of concentrated poverty, a myriad of social problems and complex inter-group dynamics" (p. 11). In this way we can easily see the connection between Critical Race Theory and Social Capital Theory. Because schools where high concentrations of minority students typically attend are generally lower performing, those students who do excel often times leave seeking greener pastures. This leaves under performing schools at an even greater social capital deficit.

Ladson-Billings (2009) explains Critical Race Theory in relation to education, "If we look at the way that public education is currently configured it is possible to see the ways that CRT can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience" (p. 28). Additionally, Critical Race Theory can examine everything from curriculum to funding in terms of racial inequity. Curriculum in itself can be a very expansive topic and can encompass not only the content which is embedded in it but also the rigor and access of curriculum across racial lines. This is most often seen when instruction can often times focus on remediation for African American students instead of the enrichment typically found in whiter, wealthier schools. Because of the low test scores that typically plague schools with a high minority population, these students are frequently subjected to constant review of already taught material rather than higher-level content.

Another component of education that has been carefully evaluated by CRT scholars is assessment. Just as Critical Race Theory scholars would argue that instruction can often times be focused on deficiency or remediation for African American students, Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that, "For the critical race theorist, intelligence testing



has been a movement to legitimize African American student deficiency under the guise of scientific rationalism” (p. 30). Further, Ladson-Billings asserts that, “In the classroom, a dysfunctional curriculum coupled with a lack of instructional innovation (or persistence) adds up to poor performance on traditional assessment measures” (p. 30). Although standardized test results may prove that students do not know the material on a given test, they do not speak to a student’s knowledge of capabilities in any other area. In this way, standardized testing seems to highlight students’ deficits instead of focusing on their improvement.

According to Taylor (2009), CRT holds firm to two main objectives: to study the history of white supremacy in the U.S. and to change the power dynamic that currently exists. Not only does it empower the oppressed but it can also serve to “catalyze cognitive conflict” in the mind of the oppressor. Although Critical Race Theory identifies many significant issues in society, CRT focuses not necessarily on radical change but rather on a resistance and refusal to remain quiet. As well as promoting efforts of resistance, CRT additionally aims to “inform educational strategies” (Taylor, 2009, p. 12).

### **Cultural Capital Theory**

Cultural capital theory, which is commonly credited to Bourdieu’s 1977 work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, makes the claim that, “schools reflect and are responsive to the cultural orientations of the dominant class. Thus, elite children- strongly socialized at home to their class culture- come to school with dispositions that distinctly “fit” the cultural biases of this institution and are rewarded in school for their particular cultural orientations” (Kingston, 2001, p. 89). Bourdieu’s

claims mean that schools reflect cultural norms of the dominant class, therefore members of this class can more easily excel in school. Ansalone (2009) explained, “Bourdieu first developed the term cultural capital in the early 1970s to explain the differences in educational outcomes in France” (p. 65). Cultural capital can include a variety of high brow signals such as, “attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and credentials” (Kingston, 2001, p. 89). Explicit example of what cultural capital may include are, “going to art museums or liking classical music” (Kingston, 2001, p. 90). Further, these signals have value not because of some inherent quality they possess but rather because people of the elite social group say they do. Kingston (2001) says, “It has this currency because its ‘signals’ are broadly accepted. Cultural capital ‘counts’ because many people or, at least, key gatekeepers believe it should be rewarded” (p. 89).

Although Bourdieu began an important discussion regarding the impact of cultural capital, since that time many scholars have offered their ideas on the subject. As a result, there is no clear agreement on what exactly cultural capital consists of. Kingston (2001) explains that, “too many conceptually distinct variables have come to be placed under the big umbrella of cultural capital, creating a distorted sense of what accounts for academic success” (p. 89). Even Bourdieu himself did not offer a clear picture of what exactly cultural capital is. Kingston (2001) says, “Bourdieu’s explanations are often vague, even contradictory. Because his conceptual arguments are weakly linked to specific, concrete referents, researchers have an uncertain guide about how to proceed with empirical tests” (p. 89). Lareau and Weininger (2003) explain cultural capital saying, “the concept of cultural capital is assumed to denote knowledge of or competence with ‘highbrow’ aesthetic culture (such as fine art and classical music)” (p. 568). Lareau

and Weininger (2003) also provide a summary of other scholar's ideas regarding cultural capital. In Robinson and Garnier's 1985 work they explain cultural capital to mean, "linguistic and cultural competence...Purchasing and borrowing books, attendance at museums, theatre, concerts, styles of speech and interpersonal skills" (p. 570).

Aschaffenburg and Maas define cultural capital as "dominant cultural codes and practices, linguistic styles, aesthetic preferences, styles of interaction...institutionalized as legitimate" (p. 572). Finally Sullivan's 2001 work says that cultural capital consists of, "familiarity with the dominant culture in the society, and especially the ability to understand and use 'educated language'" (p. 573).

### **Cultural Capital Theory and education.**

Kingston (2001) summarizes the perspective of cultural capital theorists saying, "many scholars now stress the role of cultural capital in schools: in brief, that the privileged enjoy academic success because schools reward their elite practices. To the extent that cultural capital theorists are correct, educational attainment is not an individual achievement in any meaningful sense of the word, and schools are not transmitters of opportunities but active agents of social reproduction" (p. 88). This theory claims that students do not achieve academic success individually or even because of what the school provides but rather because of their social status.

DiMaggio (1982) explains how cultural capital might influence a student's experience saying, "Teachers, it is argued, communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital" (p. 190). DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) point out that, "Cultural capital has a strongly

significant effect on both educational attainment and college attendance...”(p.1241).

Further, they explain that, “For both genders, the effect of cultural capital on educational attainment and college attendance is greater than the effects of father’s education on high school grades. For women, the effect of cultural capital is more than three fifths that of measured ability” (p.1241).

Another issue that has come up in association with cultural capital theory can be summarized with the following question, “Is cultural capital related to achievement not of other determinants of achievement?” (Kingston, 2001, p. 91). If students have a high level of cultural capital then they usually have other advantages commonly associated with cultural capital as well. As a result, it is difficult to tell exactly what is responsible for the high academic achievement. Kingston (2001) summarizes this point saying, “Students who go to museums are also likely to be advantaged by, among other matters, intellectual ability, educationally savvy parents, and material resources” (p. 91).

DiMaggio claims that cultural capital still affects has positive effects on students’ school performance regardless of additional variables. DiMaggio (1982) says, “Even with these limitations, the data show that cultural capital has an impact on high school grades that is highly significant and that, in nontechnical subjects, approaches the contribution of measured ability” (p. 199).

While Bourdieu says cultural capital is possessed mainly by the elite, DiMaggio’s 1982 work says it is possible for any student to possess it. DiMaggio’s found that, “cultural capital facilitates the academic success of anyone who has it and is not the resource of a particular class” (Kingston, 2001, p. 92). Research by Broderick and Hubbard also supports the notion of cultural capital increasing student achievement.

Their research found that, “Favorably perceived students received notably higher English and mathematics grades, after a large set of sociodemographic variables, all measures of cultural capital, and a composite measure of academic ability were controlled” (Kingston, 2001, p. 93). Although the debate continues about exactly how much cultural capital affects a student’s academic achievement, it seems clear that students’ experiences outside of the classroom continue to affect what goes on inside.

### **Conclusion**

Although all three of these theories are useful in helping to understand the achievement gap in this country, they are merely a starting point for the discussion on raising the bar for African American students. Using Social Capital Theory, we can see how gaps in family structure and connections to mainstream society put children at a disadvantage in school. Critical Race Theory gives us a lens to examine everything from curriculum to budget in terms of its racial equity. Finally, Cultural Capital Theory allows us to understand how students who are not privy to “highbrow” cultural experiences may be at a disadvantage in the classroom. Each of these theories give us important insights into differences various students in one classroom may possess. However, regardless of where students are when they come to school, it is the school’s responsibility to ensure that these students meet standards.

## **EDUCATION POLICY RELATED TO URBAN EDUCATION**

### **Introduction**

In the past, little attention was paid to secondary education with regards to its potential contribution to society. Social benefits were often associated more with

primary rather than secondary education. However, more recently, secondary education has gained increasing importance in order to meet the economic demands of the global market. Completion of secondary education has a direct connection to employment opportunity and earning potential. Christopher Swanson, author of the *Cities in Crisis (2009)* report, explains the difference a high school diploma can make. “In the nation’s largest metropolitan areas, the rate at which individuals are steadily employed consistently increases as they acquire higher levels of education. Forty percent of nongraduates (of high school) are employed full time and year-round, compared with 52 percent of high school graduates” (p. 25).

Not only does high school graduation impact employment, it can also have a large impact on potential earnings as well. Swanson (2009) explains, “For the nation’s largest metropolitan regions, median income for an individual without a completed high school education is slightly more than \$14,000 annually. That figure is significantly lower than the \$24,000 earned by graduates in the same areas” (p. 25). For those that graduate high school, these figures equal \$10,000 more annually and a 12% greater chance of maintaining full time employment.

### **History of National Education Policy**

In an effort to improve our position in the global market, our government has looked for ways to decrease the vast achievement gap that exists between minority and non-minority students, thereby improving the graduation rate and earning potential of all students. However, education policy in the United States has not always worked towards equal education for all. Spring (2004) reports that historically, “Educational policies have served the interests of those wanting to take advantage of others” (p. 1). He cites

two examples of education policy ignoring the needs of Native American and African American students saying that, “The educational policies of the English, and later of the United States government, were formulated with this vision of Native Americans as inferior. Consequently, schools were created to destroy Native American cultural and linguistic traditions and replace them with the English language and Anglo-American culture” (p.1).

Spring (2004) continues, citing the example of African American education in the south. “Europeans also viewed Africans as inferior. In the South, slave owners feared that any form of education might generate revolt against the slave system, so slaves were denied educational rights altogether” (p.1). The inequity in educational policy in the United States continues when, “The common-school movement of the 1830s and 1840s was in part an attempt to halt the drift toward multicultural society” (Spring, 2004, p. 8). Despite changes in educational policy, this trend in unequal education and achievement continued throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, one significant way in which the U.S. government attempted to close the achievement gap was through standardized testing.

### **Standardized Testing and National Education Policy**

The first major push for standardized testing by the federal government began in 1965 with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This legislation provided that Title I would include funding for state education agencies as well as local school districts for “enhanced education of children from low-income homes.” Also included was a provision requiring standardized testing to demonstrate student improvement. Because all fifty states reported above average results in the norm-

referenced tests, the accuracy of test results was questioned (Crocker, 2004, p. 164). As a result, the 70s and 80s brought a shift to criterion-referenced state assessments which effectively lowered expectations. The New Standards Project found that few states provided guidance to teachers about the test (Geisinger, 2004, p. 187).

Dialogue about American achievement versus other countries began after a 1983 report by the National Council on Excellence in Education called *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. While some claim it had purely political motives, the report said that American schools were far behind Japanese schools but in the years that followed the American economy flourished while the Japanese economy declined (Johnson, Johnson, Farenga, and Ness, 2007, p. 55). The report took test scores from all American students and compared them to select international students.

In 1991, the Bush administration pushed for standardization in five subject areas as well as voluntary national tests in three grade levels as part of the America 2000 program. However, the legislation presented no concrete plan to achieve its goals. Then, in 1992, the newly created National Council of Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) supported standardization and continued the trend by recommending “multiple state tests” (Vinovskis, 2008, p. 125). Again in 1997 the Clinton administration called for standardized testing which was later blocked by Congress. Although many people saw standardized testing as a way to ensure that all students were achieving academic success, others see a nationalized testing system as severely limiting. Clinton said, “To help schools meet the standards and measure their progress, we will lead an effort over the next two years to develop national tests of student achievement in reading and math...” (Vinovskis, 2008, p. 131).



## **No Child Left Behind Act**

In response to the increased emphasis on secondary education and in an attempt to improve education in the United States, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) on January 8, 2002, which reauthorized several federal programs aimed at improving primary and secondary education. No Child Left Behind was originally developed in response to the *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983) report in the early 1980s. In its attempt to raise standards, “NCLB required each state to formulate and submit a plan to the Secretary of Education that demonstrated that it had adopted challenging academic content standards and student academic achievement standards for all schools and children in the state. These standards applied to math and reading or language arts; science standards were to take effect beginning in 2005-2006” (Gold, 2007, p. 23). In regards to the standardized tests, states are required to use, NCLB says that tests should, “involve multiple up-to-date measures of student academic achievement, including measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding” (Gold, 2007, p. 24).

NCLB was implemented not only to raise standards of accountability for states and their state-wide educational institutions, administrations, and educators but to ensure educational achievement for all students. Wayne Au (2008) explains that, “a trend that appears in public education in the United States generally, where, according to any number of markers, poor students and students of color are simply less ‘successful’ than their wealthier and/or White counterparts” (p. 2). This issue has occurred most commonly in the African American community. Au (2008) says, “educational inequality has been a subject for research, discussion, debate, and action in the African American

community for well over 100 years” (p. 2). As a result, NCLB has been primarily focused on this educational inequity.

Because NCLB emphasizes academic achievement, assessment has become increasingly important as well. NCLB requires disaggregated data and AYP to be demonstrated for all groups. “U.S. federal education policy- now referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) has taken the issue of educational inequality and stitched it together with standardized testing” (Wu, 2008, p. 2-3). This system of standardized testing has become the backbone of educational reform in recent years. Therefore, NCLB is a form of *standards-based* or *outcome-based reform*, and its specific assessment methods and measures are left to the discretion of each state. As a result, requirements can vary greatly from state to state. Vinovskis (2009) explains saying, “states are allowed to set their own student academic content and performance standards as well as define what constitutes highly qualified teachers” (p. 2).

Despite the autonomy given to states, NCLB does establish certain parameters. Sunderman and Orfield (2009) explain the requirements of No Child Left Behind saying, “all students including all subgroups, must reach a state’s proficiency goals by 2014...NCLB requires universal high achievement for all students and attaches sanctions that become increasingly severe the longer a school or district does not meet the state’s achievement goals. Second, states have a role in helping schools and districts improve under NCLB. Third, the inclusion of timelines for when states must meet NCLB requirements means all states must end at the same place, regardless of where they start”

(p. 38). According to the NCLB timeline, all states must have a testing requirement functioning by school year 2005-2006.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, each state has the autonomy to define what AYP will mean for them. The consequences of not meeting AYP are as follows (Gold, 2007, p. 24): if they don't meet AYP for 2 years they will be identified as 'needing improvement' and must give students the option to move to another school in the district that is meeting AYP and develop an improvement plan. After four years of not meeting AYP they are placed in corrective action. According to Gold (2007), NCLB did not provide a complex structure for state compliance of NCLB but carried with it the threat of removal of federal funds which constitute approximately 7% of district funds.

John Oswald (2008) of the Educational Testing Service or ETS explains that, "Ever since the No Child Left Behind act was passed in 2001, district administrators, teachers, policymakers and testing companies have been working to implement the law's requirements to improve achievement so that all students are proficient in state standards by 2014" (p. 58). Further, this improvement must be thoroughly measured by standardized testing in each state.

### **Criticism of No Child Left Behind.**

Unfortunately, much of the research has suggested that the dawn of the high stakes testing era has done little to change educational inequality in the U.S. In order to promote academic achievement, NCLB uses the possibility of negative consequences to motivate students and teachers. However, Johnson, Johnson, Farenga, and Ness (2007) remind us that Skinner has proven that the "stick" is ineffective in eliminating behavior and the "carrot" should be used. Evidence of this is seen when students who want to

avoid the failure associated with high stakes testing drop out of school completely. Au (2008) reports that, “research analyzing data across eighteen states finds that 62% of states with high school exit exams saw an increase in drop-out rates when they implemented their exams” (p. 5). Even if a student does not take such a drastic measure like dropping out, high stakes testing frequently causes emotional and psychological distress leading to worse performance in classroom.

Not only can high stakes testing leading to emotional distress and more dropouts, Johnson et al. (2007) explain that it has also, “led to shallowness or superficiality in student thinking that inhibits their ability to think deeply about complex content material” (p. 61). This happens when often times teachers (under pressure from the administration) must teach to the test. Although Johnson et al. (2007) offer several compelling critiques of high stakes testing, they clarify their position explaining, “opposition to high-stakes testing in no way indicated opposition to standards-based instruction, but rather to the current preoccupation with mindless test prep and administration with serious consequences for students and teachers that have little to do with classroom instruction or learning” (p. 64).

Many oppose No Child Left Behind not because it promotes standards-based teaching and accountability but rather because it does not offer a way to authentically assess students’ achievement in the classroom. NCLB and standardized tests are problematic because they only measure certain skills and not creativity and reasoning. Johnson et al (2007) further argue that there is no data to support the use of testing to “enhance student learning or improve teachers’ teaching” (p. 58).

Another source for debate surrounding NCLB and standardized testing discusses who should assess students, teachers or the government. Phelps (2005) says, “The essential point of debate is whether testing, and other methods of quality control should be done ‘internally’ or ‘externally’” (p. 1). Because NCLB allows quality control to be conducted internally, what often times happens with standardized testing is something commonly known as the Lake Wobegon effect. This happens when a state may report above average results on standardized tests. However, these inflated results are not accurate. John J. Cannell discovered the Lake Wobegon effect in the 1980s when he noticed that standardized test scores were above the national average in every state. This resulted in calls for more state government control in standardized testing. However, despite the added pressure placed on states, critics continue to cite misconduct by states regarding standardized testing.

Rothstein (2004) explains the problem of state control saying, “New York State had to cancel the results of its high school math exam when only 37% of test-takers passed, down from 61% in the previous year when the curriculum and instructional methods were similar and proficiency was supposed to be defined the same way” (p. 89). The problem becomes even more evident as states not meeting NCLB standards are imposed with federally sanctioned penalties. Rothstein continues with, “if the goal is to evaluate how much the gap between lower and middle class (or black and white) students is being narrowed, a state’s proficiency definitions can be and given the penalties in federal law, they increasingly will be watered down to the point that all children can achieve them with little improvement in instruction” (p. 89). Furthermore Rothstein

(2004) explains that “states can make their test score gaps disappear by defining proficiency as either a very low standard or a very high one” (p. 89).

Not only have the actions of state educational agencies been called into question, but the behavior of those at the school level has also been investigated in regards to standardized tests. Wilde (2002) reports incidents of teachers supplying answers in New York, educators changing students’ answers in Texas and a Maryland principal giving extra time on a timed test. Even though the actions described above are clearly examples of unethical behavior, Wilde (2002) describes other, less extreme types of unethical behavior that could easily be called into debate. Some of these include, developing a curriculum based on the content of the test, preparing objectives based on test items and teaching accordingly, and presenting items similar to those on the test. Wilde (2002) contends that, “practices that attempt to boost student performance on tests (rather than focusing on learning appropriate curriculum) lead to inaccurate and indeed dishonest test results” (p. 26). Wilde continues explaining that ethical test preparation should consist of nothing more than advising that students get a good night’s sleep and know how to appropriately bubble in answers. Although No Child Left Behind attempts to ensure that all students master course material, in actuality, students may know tested material and little else. Test familiarity could also play a role since students can take a test an unlimited number of times. Wilde cites an example of a testing company salesperson offering superintendants from poor districts a particular version of a test that would be more likely to result in higher test scores.

Although the answers to questions regarding the equality, and validity of NCLB testing requirements seem unclear, it is clear that states have felt the pressure to measure

up. Regarding the purpose of standardized testing, Malen and Rice (2004) explain that, “Despite the variation in design, high-stakes accountability initiatives share a common goal. They all seek, in one way or another to pressure public schools, particularly those labeled as failing or low-performing schools to improve their performance” (p. 4). One of the most common criticisms of NCLB is the lack of funding and administrative support that accompanies the strict policy mandates. Sunderman and Orfield (2009) explain that, “NCLB combines extremely demanding educational goals with extremely limited administrative resources” (p. 38). Further, “The implementation of NCLB coincided with the biggest decline in state revenues in at least 20 years” (p. 39) leaving states in a very difficult position.

Although No Child Left Behind has mandated the success of all students demonstrated through standardized test results, change is impossible at the school level without some level of existing “school capacity.” School capacity is defined as the resources a school has along with how well they utilize those resources. Malen and Rice (2004) go on to explain that, “school capacity is an essential component of meaningful educational reform” (p. 4). They further state that “high-stakes accountability reforms cannot realize their stated aims unless targeted schools have or acquire the capacity to meet prescribed performance standards” (p. 5).

Additionally, school capacity can include a myriad of facets including, skill level (intellectual and competency level) of teachers and staff, pedagogical resources (instructional resources, time, class sizes), and instructional culture (organizational coordination). Malen and Rice (2004) present another way to think about school capacity which includes, fiscal capital, human capital, social capital, cultural capital and

informational resources. School capacity additionally includes a school's ability to translate said resources into the expected outcomes. It is also highlighted that increased resources do not necessarily equal better outcomes. An increase in outcome is more likely when the specifically needed resources are applied. Malen and Rice explain this saying (2004), "Although reforms may enhance a school's resource base, those additional assets may do little to bolster a school's capacity if the specific resources provided are not closely aligned with the particular priorities of the school" (p.20). Further problems can result when the imposed policy requirements "undercut productivity and dilute capacity for meaningful school improvement" (p.21). They can remove staff from important initiatives, or take time from meaningful instruction. At times they can also wreak havoc on institutional organization. Although NCLB may impose requirements aimed to ensure the success of all students, this success seems highly unlikely at schools where much additional support is needed.

#### **No Child Left Behind and African American students.**

Although No Child Left Behind was created with the objective of promoting academic achievement for all students, Au (2008) shows that, "high-stakes testing produces classroom level changes in the educational experiences of students and teachers that increases inequality" (p. 5). Au (2008) asks the questions, "But is this final assumption, that high-stakes, standardized testing is neutral, fair, accurate, and meritocratic, actually true? Can high-stakes tests not only mark educational inequality but also prove to be the tool to fix such inequality as well? Research on the outcomes of high-stakes testing would appear to answer 'No' to the above questions" (p. 3). What we have learned is that high-stakes testing has had a negative effect on low income students. Gold (2007)



reported that, “The reforms narrowed the curriculum and transformed classrooms into preparation centers for standardized tests. These changes only served to increase the differences between urban and rural schools” (p. 2). Further, Gold (2007) supported the idea that urban education did not improve when standardized testing increased saying, “Over the 7 years of implementation, instead of recognizing that the inability to improve urban education is a consequence of accumulated inequalities resulting from intergenerational segregation, politicians and educators simply declared that, despite its persistence, the achievement gap could be closed within the existing social structure” (p. 3).

Richard Rothstein (2004) supports the notion that standardized tests are often most harmful to already underperforming students saying that, “standardized tests generally show that average academic achievement of black students is about one-half to a full standard deviation below average white achievement” (p. 85). One reason for this may be the added emotional distress standardized tests place on students. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education Foundation (2002) reports that, “Black students may be subject to what Stanford psychology professor Claude Steele calls ‘stereotype vulnerability.’ Steele contends that black students are aware of the fact that society expects them to perform poorly on standardized tests. This added pressure put upon black students to perform well in order to rebut the racial stereotype in fact makes it more difficult for them to perform well on these tests” (p. 18). Ansalone (2009) supported this assertion saying, “It has been suggested that students with a higher sense of control are more likely to have higher achievement test scores...Black students, more often than

White, expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to control the future direction of their lives” (p. 80).

Another argument against standardized testing is that one yearly test should not be used to measure an entire year of learning. If a student has one bad day, that will reflect badly on an entire year. Further, Wilde (2002) explains that instead of pushing low performing students to do better, students who are already low performing do historically worse on standardized tests. She explains that, “evidence was suggesting not only that they’re more damaged by tests but that the results may be less valid for them” (p. 20). Much of this she explains has to do with a high level of test anxiety already low performing students typically face. Wilde (2002) says that, “requiring a passing score on a single test for high school graduation is likely to disproportionately reduce the number of high school graduates from less privileged backgrounds” (p. 21). This phenomenon creates a vicious cycle in which underperforming (generally poorer) students receive more test prep which is low-level information and traditionally not in line with best educational practices. This drilling of information generally does not support the analysis and synthesis of material. As a result, even though students can do the class work and home work in an under-performing school they are still not able to pass the exam required for graduation.

In his critical look at No Child Left Behind, Leonardo (2009) explains that, “NCLB is an ‘act of whiteness’ and perpetuates the innocence of whiteness as a system of privilege. It is a form of whiteness as policy. Its white common sense deems racial disparities as unfortunate outcomes of group competition, uneven social development, or worse, as stubborn cultural explanations of the inferiority of people of color.” (p.127).

This article aims to be a part of the movement that argues white supremacy exists in many facets of society including education policy which uses said policy to maintain the position of whites in society. Leonardo (2009) argues that racism has never ceased to exist throughout history but rather has morphed into many different forms during our nation's history (p. 130). Slavery became Jim Crow which became less overt manifestations such as those found in current education policy. Leonardo (2009) explains that, "Also known as 'laissez-faire racism,' symbolic racism or new racism, color-blindness does not just represent the fear of difference but the intensification of racial difference masking as its obliteration" (p.133).

Although NCLB may not come off as overtly racist, Leonardo (2009) reports that, "NCLB's pull yourselves up by your own school straps mentality betrays a certain lack of appreciation for the racial conditions in which schools exist" (p.138). The main problem NCLB imposes on schools is the demands it places on schools without providing the additional resources needed to accomplish its goals. For example, under No Child Left Behind mandates all schools are expected to produce the same results even though they may be facing vastly different starting points. A high school where students perform at an average reading level of ninth grade will be offered the same resources to achieve the same scores as a school where students read on an average reading level of fourth grade.

### **Education Policy in Maryland**

Jurisdiction over education in Maryland is overseen by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Maryland is known to have one of the largest minority populations in the country, fifth after only California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas. In addition to a four percent undocumented immigrant population and a six

percent Asian population, there is a prominent African-American population in the state hovering at around thirty percent. Maryland has an estimated population of over 5,700,000 and is divided into 24 counties and/or cities that serve as county-equivalents. Each county and county-equivalent (e.g., City of Baltimore) has a local board of education that governs the countywide administration of public schools. School districts have limited regulation over home-schooling, private schools, charter schools, and other alternative modes of education.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provided that each state was responsible for determining annual benchmarks for student proficiency, called ‘annual measureable objectives’ or AMOs (Dillon, 2009). In turn these AMOs would be used to gauge a state’s progress in meeting AYP. In response to NCLB, The Maryland State Department of Education determined that Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for high schools would be decided by school performance on state standardized tests and graduation rates (Maryland State Department of Education, 2003). Dillon (2009) explains AYP saying, “This summer, states once again announced which public schools made adequate yearly progress, or AYP, under the No Child Left Behind Act. It is an annual ritual during which schools find out if enough of their students scored proficient on state assessments to meet that year’s state benchmark. States are required under NCLB to release report cards on the performance of every school before the beginning of the following school year. If schools miss the annual benchmark for more than two consecutive years, they face an escalating series of sanctions, which can culminate in school restructuring” (p. 1).

In order to measure ‘proficiency’ in core subject areas, the state of Maryland established the Maryland School Assessments (MSAs) for grades 3 through 8 and the Maryland High School Assessments (HSAs) for grades 9 to 12 as an indicator for individual student achievement and overall school performance. MSDE has developed the HSA as an appraisal of NCLB secondary guidelines for the state of Maryland, and many say its commitment to HSAs is a sign of MSDE’s commitment to secondary education.

MSDE requires the Maryland School Performance Assessment (MSA) in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Student performance is assessed at three levels of achievement, based on scores on the test taken. For example, Advanced standing, which falls above a predetermined high-range score, represents outstanding accomplishment and understanding of the material; Proficient standing which falls between the high-range score and the low-range cut-off score, indicates a useful, working knowledge of the material; and Basic standing, a score which falls below the ‘cut score,’ represents that more work is needed in order to attain proficiency in the material.

### **The High School Assessments.**

The High School Assessments are administered to students in the subject areas of Algebra I/Data Analysis, Biology, Government and English II. The test objectives and tests were developed by teachers who work in Maryland classrooms. Not only are Maryland’s HSAs a measure of AYP, but they also help to determine who will and will not graduate each year. Students cannot graduate without meeting HSA requirements. The use of the HSAs as exit exams went into effect for the graduating class of 2009. Prior to that year, students only had to “sit” for the exam in order to be eligible for

graduation. This means prior to 2009 simply writing your name on the test and remaining seated for the duration of the exam would be enough to complete the testing requirement. However, the graduating class of 2009 was required not only to sit but to earn a minimum passing score on each of the four exams in order to be eligible for graduation. As a result of these more stringent requirements, The Maryland Department of Education hoped that the class of 2009 would be the best-prepared class in the history of Maryland K-12 Education.

However, because many members of the class of 2009 had not met the HSA requirements at the start of their senior year, MSDE created several alternatives to the test requirement. The first alternative allows students to transfer AP or IB credit if they earned a 3 or higher (AP) or 5 or higher (IB) on the corresponding exam to meet HSA requirements. This alternative was applicable to students who had completed requirements above and beyond those mandated by Maryland State and the HSAs. The second option allows students to earn a combined-score on all four exams instead of individual passing scores on all four tests. Students must only earn a combined score of 1602 instead of the 412 points needed to pass Algebra I/Data Analysis, 400 points needed to pass Biology, 396 points needed for English II and 394 needed for Government. This option was designed for students who have a weakness in one subject area but strength in another that they could use to compensate for the weaker area. For example, a student who is weak in government but strong in Algebra I could meet the HSA requirement by earning a 430 in Algebra I (passing score 412), a 385 in Government (passing score 394), a 400 in Biology (passing score 400), a 396 in English II (passing score 396). Even though the student did not earn the minimum passing score on the Government HSA,

they have earned a combined score of 1611 meeting the 1602 minimum combined score requirement.

A third option created specifically for special education students allows students with an IEP to take Modified HSAs or shortened forms of the test. Instead of having four answer choices on multiple choice items, the modified HSA contains only three answer choices, thereby eliminating one option. These students may also receive additional accommodations such as verbatim reading of the test, or additional time as specified by their IEP.

The fourth and perhaps most heavily criticized alternative is the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation allows students who have not passed one or more of the HSAs to complete projects in those subjects in lieu of passing the test. The projects are related to the subject matter that the student failed to pass the test in. MSDE reports that, “A student may take anywhere from 10-20 hours to complete a project, depending on the content area and the student’s mastery of the content.”

The number of projects a student must complete is determined by the highest score they received on that test (Table 1). A student uses the chart provided by MSDE to determine the number of projects needed. For example, according to the chart, a score in the range of 390-411 on the Algebra I/Data Analysis HSA would require a student to complete one project to meet the requirements for that test. The most projects a student could be required to complete for any one subject area is seven. Because there are four different subject areas students must meet requirements in, a student could potentially

have up to twenty eight projects to complete in order to satisfy the High School Assessment required for graduation.

Table 2.1: Bridge Plan For Academic Validation Project Matrix

# of Projects	Algebra	English	Biology	Government
One	390-411	374-395	378-399	372-393
Two	368-389	352-373	356-377	350-371
Three	346-367	330-351	334-355	328-349
Four	324-355	308-329	312-333	306-327
Five	302-333	286-307	290-311	284-305
Six	280-301	264-285	268-289	262-283
Seven	Below 280	Below 264	Below 268	Below 262

Projects range anywhere from ten to fifty pages and generally contain a final product component such as a power point, brochure, letter, or pamphlet. However, exactly how school districts decide to manage the Bridge Plan is up to them. Although MSDE created this option for students to meet the HSA requirement, it was left to the individual districts and schools to determine exactly how projects would be completed. As *The Washington Post* reported, “the projects would be administered locally but



designed and managed by the state to ensure consistency among jurisdictions.”

(Hernandez, 2007).

Students may complete projects independently or may be placed in an after-school or during-school bridge course. The state allows for students to work with a project monitor who may be a teacher or other professional at the school. It is up to schools to determine exactly where, when, and how often students and project monitors meet. MSDE (<http://mdk12.org/share/pdf/bridge>) explains the procedure for completing bridge projects saying that,

An appropriate school staff member will be assigned the role of Project Monitor and will work with the student throughout the duration of the Academic Validation Project Package. The student, parent/guardian, Project Monitor, and designated school staff member will sign the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation Student Agreement and the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation Schedule for Project Package Completion.

It is then up to each individual school district to establish turn-in dates as well as grading procedures. MSDE explains that, “A local review panel, established by the local school system, will review a student’s completed Academic Validation Project Package and provide a recommendation to the local superintendent. The local superintendent will conduct a final review for approval or refusal of the student’s work.”

This autonomy in the implementation of the Bridge Plan results in great differences throughout districts. Grading procedures vary by district and by subject. In some counties, where only a few dozen students might need to do projects, an entire panel will look at each submission. In New Town, two teachers review every government project, with a third coming in as a tie-breaker if there’s disagreement. In addition, Nelson Hernandez (2006) of the Washington Post voiced the concerns held by Bridge Plan critics saying, “the Bridge Plan is time-consuming, labor-intensive and not

well thought-out.” For example, in New Town during the 2008-2009 school year, there were a total of 6,532 projects completed with an 87% pass rate. Because each local school district is responsible for carrying out the Bridge Plan, New Town was faced with the task of collecting, grading, returning, and funding all of these projects.

Due to the absence of common policies and procedures the quality of bridge projects has varied vastly from district to district. MSDE (<http://mdk12.org/share/pdf/bridge>) however, reports that, “MSDE will use multiple measures to ensure appropriate use of the Bridge Plan by all participants (*see Academic Validation Project Package Approval Process*). MSDE will establish a system of State controls that will assure rigor and consistency of scoring standards for Academic Validation Project Packages across all schools and school systems.” Just what this system includes however, is unclear.

Although the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation is a state approved way to meet the HSA graduation requirement, not all students are eligible to complete this option. In order to be eligible to participate in the Bridge Plan students must; have taken and failed the HSA at least two times, earned a passing grade and credit in the course related to the assessment, be on the “path towards graduation,” and participate in “locally-administered or approved” assistance program.

Because of the large number of projects (up to 28) some students faced, the State approved yet another alternative for students who can’t meet the already modified HSA requirement. A reporter for a New Town newspaper (January 2009) explained that, “For the first time this spring, seniors will have to either pass the four-subject test or meet the standard by doing projects. Some who have extenuating circumstances may also apply

for a waiver from their local superintendents so they can graduate.” This means that any student unable to meet any of the options for completing HSA requirements may apply for a waiver to be exempt from the HSA requirement completely.

Although Maryland has worked hard to develop state wide standardized testing for secondary students, it seems that the continued modifications and exceptions that they create reduce the standards for certain students. The graduating class of 2009 was the first class required to pass the High School Assessments in order to graduate. During the summer leading into their senior year, The Maryland State Department of Education issued the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation when it became apparent that thousands of students across the state had not passed the HSAs. The overwhelming majority of these students were African American students from New Town. When MSDE created the Bridge Plan, it effectively reduced the standard it had created for this group of students. What effects these changes will have on Maryland students, particularly those already disadvantaged remains to be seen.

## **EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORKS**

### **Introduction**

Education policy, much like that from any other discipline is often influenced and shaped by a variety of factors for an unlimited amount of reasons. Malen and Knapp (1997) stated that,

Policy analysts and actors often struggle to ‘make sense’ of perplexing policy developments such as the seemingly tenuous connections between policy and practice. The stark and stubborn disparities between a policy’s stated aims and actual effects seem to defy explanation in part because the social conditions to be attended are tangled webs of problems with symptoms, sources, and ‘solutions’

that are neither readily apparent nor reliably addressed by policy provisions. (p. 419)

As a result, there is not one specific framework that is used to analyze education policy but rather a variety of frameworks that could be used depending on which aspect of the policy one is attempting to dissect and for what reason.

Because education policy can be influenced by a variety of disciplines such as political science, sociology, psychology and history the frameworks used to analyze education policy could have their roots in any of these disciplines as well. As Malen and Knapp (1997) explained, “There are multiple metaphors and models but no ‘grand theories’ of public policy generally or education policy more specifically” (p. 419). They further stated that, “Since policy takes many forms, performs many functions, and begets many effects, it is difficult to get a fix on the boundaries, let alone the ‘workings’ of a policy or set of policies. Simply put, efforts to analyse policy developments are seriously complicated by the mysteries of social problems and the intricacies of public policies” (p. 419). As a result of the myriad of influences education policy typically includes, it is useful to analyze policy using more than one framework. I will be using two different frameworks in order to better understand the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. Below, these frameworks will be explored more in depth.

### **The Political Framework**

Because education policy is explicitly linked to government at the national, state and sometimes local level it goes without saying that it is often times heavily influenced by the political process. Therefore, the political framework can be an important perspective when examining education policy. Malen and Knapp (1997) explained the political framework saying,

Political perspectives focus on policy as a vehicle to regulate conflict over the distribution of scarce material and symbolic resources in ways that affirm the legitimacy of the system. Rather than closing in on data-driven solutions to pre-specified problems or habit-driven responses to organizational disturbances, political lenses zoom in on the interest-driven, power-based interactions that occur as actors holding diverse views of the problems and priorities compete as well as cooperate to influence decision outcomes through bargains, negotiations, compromises and other accommodations. (p. 428)

If problems and solutions are not ascertained in a rational fashion, what then influences policy actors' preferences? Whereas the rational perspective suggests that policy actors find the most logical solution to a problem, the political perspective asserts that policy actors are influenced by a variety of factors that may have little to do with the most rational solution. Allison and Zelikow (1999) cite four factors as responsible for shaping players' perceptions, preferences, and stands on the issues. These influences include: 1. Parochial Priorities and Perceptions, 2. Goals and Interests, 3. Stakes and Stands and 4. Deadlines and Faces of Issues. The first of these, parochial priorities and perceptions is explained in the following way, "The factors that encourage organizational parochialism also exert pressure upon the players who occupy positions on top of or within these organizations. Representatives of the organization to a group decision process will be sensitive to the organization's orientation" (p. 298). This means that rather than looking at the best option as the rational perspective would, the political perspective would examine which solution would be most likely to support the organization's best interest.

The second factor listed by Allison and Zelikow, Goals and Interests represents the idea that, "other interests come into play, including personal interests, domestic political interests, and organizational interests. Career officials are prone to believe that the health of their organization is vital" (p. 298). This factor also supports the notion of

political policy motivated by the desire of organizational stability. The third factor, Stakes and Stands, says, “Decisions and actions advance and impede each player’s conception of the national interest, his organization’s interests, operational objectives, and other personal concerns” (p. 299). Finally, the fourth factor, Deadlines and Faces of Issues also supports the idea of policy and organizational stability. Allison and Zelikow (1999) explained, “Solutions to strategic problems are not found by detached analysts focusing coolly on the problems....Deadlines and events raise issues and force busy players to take stands” (p. 299). Rather than being motivated by the most serious problems at any given time, the political perspective asserts that policy actors are more motivated by timelines than they are by the seriousness of an issue.

Similar to the organizational framework (which asserts that policy is created in order to try and maintain the stability of an organization), the political framework suggests that policy aims to ensure the sustainability of a particular organization or group. This tenet will be most important in my research as I look at how the Bridge Policy could have been a way for the state of Maryland to “affirm its legitimacy” and therefore avoid any negative consequences associated with not meeting NCLB requirements.

In order to meet its goals of satisfying a variety of personal and organizational interests, the political framework says that policy results from a series of interactions between a diverse group of participants invested in the outcome. The result of those negotiations shape what the policy will become. Allison and Zelikow (1999) reported that, “Outcomes are formed, and deformed, by the interaction of competing preferences” (p. 255). Obviously rooted in political science, this framework looks at the power struggle that often times occur in political wrangling. Pfeiffer (1981) said, “evidence for

political models would come from finding that measures of power in social systems, rather than goals, precedent, or chance, bring about decision outcomes” (p. 29).

Therefore, in order to best understand a policy decision through the political perspective, it is necessary to understand those involved in the process.

In its attempt to satisfy all policy actors involved in the negotiation process, the political framework also suggests that policy serves to mediate social conflict. Malen and Knapp (1997) support this notion saying, “Since conflicts over the distribution of benefits and burdens in society are rarely resolved, they must be continuously managed. Policy becomes a means for mediating these disputes...” (p. 428). Edelman (1974) reiterates the idea that policy results from a series of negotiations between policy actors saying, “Public policy may usefully be understood as the resultant of the interplay among groups” (p. 39). Just who exactly constitutes these different groups? Allison and Zelikow (1999) include political leaders, heads of major organizations, the press, NGOs, and the public as potential policy actors.

Further, the political perspective asserts that the person or group with the most power, will most likely be responsible for any policy decisions. Pfeiffer (1981) said, “Political models of choice further presume that when preferences conflict, the power of the various social actors determines the outcome of the decision process” (p. 28). This means that power and not reason will ultimately influence policy in the political perspective.

Throughout this process, the goal of each of these groups or individuals is not necessarily to rectify a problem but to act as if they are assisting a certain group even though they may not actually be providing any resources. Edelman (1974) said, “The

professional politician is probably quite correct when he acts on the assumption that his advocacy of this regulatory legislation, in principle, is a widely popular move, even though actual resource allocations inconsistent with the promise of the statutes are met with quiescence” (p. 25). Therefore, the perception of being invested in change counts more than a change actually occurring or not.

When using the political perspective as a framework for analyzing policy, it is important to keep in mind that one central assumption of political perspectives suggests that policy develops in increments or stages. Malen and Knapp (1997) said that, “Political perspectives suggest that policy develops through stages or phases; interests are articulated and issues are generated; alternatives are formulated, often aggregated; choices are enacted; and choices are implemented, albeit with varying degrees of fidelity. Policy may or may not be evaluated in the strict rational sense, but responses to it generate feedback that precipitates new or renewed demands for attention or restitution” (p. 428). This implies that under the political perspective, policy formation does not occur in one instance but rather is shaped and changed over a period of time. Changes to the policy generally come as a result of feedback about initial steps in the policy process and the give and take commonly associated with political wrangling.

Malen and Knapp (1997) further explain that much of the outcome of these interactions depend on the power dynamic between the members of the negotiating team. They said, “Whatever the style of play, be it collaborative or combative, the relative power of players is the critical force that fuels, forms and re-forms policy” (p. 428). As a result, a policy may be based more on satisfying those involved in policy negotiations rather than the actual problem the policy claims to address.



Further, because of the variety of interests that may come into play during policy negotiations the process can often times become complicated and drawn out. Malen and Knapp (1997) said, “Since policy is an outgrowth of the interplay of influence among conflicting interests, consistent, coherent and consonantly implemented policy is not expected. Rather, packages of ambiguous, contradictory proposals that accommodate potentially powerful pluralistic interests are more probable and patterns of variegated implementation are virtually inevitable” (p. 428). Policy actors may go back and forth an unlimited amount of times before deciding on the final version of the policy.

Another important assumption regarding political policy is that policy actors as a whole “are neither unitary actors nor organizationally defined conglomerates. They are members of shifting coalitions that align and realign as competing pressures arise and power configurations fluctuate” (p. 429). Therefore, all parties involved in policy formation are not necessarily invested in a solution to the problem or agree on what the best solution would be.

In addition, because the struggle for power is the most important part of policy development under the political perspective, decisions are not necessarily based on which solution would be the most effective. Therefore information may not play as important a role as it would in policy developed using the rational model. Malen and Knapp (1997) explained, “knowledge of substantive problems and alternative interventions is best understood as an instrument in the play of power, as one commodity actors might use to secure decision benefits. This information, like other kinds of information can be used to bolster the influence of some and diminish the influence of others” (p. 429). As a result, policy actors will use information to support or defend their position. Each policy

actor's position is shaped largely by their values and "Policy disputes often centre on what values will prevail" (Malen and Knapp, 1997, p. 429).

In my research I will look closely at the political process involved in developing the Bridge Plan to determine what effect, if any, this had on policy decisions. Maryland state testing requirements were developed in order to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act. When hundreds of students could not meet the Maryland state requirements, alternative pathways were added for students to meet the testing requirements. It is my goal to look more closely at the development of the Bridge Plan, one of those alternative pathways, and to what extent it was designed to ensure that all students achieve academically and to what extent it was a result of Maryland's motivation to meet the demands of NCLB.

### **The Symbolic Framework**

The symbolic perspective, which has its roots in both anthropology and political science, sees policy as important not because it may be the best solution for a problem, but perhaps only because it is a symbol for the solution. Instead of viewing policy from a rational perspective where a policy action would attempt to solve a given problem, the symbolic perspective sees policy as a way to demonstrate the *appearance* of solving a given problem. Why would one choose a less rational solution to any given problem? Elder and Cobb (1983) found,

Public policy making tends to be a highly stylized and ritualized process. It is replete with symbolism that conveys reassurance and serves to rationalize the product, whatever it may be. The process represents a very peculiar form of problem solving in that its significance lies as much in the drama that attends it as in its actual output. It is the *making* of the policy rather than its execution that the public is most sensitive to. In fact, satisfaction can accrue from the process even if the process fails for one reason or another to produce actual policy outputs. (p. 22)

Therefore, even if there is not an actual solution to a problem, those invested in a particular problem may be satisfied by the process involved in policy development and not as concerned in the outcome of the policy. Elder and Cobb (1983) further explain,

Oftentimes, not even the semblance of definitive action is required to provide symbolic reassurance that a problem is being taken care of; mere consideration of the problem in an auspicious setting will suffice. Thus, with great flourish, special commissions, task forces, and study groups are appointed to conduct 'comprehensive' investigations and to provide policy recommendations....Although nothing of substance may have changed, the expectation of action has been satisfied. (p. 23)

This means that policy actors can be satisfied simply by the appearance of a solution even when no real solution has been achieved. Edelman (1977) said, "A regime can continue indefinitely to pursue policies that deny most of the population what they are promised and what they value; yet public support for such policies typically continues in spite of the occasional repudiation of individual officials" (p. 146).

Malen and Knapp (1997) explained that, "Thus the efficacy of policy resides in its capacity to shape perceptions of social conditions, events and institutions irrespective of its capacity to alter actual social circumstances" (p. 431). Therefore, a policy's effectiveness is not based on its ability to affect actual change but merely on its ability to *appear* to affect change. Malen and Knapp (1997) continued saying, "Symbolic perspectives call attention to the imagery of the reform strategy and its correspondence to widely held perceptions and conceptions of the school system. Viewed through these lenses, the systemic reform initiative comes at a time when multiple audiences share perceptions of school failure, which may or may not have a basis in demonstrated fact, but reflect a deep malaise regarding the state's social institutions including education enterprise" (p. 432).

Although symbols are used throughout the political process, they most commonly occur in policy development. Malen and Knapp (1997) clarify the motives behind using policy as a symbol, “legitimizing the institution in the eyes of relevant publics; celebrating key virtues and values; demonstrating concern for issues or constituencies; focusing attention on some conditions rather than others and developing a common understanding of those circumstances; encouraging support of or mobilizing commitment to particular courses of action; and presenting a façade of action” (p. 430). Many people will be satisfied simply by the process of policy development and will not dig deep enough to analyze the actual policy outcomes.

Much like the outcome of policy viewed through the symbolic perspective requires only the perception of change, the impetus of said policy would be based merely on the perception of a problem whether or not one actually exists. Just as the solution to a problem may not be real, the problem may not be real either. Malen and Knapp (1997) clarified this saying, “Policy ‘problems’ are construed as a matter of perception- those of the policymakers whose interpretations of events prompt the promulgation of symbols, and those of the public who collectively (yet in diverse ways) interpret the problem in light of policy actions” (p. 431).

Further, they suggest not only that the problems policy attempts to address through the symbolic framework may not actually be real problems, but that they “remain salient only as long as their symbolic meaning has potency for a key institutional audience” (Malen and Knapp, 1997, p. 431). This means that the problems will only be addressed for as long as they are meaningful or useful to policy actors and maintaining institutional legitimacy.

As a result, throughout policy negotiations, information is used, not necessarily to aid in making the best decision for policy recipients, but rather in making the best decision for policy actors. According to Malen and Knapp (1997) information is important only as a “means for apprehending institutional needs and gauging audience responses” (p. 431). Values have great importance because it is the values of policy makers, and the audience the policy is intended for, that shape the symbols used throughout the policy itself.

Seen through the symbolic framework, policy is shaped through the following process, “(1) perception of institutional needs; (2) creation or selection of symbols from the jointly held traditions, sagas, and values of the audiences; (3) targeted communication of symbols to key audiences; (4) assessment of audience responses; and (5) adjustment of symbols to maximize audience responses” (p. 431). As step five suggest, the main goal of policy through the symbolic perspective is to illicit a positive response from the target audience. In my research the target audience would be the federal government in their evaluation of state efforts to meet NCLB requirements.

Malen and Knapp (1997) reported that policy actors could vary greatly from policy to policy. They said, “policy actors can be unitary entities, segmented conglomerates, shifting coalitions, or individual agents. But whatever the configuration, they are communicators and meaning-makers who tap collectively held values and views to fashion imagery related to their particular policy preferences” (p. 431). The end result of policy then, is to satisfy those invested by the appearance of change regardless of whether or not actual change occurred. Malen and Knapp (1997) stated, “In essence,

policy is constructed to shape public meanings and produces effects largely through its impact on audiences' perceptions of problems, priorities, and possibilities" (p. 431).

Elder and Cobb (1983) explained the use of symbols in the political process saying, "Through the study of the symbolic aspects of politics, one gains insight into both the logic of collective action and the dynamics of political behavior. Symbols serve to link the individual to the larger political order and to synchronize the diverse motivations of different individuals, making collective action possible" (p. 1). They explain symbols as a way for people to feel more invested in the political process. Elder and Cobb gave an example of the use of symbols in politics saying, "blacks continued to press their demands for a fuller share of American life, relying heavily on the courts and administrative agencies to consolidate and to extend their previous victories. Racial issues indexed by such symbols as 'school busing,' 'open housing,' and 'affirmative action' became stable fare in American politics, even as the civil rights movement began to fragment and to slip from national prominence (p. 3). Although many African Americans at that time felt as though they were not receiving equal treatment, the government used things such as school busing and affirmative action to present a façade of change and equality. Elder and Cobb explained the outcome of the given example saying,

To a large extent, this form of 'problem solving' through symbolic action explains the growing disparity between black and white perceptions in the late 1960s recounted earlier. With the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, many whites came to see the 'legitimate' grievances of black Americans as largely answered; to expect more was unreasonable. For blacks, these legislative gestures merely heightened their expectations and affirmed the legitimacy of their claims. As the gap between the promise of progress and actual progress continued and even grew, so did black frustration and impatience. (p. 22)

In this case, the use of symbols in policy making served to create additional tension between blacks and whites. Although whites commonly saw policies such as affirmative action and busing as solutions to the concerns of African Americans and were satisfied by those symbols of change, most African Americans knew that these policies did not do enough to change the inequality and racism they continued to face.

Similar to the example above, in which Elder and Cobb argue that policies such as busing and affirmative action did not result in any real change in the position of African Americans in the United States at that time, I examine the Bridge Policy to see what role, if any it had on the achievement of African American students.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Overall Approach and Rationale

Through a qualitative case study, using multiple data sources including document analysis, observations, and interview, I conducted a policy analysis of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. I chose to conduct a qualitative study because as Patton (1990) explained, “Qualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributed to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry” (p. 13). It is important to me to not only understand how the Bridge Plan has affected data such as the graduation rate or reading level but also why Bridge was developed and how it has been implemented. Those questions can only be answered through qualitative research.

Another aspect of qualitative research that appealed to me was the flexibility it allows me as a researcher. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) said, “unlike quantitative inquiry, with its prespecified intent, qualitative inquiry is evolutionary, with a problem statement, a design, interview question, and interpretations developing and changing along the way” (p. 6). Since I began, the direction of my research has expanded and changed several times and continued to do so the further I went in this process. I am grateful that the qualitative approach allowed me the ability to make changes where necessary.

After deciding that I would be conducting a qualitative study, I then had to decide what type of qualitative study I would conduct. Ritchie and Spencer (2002) present four main categories for qualitative research, Contextual: identifying the form and nature of what exists; Diagnostic: examining the reasons for, or causes of, what exists; Evaluative: appraising the effectiveness of what exists, and Strategic: identifying new theories,



policies, plans or action (p. 305). My research will contain elements of almost all of the aforementioned categories. My first research question, *why was the Bridge Plan developed*, fits with the Diagnostic category as I attempt to explore the reasons for the development of Bridge. My second research question, *what does the implementation of the Bridge Plan look*, fits the first category of Contextual as I explored the implementation of Bridge. Finally, my third research question, *what is the effect of the Bridge Plan on students*, fits with the Evaluative category.

### **Research Frameworks: Political and Symbolic Perspectives**

Researchers often use theoretical frameworks to better understand a particular problem or policy. Elder and Cobb (1983) explained, “Public policy making tend to be a highly stylized and ritualized process. It is replete with symbolism that conveys reassurance and serves to rationalize the product, whatever it may be” (p. 21). As a result, it is useful to employ theoretical frameworks to better “unpack” the Bridge Plan policy. I feel that the use of multiple theoretical frameworks is essential to my understanding of the Bridge Plan. Pfeffer (1981) supported the notion of using multiple frameworks in policy analysis saying, “it is not necessary to choose between analytical frameworks. Each may be partly true in a particular situation, and one can obtain a better understanding of the organization by trying to use all of the models rather than choosing among them” (p. 29).

Analytical frameworks are useful because they allow the researcher to analyze policy in a more specific, meaningful way. Allison and Zelikow (1999) expounded on this saying, “Conceptual models not only fix the mesh of the nets that the analyst drags

through the material in order to explain a particular action' they also direct the analyst to cast nets in select ponds, at certain depths, in order to catch the fish he is after" (p. 4).

I used two different frameworks in order to better understand the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. The first framework, the political framework, which asserts that policy is used as a means to regulate conflict and retain institutional legitimacy, is used to analyze the development of the Bridge Plan. I explored how the ramifications of not meeting No Child Left Behind requirements could have affected Maryland's desire to create a policy such as the Bridge Plan. The second framework I used is the symbolic framework which claims that policy is a vehicle to create a perception of change regardless of whether that change happened or not. I used this framework to look at the effects of the Bridge Plan, investigating how student learning and achievement was changed by the Bridge Plan. Below, these frameworks will be explored more in depth.

### **Research Orientation: A Critical Approach**

In addition to using the political and symbolic frameworks, I used a critical lens to frame my research. As Prunty (1985) pointed out, the symbolic framework and the critical method can go hand in hand. He said, "it is important for the policy analyst to recognize the difference between symbolic and material policies. Indeed, the former type dovetails snugly with the critical theorist's concern with symbolic forms of domination" (p. 138). Hartas (2010) gives further evidence for the use of critical theory in conjunction with other social science theories. He said, "The critical theorists challenge a single unifying theory of science and accept diversity by employing many theories that capture different historical and political situations" (p. 45).

While the symbolic framework looks at policy's deeper meaning, the critical approach attempts to understand how that policy's deeper meaning keeps a particular individual or group oppressed. Comstock (1982) reported that, "The function of a critical social science is to increase the awareness of social actors of the contradictory conditions of action which are distorted or hidden by everyday understandings" (p. 371). In this way I use critical theory to help me dig deeper into how the Bridge Plan has affected Central High School students.

Through my research I examine the extent to which the Bridge Plan perpetuates the achievement gap that exists between black and white students. Therefore, I feel that the critical theory works well in conjunction with both the political and symbolic frameworks. As explained in the Literature Review, critical theory is an umbrella that encompasses a variety of theories that will be applicable to my research. Critical Race Theory, Social Capital Theory and Cultural Capital Theory are particularly useful in my study. Critical Race Theory, which asserts that race continues to play a role in society and politics is useful when I look at the Bridge Plan and who has been more affected by it and why. Social Capital Theory says that students' social position affects their performance in school while Cultural Capital Theory says that students' access to cultural experiences will influence how well they do in school. These theories are also useful when I dig deeper into which groups of students have been more affected by the Bridge plan.

The critical theory which came from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was born out of the European Marxist tradition. Hartas (2010) explained the goals of critical research saying, "The critical theorists argue that, to examine social reality, we

need to understand structure and agency, regularity and normatively, stressing that research should have a moral rather than an instrumental role, and is expected to challenge human oppression and achieve emancipation” (p. 45). Because critical theory is focused on issues of “human oppression” it is focused on improving the situation of those who have been the subject of oppression or limited by social constructs out of their control. Comstock (1982) explained, “Critical social research begins from the life problems of definite and particular social agents who may be individuals, groups, or classes that are oppressed by and alienated from social processes they maintain or create but do not control” (p. 378).

At its core, critical research aims to shed light on a problem or injustice and uses dialogue with the individual or individuals affected to promote self-awareness and action. Comstock (1982) said critical research promotes, “revolutionary action by engaging its subjects in a process of active self-understanding and collective self-formation” (p. 372). As critical methodology focuses on engaging the “subjects” or students affected by Bridge, I present data from interviews with students to better understand their experiences with Bridge. I also include data from interviews with teachers and administrators to better understand their perspective. In explaining the influence critical theory has had on education, Prunty (1985) reported,

works in critical theory explored the subtleties of oppression and its origins in human consciousness, communication and broader social arrangements. The process of schooling came under intensive critical scrutiny in the 1970s as researchers across the world began to unravel the part education played in transmitting, maintaining, and recreating cultural and economic patterns that favoured a privileged elite. (p. 134)

Unfortunately the achievement gap between black and white students continues today. Its effects are seen in the disparity in HSA scores across the state of Maryland. As a

result, more African American students have participated in the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation than white students. It is for that reason that I feel critical theory is valuable in my research.

Prunty (1985) offered several statements to support the use of critical educational policy analysis. He says first that,

the unique role of schools in socializing the young and transmitting, maintaining, and recreating culture must be recognized. Schools, more than any institution are charged with this responsibility, and virtually no person is exempt from the school's socializing influence. We contend that an educational policy analysis must attend simultaneously to the workings of the school and the workings of society. (p. 135)

In this way critical policy aims to analyze not only what schools are teaching but also what else schools may be transmitting to students. Prunty offers further support for this notion of schools as transmitters of culture saying, "an educational policy analysis must be conducted from within a moral and ethical stance, for the very role of transmitting values, and selecting people for or excluding them from social and occupational positions, is far from a neutral and objective activity. Further, the notion that curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation are impartial must be dispelled" (p. 135). Every aspect of schooling is wrought with values and therefore it is important to examine whose values are being transmitted and who benefits from them.

Prunty (1985) offers a specific method for conducting a critical educational policy analysis. First, he says, "The critical analyst would endorse political, social and economic arrangements where persons are never treated as means to an end, but treated as ends in their own right" (p. 136). Keeping this in mind I analyze the Bridge Plan to see, not only to see how it meets the government's goals of fulfilling NCLB requirements, but also to what extent it serves the needs of students. Second, Prunty said,

“a critical analysis would strive to expose the sources of domination, repression, and exploitation that are entrenched in, and legitimated by, educational policy” (p. 136). To this end I will be looking to see if participation in the Bridge Plan has affected black students differently than white students.

Third, Prunty continues,

a critical analysis of educational policy would pay careful attention to Bernstein’s (1971) three message systems of the school, viewing these as conduits through which the values institutionalized by the policy process are imposed upon students and perpetuated in society. When a policy is analyzed in terms of curriculum (what counts as knowledge), pedagogy (what counts as valid transmission of knowledge) and evaluation (what counts as valid realization of knowledge), close scrutiny would be given to the process of validation and, specifically, to the principles of inclusion and exclusion in deciding ‘what counts.’ (p. 136)

I look specifically at the third message system, evaluation, because the Bridge Plan is used as a means to evaluate students’ knowledge of content in four areas and fulfill the state’s testing requirement.

The fourth step Prunty identified is, “analysis of the attempts (or more likely, the lack of) by disenfranchised groups to influence the workings of the school. Here the critical analyst would try to show how the policy process subverts and contravenes the interests of the oppressed, and how this is due, in part, to the ways in which such persons see themselves and others in society” (p. 137). The fifth step involves, “awareness of domination leads the oppressed to courses of action which the critical theorist, while unable to specify in advance, may nonetheless help catalyze” (p. 137). Finally, the sixth step requires that, “the critical educational policy analyst must be knowledgeable in the policy arena..More importantly, the critical policy analyst must choose carefully a stance which will best serve those whose interests and values have been subordinated to the

desires of the dominant few” (p. 137). Prunty’s last step involves policy analysis and therefore Bridge policy analysis fits perfectly with the final step as the students that the Bridge plan is having the greatest impact on are African American students who struggle to pass standardized tests. Therefore, I will be trying to understand how Bridge meets these students’ needs.

### **Research Methodology: Case Study**

Yin (1994) tells us that, “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). This methodology works well with my research goals because the Bridge Plan gives individual school the autonomy to implement the policy as they see fit, making it practical to observe implementation at the school level.

The case study is unique because as Merriam (1998) explains, “Unlike experimental, survey, or historical research, case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. Any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing can be used in a case study, although certain techniques are used more than others” (p. 28). As a result, case study gives researches the flexibility to use the data sources they think will work best for their particular topic. Merriam (2009) reported, “Data have usually been derived from interviews, field observations, and documents” (p. 203). Therefore, a case study can incorporate both qualitative and quantitative data and any combination of research methods.

Because case study allows researchers the flexibility to incorporate many types of data, case studies are supported by multiple sources of data. Yin (1994) explained this benefit of a case study saying, it

copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result; relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result; benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 13)

Although a researcher may be using multiple types of data, it is important for the researcher to be able to determine which data points are most applicable to the study's objective.

### **Steps of a case study.**

One of the first steps in conducting a case study is to select the case to be researched. Merriam (2009) explained that, "A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). When talking about how the case would be selected, Merriam (1998) said that, "The bounded system, or case, might be selected because it is an instance of some concern, issue, or hypothesis" (p. 28). Merriam (1998) further explained that,

Case studies in education can focus on individual students- to diagnose learning problems, for example. More commonly, though, case study research in education is conducted so that specific issues and problems of practice can be identified and explained; researchers in education often draw upon other disciplines such as anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology both for theoretical orientation and for techniques of data collection and analysis. (p. 34)

Much like Merriam explained, I focus on one issue but using history, sociology, as well as political science to guide my research.

When choosing a case it is important to make sure the parameters of the case are clearly defined. Merriam (1998) explains what exactly constitutes a case saying that,



“The case then, could be a person such as a student, a teacher, a principal; a program; a group such as a class, a school, a community; a specific policy; and so on” (p. 27).

Further, a case study must be bound in a definitive way and have clear limits.

Additionally, Merriam says,

If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case. One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be, that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite amount of time for observations (p. 28).

### **Types of case studies.**

Within the classification of case study there are many different forms a case study can take. Merriam (1998) explains that there are three ways to characterize a case study which include, particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Particularistic “means that case studies focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 29). One benefit of a particularistic case study Merriam notes is that, “this specificity of focus makes it an especially good design for practical problems- for questions, situation, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice” (p. 29). Merriam also identifies three statements which are reflected in a particularistic case study: “It can suggest to the reader what to do or what not to do in a similar situation, It can examine a specific instance but illuminate a general problem, It may or may not be influenced by the author’s bias” (p. 30).

The second way in which case studies may be characterized is descriptive which means “that the end product of a case study is a rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study....They also have been labeled holistic, lifelike, grounded, and exploratory” (p. 30). Further, the data used in a descriptive case study is usually

qualitative and focused on prose or literary techniques. Finally, heuristic refers to a case study that, “illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known” (Merriam, 1998, p. 30).

Merriam (1998) offers an additional way to categorize case studies based on their intent. She explains that there are three orientations a case study may take including descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative. The orientation that fits best with my research is the interpretive orientation. Merriam says, “Interpretive case studies, too, contain rich, thick description. These descriptive data, however, are used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering” (p. 38). I first describe the Bridge Plan but then dig deeper to see how it has impacted students.

Yin (2003) however, explains that there are three types of case studies which include exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. An exploratory case study aims to define “the questions and hypotheses of a subsequent study” (p. 5). Further, an exploratory case study differs from other types of case studies in that research is begun before the final study questions have been created. The second type of case study, which is explanatory case study, “presents data bearing on cause-effect relationship-- explaining how events happened” (p. 5). The last type is descriptive which “presents a complete description of a phenomenon within its context” (p. 5).

Yin (1994) explained one easy way to determine which type of case study will work best for a particular research question. He said, “To summarize, the first and most important condition for differentiating among the various research strategies is to identify

the type of research question being asked. In general, ‘what’ questions may either be exploratory (in which case any of the strategies could be used) or about prevalence (in which surveys or the analysis of archival records would be favored). ‘How’ and ‘why’ questions are likely to favor the use of case studies, experiments, or histories” (p. 7).

Yin (1994) also explained that, “case studies can have a distinctive place in evaluation research. There are at least five different applications. The most important is to explain the causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies. In evaluation language, the explanations would link program implementation with program effects” (p. 15). Yin went on to explain other ways in which case study could be used in evaluation research including, to illustrate certain topics within an evaluation, to explore a situation with no clear outcome, a meta-evaluation which would be a study of an evaluation and finally some journalism could be considered examples of case study in evaluation research. It was my goal to be able to use the case study methodology to shed light on the implementation of Bridge and the effects of the Bridge Plan on Central High School students.

### **Case Selection: Central High School, New Town, Maryland**

Central High School was chosen as the site to conduct my case study because of the size of its Bridge program. When HSA testing requirements went into effect for the graduating class of 2009, over half of Central’s seniors had yet to pass the tests. As a result, the first year the state offered The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation as an option for Maryland students, Central High School students required more projects than any other school in New Town or across the state. Therefore, because I am trying to better understand the effect of Bridge on students, it is helpful to look at the school where

a great number of students are impacted. In addition, because I have worked at Central High School since the creation of the program I have access to Bridge data at that school.

### **Data Sources and Methods of Data Collection**

In order to get a more complete picture of Bridge at Central High School I used a variety of data sources. Yin (1994) described six main sources of evidence including, “documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts” (p. 79). Throughout my research I focus primarily on document analysis and interview while also including observation. Yin (1994) also suggested following three basic principles during data collection. These three principles are as follows: Principle 1, use multiple sources of evidence; Principle 2, create a case study database; and Principle 3, maintain a chain of evidence. I use this advice to guide the data collection process.

#### **Document analysis.**

One of the primary methods that I used to gather data is that of document analysis. Yin (1994) explained the primary purpose of documents saying, “For case studies, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 81). Hartas (2010) reported, “Documentary research is derived largely from historical methods, which are essentially concerned with the problems of selection and evaluation of evidence” (p. 187). Regarding document analysis Merriam (2009) explains that, “Interviewing and observation are two data collection strategies designed to gather data that specifically address the research question. Documents, however, are usually produced for reasons other than the research at hand and therefore are not subject to the same limitations. The presence of documents does not intrude upon

or alter the setting in ways that the presence of the investigator often does” (p. 139).

Document analysis is valuable in that it will not necessarily include the bias that interviews or observations are prone to include. Despite this, document analysis is prone to other types of bias.

Yin (1994) explained a variety of strengths as well as weaknesses to using document analysis. Some of the strengths listed include its stability (can be reviewed repeatedly), that it is unobtrusive (not created as a result of the case study), that it is exact (contains exact names, references, and details of an event), and that it offers broad coverage (long span of time, many events, and many settings). Some of the weaknesses he identified were retrievability (can be low), biased selectivity, (if collection is incomplete), the potential reporting bias (reflects (unknown) bias of author), and its access (may be deliberately blocked). After considering these advantages and disadvantages to using document analysis, I decided that the stability and exactness of document analysis as a data source would be extremely valuable particularly when looking at the development of the Bridge Plan.

I analyze a variety of data points to gather information both about the development of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation and the implementation of it. Merriam (2009) explains that there are a variety of documents that could be analyzed including public records (census, police records, court transcripts, program documents, government documents, etc), personal documents (diaries, letters, photo albums, biographies), popular culture documents (television, radio, newspapers, internet), visual documents (film, video, photography), physical materials/artifacts (physical objects found within the study setting), researcher-generated documents (documents prepared by

the researcher after the study has begun including quantitative data). The data sources that I collected and analyzed include data found on MD Report Card indicating participation in the Bridge Plan based on race, FARMS, and SPED status. I also use data indicating which schools and districts have the highest number of Bridge Projects as well as average HSA scores.

### **Observations.**

In addition to gathering data from document analysis I also gather data through working at Central High School. Merriam (2009) explained that, “Interviews are a primary source of data in qualitative research; so too are observations...observational data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (p. 117). Because observation has the potential to be extremely biased, Merriam (2009) warned that, “Observation is a research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances in producing trustworthy results” (p. 118).

Merriam (2009) also explained that the observer can assume one of four possible roles. These roles include, complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant and complete observer. The role that best fits my role as an observer of the Bridge Plan is “participant as observer.” Merriam defined this role saying, “The researchers observe activities, which are known to the group, are subordinate to the researcher’s role as a participant. The trade-off here is between the depth of the information revealed to the researcher and the level of confidentiality promised to the group in order to obtain this information” (p. 124). Although it is easier to glean

information about a situation in which one is already involved there is also the risk of data bias. Merriam (2009) pointed out that, “Another concern is the extent to which the observer investigator affects what is being observed” (p. 127). Although there is no specific way to prevent bias from affecting participant observer observations it is suggested that the observer must simply be aware that the possibility of bias exists.

Merriam further advises what exactly could be observed in any given situation including the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and the observer’s own behavior. In addition, Merriam (2009) pointed out the need for field notes to be highly descriptive saying, “What is described are the participants, the setting the activities or behaviors of the participants, and what the observer does. By highly descriptive I mean that enough detail should be given that readers feel as if they are there, seeing what the observer sees” (p. 130).

Hartas (2010) asserts that field notes are of vital importance when conducting interviews. He said, “Where fieldnotes are used, the researcher constructs a narrative of the events being investigated, and does so, as I have said, with reference to their existing and emerging interests. Fieldnotes usually record both contextual information and detailed information. Detailed information refers to the main events in a given observation and may include central structural features, problems, unintelligible events, confirmations of previous observations and so on (p. 63). In addition to the rich description of the phenomenon being observed it is also important to include a reflective component. Merriam (2009) said, “This reflective component is captured in observer commentary, indicated by being set apart from the description either in the right of left margins or in brackets in the commentary itself. Reflective comments can include the

researcher's feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, speculations, and working hypotheses" (p. 131). As an observer, I attempt to look objectively at the Bridge classes held at Central High School as well the scoring of the Bridge projects held at New Town Schools' central office. I am looking specifically at how each of these things works to ensure that all students are achieving academically. In conducting my observations, I attempt to put aside the prior knowledge I have about the program, and gather information through the lens of a researcher who has not worked directly with the program.

### **Interviews.**

The final source I use in my research is interview. Merriam (2009) reported that, "In all forms of qualitative research, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews" (p. 87). Yin (1994) cited three categories for interviews including open-ended nature, focused, and survey. Merriam (2009) further explained that there are three structures for interviews, Highly Structured or Standardized, Semistructured, and Unstructured or Informal. Merriam (2009) explains the difference in the three formats saying, "The most structured interview is actually an oral form of the written survey" (p. 90). However, as Merriam says, "For the most part, however, interviewing in qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured" (p. 90).

Merriam (2009) offers several valuable tips for conducting an interview. She advises, "The key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions" (p. 95). Hartas (2010) said, "The formulation of the specific questions/topics to be examined in the interviews is a central aspect of the design of interviews" (p. 61). I use the semi-structured format which includes, "a mix of more and less structured interview



questions, all questions used flexibly, largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored, and no predetermined wording or order” (p. 89). A list of interview questions is provided in the appendix. I interviewed nine students, six teachers and five administrators and officials to gain a variety of perspectives on both the development and the implementation of the Bridge Plan.

My objective for the interviews varied slightly depending on who I was interviewing. When interviewing the Maryland State Department of Education employees I focused more on the development of the Bridge Plan and the motivation behind its development. Likewise, when I interviewed individuals that work at Central High School or New Town Schools I focused more on the implementation of Bridge. An interview guide has been included in the Appendix which I used during each interview. My questions attempted to get the opinions of the individuals I was interviewing on the theoretical perspectives I am focusing on. For example, views on the political perspective are addressed in questions 3 and 6. With these questions I was looking to see to what extent these individuals perceive the development of the Bridge Plan to be politically motivated. The symbolic perspective is addressed by questions 4, 5, 7 and 11. These questions attempted to understand if the students that have met HSA requirements through Bridge have been as adequately prepared as those students who passed the tests. Critical Race Theory, Social Capital Theory and Cultural Capital Theory were addressed by questions 10, 12 and 13. These questions tried to assess factors outside of school that may impact students’ achievement and therefore participation in the Bridge program. The information obtained from the interviews filled in the gaps from data analysis and was important to better understand the Bridge Plan through the political, symbolic and critical perspectives.

## **Data Analysis**

Merriam (2009) explains that, “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning” (p. 175). This then leads to the question of how exactly do you go about making meaning out of data. Merriam (2009) said that, “The overall process of data analysis begins by identifying segments in your data set that are responsive to your research questions...The task is to compare one unit of information with the next in looking for recurring regularities in the data” (p. 176). When speaking specifically about data analysis within a case study, Merriam (2009) said that, “To begin the more intensive phase of data analysis in a case study, all the information about the case should be brought together—interview logs or transcripts, field notes, reports, records, the investigator’s own documents, physical traces, and reflective memos. All this material needs to be organized in some fashion so that data are easily retrievable” (p. 203).

Many authors suggest developing a coding system in order to more easily organize data into categories. Merriam (2009) suggests several criteria for categorizing data. She says, categories should be responsive to the purpose of the research (categories should be the answers to your research question), categories should be exhaustive (all data should be able to be placed in a category), categories should be mutually exclusive (a particular unit of data should fit into only one category), categories should be sensitizing (the naming of the category should be as sensitive as possible to what is in the data), and finally categories should be conceptually congruent (the same level of

abstraction should categorize all categories at the same level) (p. 185). Using this system, I categorized the responses received from the interviews in order to themes across the responses.

### **Data Trustworthiness and Validity**

#### **Construct validity.**

There are several issues to be concerned with when thinking about the ethical considerations of research. One of the first considerations is that of construct validity. Yin (1994) explained that construct validity is “establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied” (p. 33). Yin further stated that construct validity can be of particular concern for those researchers conducting a case study because, “People who have been critical of case studies often point to the fact that a case study investigator fails to develop a sufficiently operational set of measure that ‘subjective’ judgments are used to collect the data” (p. 34). In addition Yin offered two pieces of advice to help researchers ensure a high level of construct validity saying, “Select the specific types of changes that are to be studied (in relation to the original objectives of the study) and demonstrate that the selected measures of these changes do indeed reflect the specific types of change that have been selected” (p. 34). This is especially relevant to my study as I compared data before and after the implementation of Bridge.

#### **Internal validity.**

Another ethical consideration is internal validity. Internal validity answers the question, how well do the research findings match what is happening or happened in reality. Yin (1994) explained this potential problem saying, “internal validity is a concern only for causal (or explanatory) case studies, in which an investigator is trying to

determine whether event x led to event y. if the investigator incorrectly concludes that there is a causal relationship between x and y without knowing that some third factor—z—may have actually caused y, the research design has failed to deal with some threat to internal validity” (p. 35). I think that using multiple methods of data collection helps to ensure its accuracy. This is often referred to as triangulation. Merriam (2009) explained that, “Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people” (p. 216). One of the best ways to ensure internal validity is triangulation. Another way to ensure internally validity is member checks or respondent validation. Merriam (2009) says this is when you, “solicit feedback on your emerging findings from some of the people that you interviewed” (p. 217). In order to ensure internal validity, Merriam additionally suggests, adequate engagement in data collection, looking for data that support alternative explanations, and reflexivity. Yin (1994) also offers several suggestions for ensuring internal validity including pattern-matching, explanation-building and time-series analysis.

### **Consistency.**

The third ethical concern a researcher must consider is that of reliability or consistency. Merriam (2009) said that, “Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p. 220). Although she explains that complete reliability seems largely impossible due to the constant changing of the phenomenon being studied, Merriam does say that, an audit trail or log may help to preserve some consistency for future research. Merriam explained that, “An audit trail in a qualitative study describes in

detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (p. 223).

### **External validity.**

An additional ethical consideration is that of external validity or transferability. Merriam (2009) explained that, “External validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (p. 223). Merriam further says, “To enhance the possibility of the results of a qualitative study ‘transferring’ to another setting several strategies can be employed. The most commonly mentioned is the use of thick description..a highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of a study” (p. 227).

### **Protection of research participants.**

Merriam (2009) reminds us that, “In any qualitative study, ethical issues relating to protection of the participants are of concern” (p. 161). Merriam further explains the difference between participants and subjects saying, “The term participants is commonly used by qualitative researchers to describe the individuals being studied...If this term cannot be accurately used—if subjects more appropriately describes the inclusion of unwilling or uninformed individuals under the researcher’s scrutiny—then the researcher should honestly reevaluate the methods and procedures of the study” (p. 162). Further, there are more specific concerns that go along with independent research. Sadler (2002) says that include, “(1) conflict of interest between the evaluator (or the agency) and the program evaluation itself; (2) reactivity between the providers of information on the one hand and the evaluator as consumer of information on the other, because of the purposeful, goal-oriented activity of both parties; and (3) sloppiness in the way the

evaluation is carried out (shallowness, prejudice, capriciousness, and the intrusion of unsubstantiated opinion)” (p. 124).

**Personal bias.**

I know that because I work at Central High School it was important for me to try to remain as unbiased as possible during the research process. In addition to my bias as an employee at Central High School, race was also a factor for me as a researcher when looking at the impact of the Bridge Plan on Central High School students. Because the vast majority (98%) of Central High School students are African American and I am white, this difference in race could impact my research. Some authors have asserted that White teachers are less able to relate to Black students. Kinjufu (2002) explained this idea saying, “White teachers grew up in rural areas or lived their entire lives in White neighborhoods. They attended a White university, worshipped in a White church, and shopped in White grocery stores....Consequently, they are ill prepared to work with African American children, and I don’t believe it is their fault. How could a teacher who grew up in a White rural community and was educated in a White environment be effective in the inner cities of America?” (p. 18). As a result of the little experience that White teachers may have with African Americans, Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) pointed out that,

A lack of cultural synchronization means that teachers and African American students do not share a common understanding of verbal and nonverbal language, manner of personal presentation, or ways of processing information and knowledge....In other classrooms, a lack of cultural responsiveness results in negative expectations by teachers and by the students themselves, as well as in a pattern of differential teacher-student interactions and behaviors that cause tensions and conflicts.” (p. 52)

However, this description doesn't completely describe me as I attended schools that were extremely diverse. For example, the high school I attended had an approximately 40% African American population. Because I grew up in a racially diverse environment, it wasn't until later on in life that I developed a more complete understanding of the racial inequalities that still exist today. As a child I had many African American friends and never thought much about differences between Black and White individuals. I remember first becoming aware of race in the eighth grade. One of my best friends at the time was an African American girl named Daisha. I remember the phone ringing one night and hearing my mother speak on the phone while becoming very upset. I later learned that another student's mother had called my mother to try to convince her that I should not be friends with Daisha because she was black. It was hard for me to wrap my head around why something I perceived to be as simple as skin color was such a big issue for some people.

Since that time I have come to understand that race is an issue far more complicated than I originally understood. Despite this, I continue to live with the belief that students' achievement is determined by high expectations and quality instruction rather than skin color. This is the belief that has been the backbone of my career as a teacher. As an American Government teacher, I consistently had 60% or more of my students passing the Government High School Assessment while the average in New Town at that time was approximately 25%.

Edwards, McMillon and Turner (2010) describe this idea very well, "Students need adults who are willing to help them learn how to effectively address situations. It is a fact that every teacher or professor is not going to make learning easily accessible and

exciting for all students. Black students must be taught how to fight for their right to learn...” (p. 71). I saw examples of low expectations for my students all around me and made sure to teach students how to advocate for themselves not only in school but in all situations throughout life. Having taught American Government, I had the opportunity to hear as well as witness situations of my students being treated unfairly because law enforcement knew that they were unlikely to advocate for themselves.

In one situation a student was arrested right outside my classroom door as I was teaching for simply bumping into a police officer. The young man was one of the most polite, respectful students I had and I saw that he had done nothing to warrant the arrest. He was promptly handcuffed and put in the police car. At that point, I called the local police station and asked to speak to the police captain on duty. Within ten minutes, he was dropped back off at school, handcuff free. I remember many students surprised that you could voice complaints against the police and hearing numerous accounts of times they had been mistreated. Since that time, I knew it was important to teach my students the importance of becoming their own advocates.

Although I am not able to fully understand my students’ experience with race, I am able to more closely relate to the lack of social and cultural capital many of my students have in common. Because I was raised in a single-parent home where my mother worked two and at times three jobs to support my sister and me, there were times that, like my students, I lacked many of the social and cultural resources middle class and upper class students had access to. My mother had my sister at age sixteen and never graduated from high school as a result. This made it difficult for her to guide me through the college application process or provide me with academic support at home.



Despite these similarities, there are also vast differences between my students and me. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a neighborhood where I did not have to worry about threats of violence and drugs. Although I recognize that my students' experiences are vastly different from my own, I use my own experiences to reiterate to students the opportunity they have to change the social structure they have been born into should they choose to do so.

## **CHAPTER 4: CASE AND PARTICIPANT PROFILES**

### **Introduction**

New Town, which is located in the state of Maryland, has dealt with high crime, a high rate of poverty and struggling schools. New Town Schools have been plagued by a myriad of problems such as unqualified teachers, misappropriated funds, poor attendance, and poor test scores. All of these things converge to result in low test scores and a dismal graduation rate. New Town is still far behind other Maryland school districts in almost every indicator.

### **New Town Public Schools**

According to the 2010 Maryland Report Card, New Town Public School System is currently comprised of 201 schools. New Town Public School System has an 87.8% African American population and 7.8% White population (Maryland Report Card, 2010). Currently, high schools in New Town operate on a tiered system with the top tier of high schools being highly selective down through schools at the bottom tier that do not have an application process. The top tier schools are highly competitive and do not represent the typical situation in most New Town high schools. They have a high graduation rate, extremely low dropout rates and near perfect performance on state exit exams. The next tier of high schools includes schools that have the ability to select which students will attend and remove students that are not meeting success in their program. They also boast above average graduation rates and test scores. Next come charter schools and less selective public schools that become more selective simply because they require students and parents to fill out an application. Typically, these schools struggle with issues such as low graduation rate, low test scores and behavior issues. Finally, there are a small

number of neighborhood or zone schools which have no application whatsoever and can only remove students in extreme situations. Although students can choose to come to a zone school from anywhere in the city, students typically tend to be from one particular part of the city. Central High School is one of the few remaining zone schools.

### **Central High School**

The school which will be the focus of this research is Central High School in New Town, Maryland. Central houses grades 9 – 12 with approximately 950 students with over 100 faculty and staff. Currently Central’s population is 96.7% black and 1.2% White. One of the few zone schools remaining, these “zone” or “neighborhood” schools have a history of low attendance and high dropout rates. Central High School is currently a school identified for Improvement by the Maryland State Department of Education. MSDE explains that schools in Improvement are, “Schools that do not make the targets, the Annual Measurable Objectives, in the same subject or other reported area for two consecutive years are identified for School Improvement” (MSDE, 2010). The School Improvement program began, when in, “July 1, 2008, the Maryland State Department of Education received approval from the U.S. Department of Education to implement a Differentiated Accountability pilot proposal that allows Maryland to distinguish between schools in improvement that need substantial help and those close to meeting achievement goals” (MSDE, 2010). In addition, Central High School (CHS) went through the restructuring process in 2008 and was “zero based” receiving an almost entirely new administration and staff.

### **Test Scores at Central High School and across New Town.**

High School Assessment (HSA) scores at Central High School have been consistently below the city and state averages. In 2009, scores on the Algebra HSA for 12<sup>th</sup> grade Central student are approximately 20 points below the New Town average and over 30 points below the Maryland state average. In addition, scores in the other three content areas follow a similar trend.

Most students across the state take Algebra I for the first time in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and all other subjects for the first time in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. However, at Central High School in 2009, no 10<sup>th</sup> graders met HSA requirements compared with 74.7% of students across New Town Schools and 85.5% of students across Maryland State. However, 98.9% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students at Central High School did meet HSA requirements. The reason for this sharp jump in the amount of students meeting HSA requirements between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades has everything to do with the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. The Bridge Plan allows seniors to complete projects instead of earning a passing score on the HSA exam in order to meet their HSA requirement. According to the 2009 Maryland Report Card, 41.2% of all students meeting HSA requirements at Central High School did so using the Bridge Plan option. This is compared to the only 6.3% of students who used this option throughout the state of Maryland and the 20.9% who used this option in New Town.

### **Attendance at Central High School and across New Town.**

One issue that has substantially contributed to this disparity in scores is attendance. According to the 2009 Maryland Report Card, Central High School had a 76.7% attendance rate in 2008 and a 79.5% attendance rate in 2009. New Town had an

attendance rate of 83.6% in 2008 and 83.5% for 2009. This is compared to the state average of 91.9% in 2008 and 92.4% in 2009. For the past three years, Central High school has employed three full time attendance monitors to promote attendance, conduct home visits and make phone calls to those with poor attendance. In addition, Central holds monthly awards assemblies for students with good attendance. Despite these efforts, attendance continues to be a problem.

#### **Graduation Rate at Central High School and across New Town.**

As a result of these dismal test scores and attendance rate, it is not surprising that the graduation rate is also suffering. In 2008, Central High School graduated 64.8 % of 12<sup>th</sup> graders and in 2009 this rose slightly to 65.5%. This is compared to the 85.09% across the state of Maryland in 2008 and 85.24% in 2009. Characteristics common to dropouts in New Town include, a slightly higher percentage of male students (57%) compared to female students (43%), a higher percentage of special education students (29.3% compared to the 16.7% of special education students in school), chronic attendance issues, history of suspension, and course failure.

#### **Free and Reduced Meals at Central High School and across New Town.**

In 2010, Central High School had 74.8% of its students eligible for free or reduced meals. This is slightly higher than the average in New Town and more than double the average state-wide. In New Town, the percentage of students receiving free or reduced meals is 71.5% and in all of Maryland it is 32.4%. The Maryland State Department of Education defines Free/Reduced Price Meals as “The number and percentage of students whose applications for free-reduced price meals meet the family size and income guidelines (as promulgated annually by the U.S. Department of

Agriculture) and students approved through direct certification. The counts are reported as of the student's last day of enrollment in the school system- either the last day in school or the date the student withdrew. The percentage is calculated by dividing the number of students receiving free or reduced price meals by the June net enrollment" (Maryland Report Card, 2010).

Although Central's official number is 74.8% it is probable that the number may be even higher. Schools rely solely on parents to fill out Free and Reduced Meal paperwork and it can often times be difficult to get complete compliance. Illiteracy is also a common reason why parents do not fill out the forms. The school's high poverty rate is also shown by the 72% of students who are working with the Department of Social Services (DSS). Most of these children were or are currently in foster care.

#### **Special Education Program Participants at Central High School and across New Town.**

In 2010, 19.4% of students are identified as receiving special education services. This is up slightly from 18.1% in 2009 but down from the 23.1% of students that qualified in 2008. MSDE reports that a Special Education Program Participant is, "The number and percentage of special education program participants- students with disabilities who have current Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)" (MSDE, 2010). In New Town, there were 16.9% of students receiving services in 2008, 14% in 2009 and currently 16.6% in 2010. Maryland State averages were 12.5% in 2008, 10.3% in 2009 and 10.7% in 2010.

#### **Teachers at Central High School and across New Town.**

MSDE (2010) explains Teacher Qualifications are, “the percentage of teachers in each category is based on the number of teachers who have credentials and are teaching core academic subjects as defined by the federal government under No Child Left Behind Act. The core academic subjects are English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography. Teachers who are teaching other subjects are not included in these totals.” It is easy to see why there are such low test scores and graduation rate when the quality of teachers between Central, New Town and the State of Maryland are compared. In 2009, for example Central High School had approximately 26% of its classes not taught by teachers that were Highly Qualified while the average across the state of Maryland was only approximately 12%.

### **The Current State of New Town**

Currently, New Town’s population is 64.3% Black, 31.6% White, 1.7% Hispanic and 1.5% Asian (US Census 2000). The US Census Bureau also reports that 68.4% of all residents are high school graduates compared to the Maryland State average of 83.8%. Further, New Town has a 19.1% population of bachelor’s degree recipients while Maryland State has 31.4% of its residents holding bachelor’s degrees. When disaggregated by race, only 10% of African Americans have a bachelor’s degree compared to 33% of Whites and 52% of Asians.

In addition to low graduation rates for both high school and college, New Town has been plagued by a high level of poverty. Currently, the poverty line for a single parent household with two children is an annual income of less than \$17,346. The 2000 Census reported that 22.9% of New Town residents were living below the poverty level

while that number was only 8.5% throughout the state of Maryland. By 2008, that number improved slightly to 19%. The discrepancy between poverty in New Town and state-wide hits home even more when we see that, “Overall, Maryland has the second-lowest poverty level in the nation, trailing only New Hampshire” (Jones, 2009, p. 2).

Crime has also been another serious issue facing New Town. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), per 100,000 people New Town had a murder rate of 43.3 in 2006 and 45.2 in 2007. This is compared to the rate for the New Town suburban area of 3.9 in 2006 and 3.6 in 2007. In addition, the robbery total for New Town was 663.3 in 2006 and 624 in 2007. The rate for the surrounding suburbs was 178.4 in 2006 and 159.9 in 2007.

The high levels of crime and poverty has obvious effects for students in New Town Schools. Although all schools serve students breakfast and lunch, many students still deal with hunger on a daily basis, knowing that these two meals will be the only food they eat for the day. The gang activity associated with the high rate of crime also permeates into schools creating an unstable learning environment in many classes. It is clear that students’ environment and their performance in school go hand and hand. If New Town Schools hope to continue to make improvements, it is imperative that gains are seen throughout the entire town.

### **Interview Participants Profile**

All interviews were conducted in the spring and early summer of 2011. A total of 19 people were interviewed for this study. Participants did not receive any financial



compensation for their participation in the interview. All participants' names have been changed to protect their identity.

**Student Interview Participants.**

Student interview participants were selected at random from a list of all students that had participated in Bridge. An equal number of students from each graduating class from 2009-2011 were selected.

Table 4.1: Student Interview Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Graduation Year</b>	<b>Passed HSAs</b>	<b>Number of Projects</b>	<b>Race</b>
Kara Beard	2009	Yes	0	African American
Stephanie George	2009	No	14	African American
Briana Gibson	2009	No	12	African American
Sandra Wallace	2010	No	6	African American
Naomi Harris	2010	No	8	African American
Tonya Davenport	2010	No	2	African American
Jason Davis	2011	No	5	Hispanic
Shayla Smith	2011	No	12	African American
Tobias Moore	2011	No	6	African American

**Kara Beard**

She graduated from Central High School in 2009. She did not have to complete any Bridge projects as she earned a passing score on all of the HSAs. She lived with her

mother and then her grandmother while she was a student at Central High School. She is currently in her junior at St. Mary's College and hopes to become a lawyer.

**Stephanie George**

She graduated from Central High School in 2009. She is currently enrolled at cosmetology school and would eventually like to open her own business. She lives with her father and cousins.

**Briana Gibson**

She graduated from Central High School in 2009. Although she wanted to go to college, she did not have enough money to do so. She lives with her aunt, grandfather and cousins. She currently works as a cashier at a grocery store.

**Sandra Wallace**

She graduated from Central High School in 2010. After graduating she went to culinary school. She lives with her mother and younger brothers and sisters. She currently works as a cashier at the zoo.

**Naomi Harris**

She graduated from Central High School in 2010 and has been collecting Social Security since that time. Because her benefits have run out she has decided to join Job Corps. She lives with her mother and cousins.

**Tonya Davenport**

She graduated from Central High School in 2010. She currently attends ITT Technical Institute and is planning to graduate next year with an Associate's degree in graphic design. She lives with her mother.

**Jason Davis**

He graduated from Central High School in 2011. He is currently not working or going to school. He would like to attend a community college in the future. He currently lives with his parents and younger siblings.

**Shayla Smith**

During the time of the interview she was 18 years old and in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. She was supposed to graduate in June 2011 but does not have enough credits and will wait until the following year to graduate. Prior to attending Central High School she went to school in New York City and then Prince Georges County. She lives with her aunt and her daughter.

**Tobias Moore**

During the time of the interview he was in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and planning to graduate in June of 2011. He would like to go to college but had not applied to any schools. He lives with his mother and several other family members.

**Teacher Interview Participants.**

All teachers who worked with the Bridge Program were asked for an interview. The following group represents all of the teachers who were involved in the Bridge Program except two teachers who were no longer living in the area.

**Laura Arnold**

She is a white female and was in her fourth year at Central High School. She worked with students in a Bridge class during the regular school schedule. Prior to that she taught at a middle school in New Town for five years.

**Karl Griswold**

He is an Asian male and during the time of the interview he was in his third year working at Central High School. He taught Saturday Bridge classes, summer Bridge classes and Bridge pull outs in biology. He has taught almost everything from Science and Sustainability, to Life Skills (Special Education students working towards a certificate instead of a diploma) to Advanced Placement Biology.

**Samantha Harlow**

She is a white female and during the time of the interview she was in her third year teaching at Central High School. She is a special educator who taught two Bridge classes the first year and three the second year. She also oversees the scoring of English Bridge projects for all of New Town.

**Aaron Hedgecock**

He is a white male and during the time of the interview he was in his third year teaching. He taught English IV, Creative Writing, Interactive Media and Journalism and Bridge. He began teaching at a middle school in New Town but due to budget adjustments was moved to Central High School in October of his first year teaching.

**Audrey Morris**

She is a white female and during the time of the interview she was in her fifth year working at Central High School. She has taught Biology Bridge for three years during

the regular school day as well as Saturdays. She has also participated in nearly all scoring sessions.

**Rick Nolt**

He is a white male and during the time of the interview he was in his seventh year working at Central High School. He has worked with Bridge for the past year during the regular school day. He has taught AP US History, World History and one class of Bridge.

**Administrative Interview Participants.**

***Central High School Officials.***

**James Harrington**

He is a white male and during the time of the interview he was in his third year working as principal at Central High School. Prior to that he taught for seven years at another neighborhood high school in the New Town. At the end of the 2010-2011 school year he left Central High School and New Town to work as a principal in a private school.

***New Town Public Schools Officials.***

**Andrea Ricker**

She is a white female and during the time of the interview she served as Director of Social Studies was in charge of the Government Bridge Plan at the district level. She was responsible for providing professional development regarding the scoring process. Starting in 2009 she was responsible for the English projects as well when she became the Director of Humanities for New Town Public Schools.

*Maryland State Department of Education Officials.*

**Stewart Peters**

Stewart Peters is a white male and was asked by Nancy Grasmick (the former Maryland State Superintendent of Schools) to come and work with Bridge in July in 2008. He started working with Bridge after it was already developed but he has headed the Bridge program since that time. In the interview he explained, “Now it is basically self sufficient so I can focus on other things.”

**Bob Smith**

He is a white male and he was present during the Comparable High School Assessment Task Force Meetings and worked with Stewart Peters visiting schools with high numbers of Bridge Projects. He is still employed by MSDE.

*Other interview participants.*

**Scott Ford**

He is a white male and he was asked by Nancy Grasmick to become a member of the Task Force for Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments. At the time of the Task Force meetings, he was the Managing Research Director at the American Institutes for Research and prior to that worked for 12 years and ran the Assessment Division of the Maryland State Department of Education. He presented twice to the Task Force about the technical issues important to comparable assessments.

## CHAPTER 5: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRIDGE PLAN

### Introduction

The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation was developed by both the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments and the Task Force for the Review of High School Assessment Options. The development of the Bridge Plan first began in the fall of 2004. The Maryland State Department of Education Bridge Plan Program Guide (2008) reported that,

The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation (Bridge Plan) grew out of the work of the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessment (HSA) and the Task Force for Review of High School Assessment (HSA) Options as well as research into similar plans for alternatives to meeting State assessment requirements currently in place in numerous states across the country. Both task forces were asked to explore what options Maryland could pursue to ensure that all students have a fair opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills if traditional testing instruments are not effective for them. (p. 1)

With the goal in mind of developing an alternative that would allow all students the opportunity to meet state testing requirements, The Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments began its work in October 2004 while the Task Force for the Review of High School Assessment Options did not meet for the first time until May of 2007. The Meeting Notes from the October 1, 2004 meeting of the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments reported that, “the task force is charged with examining and proposing options for comparable methods of assessing students’ knowledge in English, algebra/data analysis, biology, and government” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 17).

Similarly, the September 2005 Report of the Task Force for Review of High School Assessment Options stated that, “The charge of the Task Force was to consider possible options relative to High School Assessments for students with disabilities, students with 504 plans, and English language learners” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 17). Both of these groups met several times to discuss the state’s options for creating an alternative assessment which eventually led to the creation of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation.

### **The Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments**

In 2004, the Maryland State Department of Education announced that the graduating class of 2009 would not only have to sit for the HSA in Algebra I, Biology, English II and Government like in previous years, but that they would have to pass them as well. A memo sent by Nancy S. Grasmick to the Members of the State Board of Education requested that a task force be convened to consider alternative options for students to meet the HSA requirement. The document reported that,

Through its extensive outreach efforts, the Department has learned that some education stakeholders are concerned that students with disabilities and other students with special needs may have difficulty demonstrating their knowledge in a traditional test setting, such as with the High School Assessments. As a response to these concerns, we are proposing that the Department convene a task force that will examine comparable methods of measuring student knowledge and skills in English I, algebra/data analysis, government, and biology. This task force would examine options for comparable measurements of student knowledge and skills related to the High School Assessments and would make recommendations regarding the feasibility of implementing one or more of those options as a part of the assessment requirements for high school graduation. (Grasmick, 2004)

The document further specified that the panel should, “Represent a broad range of stakeholders, including state, local, and school-level educators, higher education



representatives, advocates for students with special needs, parents, and students.” Shortly thereafter, a group of stakeholders was brought together and the first meeting convened in October 2004.

**The first meeting of the panel: October 1, 2004.**

The panel first met on October 1, 2004 at the Meeting House in Columbia, Maryland. The Task Force was comprised by the following people: Carol Ann Baglin, Jann Barber, Cascelia Burgess, Sheldon Caplis, Robin Church, Sandra Erickson, Tonia Ferguson, Steve Ferrara, Clara Floyd, Harry Fogle, Sharon Gardner, Nancy Grasmick, Gary Heath, Patrick Hogan, Leslie Seid Margolis, Kelli Nelson, Esther Parker, Ronald Peiffer, Jim Peters, Karen Salmon, Elliot Schoen, Leroy Tompkins, Joan Valentine, Joseph Warfield, Karen Whitehurst, Jacquelyn Wilhelm, Sheree Witt, and Carolyn Wood. This group included predominately MSDE officials but also contained several experts from the fields of Educational evaluation and testing. The Meeting Notes identified the Chairperson of the Task Force as Sheldon Caplis who was the Vice President for Institutional Advancement at UMBC. During this meeting the State Board specified that they were requesting a final report and recommendations from the panel by the fall of 2007. A timetable of work was distributed by The Superintendent of The Maryland State Department of Education, Dr. Nancy Grasmick which included dates by which the Task Force should study the data from students who were now required to pass the HSA. A website was developed and to be utilized by members of the Task Force for data sharing. The meeting notes summarized the comments made by Dr. Grasmick in regards to the website,

Dr. Grasmick asked the group to use discretion in sharing materials and discussion from task force meetings. The group is not operating in secrecy, so it

would be fine to share many of the presentations and materials. However, it would be counterproductive if brainstorming sessions and preliminary ideas were communicated to audiences outside of the task force. This could result in misunderstandings and unnecessary contention among stakeholders. Task force members are advised not to share the password information for the Web site and to use discretion in sharing task force materials and discussion. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 2)

Following the information about the Task Force website, several members of the Task force including Dr. Grasmick presented information on the Maryland state assessments titled, “Background on testing and graduation requirements in Maryland.” The presentation included information on the High School Assessments, Maryland School Assessment, ALT-MSA and the now-defunct Functional Tests. After the presentation, Elliot Schoen from the Attorney General’s Office made comments regarding testing models. The meeting notes reported that Shoen said,

In designing a test, it is essential to avoid “arbitrariness.” The test model must be legally defensible in terms of validity and scoring comparability. There must be a controlled testing environment. Scoring must be as objective as possible and the test must be able to be re-scored in a straightforward way, as with a scoring rubric. There are some challenges to nontraditional testing models. A portfolio assessment can be more time intensive and therefore expensive, more subjective in scoring, difficult to control the testing environment, more difficult to identify the standards, and more difficult to have inter-rater reliability. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 18)

The Task Force was next presented information by Dr. Steven Ferrara the managing research director at the American Institutes for Research about the differences between comparable, equivalent, alternate, and substitute assessments. The meeting notes summarized his presentation saying,

Steve emphasized that the task force must be clear on what the comparable assessment to be designed should be comparable to. In the task force’s case, it should be comparable to the High School Assessments, i.e., it should be similar in content, rigor, achievement level, and score interpretation to the High School Assessments Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005. (p. 19)

As the meeting wrapped up Dr. Grasmick announced that the Center on Education Policy (CEP), Achieve, and the University of Maryland would also provide information to the Task Force as research organizations. Subsequent meetings were scheduled for January 6, 2005, April 22, 2005, and June 24, 2005.

The purpose of the first meeting appears to be to provide information to all Task Force participants on what testing at the high school level currently looks like in the State of Maryland. In addition, information was provided regarding types of assessment and the appropriate use of each of the assessment types. This meeting appears to be strictly informational as no discussion by participants on an alternative for the State of Maryland was begun.

**The second meeting of the panel: January 6, 2005.**

During this meeting, Jack Jennings and Keith Gayler from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) presented information on the options other states are giving to students to meet high school exit standards. Their report stated that, “All 25 states with exit exams allow 2 to 11 opportunities to retest and that 13 states provide certificates of achievement, attainment, or attendance” Further they reviewed the pros and cons of the Three Main Optional Paths to a Regular Diploma which included Substitute Assessments, Waivers and Appeals Processes, and the State Developed Assessments.

They reported that five states were currently utilizing Substitute Assessments such as the SAT or ACT and stated the Pros and Cons were, “Relatively inexpensive in terms of development costs, validity problems, not necessarily aligned to state standard, may undermine support for state test, and setting appropriate cut-off score can be difficult.” They also reported that the second option, Waivers and Appeals is the most common

option and was currently being used in eleven states. The Pros and Cons of Waivers and Appeals included, “Perceived as fair for the most part but some may try to use it as a free pass, can be a large administrative and cost burden, even with many criteria relies on subjective decisions on evidence, and have to decide on local versus state adjudication.” The final option was State Developed Assessments is reported as rarely used (currently in two states and under development in a third). The Pros and Cons were listed as, “Less subjective than most appeals processes with outside raters and clear scoring guidelines and evidence requirements, links clearly to state standards, provides more flexibility than an actual test and doesn’t look like a test, so burdensome that it is rarely used and not much protection” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 24)

Steve Ferrara led a continuation of the presentation on what a comparable assessment would look like. Dr. Ferrara raised the following two points in his presentation:

1. It seems likely that the only comparable assessments that would yield linkings like those addressed in the psychometric literature (to this point) would be too similar to the HSAs to provide students with special needs an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skill in relation to the CLGs.

2. Comparability perhaps can be defined in terms of high school improvement policy goals in conjunction with psychometric criteria. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 25)

As the meeting concluded, Dr. Grasmick reminded the attendees that an interim report would be due to the Maryland State Board of Education in June 2005.

The focus of the second meeting also appears to be strictly informational. This time information is presented on testing at the high school level from different states. A presentation on information on various types of assessment was continued from the previous meeting. A discussion on an alternative assessment for the State of Maryland did not begin at this meeting.

**The third meeting of the panel: April 22, 2005.**

The third meeting began with a report by Dr. Baglin, the Assistant Superintendent of Special Education. The meeting notes stated Dr. Baglin reiterated that fact that,

All students with disabilities are expected to receive instruction on the Voluntary State Curriculum content standards at grade level. All students with disabilities are expected to participate in Statewide and districtwide assessments. There are no exemptions. A student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team is to determine appropriate accommodations, supplementary aids and supports. For students with significant cognitive disabilities it is also the student's IEP team that makes the decision as to whether a student participates in HSA or Alt-MSA. Alt-MSA is designed for students with significant cognitive disabilities that receive instruction on alternate curricular standards. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 21)

After Dr. Baglin's reminder on the importance of maintaining high expectations for special needs students, representatives from both Massachusetts and Mississippi presented information on their state's respective testing alternative. Jeff Nelhaus the Associate Commissioner from the Massachusetts Department of Education explained the Performance Appeals Process being used in Massachusetts. He explained that,

This process uses students' grades to determine whether they have met the State's high school graduation standard. MCAS is designed to provide students, who have repeatedly not demonstrated a passing score on the grade 10 MCAS tests required for graduation, an opportunity to demonstrate through other measures that they possess the skills and knowledge required to meet the standard. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 21)

In Massachusetts, students who cannot demonstrate success on the state exit exams are allowed the opportunity to meet the exit exam requirement by submitting information that shows success in their classes. Then Kristopher Kaase the Director of the Mississippi Department of Education presented on the exit requirements used in Mississippi saying,

Students are assessed in four courses: Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and U.S. History from 1877. This replaced the State Functional Literacy Exam that began in 1987. It has been phased in as graduation requirement. The Class of 2006 will be the first class required to pass all 4 courses. A student may meet the graduation requirement in one of three ways:

- Achieve a passing score on the test
- Achieve a passing score on the alternate assessment (open to special education students only)
- Request a substitute evaluation (open to any student). (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 23)

According to Mr. Kaase, students in Mississippi have the option to request a substitute assessment. He elaborated that the specifications for the substitute evaluation include, “A student, parent, or school personnel can submit a written statement with supporting evidence of mastery and reason for a substitute evaluation. The appeal is submitted to the local school district for determination of merit” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 23).

Dr. Leslie Wilson from MSDE then presented on the alternative testing model used in New Jersey. Dr. Wilson explained that,

The New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) covers language arts literacy and mathematics. It includes multiple-choice, short answers, and writing prompts. The assessment is untimed. Passing the exit exam is a graduation requirement for Class of 2003 and beyond. New Jersey also has a Special Review Assessment (SRA). The SRA consists of two components: remedial coursework and performance assessment tasks (PATs). Student continues to take regular HSPA. The SRA administered and scored by teacher. The SRA is administered when teacher deems student is ready (anytime). Each local school district is responsible for auditing scoring of PATs. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 24)

Dr. Wilson further explained that New Jersey offered the following advice to Maryland in regards to using a comparable assessment, “Avoid any assessment that is administered and scored locally, If we choose to implement a comparable assessment, keep it for strictly documented cases only, and to concentrate efforts on instructional and remedial programs” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 24).

The meeting then shifted its focus to improving instructional practices.

Representatives from Carroll, Howard and Harford counties were asked to present to the group on effective instructional strategies that had been used in their district. Dr. Harry Fogle, Assistant Superintendent of School Management in Carroll County explained that four years ago over 30% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students were 6 months or more below grade level in reading. In response, a team was assembled to analyze students’ records in hopes of finding out why students were performing so poorly. The team discovered that students who received instruction strictly in a regular education room or strictly in a special education room did worse than students who received instruction in both settings. The county decided to implement the following strategies, “Group teachers into interdisciplinary teams that meet regularly to discuss students and align instruction, help teachers of other subjects like Math or Science teach struggling readers how to read better, in ways appropriate for those subjects, and regularly assess student performance, with a standard measure and report that information for accountability purposes” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 25).

Mr. James Walsh, Director of Special Education from Howard County presented information on their co-teaching model to the group. Mr. Walsh explained that, “The Co-Teaching Intervention Pilot involves a general education and special education teacher

sharing responsibility for teaching all of the students assigned to a classroom. It involves the distribution of responsibility among the teachers for planning, instruction, and evaluation for a classroom of students” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 25). He further explained that,

For 80-90 percent of the student population Howard County implements the Essential Curriculum for all students which includes preventative and proactive interventions. For 10-15 percent of the population employ targeted group interventions, including the Co-Teaching Intervention Pilot. One to five percent of population needs intensive individualized interventions that are highly structured. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 25)

Finally, Harford County’s Assistant Supervisor of Special Education, Susan Austin presented on an approach used to teach content to an academically diverse group of students known as “Content Enhancement.” The most significant components of the program include, “critical features of the content are selected and transformed in a manner that promotes student learning; and instruction is carried out in a partnership with students” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 26). The meeting was adjourned following this final presentation.

The third meeting also continues providing information to Task Force participants without beginning the discussion about an alternative specific to Maryland. Presentations on testing alternatives in other states were continued at this meeting. The focus seemed to shift slightly to Special Education as an overview of special education across the State of Maryland was provided.

**The fourth meeting of the panel: June 24, 2005.**

The fourth meeting began with a review of the presentations made by Massachusetts, Mississippi, and New Jersey. The committee agreed that programs from



all three states shared several characteristics. According to the Meeting Notes, the team agreed on the following characteristics that they felt each of the states' programs shared, "Attention to the credibility of the process; The importance of using a standardized process with specific standards; The value of having eligibility requirements that encourage student effort; and Use of a collection of evidence as last step or for limited populations" (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 27).

The possible applications for the examples from other states in Maryland were discussed by Dr. Leslie Wilson. Possible requirements for participation in the Bridge Plan were discussed. The following list was developed by meeting participants that students who have passed the Bridge Plan would have:

- Taken the HSA multiple times;
- Actively participated in tutoring and/or other appropriate assistance;
- Achieved the established minimum score, but not the total points for the composite;
- Passed the course with a minimum grade of "C;"
- Met an overall attendance standard (TBD);
- Received certification from a minimum of two content area teachers and the principal that the student's work is comparable to that of students who pass the HSA; and
- Audits will verify grading decisions. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 28)

Careful attention was paid in particular to each state's collection of evidence requirement. It was agreed that if Maryland were to include a collection of evidence component it

should follow the following specifications, “Addresses the Core Learning Goals, Consists of work completed individually by the student, Can be scored reliably using standards equivalent to the HSA, by the state” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 28). Presentations were then made by additional representatives from other states using the collection of evidence method.

The Mathematics Assessment Specialist from the Oregon State Department of Education, Cathy Brown presented information on the state’s Juried Assessment Program. The Minutes for the June 24<sup>th</sup> meeting explain that, “Through the Juried Assessment Process, a panel of experts juries a collection of material submitted by a student that demonstrates his or her ability to meet a standard for both sufficiency and proficiency. Any student may use a Juried Assessment as an alternate to the statewide assessments” (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 29).

Following the presentation on Oregon’s collection of evidence method there was continued discussion on the applicability of such a method in the state of Maryland. Task Force participants stressed the need to,

emphasize quality instruction for all students at the school, school system, and State level, including educating parents on issues of grade level versus developmental level and instructional level. Members discussed the importance of training IEP teams and general educators on strategies for addressing content in order to write appropriate goals on IEPs for students with disabilities. (Interim Report to the State Board of Education September 2005, p. 29)

Finally, at this fourth meeting of the Task Force, and the final meeting for the 2004-2005 school year, comparisons began to be drawn between all of the programs from other states and how elements from each of the programs would work in the State of Maryland. A preliminary list of requirements for participation in the alternative assessment was also developed. However, after a year’s worth of meetings, because no

concrete decisions were made regarding an alternate assessment, subsequent meetings were scheduled for the following year.

**The fifth meeting of the panel: October 14, 2005.**

This meeting began with an introduction by Dr. Grasmick about what the group's focus should be for the next year. She explained that the Task Force needed to, "further define our target group, and possibly conduct focus groups to obtain input into content and scope of the Comp HSA" (Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education, October 2006, p. 17). Next, a presentation was made by Gary Heath on the 2005 HSA results. The Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education from October 2006 states that, "Gary reviewed some of the interventions that will be available to the 1500 students statewide who did not pass algebra/data analysis but who must graduate. Some schools will be providing significantly more interventions than others, and this is a concern" (p. 18). No further discussion regarding the disparity in test preparation offered was noted in the Final Report.

For the remainder of the meeting the group was charged with the task of developing a list of eligibility requirements for students to participate in the Comp HSA. The Task Force reviewed the requirements other states with similar programs had in place and developed the following list of requirements for students in the state of Maryland who have:

- Achieved the established minimum score but not the total points to meet the combined score option and/or received certification from a minimum of two content area teachers and the principal that the student's work is comparable to that of students who pass the HSA. (Audits will verify grading decisions).

- Actively participated in academic intervention provided by the local schools system.
- Passed the course
- Taken the HSA a minimum of two times
- Met an overall attendance standard of 94% (need to specify if attendance is related to the course or year, and make a final decision on if it is tied to the state standard of not). (Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education, October 2006, p. 19)

Although no mention was made as to how the decision came about, the alternative testing option for the State of Maryland began being referred to as the Comp HSA. The alternative assessment was first called the Comp HSA by Dr. Nancy Grasmick as she gave the introduction to this year's Task Force meetings as well as provided what she would like to see as the focus over the next year. This meeting resulted in a more defined list of participation requirements for the Comp HSA but no specific conversation on what the Comp HSA itself would consist of.

**The sixth meeting of the panel: December 1, 2005.**

The meeting began with the announcement of a subcommittee that was formed to “collect information on possible assessment methods that may be able to be used with students who have difficulty demonstrating the standard in the formats used on the HSAs” (Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education, October 2006, p. 20). The subcommittee consisted of three representatives from Harford County, one from Anne Arundel County, two from Kennedy Krieger, three from MSDE, and one from Allegany County. New Town was not represented on the subcommittee.

The Task Force then decided to revisit the eligibility requirements decided at the previous meeting and made the following changes:

- Passed the course was changed to Successful completion of the course as determined by the school system
- All other requirements were removed except, Taken the HSA a minimum of two times

The following concerns were raised by the group, how can we ensure that all students have access to interventions which are shown to be effective, and how can we ensure that there was a VALID conclusion about a student who knows the content and has the skills, but cannot demonstrate this on the HSA. It was stated that “those who don’t ‘know’ should not be part of the Comp HSA” (Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education, October 2006, p. 20). The amount of time it will take for schools to conduct interventions, administer the test twice and collect evidence to be used in the Comp HSA was also listed as a concern.

This meeting began the discussion on what the Comp HSA would consist of. The Task Force decided to form a sub-committee in order to gather more information on possible ways to structure the Comp HSA. There was also further discussion on the requirements for participation in the Comp HSA and several changes were to made to the requirements that had already been established.

**The seventh meeting of the panel: February 17, 2006.**

This meeting began with a report of the Subcommittee whose charge was to gather information on ways to assess students that may have trouble with the format used on the HSAs. The Subcommittee discussed three main ideas. They were, (1) the problems of students with limited long term recall, (2) the apparent issue that grade assigned by teachers are based on many non-academic components of performance, therefore teachers have no expectation that there is or should be a relationship between

course performance and HSA performance, and (3) reading and writing issues for low achievers (Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education, October 2006, p. 23).

Following the report by the Subcommittee, the focus shifted back to Comp HSA participation requirements. The Task Force looked at possible ways to determine which student knew the material and which students did not. The following distinction was made regarding the two groups. The first group of students were those who did not have sufficient opportunity to learn the material or did not have access to a well taught curriculum with differentiated instruction. The second group of students were those who did receive appropriate instruction but were not able to demonstrate their knowledge on the HSA. The committee agreed that the second group were the only students that should be eligible for the Comp HSA.

Dr. Grasmick then spoke on the importance of effective instruction. She said, MSDE must impress upon Superintendents that it is their responsibility to make sure all students have appropriate instruction to get them to standard. They should look at their data- if a high percentage of student in a classroom are not passing, the issue is probably not due to students not being able to demonstrate the standards on the HSA. Therefore the Comp HSA would not help them. (Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education, October 2006, p. 25)

The meeting concluded with various members of the Task Force expressing their desire to have a system which maintains high standards and does not become just simply a way to let students finish high school.

This meeting consisted primarily of a discussion about possible ways to structure the Comp HSA. Discussion regarding participation requirements was also continued.

Although only two more meetings of The Task Force remained, no final decisions were made regarding the structure of the Comp HSA.

**The eighth meeting of the panel: April 21, 2006.**

The focus of this meeting was to refine the list of recommendations the Task Force would make to the State Board of Education. Multiple concerns from members of the Task Force were addressed during this meeting. The first major concern was regarding the requirements for student participation in the Comp HSA. The Task Force's Final Report to the State Board of Education in October 2006 reported, "concern was expressed that students and schools should not have to go through this cumbersome process unless they have a good chance of success. The challenge is to make the criteria clear enough that good decisions are made by schools and systems" (p. 27).

The next concern raised by members of the Task Force was the amount of time the entire process of completing the Comp HSA would take. The importance of starting interventions early in a student's high school career was stressed. The final concern was regarding the collection of evidence and the amount of time and resources such a task would take. There were no final decisions made by the end of the eighth meeting.

**The ninth meeting of the panel: September 26, 2006.**

The ninth meeting began with a review of the 2006 HSA results. This was the first year that the ninth grade class must pass the exams in order to graduate. Gary Heath reported that 2006 results showed a significant improvement in scores from previous years. As this was the final meeting, Dr. Grasmick began the meeting reiterating the importance of coming to a consensus on recommendations that will be made to the

Board. She announced that the Comp HSA will be piloted in Howard and Talbot school districts. The following were the recommendations to be made to the Board:

1. Maryland should have a Comp HSA.
2. Students who meet HSA graduation requirements through the Comp HSA process should receive the Maryland high school diploma.
3. The Comp HSA should not be another test; it should be a collection of evidence assembled in a way to allow the student to demonstrate his or her knowledge of the content standards. For purposes of clarification, the Task Force envisions the Comp HSA as a collection of evidence. The collection of evidence is defined as tangible examples that demonstrate a student as the knowledge and skills specified in the Core Learning Goals at a level that is comparable to the level of knowledge and skills required to pass the HSA for high school that are assessed on the regular HSA. The examples can represent a variety of formats that best allow the specific student to demonstrate the performance targets, and may include performance tasks, reports, quizzes, projects, video demonstrations, etc.
4. Scoring must be based on a standard that is comparable to the passing standard on the HSA and that result in comparable and consistent judgments for all students.  
MSDE will conduct a pilot for an algebra Comp HSA as soon as feasible with a few school systems. The goal is to have a Comp HSA in place no later than the 2008-2009 school year.
5. Each school will convene an evaluation team. The team will first certify that the student has met minimum eligibility requirements as follows (or file a request for exemption to the minimum eligibility requirements): Students must have:
  - a. Successfully completed the course as determined by their school system
  - b. Demonstrated knowledge (through class work, unit tests, projects, etc.) of the content standards as specified in the Core Learning Goals at the level required on the regular HSA.
  - c. Taken the specific HSA a minimum of two times.
  - d. Attained an adequate performance on the HSA to demonstrate some knowledge of content standards (this requirement will be waived for students with disabilities and LEP students).
  - e. Received a recommendation from their school team and central office team. The school team will use multiple sources of achievement data to determine that a student has demonstrated the standards in the relevant content, and meet eligibility requirements.



6. Local school systems will convene a team at the central office to verify that a student being recommended by the school has demonstrated the standards in the relevant content and is eligible for the Comp HSA.
7. Once the student has been deemed eligible by the school and system team, an application to participate in Comp HSA will be filed with MSDE.
8. The application will be evaluated by MSDE. Once approved for participation, a Comp HSA administration window will be scheduled.
9. Students will have opportunities to appeal decisions in the Comp HSA process.
10. Submitted evidence will cover all assessed content standards.
11. Evidence must be obtained during controlled situations (under the supervision of a teacher, the student must complete work independently; evidence must be collected over a finite timeline.)
12. Upon completion of the collection of evidence, the principal and school system will sign off that the collection meets requirements and forward the collection to MSDE.
13. MSDE of its designated vendor will evaluate the Comp HSA. Upon submission, the collection will be evaluated for completeness and alignment to content standards, and if sufficient, scored and a decision be rendered.
14. MSDE should make available additional samples of student work that successfully demonstrate the standards as well as scoring rubrics for use by teachers and students. Schools will be given access to a website providing examples of activities that align with assessed content standards, and sample responses that align with performance targets. The website will also include examples of activities that do not align with content standards.
15. MSDE and local school systems must do everything possible to ensure that parents and students have full access to complete information about student status on HSA requirements, opportunities for intervention, and options for meeting HSA requirements.
16. Maryland's local school systems will be pro-active in taking steps to assure that all students have access to a well-implemented curriculum aligned to HSA standards. Intervention plans must include before, during and after course options.
17. Professional development efforts should support teacher expertise in developing and evaluating instructional and assessment activities that are

aligned to the content standards and performance targets. Teachers must be prepared to guide students in submitting a Comp HSA that is evaluated as complete and aligned with content standards so that they have the highest probability possible to be successful on the Comp HSA. (Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education, October 2006, p. 9)

After meeting for over two years, The Task Force recommended that the Comp HSA be structured as a “collection of evidence.” Although these recommendations to the Maryland State Board of Education provided an extensive plan for a Comp HSA, it was now up to the Board to finalize those recommendations. In its final form, The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation is not a collection of evidence, rather pre-made, standard projects that students complete to receive HSA credit. Below I present information on the second Task Force formed to try to better understand how the Bridge Plan and its projects evolved from the “collection of evidence” the first Task Force recommended as the structure for the Comp HSA.

### **The Task Force for the Review of High School Assessment Options**

In addition to the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments, another task force was convened simultaneously to look at possible alternatives to the HSA. The Charge of The Task Force for the Review of High School Assessment Options was to, “consider possible options relative to High School Assessments for students with disabilities, students with 504 plans, and English language learners” (Report of the Task Force for the Review of High School Assessment Options, September 2007, p. 1). The Task Force had forty-six members which consisted of representative of school superintendents, instructional personnel, educational organizations, parents, and advocates. Dr. Carol Ann Baglin, Assistant State Superintendent, Division of Special Education and Dr. Leslie Wilson, Assistant State

Superintendent, Division of Accountability and Assessment served as the co-chairs to the Task Force. The Task Force was asked to consider the following options for students:

- Waiver-students will continue to participate in the HSAs and participate in interventions until their final year when they can apply for a waiver for each HSA not passed
- Variance-use of a Comp HSA instead of the traditional HSA
- Delay-HSAs as a graduation requirement would be delayed for a period of time for specific students
- Adjustment of passing score-the passing score for each HSA would be changed for certain students
- Expansion of the Mod-HSA-the percentage limit of students taking the Mod-HSA would be eliminated
- Differentiated diploma-the HSA requirement for a diploma would be eliminated for some students. (Report of the Task Force for the Review of High School Assessment Options, September 2007, p. 2)

The Task Force was scheduled to meet three times and the following dates were set for Task Force meetings, May 23, June 19, and July 11, 2007. Throughout all three of these meetings, Task Force participants reviewed current HSA data for the state of Maryland, reviewed the alternative assessment options utilized in other states, and considered how other states' programs would be applicable in Maryland. At the close of those three meetings, the Task Force made the following recommendations:

- A waiver for three subgroups used as a temporary options while other measures are under construction with a limit of two retakes per HSA subject area
- A variance option that would continue the development of the Comp HSA
- Delay of requirements although there was no consensus as to what this would look like
- Expanding the Mod-HSA assessment in place of the HSA for specific subgroups

The second Task Force, after meeting three times, did not change the first Task Force's ideas regarding the creation of a Comp HSA. They did not alter the proposed structure made by the first Task Force and so the recommendation for a "collection of evidence" stood.

## **The Options Considered**

Although the meeting notes give little insight into the discussion that took place surrounding the presentations that were made to Task Force group members, one meeting participant shared his recollections of the group's discussions.

### **Dual diploma system.**

One of the options that did not receive mention in the meeting notes was the adoption of a dual diploma system in the State of Maryland. Bob Smith is currently employed by MSDE and was present at the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments. Smith explained,

Prior to the development of the Bridge Plan we knew that there were states who wanted to make rigorous testing requirements with alternatives so it made sense to look and see what they had done. There were other states that had created a dual diploma system and there was a lot of debate about a dual diploma system here in Maryland but we didn't know what the second diploma would look like. There was also overwhelming support by school superintendents to not have a dual diploma system. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

In regards to the discussion of a dual diploma system, Scott Ford, a member of the Task Force shared, "No one would want it and you'd lose your job trying to push it through the state legislature. It would be an example of what Bush called the soft prejudice of low expectations" (Personal Communication, August 28, 2011).

### **The structure of the alternative assessment.**

After it was decided that there would be no dual diploma system in Maryland, the discussion then turned towards what exactly the alternative assessment in Maryland would look like. Bob Smith recalled that,

Maryland along with other states who had gone the route of an alternative assessment had to come up with a means to do that. Other states would require a portfolio of student work over their high school career. We felt in Maryland that even though a portfolio have had some merit, the student needed to demonstrate

specifically those concepts that are directly related to the Maryland State voluntary curriculum. We wanted the alternative to be directly related to the same concepts that were being tested. Of the 26 states that had already developed an assessment tied to graduation, all of them had some type of alternative testing system. We didn't think from a record keeping standpoint and a review standpoint that we wanted a demonstration of skills. Although some of the other states have changed to a demonstration system we thought it would be better for students to receive additional instruction and have another opportunity to master Core Learning Goals. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

Although many states had been offering an alternative option to their state's standardized tests, there was no program that existed similar to Bridge. Many of the presentations to the Task Force centered around states that were using the portfolio option or some variation of that demonstration system. Stewart Peters from MSDE echoes that sentiment saying,

The primary concern for us was for all students to pass the HSA. Before we came up with the Bridge Plan, other states were already implementing alternative testing. For example, in New Jersey they have a portfolio process. We knew we wanted something that would remove the anxiety from the process. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

However, according to Mr. Smith, Maryland's State Board of Education wanted to give students an additional opportunity to master the same material found on the High School Assessments and, as a result, decided that instead of a portfolio, a project based option focused on Core Learning Goals would be most beneficial to Maryland's students. He also cited concerns from local superintendents regarding the time and cost that would be involved in a "collection of evidence." Therefore, The Board wanted to streamline the portfolio process by providing students and teachers with specific projects for students to complete rather than gathering evidence independently. As a result, the recommendations of both the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments and the Task Force for the Review of High School

Assessment Options were altered and the Board decided that rather than have the Comp HSA consist of a collection of evidence, specific projects would be developed to give students an alternative path to meet HSA requirements.

### **The Motivation for Creating the Bridge Plan**

#### **MSDE perspective.**

#### ***Serving students with special needs.***

In the 2008 version of The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation Program Guide, The Maryland State Department of Education (2008) reported that,

The Bridge Plan has particular implications for students with disabilities, students with 504 plans, and English Language Learners (ELL) by allowing a student to demonstrate content mastery using a method other than a traditional test. The Bridge Plan can also have significant value for students who experience test anxiety or who do not perform well on a traditional test. (p. 2)

It is also clear from talking to individuals that work for the Maryland State Department of Education that the initial motivation for creating an alternative assessment was to better serve the needs of students with disabilities. When asked what the primary motivation was for creating the Bridge Plan, Stewart Peters from MSDE explained,

It started with a committee that was looking at developing a HSA alternative. They were looking at coming up with alternatives primarily for students with disabilities. They wanted a way for these students to show what they knew but not on the HSA. It started in 2007 and out of that grew the idea that a project based initiative would make the most sense. There were also a group of consultants that came. It was never designed to be solely for the Special Education students. Although that was the initial motivation we knew that it would be useful for all students. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

Bob Smith from The Maryland State Department of Education also talked about the need for an additional option for students with special needs. However, he shared that in addition to serving the needs of Special Education students, Bridge was also

developed in attempt to meet the needs of students with high test anxiety or trouble concentrating. He explained that,

There was a common understanding that there were students who would not be able to demonstrate their knowledge on the HSA tests. Folks were intensely interested in special education students and students who we would call nontraditional students. The students that we were really concerned about were SPED students because they need more time than is given in a regular period for testing. There are also students that quit after a certain time because they got frustrated and then there are the students that lose attention. We also found that there are students who do better when they are presented with chunks of information. That they can do the assessment in pieces but not all at once. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

Based on the idea that Bridge would help all students, both Special Education and Regular Education, it was decided that the Bridge Plan would be available to all students in the state of Maryland, not just those with an Individualized Education Plan.

***Political motivations.***

Scott Ford, who served on the Task Force and had previously worked for MSDE felt that the State also had political motivations for creating the Bridge Plan. The more students were able to meet state testing requirements, would mean more students eligible to graduate which would increase school's chances of meeting Annual Yearly Progress. He said,

They knew that a lot of special education, ELL and struggling students would not be able to pass the HSA and there was a fairness issue to the students that fall into those categories. By struggling students I mean students who aren't in special programs but aren't functioning at a high school level. But there was also a political survival component there as well. There would be so many students who wouldn't pass the HSAs and the program would be defeated for political reasons and that would defeat the goal of bringing rigor to all students. So they needed a way to keep the HSA program alive. (Personal Communication, August 28, 2011)

Bob Smith from MSDE supported the notion that Bridge was important to school's graduation rates. Bob Smith reported that, "The head of New Town schools has said that

he is more interested in the graduation rate than the AYP and we also knew we had to give students a way to meet graduation requirements” (Personal Communication, August, 3, 2011).

**Teacher perspective.**

***Political motivations.***

Although Maryland State Department of Education Employees hold steadfast to the idea that Bridge was created primarily as a way to help all students master Core Learning Goals, teachers at Central High School had somewhat different ideas. Teacher Aaron Hedgecock voiced his opinion on the matter saying,

In my opinion the purpose of the Bridge Plan is to increase numbers of graduated students. Period. It had nothing to do with teaching anything. As far as the state was concerned it has nothing to do with re-teaching anything. It couldn't have, there wasn't enough time to teach them everything. A two week long project can't make up for an education. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Although the 2008 Bridge Plan for Academic Validation Program Guide reports that projects can take up to 20 hours to complete, Hedgecock felt that there simply wasn't enough time to re-teach material and that Bridge had more to do with meeting AYP than it did with remediation. Other teachers echoed Hedgecock's ideas about Bridge being more about graduation than about remediation. Another Central High School teacher Audrey Morris said, “They knew kids had to pass the HSA to graduate so they had to do something to make that happen” (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Teacher Samantha Harlow agreed that Bridge had more to do with graduation rate than it did with helping students. She explained, “Maryland wanted to have a back up measure in place so that they could maintain their number of high school graduates and not take a hit” (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Bridge teacher Laura Arnold agreed saying,



“Our students are not successful and if there wasn’t a Bridge plan in place the graduation rate would be so low. This gives our students the opportunity to get a state certified diploma” (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011).

Other teachers believed that while the state may have had good intentions while creating the Bridge Plan, the program turned out differently than expected especially for students in New Town. Teacher Rick Nolt shared that,

I think it was developed to follow the dictates of NCLB. To bring disadvantaged children to parity with those who have advantages. My opinion is that Bridge is another barrier in disadvantaged schools where students already struggle to graduate and it just provides another obstacle to graduate. It is a gate keeping device without which students have little opportunity to get a good job. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

***Serving students with special needs.***

The Principal of Central High School, James Harrington explained, “It was understood to be an alternative for kids that struggled with anxiety. In the city though it ended up being another way for kids to meet requirements that couldn’t” (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011). Other teachers, however, were less skeptical. Teacher Karl Griswold shared that, “I believe it provides students who don’t take tests very well a way to prove what they know. I think it is a way to help them be successful” (Personal Communication, May 4, 2011).

**Student perspective.**

***Graduation rate.***

When asked why they think the Bridge Plan was developed as an alternative to the HSA many students felt that the State was looking for a way to help all students meet success. Jason Davis, a 2011 Central High School graduate said he believed Bridge was

created in order, “To help the students that failed and help them graduate” (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011). Naomi Harris, a 2010 graduate said,

I think they made the projects to give people a chance and to really show students that even when you get sidetracked that it is possible if you try more than once you can pass. The average person in a class can't keep still and can't concentrate. When they say on the HSA if you don't know the answer then circle anything. But when you say that people are going to just choose anything. But with the Bridge Projects you can't do that. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

Another 2010 Central High School graduate, Tonya Davenport explained that, “I think because everyone deserves a chance for everyone to go off to college and they want to make sure people can have that chance and it encourages people to keep going instead of dropping out” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011).

Although many students believed that the State's intentions were positive when it came to Bridge, other students argued that the State's motivation may have had more to do with the overall graduation rate than their concern for individual students. Stephanie George, a 2009 Central High School graduate explained, “I think they wanted to help students more so they could pass and get their work done. So that way students wouldn't have to drop out and they could graduate” (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011).

Sandra Wallace said, “I think they made them projects so the graduation rate would go up and more people would be able to graduate” (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011).

### ***Political motivations.***

One student however, believed that MSDE had much different intentions. Interestingly, of all of the students I interviewed, Kara Beard, a 2009 Central High School graduate, who was able to pass all of the HSAs and did not require any projects, was the only student to attend a four year college or university. Kara Beard shared her perspective on the state's motivation to create Bridge,

Because they wanted money. There was some No Child Left Behind thing and George Bush started it. The HSAs were out before and you just had to take it and you didn't have to pass it but then they said if you pass the test then the State gets money. So either way if people do the projects or pass the test they still get the money. If you think about it though you are just cheating the students. That makes teachers want to just teach to the test. If we weren't getting taught to the test then we would be taught a lot of other things that we should know. Those things become unimportant because they are just worried if you pass the test. I remember teachers saying, this is only what you need to know for the test, don't worry about anything else. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)

### **The Influence of NCLB**

Because the No Child Left Behind allows each state to decide how they will assess their students, some people argue that this encourages states to set low standards for students as there is a greater likelihood that more students will be able to meet the requirements. Ryan (2010) explains that,

The key point to recognize is that the academic bar has been set quite low, which is partially a product of the perverse incentives created by the NCLB and partially a product of the same political dynamic that has shaped school finance reform and school choice. The NCLB requires states to impose sanctions on schools that do not meet certain testing benchmarks, but it lets states decide for themselves how hard their tests will be to pass. State officials are not dumb. They quickly realized that setting a high bar would lead to more schools being sanctioned, which would be costly both financially and politically. (p.11)

Scott Ford, a member of one of the Task Forces responsible for the development of the Bridge Plan, spoke about the extent to which No Child Left Behind was part of the state's motivation for creating the Bridge Plan. He explained,

Some of the discussion about NCLB was veiled and indirect. It was said that we can't deny these kids a diploma because of the high school assessment program. Denying 20% of the kids in the state of Maryland a diploma was not going to fly politically. Without Bridge, all of the superintendents and all of the principals would be worried that all of the kids wouldn't meet the graduation requirements and wouldn't graduate. So NCLB forced the state to come up with a substitute. Some people think that Bridge lets the students get off easy. I would argue that it lets all students show success. (Personal Communication, August 28, 2011)

Bob Smith, another member of the Task Force from MSDE said simply without elaborating, “Of course NCLB was a consideration in developing Bridge (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011).

### **The Development of the Bridge Plan Projects**

#### **Who creates the Bridge Projects.**

Bridge Projects were developed by a team of Maryland teachers who applied to and were paid to be part of the project development process. Bob Smith talked about the decision of who would create the Bridge Projects saying,

One of the first things we had to decide was should the projects be developed by an external agency or at the least be reviewed by an external agency? We decided projects would be developed by teachers and changed every year. We thought the cost involved with contracting an outside agency would not be feasible. So we decided that we would embark upon this grand plan for project development our self. By developing the projects our self and not using an external agency, we could control the projects more and the cost was more acceptable than having external folks to do it. Once the decision was made to have Maryland teachers create the projects, the recruitment process began. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

In regards to the recruitment process, Stewart Peters from MSDE explained that, “In order to find people to work on project development, we put out a call for folks who would like to volunteer but they typically came from folks who had completed governor’s academies or had assessment experience or test item writing experience” (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011).

When speaking about how the Bridge Projects were written, Stewart Peters shared that, “When we write the Bridge Projects we start with the Core Learning Goals and then work on the scoring tools which are also tied to the Core Learning Goals. Because there is fidelity on the development of the Bridge Projects in regards to the Core Learning

Goals, we know that students who do complete Bridge Projects are getting extra instruction on the Core Learning Goals” (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011).

### **The Bridge Plan and AYP**

Because The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation was not approved by the United States Department of Education as an acceptable alternative for students to use to meet HSA requirements, the issue did not require legislative approval by the Maryland General Assembly. Bob Smith from MSDE explained this further,

We submitted the projects to the United States Department of Education as an acceptable way to meet AYP and we weren't accepted because the scoring was not done by an outside agency. Therefore, the testing requirement students have to meet through the HSA is a legislative issue since it counts towards AYP, however because Bridge is not allowed to count towards AYP, it did not have to go through the General Assembly and was put into effect through COMAR. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

Mr. Smith reiterated the fact that, “The only thing that Bridge Projects do is securing a way for students to get a diploma but they do not help us meet AYP for testing. The reason why we did not want the alternative to be a test is because we would get into a whole different layer of test security” (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011). In order for the Bridge Projects to count as an acceptable alternative for students in the State of Maryland to meet HSA requirements in the eyes of The United States Department of Education, they would have to be subject to test security measures similar to those utilized in the High School Assessments. For example, the HSAs are not graded by the State or LEAs, but by an outside agency in order to ensure the security of those scores. Bridge Projects however, are graded by teachers in each local district and therefore the security and consistency of those scores cannot be guaranteed across the state. Although the completion of Bridge Projects could not count towards AYP, the

State decided to keep it in place as a graduation requirement. They then worked to develop a series of requirements students would have to meet in order to be eligible to participate in Bridge.

### **The Bridge Plan Program Requirements**

COMAR (the Code of Maryland Regulations) is the official compilation of all administrative regulations issued by agencies of the State of Maryland. According to the Division of State Documents website, “The Legislature enacts statutes and Administrative agencies adopt, amend and repeal regulations under the authority granted to them by statutes. Unless the Legislature has created an exemption, agencies must follow the procedures in the Administrative Procedure Act when adopting, amending or repealing regulations.” The Maryland State Department of Education wrote the following requirements for participation in Bridge. COMAR 13.A.03.02.09B(d) states that, A student may participate in the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation if the student has:

- (a) Failed one or more High School Assessments at least twice;
- (b) Received a passing grade and earned credit in the course or courses related to the assessment or assessments;
- (c) Demonstrated overall satisfactory attendance in the most recent school year completed;
- (d) Demonstrated satisfactory progress toward achieving the high school diploma requirements specified in COMAR 13A.03.02.09B(1) and (2); and
- (e) Participated successfully in appropriate assistance as defined in COMAR 13A.03.02.07D after having failed one or more of the High School Assessments.

Because the requirements listed under (c) and (e) were not specific they were left to the discretion of individual districts. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation program guide (1/16/08) specified that,

Each local school system has developed strategies for providing assistance to students who have not passed one or more HSAs. These opportunities could include sample test reviews, tutoring, or after-school or Saturday instruction. The school will determine what type(s) of assistance will be provided to students. The student is responsible for taking advantage of the assistance to help prepare for retesting. A student considering using the Bridge Plan is required to participate in locally-administered or approved assistance. (p. 3)

Although the State developed the requirements individual school districts were to follow to determine students' eligibility, the specifications of some of those requirements were open to interpretation by individual districts and schools.

## **CHAPTER 6: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BRIDGE PLAN FOR ACADEMIC VALIDATION AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL**

### **Introduction**

The guidelines set forth during the development of the Bridge Plan allowed each individual district and school to determine what implementation would look like for them. Because the State did not specify how Bridge Programs should be run, it was up to individual schools to figure out what would work best for their individual situation. The Principal of Central High School, James Harrington explained that, “There was no guidance from the Central Office. So we had to figure everything out on our own.” As a result, during the summer of 2008, when the start of the Bridge Program for Academic Validation was announced, the Principal, Academic Dean and the Bridge Program Coordinator met to decide how Bridge would work at Central High School (Central High School Bridge Plan Log 2008-2009).

### **The Bridge Plan Structure at Central High School**

Because Central High School had the highest number of Bridge Projects in New Town to complete the first year, students were offered a variety of days and times to work on Bridge Projects.

Stewart Peters, a MSDE official who worked with Bridge talked about the difference in the amount of projects between schools, “The biggest difference has to do with issues of scale. Some schools are looking at 10 students that need projects whereas there are schools that have 60% of their students that need bridge. The model will look completely different for each of those situations” (Personal Communication, July 19,



2011). Bob Smith who also worked with Bridge at MSDE echoed Mr. Peter's comments on the varying size of Bridge programs across the state saying,

The problem is that you have zone schools which have huge amounts of projects and very small schools that only have a few projects so there are different models depending on a school's situation. The ideal model is that a student has sustained direct instruction everyday as part of their regular schedule. We have only seen Saturday classes successful in New Town. We have found that in Prince George's county kids won't come on Saturdays. By far though the most successful programs we have seen are those that happen during a student's daily schedule. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

Because Central High School was one of the schools with a significant number of its seniors needing Bridge, in addition to Bridge classes scheduled during the regular school day, after school as well as Saturday sessions were offered (Central High School Bridge Plan Log 2008-2009). When explaining why Bridge was scheduled in that way, Central High School Principal James Harrington says:

It was really about how we could get our kids who are difficult to manage through the process and keep tabs on them in a really deliberate way. I knew it would need to be a hybridized model. We knew that there needed to be a day component as well as an after school component. We also tried to keep the integrity of the other classes and not have Bridge take over. (Personal Communication May 7, 2011)

Although Saturday classes were not part of the original plan, many students were not able to make after school sessions because of work commitments so Saturdays were soon added to accommodate students' schedules (Central High School Bridge Plan Log 2008-2009). When asked about the structure of Central High School's Bridge Program, a 2010 graduate, Tonya Davenport said that, "I would say that they made sure they had flexible schedules so students could get them done when it was convenient" (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011). Sandra Wallace, a 2010 Central High School graduate also commented on the structure of the Bridge Program saying, "I got good assistance.

The teachers was real helpful. I had to come Saturdays and also had the Bridge class so there were lots of times I could get my projects done” (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011). A 2009 Central High School graduate, Stephanie George said, “The school worked with me and they gave me a lot of help. They gave me extra classes during spring break and they read to me when I didn’t understand things” (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011).

The Central High School model soon became the standard for other schools to follow. One teacher, Samantha Harlow, who works with Bridge at Central High School and at other schools explained that,

I’ve seen how Bridge works at a couple of different schools I feel like the way we do it is really effective. Kids don’t get the same attention in other classes that they get in Bridge at our school. We make it a very individualized process. You need very sympathetic staff in the Bridge department. People who are really persistent and flexible. Having worked with Bridge in other schools I have learned that we really are the model, nobody knew what to do before us. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Another teacher, Aaron Hedgecock echoed that sentiment saying, “I think that of the schools in New Town, ours was probably the most successful. We were consistently submitting the most projects across New Town because we had so many opportunities for students to complete them” (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011). Andrea Ricker who worked with Bridge for New Town Public Schools explained what she saw in regards to Bridge Plan models across New Town,

In my first year there were huge differences in Bridge between schools. Some schools had Bridge during the day and really carefully constructed plans and some schools didn’t have Bridge at all and no plan whatsoever. Then there were also some schools that didn’t need to have a structure because they might have only had a handful of projects. Those schools without plans were constantly failing and eventually had to end up doing what Central did. They eventually got it together but the first year there was a huge learning curve. (July 27, 2011)

However, as a result of devoting so much time and so many resources to Bridge, Central High School was forced to sacrifice teachers and resources in other areas. The principal of Central High School, James Harrington said,

To some extent we sacrificed remediation at the freshman level to be able to help the seniors graduate. We relied on better instruction in 9<sup>th</sup> grade but we didn't have staff to do it. The biggest issue I've had is that I had to rob remediation to make Bridge work. I have had to sacrifice the extra teachers I could have used to provide remediation in ninth grade to work in Bridge. (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011)

### **Bridge Classes at Central High School**

Laura Arnold, a teacher that worked with students on Government Projects explained how Bridge classes were scheduled,

Prior to the school year starting the instructional leadership team meets and we look at the data points and see how many projects students need based on their total score. Then we look at the classes they still need and how we can fit Bridge into their schedule, like do they fit first or second semester. They also might need a more intense intervention like being pulled from classes in addition to a Bridge class. We also see how many students have IEPs and see if we need to add in a SPED teacher and then we figure out which teachers we can add in. When students successfully complete projects we keep going back to the master list and start taking those students off the list. We are constantly checking and re-checking the data. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Students who had room in their schedule and had three or more projects to complete were scheduled to have Bridge as a class in their schedule during the regular school day. The Bridge Program utilized two classrooms, one shared by English and Government Bridge teachers and one shared by Biology and Algebra Bridge teachers. At the beginning of the school year, the students were split up evenly between the four subject areas with an average of about eight students per teacher. As students finished with one subject area, they were immediately rotated to begin work on their projects in another subject. As students in the Bridge class began to finish their projects, teachers would pull students

from other classes to work on their projects. (Central High School Bridge Plan Log 2008-2011).

### **Individualized instruction.**

In many classrooms, instruction is given by the teacher to the entire class at the same time. In Bridge however, the traditional format would not work. The Principal of Central High School, James Harrington explained that,

There is much more individual attention and differentiation in Bridge compared to other classes. Teachers have to work much harder at getting the kids in the room and getting them focused. Kids were working at their own pace and sometimes it crossed my mind that other classes should be structured the same way. We were very lucky to staff it the way we did. We absorbed four people in the budget to work on Bridge and we needed every minute of it. The one thing I will say is that it does at least prevent us from giving up on the kid. They do have to work through the project and I think some kids do learn from going through the process. (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011)

Although it was originally intended for Bridge Projects to be taught step by step to the entire class, this structure became impossible as soon as student absence began. A teacher was unable to teach the entire class together because if a student missed one day's worth of work it was impossible for them to move on in the project without making up the missed section. As a result, teachers were frequently going from one student to the next providing one on one instruction. Teacher Laura Arnold explained, "I think it is more differentiated with Bridge than other classes and there were more one on one interventions. Also it was a lot more interpersonal. You got to know what made the kid tick like if they had attendance issues and you could focus more on each student's particular issues" (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011). One English Bridge teacher, Aaron Hedgecock explains how teaching Bridge compared to teaching other classes,

It's totally different. Getting to work one on one with students in Bridge was the best and most rewarding aspect. Getting them to sit down and write a poem or think about what a poem means, was a first for many of them. They couldn't get lost in the shuffle. Them failing wasn't an option. We sat there and did what we had to do with each and every one of them. Kids that couldn't read were getting a poem explained to them until they were able to make connections to the world that they knew. It was really stressful, Saturdays, nights, sitting with the same kids, kids that the only reason they were doing it was because of your sheer will. This is the only reason they finished their projects and graduated. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

A Biology Bridge teacher, Karl Griswold echoes that sentiment,

Teaching Bridge you get a lot more individual time with the kids. More so than if you were in a classroom but there are a lot more time management issues because everybody is working on something different. It's like having ten fingers in ten different pies. (Personal Communication, May 4, 2011)

Another Central High School teacher, Rick Nolt argued that Bridge was not so different from teaching any other class saying, "Bridge is as challenging as teaching any other class but the advantage is you get to work with students one on one. Classroom management is still an issue. You have to use the same principles of teaching Bridge that you do in the classroom" (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Samantha Harlow explained one of the challenges she faced working with Bridge,

With Bridge you really need to be a content specialist. Especially with English you are required to know every poem every kid is doing and it makes it very complicated to help every kid. Yes, there is less planning than a regular class but working with Bridge still has its challenges because you have to work with each student individually. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Despite the challenges Bridge offered most teachers agreed they would still prefer to teach Bridge because of the motivation the students have to finish their projects and graduate.

***Student perspective.***

Individualized attention was a common theme cited by students as helping them to be successful in Bridge. One senior who was planning to graduate in 2011, Shayla Smith, reported that,

I have to come mostly on Saturdays and sometimes I can leave my class to work on the projects. A teacher will sit with you and work on the project with you and help you. This is how I do good, when someone sits with me and reads to me I can do the work because I am not good at reading on my own. (Personal Communication, April 9, 2011)

Briana Gibson, a 2009 Central High School graduate said, “Bridge is more one on one where you get help at every step” (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011). Sandra Wallace who graduated in 2010 agreed saying, “It was different because in Bridge you get more attention and the teachers are helping you all the time. In other classes there was so many students that the teacher can’t help just one student at a time” (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011). Stephanie George, class of 2009 felt that, “It was good because I knew I would have one on one attention and the class was smaller” (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011). A 2010 Central graduate Tonya Davenport said, “The teacher was just worried about one student at a time instead of the whole class. There weren’t as many distractions” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011).

Another 2010 Central High School graduate, Naomi Harris had mixed feeling about the structure of the Bridge classes. She explained that,

I feel like I learned more from Bridge than the regular class. In Bridge you had teachers going one by one instead of the teacher teaching the whole group. If you are in a whole class you could get lost but in Bridge they just kept going one by one. In Bridge they gave us breaks so we could concentrate and they were smaller classes so it was easier for us to learn. Everybody was working on different projects so sometimes it was harder to get help but I felt like the teachers helped me more than I could help myself.” (Personal Communication, July 13)

When asked about how she felt about the structure of the Bridge Plan, a 2009 graduate, Briana Gibson reported,

I got 100% assistance. I had a lot of help with my projects. I came on Saturdays. I had Bridge class for one semester but I also had to come on Saturdays. Teachers really help you to get your projects done. You can keep trying if you make a mistake, they will help you fix it. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)

### **Relationship Building.**

In addition to individualized instruction, another theme that emerged among teachers and students was the relationship building aspect of the Central High School Bridge Program. Teacher Audrey Morris said, “Bridge is also good for building relationships with students. I think as a school we do that really well. We really make it a point to get to know the students” (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011).

Teacher Laura Arnold agreed that relationship building was a key component to the Bridge Program. She explained,

By working within the structure our school set up, in such a nurturing environment, our students are able to succeed. We really worked hard at getting to know our students. It is a room-wide celebration when a student finishes a project and an even bigger celebration when student finishes all their projects. Our kids need that kind of support to be successful. It was also more rewarding as a teacher because you felt more of a personal sense of accomplishment because even though you’re helping students pass a class, in Bridge you are helping students graduate. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Aaron Hedgecock said, “It was very fulfilling to know that once a student passed their projects they would graduate. It was the most thanks as a teacher I’ve ever received. That year’s graduation was by far and away the most important to me because of the relationships I developed with students through Bridge” (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011).

Students also seemed to respond well to the more personalized attention they received in Bridge. Jason Davis, a 2011 Central High School graduate explained, “Every time I needed help the teachers were always there to help me. If I was stuck there was someone there to help me keep going” (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011).

In addition to relationship building with students, Bridge staff also worked hard to keep parents and guardians consistently informed about their student’s status with Bridge. Parents were constantly being updated up their students’ progress. Parents and guardians were frequently provided with an update on their students’ progress through parent-teacher conferences, phone calls, report card nights as well as mailings.

### **The role of the Project Monitor**

The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation program guide (01/16/08) explained that, “The assigned Project Monitor will periodically review a student’s progress and may adjust the student’s timeline as necessary. The monitor can facilitate the student’s work and advise but must not complete any of the student’s Academic Validation Project Package” (p. 11). Although most students worked with teachers during a Bridge course held during the regular school day, additional teachers were also hired to work with students after school and on Saturdays.

James Harrington, the principal at Central High School explained the way teachers were selected to work with Bridge,

The number one factor in selecting teachers to work in Bridge was, could this teacher hook the kid in and get them to finish their project. Some of it is also situational based on schedule. For example, we were overstaffed in English so we got some extra English help. We have had the most successful program and we haven’t had an integrity issues. That has to do with the staff we selected to work with Bridge. Even when we knew a kid was going to get a waiver we still kept working with that student when most schools would have let that kid slide. (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011)



However, as the school’s budget has faced severe cuts year after year, the Bridge Program has had to drastically reduce the size of its staff. The first year of the program, the 2008-2009 school year, there were six teachers who worked with students on Bridge Projects. By the start of the 2011-2012 school year, the Bridge Program staff had been cut to just three teachers with nearly the same amount of projects as previous years.

**Overview of the 2008-2009 School Year**

Total number of seniors: 249

Total students met HSA requirement: 89

Total student not met HSA requirement: 160

Percent of students needing Bridge: 64%

Total number of projects submitted: 686

Overall pass rate: 81%

Table 6.1: Projects Submitted During the 2008/2009 School Year

Date	Algebra Projects Submitted	Percent of Algebra Projects Accepted	Biology Projects Submitted	Percent of Biology Projects Accepted	English Projects Submitted	Percent of English Projects Accepted	Gov. Projects Submitted	Percent of Gov. Projects Accepted	Total Projects
10/13/08	2	0%	0	N/A	0	N/A	1	0%	3
11/17/08	26	65%	0	N/A	12	42%	36	3%	74
12/15/08	20	100%	4	100%	19	68%	43	63%	86
1/12/09	19	100%	2	100%	12	67%	14	100%	47
2/17/09	39	100%	36	100%	32	100%	43	100%	150
3/23/09	67	94%	63	100%	35	80%	36	92%	201

4/15/09	2	100%	5	100%	0	N/A	0	N/A	7
4/27/09	19	100%	35	97%	15	73%	15	100%	84
5/11/09	2	100%	14	100%	14	71%	4	100%	34
Total Projects	196	84%	159	99.5%	139	72%	192	70%	686

During the 2008-2009 school year, Central High School offered students the following options for completing their bridge projects: 3 bridge classes during the school day for students who needed three or more projects, pull-outs during the day for students who did not have space in their schedule for a bridge class, after school sessions where students were paid anywhere from \$25-\$110 to attend through the CAROI program, Saturday sessions, and spring break bridge sessions.

First period had thirty students. First semester there were three teachers and second semester there were four teachers. First semester the same teacher was responsible for both Biology and Algebra projects due to a staffing shortage. Third period had twenty six students. There were four teachers available both semesters. After the first week, the English teacher was switched as she was transferred to another school. Then two months after school began we were sent an additional teacher to assist with English. Fourth period had twenty eight students. There were four teachers available, one for each content area.

### **Overview of the 2009/2010 School Year**

Total number of seniors: 244

Total students met HSA requirement: 86

Total student not met HSA requirement: 158

Percent of students needing Bridge: 65%

Total number of projects submitted: 606

Overall pass rate: 87%

Table 6.2: Projects Submitted During the 2009/2010 School Year

Submission Date	Algebra Projects Submitted	Percent of Algebra Projects Accepted	Biology Projects Submitted	Percent of Biology Projects Accepted	English Projects Submitted	Percent of English Projects Accepted	Gov. Projects Submitted	Percent of Gov. Projects Accepted	Total Projects Submitted
9/28/09	3	33%	4	100%	20	95%	8	63%	35
10/26/09	7	14%	3	100%	17	57%	3	33%	30
11/30/09	25	52%	5	100%	36	100%	16	100%	82
1/19/10	38	92%	9	100%	28	94%	22	91%	97
2/22/10	21	100%	4	100%	21	100%	10	90%	56
3/15/10	48	98%	49	98%	42	88%	37	97%	176
4/19/10	25	100%	42	98%	15	93%	29	83%	111
5/10/10	4	100%	6	100%	5	100%	4	100%	19
Total Projects	171	74%	122	99%	184	91%	129	82%	606

During the 2009-2010 school year, Central High School offered students the following options for completing their Bridge Projects: 2 bridge classes during the school day for students who needed three or more projects, pull-outs during the day for students who did not have space in their schedule for a bridge class, Saturday sessions, and spring break bridge classes. During the 2009-2010 School year, two Bridge classes were held, as there were not enough staff to run three full sections of Bridge. There were 27 students in the 2<sup>nd</sup> period class and 30 students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> period class. There were eight teachers available to work with students in all four subjects.

**Overview of the 2010/2011 School Year**

Total number of seniors: 248

Total students met HSA requirement: 63

Total student not met HSA requirement: 185

Percent of students needing Bridge: 75%

Total number of projects submitted: 502

Overall pass rate: 94%

Table 6.3: Projects Submitted During the 2010/2011 School Year

Submission Date	Algebra Projects Submitted	Percent of Algebra Projects Accepted	Biology Projects Submitted	Percent of Biology Projects Accepted	English Projects Submitted	Percent of English Projects Accepted	Gov. Projects Submitted	Percent of Gov. Projects Accepted	Total Projects Submitted
10/18/10	14	93%	23	96%	10	100%	8	75%	55
11/15/10	38	37%	25	88%	29	100%	19	84%	111
12/10/10	21	100%	20	100%	12	100%	14	100%	67
2/2/11	15	100%	14	93%	12	100%	18	100%	59
2/28/11	22	100%	7	100%	19	100%	12	92%	60
3/28/11	26	100%	30	100%	20	100%	25	92%	101
5/2/11	0	N/A	15	93%	11	100%	10	100%	36
5/16/11	0	N/A	4	100%	7	100%	2	100%	13
Total Projects	136	88%	138	96%	120	100%	108	93%	502

During the 2010-2011 school year, Central High School offered students the following options for completing their Bridge Projects: 1 bridge class during the school day for students who needed three or more projects, pull-outs during the day for students who did not have space in their schedule for a bridge class, Saturday sessions, and spring break bridge sessions. The amount of Bridge courses held during the day was cut again in the 2010-2011 school year due to budget adjustments. There were seventy student scheduled for the 3<sup>rd</sup> period Bridge class with five teachers available to work with students in all four content areas.

## Bridge Project Scoring

Bob Smith from MSDE explained the discussion surrounding the scoring of Bridge Projects during the development phase saying, “In the beginning we offered to be the external scorer for all LEAs. But the problem we faced was time because of the thousands of projects that would be coming in each month to grade. In addition, all of the superintendents said no to an external scorer, that they would prefer to score their own projects” (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011). As a result, MSDE decided that each LEA would be responsible for scoring its own projects. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation program guide (01/16/08) specified that,

Upon a student’s completion of the Academic Validation Project Package, the designated school staff will submit the package to the Local Review Panel. A student’s Academic Validation Project Package must include an Academic Validation Project Package Submission Form (*Appendix E*) signed by the student, parent/guardian, Project Monitor, and designated school staff member, and all supporting materials(s) for the completed project modules. The Local Review Panel will be judging Academic Validation Project Packages for the student’s mastery of content. The Local Review Panel will then send recommendations to the local superintendent for approval or rejection of the Academic Validation Project Package. (p. 11)

Each LEA was given the autonomy to decide exactly how scoring would work, and as a result, this process varied from district to district. Andrea Ricker, a New Town district employee who worked closely with Bridge explained that,

We did have some meetings with MSDE regarding scoring and they kind of gave us an idea of what we should do and then we took it and ran with it. We pioneered what scoring looks like across the state. We began with suggestions from MSDE and went from there. We started with little teams for the first few scorings and it grew from there. (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011)

Finished projects had to be submitted with a submission sheet signed by the student verifying that all work on the Bridge Project had been completed by them. In addition the Project Monitor (the Bridge teacher who helped them with the project) and

an administrative representative from the school must sign to verify that the student completed the work.

Projects were generally scored once a month on the Saturday and Sunday following the project due date from 9am until 5pm. The results of the scoring session were available for pick up on the following Wednesday. Projects were scored using State developed scoring tools and answer keys. Students and teachers were provided with a feedback sheet which indicated sections where errors were found. Students were then given the opportunity to correct the sections with errors and re-submit the project at a future scoring date. Briana Gibson, a 2009 graduate from Central High School explained how the process worked saying, “You got finished and then you were just told if you passed or not. You could fix things if it didn’t pass so you can’t really fail” (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011). Stewart Peters from MSDE commented on average pass rates across the state. He reported,

We know that when Bridge was first implemented only 70% of students were passing. That first time acceptance rate is now up to 90%. Points of contact of Superintendents are now reporting that the pass rate on second submits is nearly 100%. So clearly Bridge is difficult enough that we don’t have all students passing the first time around, but what is important is that it gives all students the opportunity to meet HSA requirements through multiple attempts. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

During scoring sessions teachers were not allowed to score any projects that had come from the school where they are currently employed to avoid any potential bias.

Andrea Ricker, a New Town employee who ran scoring in New Town for the first two years was very careful to ensure that projects were scored fairly and without bias. She said,

I very much believe that things need to be done in an above board fashion. There can be no smell of cheating. I remember when I first got called to the table and it was said that

you're not passing enough students. In Government, we did have the lowest pass rate of the four content areas. We are told by the state that New Town is tougher than other districts in scoring. (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011)

### **Scorers.**

The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation program guide (01/16/08) specified that, "Members of the Local Review Panel will include education professionals appropriate to the HSA content area of the Academic Validation Project Package the student has submitted as well as any student-specific needs identified" (p. 13).

Scorers were paid \$30 per hour as well as provided breakfast and lunch. Scorers were required to be certified in the content area they wished to score or Special Education. Scorers were also required to attend a one hour training session prior to scoring for the first time. Andrea Ricker from New Town district explained how New Town chose scorers,

Originally when the state said you had to be a certified teacher in that field in order to be a scorer. We did a massive call for scorers and what we ended up getting was people that needed the money. We became a close cohort of people that got together to score every month. We did discourage some people from scoring because not everyone is cut out to be a scorer. Some of the issues we faced were people who had deficiencies in the English language, content knowledge, and rigor. (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011)

### **Scoring as a professional development opportunity.**

In addition to simply scoring projects, scoring sessions also served to teach project monitors exactly what was expected from each project. Andrea Ricker, a New Town district employee who worked closely with Bridge explained that, "We tried to tell teachers that the best way to learn the projects is to score" (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011). One teacher at Central High School Aaron Hedgecock explained,

The first year was a disaster. We had no idea what was expected on the project. We basically had to interpret what we thought they were looking for so it was a

lot of trial and error. When you go to scoring you learn what not to do. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Another teacher, Audrey Morris echoed these sentiments saying,

Scoring is extremely stressful. I had to stop going because I would hear someone say something about our school and I would get so stressed out. And it is a surprise if you actually speak English. I think with scoring if you are in a school that is not known for good projects, there is a stigma there. The biggest issue is that the guides don't tell you what they are asking for so you have to go to scoring to find out what they want. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

### **Issues with scoring.**

One of the main complaints scorers had with the process the first few years was the problems with the state-developed scoring tools. Several errors were found on the scoring tools especially in the first year of scoring. Andrea Ricker, a New Town district official who organized scoring at the district level said,

One of the main frustrations we had was that there were inconsistencies and errors among scoring tools and so we had to make up some of our own. The State did not like being questioned, they would respond that they would fix it the next time. Also the projects initially had inconsistencies between the scoring guide and the project. A teacher may interpret a particular activity one way but when we looked at the scoring tool we knew they were looking for something different. Those issues were worked out more so after the first and second year. (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011)

Bob Smith from MSDE felt that the issue had more to do with the scorers themselves than with the scoring tools. He explained that after the scorers became more familiar with the scoring tools, the pass rate went up significantly,

When we first started with Bridge Projects about 30% of projects were rejected during scoring. As the project monitors in the school became more familiar and served at a scoring site with the projects and knew what was being asked, then the rejection rate dropped. After the first year we went from 70% acceptance to 80% and now we are at 85 to 90 percent. By working as a scorer they get to see the scoring tools and answer keys. We also give the scoring tool and answer keys to LEAs to use during professional development. We can't make them widely available because there would be security issues. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)



Samantha Harlow explains some of the changes that have occurred with project scoring over the past few years, “When we first started, anything that involved the teacher writing on the project was okay, now it is no good. Over time it’s become more clear what the expectations are. The projects themselves have gotten harder but they have become more specific. Now we have answer keys for English. Before that didn’t exist. You just had to guess what they wanted and you were never sure until you went to scoring and saw the scoring tool” (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Teacher Laura Arnold also experienced some inconsistencies with the scoring procedure. She said,

Some projects have come back and I couldn’t believe that they didn’t pass them. They were things on the project that were easy to fix but they were petty. Other times there were projects that were turned in that were deplorable and they passed. I don’t think that they always followed the rubric while scoring. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Although New Town Schools said they would send a letter for each project indicating pass or reject, the first couple of years feedback was not always received consistently. Jason Davis explained that, “You have to wait until they send a letter to find out if you passed but sometimes they didn’t always send a letter. So we would have to wait a long time to find out” (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011).

### **The Monitoring of the Bridge Plan**

The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation program guide (01/16/08) specified that, “MSDE staff will serve on Local Review Panels during initial reviews until there is a level of assurance that the local panel members understand the scoring criteria and can apply them consistently” (p. 13). In an attempt to ensure that scoring was consistent across the state, MSDE conducted site visits to weekend scoring sessions at New Town

School's Central Office. Stewart Peters, a State official that works with Bridge explained that,

Well the first two years another state official and I visited every scoring panel at least once in every district. In Prince George's County and New Town we visited scoring every single time. We were looking for fidelity of implementation throughout the districts. In some districts it would be de-centralized and they would use central office folks but there would still be two people scoring together just like in the districts with more projects. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

In addition to the monitoring of local review panels, a yearly audit of scored projects was also conducted. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation program guide (01/16/08) specified that, "Each year, the State will review Local Review Panel results for process effectiveness and student use of the Bridge Plan. MSDE will provide procedure to local school systems so they may perform their own evaluations" (p. 14).

Bridge state official Stewart Peters confirmed that,

Also we do have scoring consistency reviews. Districts are asked to choose a random sample which is about 2% of all projects submitted and submit that sample to us. Then we have content experts who worked on the development of the projects provide feedback during the review. So the scoring consistency panel ensures that scoring is consistent across districts. Although it is only a 2% sample, in general there is a great deal of consistency. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

However, even if inconsistencies have been found or the State felt that a project that shouldn't have passed was passed, they did not override school district's decisions. In regards to monitoring of Bridge Scoring Bob Smith, from MSDE explained,

There have been cases where projects have been rejected because we thought that students did not do the work themselves. If our review panel feels that a project has been accepted and should not have passed we re-direct that to the local LEA and they handle it from there. We do not change any of the LEAs' decisions, we make them aware of what we find and leave it up to them to fix the problem. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

Although State officials may monitor the scoring of Bridge projects, the Principal of Central High School, James Harrington felt that the State did little to monitor whether or not the students participating in Bridge met the State's requirements for participation,

The City or State hasn't looked at many of the Bridge requirements in any real way. They haven't looked at the attendance requirement at all. The State just wanted another way to keep numbers the same. The Bridge Projects end up turning into another way to juke the stats. My first year teaching the government test 1 in 104 students passed the test but now with Bridge all students are meeting the requirement. (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011)

However, Stewart Peters from MSDE explained that even though the State did not individually monitor each school to ensure Bridge Plan requirements were being met, they did expect that school districts monitor individual schools. He explained the process,

Each district submits an accountability file in the summer for the previous year that contains that information. That is where districts are double checked. Attendance is a local decision so that is not audited. There is a manual and we are assuming that everyone is following the rules since they are well published. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

Stewart Peters also explained that the Bridge Plan did not have to be monitored as closely by MSDE because it was not considered to be a formal assessment. He clarified,

It is very important to understand that Bridge is an instructional intervention not an assessment. That was one important distinction that I had to learn when I came on board. Because it is not an assessment, it would not have to hold up to standards of reliability and validity and does not require the same level of monitoring tests do. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

Not only has MSDE been relaxed on monitoring Bridge Plan requirements, it has also been more relaxed on formally evaluating the Bridge Plan. Stewart Peters elaborated on the evaluation of Bridge,

There hasn't been any formalized evaluation. Mr. Smith and I completed a survey although I don't know where it is now with the points of contact of superintendents with their feedback on Bridge at the end of the first year. Also

because the goal of creating Bridge was for all students to meet graduation requirements we were mainly concerned that goal was being met. Because we have very few students that aren't meeting requirements we know that Bridge is successful for that reason alone. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

Although the State does not have strict structures in place to monitor and evaluate the Bridge Plan, it seems clear that success is measured by the amount of students that are able to graduate. Since the beginning of the Bridge Plan, Central High School has not had any students prevented from graduating because of HSA requirements.

## **CHAPTER 7: THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PARTICIPATION IN THE BRIDGE PLAN FOR ACADEMIC VALIDATION AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL**

### **Introduction**

Just as there are a variety of factors that affect a student's performance in school or on a standardized test, there are a multitude of reasons that influence a student's eligibility to participate in the Bridge Plan. African American students, Special Education students, FARMS students as well as students that have less access to social and cultural capital are less likely to pass the High School Assessments making them more likely to participate in the Bridge Plan. The extent to which these factors are true for Central High School students is discussed below.

### **The Bridge Plan and Standardized Test Scores**

#### **HSA scores.**

Central High School has a significantly lower pass rate in all HSA subject areas than the Maryland State average as well as the New Town average. In 2009, for example, only roughly 53% of Central High School students passed the Algebra HSA compared to the approximately 89% pass rate across the state of Maryland. In Biology there was also a significant disparity in the pass rate of Central High School compared to the average for the state of Maryland. Central High School had approximately 48% of its students pass the Biology HSA while 86% of students across Maryland were able to achieve a passing score. Differences in the English and Government scores were also large. In English, Central's pass rate was 57% while the average across the State was

87%. In Government, Central High School had a 63% pass rate while the State of Maryland had a 93% average pass rate.

Since participation in Bridge is dependent upon a student's HSA scores, it is no surprise that Central High School has a significantly larger percentage of its population participating in Bridge compared to the New Town and Maryland State averages.

**SAT scores.**

This trend of lower achievement on HSAs at Central High School is also shown by SAT data as well. The Composite Mean score for Central High School students was approximately 993 while the average across the State of Maryland was 1476. The numbers indicate lower SAT scores across all three domains at Central High School compared to other school in New Town and across the state.

**NAEP data.**

The HSA and SAT data is also supported by research conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The National Assessment of Educational Progress is a standardized way to measure students' progress across the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states>), although the Maryland average Reading Scale Score for Grade 8 ranks slightly higher than the National Average, the New Town District scores are significantly lower than the National Average. In addition, New Town has 9% more of its students Below Basic compared to other large cities and 23% more of its students Below Basic compared to the average across Maryland State.

### **Bridge Plan participation at Central High School.**

Because Central High School students have less than average standardized test scores, it is only logical that there is a more than average amount of students that have to complete Bridge projects. While only 9.2% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the state of Maryland participated in Bridge, 35.4% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders at Central High Schools participated in Bridge.

Bob Smith, who is employed by MSDE and worked to oversee Bridge, explained, “Every LEA in the entire state has projects. There is only one high school that has had no projects across the entire state. That is Eastern Tech in Baltimore County. There are some students that learn in a different manner in every district and Bridge is a great way for those students to demonstrate what they know” (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011). Although it is true that every district in the state of Maryland has at least a few students that require projects, it is evident that higher numbers of projects are concentrated in specific areas. When recalling discussion that took place at meetings by the Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments, Task Force member, Scott Ford recalled,

It was expressed as a concern that there would be areas that would need more projects than others. Everyone in the room knew that it would be students with the lowest achievement and would be in New Town and some parts of Prince George’s County and Baltimore County and other areas. However it was up to the Task Force to make recommendations only and the state was left to come up with the specifics on how those areas would handle a high volume of projects. (Personal Communication, August, 28, 2011)

Mr. Smith, a MSDE Bridge official commented on the distribution of Bridge projects saying, “Initially, we thought that the number of students who would use Bridge could be as high as 40% in some locales. We did find that the affected population was

about 20%. We do know that New Town and Prince George's counties are outliers in that they have a much higher percentage of students that use Bridge than other LEAs" (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011).

### **The Bridge Plan and Academic Preparation**

#### **Teaching.**

It is clear from the HSA, SAT, and NAEP data that there are significant differences in the performance of students at Central High School and the students at other New Town and Maryland high schools. We do know that there are a multitude of factors that influence a student's performance on standardized tests. A student's academic preparation, for example, has a significant impact on their achievement.

Unfortunately, often times students in schools that need the most effective teachers are plagued by problems such as high teacher turnover and less effective teachers. Central High School is no exception to this rule. According to <http://www.mdreportcard.org>, Central High School had 36.4% of its classes not taught by teachers that were highly qualified while the average for the entire state of Maryland was 8.3%.

In the spring of 2008, Central High School was zero-based and all staff had to re-apply for their position. New principal, James Harrington worked hard to bring the best possible teaching staff to Central students. For some students though, years of ineffective teachers had left them behind many of their peers at other schools. When asked about her experience with teachers at Central High School, Kara Beard, a 2009 graduate said,

Our ninth grade year our English teacher used to be asleep. She just told us make sure you look like you are reading a book if someone comes by. I feel like people at other schools have teachers that have higher expectations set. Like at other schools in New Town you can't get accepted into that school without being a better student. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)



As much as students will complain about a heavy workload, they know that good teachers have high expectations for their students. Briana Gibson another 2009 Central High School graduate reported that, “Them teachers don’t give a lot of work anyway, I could do the homework in class. I was a slacker and I still passed. Some teachers are good but some teachers don’t care” (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011). Naomi Harris, a 2010 graduate also shared concerns about the teaching at Central High School. She explained,

I was having problems with my last period teacher. I was trying to understand what she was talking about. When she would come over to me, she would just leave right away and go and talk to another person like she forgot I just asked a question. She would just ignore me so one day I took my phone out and pretended to have a conversation so she would notice me and then we got into it. I don’t disrespect no teachers but she gave me a hard way to go. I was doing a lot of stuff for her class, I stayed to six or seven o’clock to do her work because I knew I wanted to get out of there. I asked her what I was missing and she said I was missing two assignments; I had to build a bridge for one of them so I sat right there and built that bridge. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

Kara Beard made the connection between good teaching and good test scores. She said,

At our school you don’t have to really do work to pass, you can do nothing and still pass, so then when it comes to a test you don’t know the stuff so you don’t pass. When it came to Biology, my sister at another school was learning way more than I was and she had shorter classes than I had. But sometimes you have to apply yourself too even if you don’t have a good teacher you can take it upon yourself to learn what you need to know. And also homework doesn’t really count. A lot of teachers don’t really check your homework so you don’t have to do it. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)

In addition to issues with low-quality teaching, some students cited a lack of support from administrators as well. Naomi Harris, a 2010 graduate shared an interaction with an administrator that has stuck with her,

One of the assistant principals used to give me a hard way to go. I would have a pass for yearbook to take pictures and would be walking in the hall and then he would tell me I probably wasn’t going to walk across the stage. That didn’t make me feel good. I would think that he knew I was going to do the right thing so why

don't you catch the people that are just running halls. He called my mother and she asked me what was I doing running halls. I told her I was not running no halls. I had a pass. Even so I won't tell an adult "F you" like these children will. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

Not only did students at Central High School know that they weren't always getting the education they deserved, Bob Smith, an official from MSDE also agreed that the level of instruction students receive in New Town and at Central High School in particular was a concern. He said,

Is there ineffective teaching and teachers that don't teach to students? Of course. One thing that your superintendent has talked about is the difficulty he faces in maintaining high quality teachers. We know that it takes a few years for teachers to start to become master teachers but often times they leave after just a few years. Effective teaching is a huge issue. (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

### **Discipline.**

Even when students have a high quality teacher, it may be difficult to focus with so many in-class distractions from their peers. Sandra Wallace, a 2010 Central graduate explained that,

I don't know if I learned a lot from my classes at Central. If most of the kids wasn't so rude and disrespectful and talking while the teachers was talking and having to stop and put kids out I probably would have learned more. My English class was my favorite class because she could control her students and keep them in order and everyone got their work done. In my worst class I got put out all the time and then I had an attitude with him so I just put out all the time. But he couldn't keep the students in line. (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011)

Briana Gibson agreed saying, "If we had more strict and structured classes then everybody would be doing what they are supposed to do" (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011). Tonya Davenport added that, "I think students at other schools have less distractions. There could be a fight that breaks out in the hallway or in the classroom or a student could be disrespectful to the teacher and then you don't learn anything" (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011).

Student discipline problems are not as simple as students misbehaving for attention. Often times, students acted out because they were behind academically and were too embarrassed to ask for help. Kara Beard explained, “Also at Central High School you have people that weren’t willing to say that they needed help with something. Especially the boys, their pride would make them act a certain way where they wouldn’t ask for help and would rather just act out” (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011).

When asked why there are so many discipline problems at Central High School, one teacher Aaron Hedgecock explained,

You see so many kids that just want to act like little children because for them school is one of the few relatively safe places where they can act like children. So a lot of the knowledge floats past them and out the window. There is constant drama. Constant threats of violence, shouting, cursing, that erupts out of the blue. So many attendance issues. All of those things inhibit the interest in learning. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

**Prior preparation.**

Not only are many students not receiving the education they deserve at Central High School, many students come to high school so far behind that it is extremely unlikely that they will be able to be remediated to their appropriate grade level.

Maryland State Department of Education Official Stewart Peters explained,

I think the Bridge Projects are rigorous and they require lots of focus and effort but I acknowledge that all students have not received initial instruction in the HSA content that is equivalent across the state. So sometimes the Bridge Plan is re-teaching and sometimes it is teaching all the material that never got taught in the first place. We do believe that it is possible to do it better the first time for some kids who never got taught the information the first time. Also it’s not just the instruction from the teacher in high school, it has to do with preparation before hand, many students come into high school with deficiencies so it is difficult for teachers to make up for those deficiencies. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

Central High School teachers agreed that students' prior academic preparation had a significant impact on their performance in high school. Aaron Hedgecock explained,

I taught middle school early on so by the time I got to Central High school I had seen where our students came from. And it wasn't a good place. Somewhere between the sixth and seventh grade the students stopped caring and started to get left behind as far as their education goes. Working with students who could barely form the letters that make up their name will not pass a test. They didn't come into high school with the skills they needed so it was extremely hard to get them where they needed to be. Because it's Central High School, many students didn't get an education before they came. They were rejected by the upper and middle tier high schools so of course they aren't the best students. It is a Bridge Project grooming school. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Another Central High School teacher, Laura Arnold, explained another difficulty Central High School faced when students came from other schools,

There is another factor which is that our school has a large influx of transfer students who have never sat for the HSAs. So then by the time they are seniors they have to take the exam and may have never even had the test. We had a student who came from another school that wouldn't let him sit for any exams and that is the kind of student that we get. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Because Central High School is a bottom tier school there is a constant influx of students that got kicked out of another school or who were out of school for a long period of time. These issues contribute to the challenges faced by Central High School teachers.

### **The Bridge Plan and Attendance**

Table 7.1: Average Attendance by HSA Status

Year	Average Attendance for Students that Met HSA Requirements	Average Attendance for Students that didn't Meet HSA Requirements
2009-2010	89.2%	79.6%
2010-2011	83%	77%
2011-2012	86%	78%

Another significant factor that affects a student's test performance is the attendance in school. The above data chart shows that 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who met HSA requirements had a higher average attendance than those 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who had not met HSA requirements. Many students and teachers agreed that students' attendance could have a dramatic effect on their academic performance. When asked why she thought so many students at Central High School could not pass the HSAs, 2010 Central High School graduate Naomi Harris said,

I'm going to say it is because the lack of children showing up or the lack of children concentration. Where do you find children during HSAs? You find them in the halls when they were supposed to be trying on that test. I think they just didn't want to come to school or they were doing something they didn't have any business doing. I wouldn't say it was the teachers' fault. When you in high school you know what you need to be doing. I think it is the parents because my mother had me out of the house every day. There was no way I was going to be late. But by high school the children should be accountable for they own self. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

Briana Gibson, who graduated from Central High School in 2009, agreed that attendance was an issue saying, "People just did whatever, if they didn't want to go to a class they didn't go. This generation is crazy now, they are being influenced by the wrong things and people think the things they see on TV are what they want but they don't know they have to go to school to get them" (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011). Jason Davis, a 2011 graduate also agreed that attendance was a big obstacle for students. Speaking about Central High School students, he said, "They don't come to school either. I don't know, I didn't want to be in school. I found it boring but I knew I had to graduate and finish and my parents wanted me to so I could keep going in life" (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011). Stephanie George, who graduated in 2009, also agreed that attendance was a significant factor in student achievement. She said,

I think it is because kids were never going to school and they weren't learning and then when they went to take the test they would fail. Some teachers really didn't get their attention enough to get them to want to come to class. Some kids also don't have the parents that will push them to come to school. (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011)

Teacher Aaron Hedgecock felt that attendance is a concern saying, "I mean I don't know that there are that many ways to prepare for the HSA other than being a half decent student. There is no way to do that if you do not go to class. If you were absent for sixty days then prepare for a Bridge Project" (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011). When asked what he think is the biggest obstacle for Central High School students in completing the Bridge Projects, Principal James Harrington explained, "I think the number one issue for our kids is simply showing up. Our kids don't show up to school" (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011).

### **The Bridge Plan and Student Motivation**

An additional obstacle Central High School faced regarding student achievement was motivation. A 2010 graduate Sandra Wallace said, "I think it is because Central High School kids don't try. When the HSA comes they just mark anything and they don't try" (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011). Jason Davis explained that students' test performance may have more to do with their motivation not only during the test, but before the test as well. When asked why he thought many Central High School students don't pass the HSAs he said, "A lot of students failed the HSA because they don't study. I don't like to study. Also a lot of students here don't pay attention in class and aren't learning what they should be learning" (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011).

Principal James Harrington agreed that student motivation is a significant concern at Central High School. He explained,

One of the major pieces is apathy. There is really no engagement in their learning. There is a belief that has been engrained in them that if they do show up then that is good enough. Work in their mind is simply filling out a piece of paper. They get irritated when you asked them to think. The first year we had a program where students were referred when they weren't doing their work. So they were sent there to be helped one on one and their work was sent down to them. Well then they ended up wanting to go there because they only had to do book work. They wanted to get out of anything that involved higher level thinking. Our kids are not inquisitive, they don't ask why enough. (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011)

Teacher Aaron Hedgecock also agrees that student motivation is a concern. He said,

There is not interest in what the person with the chalk in their hand has to say. I don't care how many engaging activities or rigorous standards someone has if the students don't have an interest within them. I know it sounds like I am blaming them but how else can you motivate them. Our principal gives away brand new gaming stations or iPods just to get kids to show up. There is no amount of external motivation that can take the place of intrinsic motivation that makes a kid say they are curious about something. If a student doesn't want to learn they don't have to. If a student wants to take out their phone and text all day they do. And the worst they can get is a detention. It's not to lay all the blame on the students either. It was my first quarter teaching and I was teaching English and I went to a social studies teacher because 60 or 70% of my kids were failing. He said, 'look man, pass the kids you like because they're going to change their grades anyhow so you might as well pick the kids you like.' After that I was like, what's the point. So there is no reason for them to work because the system doesn't require it. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Another Central High School teacher, Samantha Harlow agreed that the New Town School System has conditioned children to want to do less. When speaking about why so many students at Central high School have Bridge Projects she said,

Not understanding the importance of following rules and thinking there will be an exception. Not understanding that the test matters and that they need to take it seriously. Our kids always know that there will be something that will save them. The system has taught them that through the years and Bridge is just one more example of that. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Another reason students may be hesitant to take the HSAs is because of test taking anxiety. Samantha Harlow explained, "Test taking fear is a big issue for our students" (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Teacher Audrey Morris agreed that that test

taking anxiety is a significant issue for some students. She said, “They have such a high test anxiety. They would rather do the projects than take the test because that is less stress” (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). One student, a 2010 Central High School graduate, Sandra Wallace agreed that test anxiety impacted her performance on the HSA. She shared, “I think the projects were good because they gave you another opportunity to graduate. Even if you failed the test you could still graduate. I was never good at tests and quizzes. Bridge was good then for me. I don’t think the projects were a waste of time. I knew I should have passed the test the first time, it made me want to go back and try harder before and gave me confidence” (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011).

### **The Bridge Plan and Reading Level**

Another theme that was consistent among student and teacher interviewees was the impact of reading level on students’ test performance. One Central High School graduate, Naomi Harris, explained why she thought Bridge Projects were easier than taking the HSA,

I think the Bridge Projects were worded different and they were easier to understand than the HSA. On the HSA I would just pick any answer because I didn’t really know what it was saying. The projects are completely different than the HSAs. I thought it was much easier to do the projects because the way they worded things on the HSA was hard. The written assignments on the projects were a lot easier than the multiple choice questions on the test. I was good at giving my opinion. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

Central High School teacher Laura Arnold felt that students’ reading level could play a huge role in their performance on the HSA. She said, “Reading level is a huge factor in all of the HSAs, and we have almost all of our students coming in as basic in Math and



Reading” (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011). Rick Nolt agreed that reading level could be a huge obstacle to students’ success on the HSA. He explained,

I don’t think that the Bridge process supports the academic success of students. They see it as a task that needs to be finished rather than a supplement to an academic process that they have already failed many times. Many of the students that are in Bridge have special needs that have not been met by the test because the test is nothing more than a reading comprehension test and our students are below grade level for reading. I’m pretty sure there is a correlation between reading scores and their involvement in Bridge. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Another Central High School teacher, Karl Griswold also cited reading level as something that Bridge students typically struggle with. He explained, “Their reading level is low so students often times have to be led to the answer in Bridge (Personal Communication, May 4, 2011). When asked why she believes many students aren’t successful on the HSA, Andrea Ricker, a New Town district employee who works with Bridge said,

There are a number of reasons. I think that a lot of our kids come to high school without the skills necessary to pass those exams. When the test changed three years ago and became more reading based our kids had a tougher time because many of our kids aren’t on grade level when it comes to reading. (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011)

### **The Bridge Plan and Special Education Status**

While approximately 50% of regular education students at Central High School were able to meet HSA requirements by passing all four HSA exams or earning a combined score, only about 9% of special education students were able to meet HSA requirements using that option. When asked about which groups of students were more represented in Bridge, Central High School Principal James Harington explained,

Because our students are fairly homogeneous, the group that I think stands out has been typically SPED students. At that point we have to face the reality that they’re reading on a first or second grade level. At that point it becomes a matter

of drawing pictures or talking to the kids to get them through. (Personal Communication May 7, 2011)

Stewart Peters, from MSDE agreed that special education students are over-represented in the Bridge Program. He reported, “We know that a higher percentage of IEP students get over the hump with the Bridge Plan. That was the initial design of Bridge and it has done that (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011). Because Bridge was created primarily to meet the needs of Special Education students, it is no surprise that those students make up a large percentage of the students involved in Bridge.

### **The Bridge Plan and Economic Status**

Because students from families with fewer financial resources tend to perform worse on standardized tests, these students are more likely to participate in the Bridge Plan. Ryan (2010) explains that,

Challenging standards would reveal the large gap between suburban and urban schools, creating pressure to close it. Challenging standards might also call into question the quality of some suburban schools, which would anger suburbanites. Neither possibility was attractive, so most states set the bar quite low. As a result, the standards and testing movement, in practice, is primarily about ensuring that students learn the basics. It is not about closing the gap between urban and suburban schools in educational opportunities or results. Students in many high-poverty schools, especially in urban areas, still struggle to pass the tests. This struggle and the penalty for failure tend to concentrate attention in these schools on little more than tests themselves. Middle-class schools in suburban areas, by contrast have relatively little trouble with the tests and provide an education that goes well beyond test. (p. 11)

When asked what factors they think make a student more eligible to participate in Bridge, many teachers cited economic status as a significant factor. Teacher Aaron Hedgecock explained that, “By and large, look at the number of free and reduced lunches in a school and then look at how many Bridge projects they have. There will be a correlation” (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011). Teacher Rick Nolt said, “Yeah, I mean if

they're at a lower level they don't perform as well. 82% of our students are FARMS students and we have one of the highest amounts of projects so there is a correlation. Their parents may not know as much about charter schools so they are relegated to neighborhood schools" (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Teacher Laura Arnold also agreed saying, "A lot of our students have learning differences. They also come from a lower socio economic background and a lot of them don't have a lot of positive experiences in their lives" (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011). Central High School Principal James Harrington reported, "You do see a disproportionate number of students in poverty participating in the Bridge program. Obviously you can see Bridge mainly clustered in schools with a higher percentage of FARMS students. Bridge is an outcrop of what's happening in the school anyway" (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011). When asked if he thought a student's access to economic resources was a factor in their participation in Bridge, MSDE employee Stewart Peters responded, "Probably yes but I don't know that. HSA pass rates are tied to SES, so one could argue that the Bridge Plan serves a higher proportion of students at a low SES" (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011).

### **The Bridge Plan and Race**

Critical Race Theory suggests that race continues to have a significant impact on American society. The effects can be seen in many sectors such as politics, law, and of course education. Race impacts educational achievement resulting in lower graduation rate, higher dropout rate, lower college acceptance rate, and perhaps most widely publicized, lower test scores among African American and Latino students. New Town and Central High School are no exceptions to this phenomenon. A significantly higher

percentage of White students than African American students have passed the HSAs at Central High School. For example, while 60% of white students pass the Algebra HSA, only 52% of African American students earned a passing score on that exam. The gap grows even larger in the Biology pass rate where 47% of African American students passed the HSA compared to 80% of white students. The pass rate for the English HSA was higher by only 3% for white students but was higher by 36% for white students in the Government HSA.

Teacher Aaron Hedgecock agreed that race was a significant factor in students' participation in Bridge. He said,

There was one white student in all the Bridge students I have seen. And she was on an IEP. But we don't have that many white students to start out with, just a handful. Look at the numbers in other schools, they don't lie. Look at how many projects other counties had. That is tied to race as well. Black students aren't being educated and Bridge is a way to make it appear that they are. What motivation do they have for education? I have had many conversations with students about how fair welfare is. When they are trying to get into college, they wonder why am I putting myself through this when I could have a decent life for free. But as far as Bridge projects are concerned, no one could have been dumb enough to think that this Project you could do in a week will take the place of 12 years. And African American students have been most affected by this. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Principal James Harrington also agreed that race was a significant factor in students' participation in Bridge. He explained, "I think it's more poverty than race. But obviously race has been a factor because nearly all our students are Black and our students do have the most Bridge projects. More so than schools with a more diverse population" (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011). Stewart Peters, from MSDE also cited race as influencing a student's likelihood to participate in Bridge. He said, "Across the state there are differences in pass rates in ELL students, IEP students and in race. So

it would stand to reason that those differences carry over to Bridge” (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011).

### **The Bridge Plan and Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital generally refers to the exposure to experiences that will enrich a student culturally and make them more likely to succeed in school. Central High School teacher Laura Arnold felt that a lack of cultural capital was a significant factor for Central High School students’ participation in Bridge. She reported that,

We have kids that don’t have the luxury to just relax and explore things and they don’t have a home environment that exposes them to different ideas. If you would talk to kids about New Town, they’ve never been outside of New Town. There is so much to see that is only an hour a way that our kids don’t know about. A lot of our kids have parents that are trying to take care of their kids the best they know how working two or three jobs. I’m always trying to give my kids different outside experiences. This helps them to have a love of learning our kids don’t have. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Teacher Aaron Hedgecock agreed saying,

I think the things they see in their community have a huge influence on them. Especially when very few of them get out to see the county much less another state. When you are exposed to so little you have less prior knowledge to pull from. We just had a student come back from his first year in college and he was an honors student here, but an honors student in New Town, does not an honors student make elsewhere. He got an F in college which was his lowest grade since middle school. He realized that nothing prepared him for college in a small town with no barber shop and no McDonalds. I feel like a lot of our students are afraid of that world or they don’t care because they love where they are at. The smart kids are afraid that is all they will ever know. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Not only do many students lack enriching experiences that may support achievement in the classroom, a significant amount of students also lack a variety of social structures to support them.

## **The Bridge Plan and Social Capital**

Social capital is a broad umbrella that encompasses a variety of things that many students across the nation take for granted. Things such as parental encouragement and a stable home life can have a great impact on how well a student does in school.

### **Home life.**

A theme that was recurring throughout interviews with Central High School students was the lack of a stable home life. Many students move frequently between family members and friends because of issues such as drugs and violence. When asked why she thinks so many students at Central High School are not successful on the HSA, Tonya Davenport, a 2010 Central High School graduate explained that, “It is because so many kids have bad influence on them outside of school. I would say it could be something that was going on at home like drama and those things could distract students” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011).

Kara Beard, a 2009 graduate supports that sentiment sharing her experience,

Well I lived with my mom and brothers and sister but that was too much drama so I started living with my grandmother. The police would come and raid our house in the middle of the night to look for drugs. Then I would have to wake up the next morning and go to school. My brothers were selling drugs but they were too smart to keep it in the house so they didn't get caught for a while. The police kept coming though and it got too much so I went to my grandmother's. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)

Briana Gibson, another 2009 Central High graduate, explained her situation saying, “I lived first with my mom and then that didn't work out because she had got a new boyfriend and we didn't get along so then I started staying with my aunt” (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011). Tobias Moore, a 2011 graduate said, “I grew up and didn't know no better. I saw my mom smoking weed and selling drugs so I did the same

thing. I feel like I am getting dumber because I smoked so much weed. I might try and stop but it is all around me, that is all I know. Everyone I live with does it” (Personal Communication, April 9, 2011). Stephanie George, a 2009 graduate talked about her living situation in high school. She said,

I lived with just my dad but then I was in a group home in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. It was like living in jail. They were really hard on us. We couldn’t eat anything after 6:30 so a lot of times I got hungry. I had to go there because my dad had anger issues and he would hit me. He still does but it is better than going back there. My mom died in a car accident when I was six months old so he was all I had. Then after I got out my uncle was having problems and got locked up and I had to take care of my little cousin so that was a lot to do with school. Now my dad married and he lives with his new wife so he wants me out of the house. So I’m trying to save money so I can leave. (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011)

Naomi Harris, a 2010 graduate explained what it was like in her house. She reported, “During school I was also living with my grandmother and my cousins and that was too many people so I was going crazy” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011).

Kara Beard explained the connection she sees between a stable home life and achievement in school. She said,

Most people do not have a stable home either because their mother was a drug addict or their family was in gangs. So you don’t have time to focus on a test because if you are going through something at home you can’t concentrate on school. Even if I am fine at home my best friend could be going through something at home and she tries to tell me about something and we both miss what is happening in class. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)

Although not affected by drugs or violence Tonya Davenport, a 2010 graduate was also forced to move frequently. When asked about her living situation in high school, she reported,

I lived with just my mom. We had to move a lot though. Our first apartment had too many cockroaches and the landlord wouldn’t get rid of them. Then we lived in another apartment and the sewage system backed up into our apartment and

ruined everything. That was really hard but people donated a lot of things to us. Now we live in a different apartment. (Personal Communication 13, 2011)

Teachers at Central High School also felt that students who lacked a stable home life were more likely to participate in Bridge. Teacher Samantha Harlow reported,

I feel like kids who have less support at home are less likely to take the test seriously and do well. In my experience kids who were in Bridge were less likely to be from nuclear families. I have no recollection of talking to any parents as a Bridge teacher. I remember trying to get a hold of certain students' parents and that was always a nightmare. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Another teacher, Aaron Hedgecock agreed saying, "I think a lot of the home resources aren't very supportive of any education. Home means cell phones and watching TV. Even in decent homes where mom is forced to work two jobs and is never home it is hard enough to get a permission slip signed let alone tell them to do home work" (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011). When asked what he thought contributed to the large number of Bridge Projects Central High School students face, teacher Rick Nolt shared that,

The climate that they live in has violence, no heat, sometimes our kids don't have steady access to food. There are brothers and sisters at home that they have to take care of. Our kids are up against a lot. There are so many things that our kids are going through that impacts how they do in school." (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Principal James Harrington also agreed that Central High School students deal with a multitude of challenges at home. He explained, "There are a tremendous number of distractions for our kids. A large number of our kids are in alternative living situations like foster care or kinship care. The problem is that those then affect the academic preparation. Those things dilute the academic preparation" (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011).



### **Parental expectations.**

In addition to a stable home life, expectations parents had for their children also seems to influence the level of students' achievement. Briana Gibson, a 2009 graduate from Central High School said,

I think they need more mentors and more counselors at school because most people don't have people at home to talk to. My family wanted me to go to college but I didn't go. My aunt went to college. They always say I should go, but I tell them is ya'll going to take care of me if I stop working. They say they want me to go but they really don't try to help. My aunt is not working right now so where are we going to stay if I don't work. I really do wish I had someone to take care of me because I do want to have my own business. I want to open a day care but I don't have time for all that right now. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)

Many students from Central High School reported feeling encouraged by family members to do well in school. Kara Beard, who graduated in 2009 explained,

As far as my family, I had people that went to college even if they didn't finish. My mom did push us, even my brothers that didn't turn out right but she tried. My mother would get on us even when our grades were bad. I had some kind of support but sometimes my house was a mess. (Personal Communication, July 5, 2011)

Sandra Wallace, a 2010 graduate shared that, "My whole family and some of my friends at Central pushed me to go to college. My mother pushed me to go to cooking school. Sometimes though my friends were distracting. They would try to talk to me in class and I couldn't pay attention" (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011). 2009 graduate Stephanie George said, "My dad always pushed me to go to school. My grandfather also pushed me to do well. I had a boyfriend though that didn't go to school so sometimes I skipped school and didn't go" (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011). Naomi Harris, who graduated from Central High School in 2010, also reported feeling encouraged by her mother to do well in school. She explained,

My mom told me that it was up to me about college as long as I could do something. My sister and brother didn't graduate so she was really happy I could graduate. She was crying so hard when I graduated. Two weeks before graduation I almost dropped out but then I called my cousin and she was cussing me out and telling me I had to finish. When I kept coming home with these problems, my mom wanted to kill me. She wasn't going up to the school because she told me I should just listen to my teacher. She just said do what you got to do. So that is what I did. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

Tonya Davenport who graduated in 2010 said, "My mom was telling me nonstop to do well in school. She always told me why stop at the sky when you could reach for the stars. I only see my dad sometimes but even though he wasn't always there, he always told me to never stop trying." Jason Davis a 2011 graduate explained, "My mom always told me to go to school and to listen and to pay attention and then if I wanted to go to college I could" (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011).

#### **Parental educational attainment.**

Even though most students reported that their families did push them to do well in school and continue on to higher education, it seems that few students had role models to show them what that would look like. Sandra Wallace explained,

I lived with my mother, my two brothers, my two sisters. No one in my family went to college. My brother and sister both started but they don't have enough money. My brother has two kids now so he can't go. (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011)

Naomi Harris shared that, "My mother used to work at UMBC at the cafeteria, she is really smart. My aunt went to college but she never graduated and she lived with us also so she could help me if I needed help but no one in my family really finished school" (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011). Jason Davis said, "I live with my Mom, well she is really my step-mom and dad and two younger brothers. My parents came here from

El Salvador and then never finished high school or college” (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011).

### **Academic support at home.**

Because many students came from homes where family members were unable to finish high school or college, they often times found it difficult to get academic assistance at home if they were struggling in school. Stephanie George reported that, “I really didn’t do homework. I didn’t have anyone at home to help me so if I had a question I just didn’t do anything” (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011). Jason Davis also felt as if he didn’t have anyone to turn to at home for help in school. He explained, “My mom is working two jobs. Plus she never graduated from high school. Her and my dad don’t really speak English that good so they cannot help me in school (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011).

Some Central students, however, did have academic support in their home. Tonya Davenport shared that, “My mom is really smart so I would ask her to explain things to me or go to coach class. I had plenty of help” (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011). Sandra Wallace agreed saying, “I had help on my homework from my mother. Everyone was good at different things in my family so I did have a lot of people to help me” (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011).

Principal James Harrington cited academic support at home as a critical factor in students’ academic achievement. He explained,

I think their resources at home limit their participation in Bridge. Our kids only work on the projects at school. Some schools have their students do their projects almost entirely at home. But lack of doing work at home seems to be pretty consistent with all our students. That is universal no matter their situation is. They’re not engaged in their learning and they don’t have anyone at home to help.

It's not a normal piece of their life that is threaded through their daily being. (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011)

**Community influence.**

In addition to the obstacles some students faced at home, many Central High School students faced even bigger obstacles in their surrounding community. Teacher Aaron Hedgecock explained what he saw in the community surrounding Central High School. He said,

And then you look at what few decent things they do have around them, and it's not much. I have seen certain branches of libraries under construction for two years, rec centers keep closing. A lot of our students have nowhere to go. The elephant in the room is the drug economy because it's right there. It's the most readily accessible future. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Teacher Laura Arnold also felt that students' surroundings influenced their success in school. She explained,

It definitely has an effect. The culture of the city we live in glorifies lifestyles that do not value an education, "thug life". The music and the videos that our students are surrounded by and even the role models that are kids look up to talk about "hoes" and "bitches." Our kids don't listen to rap songs that promote staying in school. They are listening to messages of drugs and violence. Our kids have a hard time turning it off when they get into the classroom. Kids would tell me that I want to be a drug dealer because I will make more money than you will. Also with all the violence they face they are so busy trying to stay alive. Then, if and when a kid does succeed they are subjected to verbal and physical abuse from classmates and they will cave into stuff like that. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Principal James Harrington also spoke about the support students get from their local community. He reported, "The support just looks like, are the people in their community that they associate with on a daily basis concerned with education, do they ask questions about school, are they modeling what it means to be learner? The answer is usually no" (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011).

With so many obstacles to overcome from lack of financial resources to a lack of

parental support, it is easy to see why Central High School students have struggled to stay on track. Even though the Bridge Plan provides Central Students with a way to meet high school graduation requirements and finish school, the question of how prepared these students are remains.

## **CHAPTER 8: THE IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BRIDGE PLAN FOR ACADEMIC VALIDATION**

### **Introduction**

Although the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation allows students to graduate and the State to maintain a higher graduation rate, to what extent are the students who participate in Bridge receiving the education they deserve? Students, teachers and administrative officials had varying opinions on how effective they felt Bridge was at teaching students what they need to know and preparing them for life after graduation.

### **The Bridge Plan compared to the HSA**

#### **Student perspective.**

When asked if they thought students who had to complete Bridge Projects learned as much as students who were able to pass the HSAs, the majority of students felt that they learned just as much if not more. One Central High School student however, felt that Bridge students did not learn as much as students that passed the exams. Shayla Smith explained,

No, I do not. If we passed the test we would not have to do these projects. We don't know the same as the people that passed the tests. I'm from New York and school there is hard. They don't have no Bridge Projects. If students from New Town go there, they fail. I don't understand why these kids don't want to do their projects. You have to chase these kids, they don't want to graduate. I do think about that, they have us doing these projects but we can't pass the test. What are we supposed to do when we get to college? That's why I'm not going to college I'm going to get a trade. (Personal Communication, April 9, 2011)

Many students however disagreed. Kara Beard who graduated in 2009 shared, "I think that students that completed the projects learned more. I could take a test and get something wrong on the test and never learn the right answer. But in Bridge everything is broken down to them. And they still can go and fix what they got wrong" (Personal

Communication, July 5, 2011). Jason Davis also felt that the Bridge projects were effective in teaching him what he needed to know. He said, “I learned more doing the projects because the on the HSAs nobody can help you. So if I was struggling with a question there was no one who could explain to me. But with the projects someone could explain to me and I would understand right away” (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011).

Further, some students felt that completing Bridge Projects was more valuable than passing the HSAs. One 2009 Central High School graduate, Sandra Wallace explained, “I think the Bridge Projects was much harder. Some of the things that was on the projects we didn’t learn in class but then the teachers would help you out” (Personal Communication, July 7, 2011).

Graduate Naomi Harris also agreed that the Bridge Projects were more difficult than the HSAs. She said,

I think the Bridge Projects were harder because when you take the HSA you go crazy for a few hours but in Bridge you can take your time. I would get mad and cry during the Bridge Projects but then I could always do it a different day. Also with Bridge you just can’t guess, you really have to figure out the answer so you have to know more. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

### **Teacher and administrative official perspective.**

Teachers and administrative officials also had differing opinions regarding the merits of the Bridge Projects compared to the HSAs. Teacher Aaron Hedgecock felt,

Of course students with Bridge Projects don’t learn as much as students who pass the test. Bridge and the HSAs measure two totally different things. The HSA measures how much you have learned and Bridge Projects measure how much someone can help you. The students who are able to pass the HSA have a better knowledge base. It seems to me that the caliber of students I have seen over the past three years in other classes are not same as the ones in the Bridge class. It’s got nothing to do with the program. The program is simply in place to increase numbers. I don’t know how much the program considers the kids. If it did, it

wouldn't reward kids for not doing the right thing. It is a way for the State to make itself feel better and maybe the country at large. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

Stewart Peters from MSDE explained that although Bridge Projects are valuable, ultimately they are not as rigorous as passing the tests. He said,

In Bridge, teachers can become very involved in students which would not happen with an assessment. Ultimately though students have to produce their own work and do get scored which does move back to the assessment role. But a key point is that Bridge is not an assessment, it is an instructional tool used as an intervention. So all of the things that apply to tests like test security do not apply to Bridge. For example just like students have to pass X course in which the teacher gives you a grade, students have to complete the Bridge Projects and get a passing grade. But like a class, Bridge Projects are a process, not a one-time event like a test. We think of it as a continuum of assessment. Bridge is somewhere in the middle of the HSA and passing a class. Infusing accountability structures and scoring add to it to make it more than just an intervention. Some people may say that Bridge doesn't rise to the level of passing the test, because honestly it doesn't. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

Scott Ford, a member of the Task Force that developed the Bridge Plan also admitted that the Bridge Projects did not exactly measure up to the rigor of the HSAs but still found value for students that have to complete them. He shared,

No, the projects are not as rigorous as the HSAs but I think that it is still rigorous for what it is. No one wanted to say that this is not an equivalent assessment but we knew it was better than no assessment and that it would bring some accountability and perhaps improve the rigor and the quality of the instruction the students are given. It's still appropriate and still brings rigor. There are some students that will get a diploma and we know that they are not strong academically. Most people would not argue against the point that there is more to high school than just academics. Struggling students and ELL students still need some academics plus the socialization process. They are not going to pass the HSAs but they can demonstrate something that they have learned. So it's providing more rigor as long as teachers and adults aren't helping students too much so it is still their own work. I'm talking about support in the form of guidance. (Personal Communication, August 28, 2011)



## **The Bridge Plan and the Core Learning Goals**

Although some could argue that students who complete the Maryland State testing requirement by completing Bridge Projects, instead of passing the HSAs, do not have the test taking skills they need to succeed in further education, the extent to which Bridge Projects help students master the content tested on the HSA is another debate altogether.

Each HSA measures students' knowledge of different Core Learning Goals. For example, the Government HSA covered material in four Core Learning Goals including, Peoples and Nations of the World, Political Systems, Geography and Economics. Each of the Core Learning Goals is then broken down into a series of indicators and assessment limits. When asked if he believed the Bridge Projects were beneficial to students in helping them master Core Learning Goals, teacher Aaron Hedgecock said, "I don't think the point of the Bridge program is to master anything, it was just trying to make it all better. I think some kids had no choice but to comprehend things for the first time. But for the most part I think kids were more focused on getting the projects done than really learning any skills" (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011). Another Central High School teacher, Rick Nolt agreed explaining,

I think it teaches them zero because the students have already failed multiple times. It's clear that it isn't the Goals that they can't master it's reading level. From teaching a HSA tested subject I can tell you that they can verbalize the content, but when you put it in a multiple choice format with passages, they can't interpret the information because the reading level is too high. Bridge Projects don't fix that. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Laura Arnold highlighted an additional concern in regards to the Bridge Projects and Core Learning Goals. Although each content was comprised of a series of Core Learning Goals, most projects only covered one or a part of one Core Learning Goal. She stated,

I don't think projects do help students master Core Learning Goals because the projects don't cover the scope of all indicators. You are asked to do a specific task in the Bridge Projects but when they have to take the test they have to know all of the indicators. If a student only has to do one project per subject area then they are only going to know information in one area. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Principal James Harrington also felt that the Bridge Projects did little to teach students Core Learning Goals. He said, "I think that question illuminates the problem because I don't have any examples of students mastering Core Learning Goals through the Projects. We are so fixated on just getting them through it rather than actually teaching the information" (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011).

Some teachers and administrative officials however, felt that the Projects were an effective way to teach students the Core Learning Goals. Teacher Audrey Morris explained, "We have had some kids do a project and then they end up passing the HSA so I guess you could say it does help students to master the CLGs" (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Fellow teacher Samantha Harlow agreed saying, "I think in some ways Bridge does a better job than the curriculum does because it's more holistic. But a lot depends on who they have as a teacher. They could have an English teacher for three years and learn nothing and Bridge for one year and learn way more" (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). New Town Schools official Andrea Ricker also felt that the Projects are an effective way to get students to master content material. She explained, "Yes, I do think Bridge Projects are effective at teaching the Core Learning Goals because if you look at most of the Bridge Projects, they are set up the way a teacher should be teaching. That's way I taught and that's the way students should learn. That is the way they learn best" (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011). Scott Ford, a member of the Task Force that worked to develop the Bridge Plan felt,

Well it depends how you define mastery of the Core Learning Goals. Bridge is not equivalent or comparable to the HSA because it doesn't assess mastery of the Core Learning Goals the way the HSA does. I do think it is effective in its own way for the target students to demonstrate knowledge of Core Learning Goals." (Personal Communication, August 28, 2011)

Stewart Peters from MSDE did feel that the Bridge Projects were an effective way for students to master Core Learning Goals. He explained,

Bridge has been extremely critical and important and provides one last source of instruction and support to students before they earn their diploma. Because most of the kids are able to meet that requirement, that is saying something significant about Bridge. In the first year I interviewed many students who said, 'I can't sit for three hours and concentrate on a test so if I can work at my own pace I can show what I know better. If I'm able to chunk things into small pieces it is easier for me. Also when I don't understand things I can get clarity from a teacher and that assistance keeps me going on the right track.' Based on those reports from students, we know Bridge has helped students master material that they wouldn't be able to otherwise. Those reports are probably the most important feedback we can get, even more so than the data. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

### **The Bridge Plan and Post Secondary Education**

Although the Bridge Plan may give students additional time to master material, it may do little to improve the test taking skills students need to be successful in post-secondary education. When asked if he felt that students who completed Projects were as prepared for post secondary education as students who passed the HSA, teacher Rick Nolt said,

I don't think our students are prepared for further education because they are below grade level in reading. And obviously the students who are most behind are the students that need Bridge. There is no way they can be successful in college because they can't read the material. Often times they have already given up on further education. They just want to graduate and move on to the next step which probably doesn't include higher education. Some of them may go to trade school. Of the students that have Bridge, there are a small number of students that are being punished for past transgressions and those students may go on to higher education. For example, a student may have missed a lot of content due to absence and didn't pass the test, then the Bridge projects are helpful for that type of student. Bridge doesn't prepare students for further education. It is essentially rote memorization. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

Another teacher Karl Griswold also agreed that Bridge students do not seem very well prepared to go on the higher education. He explained, “I don’t think it actually helps them master the material. Even if you have a child do Bridge projects and then they still can’t achieve on standardized tests so they can’t go to college. They eventually are going to have to learn how to show what they know on tests or they won’t be very successful in higher education” (Personal Communication, May 4, 2011). Teacher Aaron Hedgecock did not think Bridge students were adequately prepared for higher education either. He reported, “The kids that complete Bridge are not the kids the schools are looking at. Regardless of that though I didn’t see much in the Bridge Project to believe that it was preparing them for much of anything” (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011).

Another Central High School teacher disagreed that Bridge did not prepare students for higher education. Laura Arnold explained,

Yes I do think they are as adequately prepared because they have those application skills. Some kids just guess on tests but in Bridge you have to know what to do. Even though they do have a teacher looking over them and helping them every step of the way they have to work. The teacher might even tell the student exactly what to do but eventually the decisions would come from them and they learn what they need to go on to higher education. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Principal, James Harrington, however, did not agree that Bridge students were as prepared for higher education as students that were able to pass the HSA. He said, “The question pre-supposes that the HSAs are a measure of preparation for college. However, in my experience a lot of the kids that pass the HSAs are hard working, and motivated. On the other hand, the students that complete Bridge projects don’t have those same skills to succeed in college” (Personal Communication, May 7, 2011). Andrea Ricker, an administrative official from New Town Schools was also skeptical that Bridge students

were being prepared for higher education. She explained, “I would like to say yes, if the Bridge Projects are what teachers are teaching then they are preparing students for college. But unfortunately the way it has become is that teachers do a surface teaching because students have so many projects. There is just not enough time to really teach each project when a student has ten or eleven projects and prepare them for life after high school” (Personal Communication, July 27, 2011). Stewart Peters from MSDE also had mixed thoughts on the level of preparedness of Bridge students for higher education.

During my interview with him, he shared,

When we went around to visit schools we asked project monitors and we asked those working with students if they think students deserve a diploma after working on projects, if they think students deserve a diploma based on all the hours that students put in and everyone that was asked said most definitely. But honestly, at the same time, there is always the expectation that we want students to pass the test. It would be great if we didn’t need an alternative. I think Bridge students certainly meet a baseline but are they as prepared for higher education, that would be up for debate. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

Scott Ford, a member of the Task Force had a somewhat less conflicted opinion about the Bridge Plan and higher education. He explained,

It seems obvious that the target population of the Bridge Projects are not as prepared as other students that can pass the HSA. The knowledge and skills and processes required on Bridge to the knowledge and skills and processes used to pass the HSAs are very different. They are related but very different so of course Bridge students aren’t as prepared for further education. (Personal Communication, August 28, 2011)

### **The Bridge Plan and Other Alternative Assessments**

As the deadline for all students to meet state testing requirements in 2014 draws near, other states in addition to Maryland have created alternative ways for their students to meet testing requirements. Massachusetts, Alaska, Oklahoma, Nevada and Oregon all provide a portfolio or “collection of evidence” option to students who have difficulty

passing state assessments. In addition, Connecticut, Hawaii, and South Dakota use a student portfolio in place of an exit exam (Center for Education Policy, 2010).

The Maryland State Department of Education (2008) reported that, Maryland is not alone in providing alternate routes to a high school diploma. In 2007, twenty-two states had exit exam requirements for senior classes in order to receive a diploma. In 16 of those states, students had access to one or more alternate routes to a standard diploma. (p. 1)

Just as Maryland looked at models from a multitude of states' plans before developing the Bridge Plan, many states are now turning towards Maryland's model as they develop their own alternative assessment. Recently, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania adopted a program that they say mirrors The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation in Maryland. In his January 12, 2010 article, *As School Exit Tests Prove Tough, States Ease Standards*, Ian Urbina from The New York Times reported that,

The rules in Pennsylvania require students to pass at least four courses, with the end-of-course exams counting for a third of the course grade. If a student fails an exam or a section of an exam, they will have two chances to retake it. If they cannot pass after that, they have the option of doing a subject-specific project that is approved by district officials. (p. 2)

Even though it seems that students and teachers are just becoming comfortable with the Bridge Plan, Maryland and many other states will soon have new assessments to contend with. Representative from several states are currently working on assessments that will be used in conjunction with the newly adopted Common Core Curriculum.

### **The Teacher Perspective on the Effectiveness of The Bridge Plan**

Although there are many factors to consider when evaluating the merit of The Bridge Plan, I asked students and teachers whether or not they felt that the Bridge Plan was a worthwhile policy overall. Teacher Laura Arnold felt that Bridge was positive for many students and shared that,

From a teachers perspective I think Bridge is wonderful. It helps the kids that weren't successful meet the state requirements and they are able to make personal connections with teachers and it's a wonderful experience for them. The purpose of the Bridge program is as the name states, a Bridge. The students were not successful on the test for any number of reasons like attendance or lack of knowing testing strategies so this is way for students to demonstrate success. In my opinion students have a better understanding of the content because especially in the government projects they had to understand the content and apply it. Rather than just guessing on a test they had to actually learn to apply the content. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Another Central High School teacher, Samantha Harlow, agreed that Bridge was beneficial to students. She said, "Even though the Bridge Projects lower the standards somewhat they do help some students get through that otherwise wouldn't have a chance" (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011). Audrey Morris, however, had mixed feelings on the Bridge Plan. She explained, "I think it also helps them intrinsically because now they are given more skills that they need to pass the test. Kids that have test anxiety will obviously also have an easier time with Bridge. In some ways though it does handicap them having this option. Life is hard and eventually they are going to have to know how to take a test (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011).

Teacher Aaron Hedgecock was more critical than his colleagues about the Bridge Plan. He said,

It seems like the Bridge Program was kind of set up to be a get out of jail free card for students who were lazy but it wasn't set up to rehabilitate students with deficiency. We learned early on that it was all about how many projects we turned in and so for me it was easy because this was earning the student a piece of paper, that they would get nowhere else. I figured at least in New Town, because they weren't going anywhere else at least they could get hired at McDonalds. (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011)

## **The Student Perspective on the Effectiveness of The Bridge Plan**

Although teachers seemed to be divided on the merits of The Bridge Plan, students I interviewed reported more positive feelings regarding the policy. A 2010 graduate, Tonya Davenport shared,

I learned a lot more doing the projects because there was enough time to break it down to where I really understood it. I think the projects were more effort than the regular class. You think it is easy at first but then as you go along it gets harder and pushes you more I felt more confident doing this because I had help this time and I knew I would pass. The teachers were always asking you if you need help or if you were getting them done. I liked Bridge. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

When asked if he thought Bridge was a good policy to have in place, 2011 Central High School graduate Jason Davis said, “Yeah because it helps you learn more and lets you graduate. It helped me a lot because I wouldn’t have passed without Bridge” (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011). Another 2011 graduate Tobias Moore was also grateful to Bridge for the opportunity it provided him to be able to graduate. He explained, “I think I should not have taken school for granted and I should have paid attention more. I think I should have not played around so much and learned more from school so I’m glad I had the projects to help me graduate” (Personal Communication, April 9, 2011). Stephanie George, a 2009 Central graduate also had positive feelings about The Bridge Plan. She said, “I think I learned a lot and that the Bridge Program should go for all students. I learned more with the Bridge Projects because it explained more and I had to pay attention more than with the class” (Personal Communication, July 8, 2011). Finally, 2010 graduate Naomi Harris reported that,

I think they should still keep the Bridge Projects around. That could teach them students a lesson. If you want to run halls and not learn anything for the HSAs then you are still going to have to do the work. I think it is a discipline. It can



break you down and make you cry but then you can still learn things you didn't know. (Personal Communication, July 13, 2011)

Although it seems clear that most students were grateful to The Bridge Plan for allowing them the opportunity to graduate, teachers had more varied opinions on the subject. While some teachers did see Bridge as a valuable instructional tool, many teachers felt that Bridge did little to prepare students for what they would face in post-secondary education.

## **CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

Throughout my research I used several frameworks in order to better understand the development, the implementation and the impact of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. Malen and Knapp (1997) asked the question, “how might policy analysts and actors ‘make sense’ of the policy puzzles and get at the connections between policy and practice?” (p. 421). Their answer involved “the use of alternative models to examine and interpret policy events, to create a conceptual map that could guide the examination and interpretation of education policy developments” (p. 420). With this in mind I chose the political and symbolic frameworks to use in conjunction with Critical Race Theory, Cultural Capital Theory and Social Capital Theory in order to help me better understand the Bridge Plan.

### **The Development of the Bridge Plan and the Political Framework**

The political framework asserts that policy is developed in order to ensure the institutional legitimacy or the survival of the agency responsible for creating the policy. While looking at the development of the Bridge Plan my aim was to better understand to what extent the political framework fit with the development of the policy. When describing the political framework, Malen and Knapp (1997) explain,

Rather than closing in on data-driven solutions to pre-specified problems or habit-driven responses to organizational disturbances, political lenses zoom in on the interest-driven, power-based interactions that occur as actors holding diverse views of problems and priorities compete as well as cooperate to influence decision outcomes through bargains, negotiations, compromises and other accommodations. (p. 428)

Although certainly more prevalent in teacher interviews than it was in interviews of administrative officials, many interviewees cited political motivations as a reason they believed led to the creation of the Bridge Plan. For example, Teacher Aaron Hedgecock said, “In my opinion the purpose of the Bridge Plan is to increase numbers of graduated students” Personal Communication, April 15, 2011).

As part of the requirements for Annual Yearly Progress, high schools must report their yearly graduation rate. Swanson (2003) reported that, “While student achievement must be the primary indicator of performance under NCLB, statewide accountability systems are also required to incorporate one additional academic indicator. At the secondary level, this must be the high school graduation rate (HSGR)” (p. 1). Although NCLB does not give specific requirements for a minimum graduation rate, “the regulations require that states set a long-term goal for graduation rates and annual growth targets that demonstrate ‘continuous and substantial improvement’ from the prior year toward meeting the long-term goal. For a school or district to make AYP, it must meet the states’ goals for proficiency on state tests and graduation rates” ([http://www.all4ed.org/files/Maryland\\_grp.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/Maryland_grp.pdf)). Clearly, graduation rate is an important indicator for secondary schools.

As the 2008- 2009 deadline for High School Assessment requirements to go into effect approached, MSDE officials knew that the graduation rate would drop drastically if they did not put an alternative in place. At the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year there were still thousands of students that had not met HSA requirements rendering them ineligible to graduate. It was at that point that Maryland decided to offer students an alternative way to meet the testing requirements and be eligible to graduate.

Even though the High School Assessments had been in place in the State of Maryland for over five years, it was not until the year that those HSAs would begin to affect the graduation rate arrived, that the State offered an alternative “in order to better serve special needs students.” It seems that if serving this group of students was the State’s primary motivation, then an alternative would have been offered years before. However, it seems the state was not motivated to create an alternative for students until it was clear that they would be negatively affected under federal No Child Left Behind requirements. This seems to support the political perspective in that Maryland did not create The Bridge Plan policy until it had political motivation to do so.

In addition to policy developing from a need to “maintain institutional legitimacy,” Malen and Knapp (1997) describe the process of policy development as seen through the political perspective. They said,

Political perspectives suggest that policy develops through stages or phases: interests are articulated and issues are generated; alternatives are formulated, often aggregated; choices are enacted; and choices are implemented, albeit with varying degrees of fidelity. Policy may or may not be evaluated in the strict rational sense, but responses to it generate feedback that precipitates new or renewed demands for attention or restitution. (p. 428)

The development of policy through “stages or phases” as Malen and Knapp describe also seems to fit well with the process used for the development of the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation. The meetings of The Task Force on Comparable Testing Methods for the Maryland High School Assessments seem to go through many different stages including information gathering, information evaluation, and then finally the development of recommendations.

Further, the idea that policy is developed through a process that is not necessarily rational but rather is a response to the feedback generated by it, also seems to fit well

with what we know about the development of Bridge. Even though both Task Forces recommended that the State use a portfolio option which would require a “collection of evidence,” the state decided to create standardized projects after hearing concerns that the collection of evidence would be too time consuming. The recommendations made by the Task Forces came after multiple years of research into alternative assessments and deliberation as to what would best serve the needs of all of Maryland’s students. Changes to the recommendations, however, seemed to come very quickly and seemed to be based on little, if any additional research.

### **Participation in the Bridge Plan and Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory asserts that race continues to be a significant factor in inequity in the United States. This theory has clear implications for education and in particular the educational achievement of African American students. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) assert

While some might argue that poor children, regardless of race, do worse in school, and that the high proportion of African-American poor contributes to their dismal school performance, we argue that the cause of their poverty in conjunction with the condition of the schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism. (p. 55)

Keeping these ideas in mind, I tried to understand to what extent the students involved in my study performed worse in school because of inequalities in the education they received as a result of their race. Although it is difficult to say for certain that more African American students participated in Bridge because they did not receive the same education as white students, there are several things we do know for sure. First, New Town Public Schools are comprised of a majority African American population. Second, only two other school districts in the state of Maryland have a majority African American

population. New Town School's African American population however, is nearly 20% higher than any other district. Third, students in New Town Public Schools perform, on average, consistently worse than students in other school systems on standardized tests.

The institutional racism that plagues so many aspects of American society, including education, has displayed itself through much of the data available about education in New Town. These differences are apparent not only in standardized test scores, but in the graduation rate as well. In 2009, the graduation rate overall for the state of Maryland was 85.24% (Maryland Report Card, 2009). The graduation rate across New Town Public Schools however was only 41.5% (Swanson, 2009). Differences are also noted in the dropout rate of students across the State compared to that of students in New Town Public Schools. The 2010 Maryland Report Card shows that overall, the state of Maryland had a 2.8% dropout rate. The statistic for White students was 2.16% while African American students dropped out at a rate of 3.62%. In New Town, the overall dropout rate is reported as 6.2% with 4.92% for White students and 6.39% for African American students.

The reasons for the decrease in standardized test scores and graduation rate, and increase in the dropout rate are not so simple. A variety of factors, from budgetary differences to differences in teacher quality contribute the lower test scores and graduation rate. Students in New Town Public Schools are more likely to be taught by teachers who are not highly qualified. According to the 2010 Maryland Report Card, only 8.3% of classes across the state of Maryland are taught by teachers who are not highly qualified. In New Town the figure jumps to 30.5%. New Town Public Schools has also suffered from widespread corruption leading to less resources available to its

students. The discrepancies in test scores, graduation rate, teacher quality, and school funding seems to support the fact that students in New Town Public Schools, who are predominately African American, are not being educated to the same standard as students in other districts.

The connection between Critical Race Theory and The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation is further supported by the fact that the two districts in the State of Maryland that have the highest African American populations have the highest amount of projects. This is demonstrated by the table below.

Table 9.1: Comparison of Percentage of African American Students and Percentage Of Students Needing Bridge Projects in 2009

<b>School District</b>	<b>Percentage of African American Students</b>	<b>Percentage of Students that met HSA requirements</b>
New Town	86.6%	65%
District 1	4.1%	85.6%
District 2	20.7%	91.8%
District 3	38.7%	84.6%
District 4	14.6%	94.3%
District 5	16.4%	87.4%
District 6	3.5%	95.2%
District 7	8.5%	90%
District 8	51.5%	88.7%
District 9	36.5%	87.8%
District 10	10.6%	93.7%
District 11	.4%	88%
District 12	18%	92.9%
District 13	20.4%	92.9%
District 14	22.3%	75.7%
District 15	21.3%	81.8%
District 16	68.9%	65%
District 17	19.5%	89.7%
District 18	41.3%	87.4%
District 19	17.9%	81.4%
District 20	11.6%	92.7%

District 21	34.7%	75.4%
District 22	20.7%	88.6%

This table demonstrates that New Town and District 16 required the most projects with only 65 % of their students meeting HSA requirements. It also shows that both of those districts have the highest population of African American students. These findings support the tenets of Critical Race Theory and offer evidence that African American students are not receiving an education equal to that of students from other races and are therefore less likely to meet Maryland State standardized testing requirements.

### **Participation in the Bridge Plan and Social Capital Theory**

Although social capital theory can be summarized in a myriad of ways, Portes (1998) reported, “the consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (p. 6). This has been related to many fields within the social sciences and education is no exception. Although there seems to be an unlimited amount of resources that can be considered social capital, I focused on just a few for the purposes of my research. Through the interview process, I attempted to see to what extent social capital or a lack of social capital was a factor for students who participated in Bridge. The factors I focused on were home life (a stable living arrangement), parental expectations, parental education attainment, academic support at home, and community support.

In summarizing the varied beliefs regarding the influence of social capital on education Portes (1998) explained, “greater amounts of social capital—presence of two parents in the home, lower number of siblings, higher parental educational expectation,



and intergenerational closure—lead to lower incidence of dropping out of school” (p. 34). Because Portes argues that social capital can have a direct affect on graduation rate, it is not a stretch to argue that social capital can affect student’s performance on standardized tests as well.

One of the goals of my research was to see if the students who participated in Bridge also lacked many of the elements of social capital that many social scientists argue are necessary for success in school. One of the first elements of social capital that I considered was the stability of students’ home life. In speaking with students, the majority of the students I interviewed had moved between family members or were part of the Department of Social Services living in a group home or foster care situation. One student explained, “During school I was also living with my grandmother and my cousins and that was too many people so I was going crazy” (Naomi Harris, Personal Communication, July 13, 2011). In addition to the student interviews I conducted, the teacher interviews also supported the notion that many students who participated in the Bridge Plan from Central High School came from homes that were not stable.

The second aspect of social capital that I considered was parental expectations. This, however, was not so clear cut as the stability of students’ home life. The vast majority of the students I interviewed (eight out of nine) reported knowing that their parents expected them to succeed in school and being pushed to do well in school. However, it is often said that parents should lead by example, and although many of the students were encouraged to work hard in school, very few parents were able to complete college or even high school themselves. Eight out of nine students interviewed said that their parents had either not finished high school or had not gone on to further education.

As a result, the vast majority of students had parents who had a high school education or less. It is no surprise then that these students had access to less academic support at home. As a result, many students reported being unable to get homework help from anyone at their house. One student, Jason Davis, said, “I live with my Mom, well she is really my step-mom and dad and two younger brothers. My parents came here from El Salvador and then never finished high school or college” (Personal Communication, July 14, 2011).

The final element of social capital theory that I considered was community support. None of the students I interviewed reported utilizing any type of academic support from their surrounding community. Further, many students cited elements of their surrounding communities such as crime, drugs and violence as obstacles to their success in school. Tobias Moore, a 2011 graduate said, “I saw my mom smoking weed and selling drugs so I did the same thing. I feel like I am getting dumber because I smoked so much weed. I might try and stop but it is all around me, that is all I know. Everyone I live with does it” (Personal Communication, April 9, 2011).

Lack of a stable family structure, academic support at home, as well as lack of support from the surrounding community seemed prevalent among the students that I interviewed. It seems that these factors contributed to students’ difficulty in the classroom and therefore made them more likely to participate in Bridge, supporting the principles of Social Capital Theory.

### **Participation in the Bridge Plan and Cultural Capital Theory**

Cultural capital theory explores the impact of a person’s cultural capital which can include their class structure, access to enriching experiences, as well as their social

network. Much like social capital carries with it certain benefits for children in school, cultural capital can also lead to a variety of advantages for students who have access to it.

Kingston (2009) explains the relationship between cultural capital and education saying,

The socially privileged receive better grades in school, perform better on standardized tests, and earn higher degrees. And because education is the predominant pathway to economic success, it is hard to overestimate the significance of the connection between social privilege and academic success. (p. 88)

Cultural capital however, was not as easy to pinpoint throughout the interview process as social capital. Because most of the students I interviewed have not been exposed to some of the culturally enriching experiences that many of their wealthier counterparts have, they are often times not aware that those experiences even exist. It is also evident by their qualification for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, that they are not privy to the benefits that go along with being part of a higher economic class. All of the students I interviewed come from families that are forced to be more preoccupied with finding a way to pay for housing and food than they are with providing enriching experiences to their children. Throughout the interview process many teachers reported students who were distracted by things such as hunger or a safe living environment. One Central High School teacher, Laura Arnold, reported that,

We have kids that don't have the luxury to just relax and explore things and they don't have a home environment that exposes them to different ideas. If you would talk to kids about New Town, they've never been outside of New Town. There is so much to see that is only an hour a way that our kids don't know about. A lot of our kids have parents that are trying to take care of their kids the best they know how working two or three jobs. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Because Central High School students are in a position where they must frequently focus on the necessities of survival, it is unlikely that they are privy to the type of cultural capital that will help them succeed on Maryland's standardized tests. Another Central

High School teacher, Aaron Hedgecock, agreed saying, “I think the things they see in their community have a huge influence on them. Especially when very few of them get out to see the county much less another state. When you are exposed to so little you have less prior knowledge to pull from” (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011).

That is not to say that Central High School students are not exposed to any type of cultural capital. On the contrary, many students are involved with groups such as religious organizations, performance arts groups or other community groups that offer a variety of culturally enriching experiences. However, because standardized tests are often written with the experiences of middle-class white students in mind, the type of cultural capital Central High School students are exposed to, is often times not beneficial to them in the realm of standardized testing.

### **The Effectiveness of the Bridge Plan and the Symbolic Framework**

According to Malen and Knapp (1997), “Policy viewed from symbolic perspectives is intended to shape conceptions of institutions, the problems they face, and the work they carry out” (p. 430). Malen and Knapp further explain that, “Thus the efficacy of policy resides in its capacity to shape *perceptions* of social conditions, events and institutions irrespective of its capacity to alter actual social circumstances” (p. 431).

Therefore, the symbolic framework asks the question, to what extent is The Bridge Plan serving the needs of students or to what extent is it only appearing to serve the needs of students. Or, is the Bridge Plan effective or does it only appear to be effective. It is perhaps the most difficult of the frameworks to analyze as there are many ambiguities to consider before the symbolic framework can be reconciled with the effectiveness of the Bridge Plan. For example, if we want to compare the preparation of

students who completed Bridge Projects versus the preparation of students who passed the High School Assessments, we must first decide what appropriate preparation looks like and for what exactly they are being prepared.

However, nearly all of the Bridge students I interviewed reported they felt that they learned as much, if not more, as students that were able to pass the High School Assessments. Further, many students felt that they gained a deeper understanding of the material covered by the Core Learning Goals by completing Bridge Projects than they did by simply taking the High School Assessments. One issue, however, that was consistently raised by teachers I interviewed was that of preparation for higher education. Many teachers argued that because students will frequently have to be able to demonstrate what they know on exams if they go on to higher education, the Bridge Plan is not an effective means of preparation. Most often, college courses do not provide students with an alternate assessment if they are unable to pass an exam. Therefore, some teachers argued, students should be taught how to do well on exams. Central High School teacher Karl Griswold explained, “Even if you have a child do Bridge projects and then they still can’t achieve on standardized tests they can’t go to college. They eventually are going to have to learn how to show what they know on tests or they won’t be very successful in higher education” (Personal Communication, May 4, 2011).

Other teachers also voiced concerns that the Bridge Plan did little to change students’ reading level or content deficiencies. Central High School teacher Rick Nolt said,

I don’t think our students are prepared for further education because they are below grade level in reading. And obviously the students who are most behind are the students that need Bridge. There is no way they can be successful in

college because they can't read the material. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011)

In addition to doing little to improve students' reading level, teacher Laura Arnold felt that Bridge Projects do little to help students master all the material they need to know for the High School Assessment. She stated,

I don't think projects do help students master Core Learning Goals because the projects don't cover the scope of all indicators. You are asked to do a specific task in the Bridge Projects but when they have to take the test they have to know all of the indicators. If a student only has to do one project per subject area then they are only going to know information in one area. (Personal Communication, August 4, 2011)

Further support for the Bridge Plan as inadequate in actually improving instruction for students is offered by the amount of time students have to complete projects. When speaking about the effectiveness of the Bridge Plan, teacher Aaron Hedgecock said, "it has nothing to do with re-teaching anything. It couldn't have, there wasn't enough time to teach them everything. A two week long project can't make up for an education" (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011).

However, despite the evidence showing the Bridge Plan as a merely symbolic policy, two teachers and all of the administrative officials I interviewed had more positive feelings regarding the effectiveness of The Bridge Plan. They argued that all students will not go on to higher education and therefore Bridge is an effective way to provide students with the additional instruction they need before leaving high school. Although some administrative officials did admit that it was not ideal, they felt The Bridge Plan was an important step in the right direction for Maryland students.

It is difficult to conclude whether or not The Bridge Plan fits with the symbolic perspective. Because The Bridge Plan afforded students the chance to graduate that they

so desperately wanted, they were quicker to cite the benefits of the policy.

Administrative officials also seem support Bridge as an effective policy. Teachers, however, who are those that work most closely with students and The Bridge Plan, are not so quick to sing the policy's praises.

### **The Common Core and the Future of the Bridge Plan**

In 2010, The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) in conjunction with parents, teachers, school administrators and education experts from around the nation have worked to develop a Common Core of State Standards. The Common Core website explains that, "The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort to establish a single set of clear educational standards for English-language arts and mathematics that states can share and voluntarily adopt." They also explain that they used the following criteria to develop the Common Core Standards:

- Aligned with expectations for college and career success
- Clear, so that educators and parents know what they need to do to help students learn
- Consistent across all states, so that students are not taught to a lower standard just because of where they live
- Include both content and the application of knowledge through higher-order skills
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards and standards of top-performing nations
- Realistic, for effective use in the classroom
- Informed by other top performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society
- Evidence and research-based

Only six states have yet to adopt the Common Core standards. Maryland was one of the first states to adopt the Common Core. MSDE reported that,

In June, 2010, the State Board adopted the standards by unanimous vote. Maryland has launched a broad-based, year-long process to revise its curriculum

to align with the new standards. Hundreds of classroom educators, instructional leaders, administrators, and higher education representatives will help State officials develop the new Maryland Common Core State Curriculum. The curriculum Framework, the foundation of the new curriculum, will be presented to the State Board in June 2011, and the completed curriculum will be implemented in Maryland schools in the 2013-2014 school year.

Along with a new set of standards will come a new batch of assessments. Bob Smith from MSDE offered his insight on what impact the Common Core will have on state assessments. He explained,

As we move to Common Core there are associated tests being developed and there are different tests being developed. These tests will most likely consist of a pretest and several post tests. We will then have to see if MSDE will accept these new tests as a substitute for the HSA. That has not been decided yet. The timeframe for that is by 2013 we will be testing prototypes that will not count but will only be field tests. We also know that the new tests will most likely be externally produced and externally scored. There is a consortium of states that are working together on the new assessments. There are two considerations that the State of Maryland will have to look at: Will the new tests be a graduation requirement? And will all students be required to pass the tests? We know that the rigor on the new tests will be greater. That's a topic that will need to be discussed and we will have to look at a dual diploma again. The state board changes all the time so I don't know what will happen. Even though the state board voted down a dual diploma system previously there are new members now so we don't know what will happen. Then do we provide alternative? (Personal Communication, August 3, 2011)

Although nothing formal has been released by the State, many people anticipate that this will be the last year for the HSAs and Bridge Projects, and as Mr. Smith indicated, the replacement assessments are likely to be even more challenging than the current High School Assessments. Central High School teacher Aaron Hedgecock said, "I didn't see very much of a future in Bridge because it's not right that so many students are getting by without really learning anything" (Personal Communication, April 15, 2011). Another teacher, Samantha Harlow shared, "People are afraid that Bridge is going away because of Common Core. We put all this time into making Bridge work and now



we are going to have to figure out how to do something new all over again” (Personal Communication, April 28, 2011).

With so many questions still unanswered, students and teachers across the State of Maryland are anxious to see what the new Common Core assessments will mean for them. However, with the promise of higher standards and increased rigor from the Common Core assessments, it seems likely that no sooner will the new assessments be developed, than policymakers will have to start thinking about yet another alternative for students who are unable to pass the test.

### **Policy Recommendations**

This research suggests that the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation is a by-product of the inequalities that continue to exist in public education that can be seen by disaggregating data by race, social capital, cultural capital and economic resources. There are several things that I feel can improve the quality of education for all students and work to further close the achievement gap.

#### **Suggestion 1: Reallocate resources in New Town Public High Schools.**

Because New Town Public Schools structures its high schools into a tiered system, there are schools that serve students who score higher on standardized tests and schools that serve students who are typically behind grade level and have a more difficult time succeeding on standardized tests. The most selective high schools in New Town typically have no more than one to five projects total for all of its students in the senior class. In addition to these top tier high schools, there are less selective schools that typically require fifty to one hundred projects for the entire senior class. This trend continues until you reach the least selective schools that do not have admission

requirements. These bottom tier schools have a significantly higher percentage of students who are behind one or more grade levels in reading or math and therefore these schools typically have a senior class that has to complete anywhere from two hundred to six hundred projects. In addition, students in bottom tier schools are more likely to be involved in the Department of Social Services and are more likely to have been involved in the Juvenile Department of Criminal Justice. As a result, these students often times require far more resources than a typical student would in order to meet their daily needs and prepare them to succeed on standardized tests.

Although New Town Public Schools has purposely created the tier system, which, by default results in lower tier schools, these lower tier schools are not provided additional resources to service the most challenging students in the system. I believe that if New Town Public Schools is deliberately creating schools to work with a high concentration of needy students, then they should provide those schools with the necessary resources. Bridge Programs require a significant increase in staff and resources but neither New Town Public Schools nor the State of Maryland has ever recognized that need or done anything to support it. As a result, schools with the greatest number of projects, such as Central High School, have had to shift resources from areas such as providing remediation or test preparation for its students in order to fund the Bridge Program. I believe it is necessary for New Town Public Schools as well as the State of Maryland to provide additional resources and support to the schools that serve the neediest students.

**Suggestion 2: Improve teacher quality and the work environment in the schools that serve the most challenging students.**

Because schools like Central High School serve students with the greatest needs, there are often times more responsibilities that go along with working there. For example, teachers at Central High School who are particularly invested in their students and want their students to have a chance at passing standardized tests will often times hold after-school review classes as well as Saturday sessions. In addition to an increase in responsibility, there are often times more fights and more discipline issues and less resources allocated to things like textbooks and instructional resources. As a result of these less than desirable work conditions, most of the more experienced teachers will go on to work at one of the middle or upper tier high schools leaving bottom tier high schools like Central, new, inexperienced teachers or those teachers who have been asked to not come back to another high school. In New Town Public Schools it is extremely difficult to fire a teacher from the system. I have seen everything from teachers being verbally and physically abusive to students to teachers who simply won't teach that are not fired. In most instances, those teachers will be "surplused" from a school or cut from the budget and moved to a different school.

Having less experienced and less effective teachers perpetuates the problem of Central High School students being behind their peers one or more grade levels and making them even less likely to succeed on standardized tests. I believe it is necessary to try to recruit experienced, highly effective teachers into schools with the greatest need by offering them incentives to work there. In addition to better pay for working in more challenging schools, I think it is important to hold teachers accountable for their students' success.

Often times, teachers are not motivated to go the extra mile to help their students succeed academically because there are no consequences for failing to do so or rewards for success in the classroom. Because I work at Central High School I am able to see the percentage of students that pass each standardized test from each teacher. There are often times huge differences between teachers' scores. For example, on the English High School Assessment, one teacher may have 40% of their students pass the test while another teacher has only 15% of their students who pass. These test scores affect neither the pay nor the written evaluation that teachers receive. If we want teachers to work hard to ensure students' success we have to provide them with the resources to do so, as well as hold them accountable for their students' performance.

**Suggestion 3: Monitoring of the Bridge Program by the State at the school level.**

Currently, there is little to no monitoring of the implementation of the Bridge Plan at individual schools by the State. When asked about the monitoring of the Bridge Plan, Stewart Peters, an MSDE official said,

There hasn't been any formalized evaluation. Because the goal of creating Bridge was for all students to meet graduation requirements, we were mainly concerned that goal was being met. Because we have very few students that aren't meeting requirements we know that Bridge is successful for that reason alone. (Personal Communication, July 19, 2011)

I believe that if the State was more closely monitoring the implementation of the Bridge Plan they would gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by many of the schools that require such a large amount of projects. Although the original intent of the Bridge Plan was to assist special needs students in meeting state testing requirements, it has become a way for students who have not received the education they deserve to be

pushed through graduation requirements. One of the first things necessary for this to ever change is for the State to better understand what a drastic issue it is for students particularly in New Town Public Schools.

### **Recommendations for Further Studies**

The first students to participate in the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation graduated in 2009. For the students who went on to a four-year college or university, they are currently in their third year of undergraduate studies. It would be beneficial to see the percentage of students who passed the High School Assessments and went on to a four-year college or university compared with the percentage of students who met the testing requirements through Bridge and went on to a four-year college or university. Although all students are not interested in going on to college, I believe that every student should receive the preparation necessary to succeed in higher education should they choose to do so. Many of the teachers and administrators I interviewed felt that students who completed Bridge projects would not be as adequately prepared for higher education as those students who were able to pass the High School Assessments. As a result, I would like to see if participation in the Bridge Plan is correlated to success in higher education.

It seems that the High School Assessments and their alternative, The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation will soon be replaced with the Common Core Assessments. Therefore, it will be interesting to see how schools that are already struggling to help their students pass the High School Assessments will manage with the new, more difficult, Common Core Assessments. The increased rigor of the Common Core will ensure that an alternative assessment will most likely be necessary if the schools in the

state of Maryland hope to maintain their current graduation rate. Whether this alternative will be consistent across all states that have adopted the Common Core is still yet to be determined.

## **Conclusion**

Being confronted daily with the reality of inequality in public education motivated me to dig deeper into some of the structures policy makers have put in place for students across the State. It seems clear that African American students across the country and particularly in New Town, Maryland continue to achieve at lower levels on standardized tests. With so many factors contributing to the difference in achievement, the answer to this issue is not a simple one. Although the Maryland State Department of Education and New Town Public Schools do have control over things such as budget and testing policy, things like social and cultural capital cannot be regulated by educational agencies. Seemingly, education can be influenced by an infinite amount of variables. Everything from family structure and surrounding environment to access to culturally enriching experiences as well as the quality of instruction can impact how a student performs in the classroom. I chose to examine just a few of the factors that can help determine whether or not a student is successful on standardized tests or may have to participate in an alternative assessment.

Although some may view social capital theory and cultural capital theory as “deficit theories” that focus on students’ and families’ deficiencies and blame them for any negative outcomes in their lives, others will argue that the cultural and social capital that many of the students at Central High School possess is extremely valuable in its own right and simply needs to be more widely recognized, accommodated and supported in

public schooling. Even though Central students' cultural experiences may not be similar to those of students in a predominately white, middle-class school, they are equally as valuable and should be drawn upon as part of the educational process. The same can be said of social capital as well. Although some may view a "non-traditional" living situation which could include living with an aunt, cousin, or grandfather as unstable, it could also be seen an asset to have such a supportive extended family.

The question of whether or not Bridge works to perpetuate that inequality or to close the achievement gap is not a simple one. I have discovered that students, teachers, and administrative officials have a myriad of opinions regarding the merits of the Bridge Plan. For students in one school, in one East Coast city, The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation was what many students depended on to graduate. Whether or not the policy helped to further prepare them for life after graduation, however, is still up for debate. No sooner do we start to closely examine this policy than we are already preparing to usher in a whole new set of testing requirements. Just as styles come and go in the world of fashion, what's "vogue" in education seems to change nearly as often. Unfortunately, decisions made in education are not so insignificant as buying a new pair of jeans, the lives and well being of children are at stake.

## Appendix

### Appendix A: Student Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself? What grade are you in? or When did you graduate?
2. What requirements did you have to complete in order to graduate?
3. How did you fulfill the HSA requirement?
4. If you had to complete projects, how many did you have and in what subject area?
5. If you completed projects, what kind of assistance were you given in completing them?
6. What do you feel you gained as a result of completing projects?
7. Do you think students who completed projects learned the same as students who passed the HSAs?
8. Do you think Bridge is a good thing for students?
9. What do you think is the purpose of the Bridge Plan?
10. How are Bridge projects scored?
11. Why do you think so many students at Central High School have not passed the HSAs?
12. How do Bridge classes compare to the other classes you have taken?
13. What race do you identify yourself as?
14. Who do you live with at home?
15. Did your parents finish high school and or college?
16. Does your family encourage you to come to school? Do they expect you to go to college?
17. Do you get help on school assignments from anyone at home? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?



## Appendix B: Teacher Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, how long have you worked here? What have you taught?
2. What role, if any do you have in working with the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation?
3. In your opinion, how does teaching Bridge compare to teaching other classes?
4. What do you understand to be the purpose of the Bridge Plan?
5. Why do you believe the Bridge Plan was developed as an alternative to Maryland State testing requirements?
6. What do you think the state's motivation was in creating the Bridge Plan? Can you provide any anecdotes to support your opinion?
7. Can you please explain what you have seen at the school level when students are working on Bridge projects? What does this process look like? Does this process support the academic success of all students? What measures need to be in place if more changes are needed?
8. Can you please explain what you have seen at the scoring of Bridge projects? What does this process look like? Does the process support the academic success of all students?
9. Is the scoring of Bridge projects consistent across time and content matter? Can you provide any anecdotes to support this?
10. How effective do you think the Bridge Plan has been in helping students master Core Learning Goals in each content area? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
11. Do you think Bridge students are as adequately prepared for further education as students who pass HSAs? If yes, how? If not, why not? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
12. How are Bridge students prepared for post-secondary education? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
13. How are students who pass the HSAs prepared for post-secondary education? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
14. Do you feel that the Bridge projects are as rigorous as the preparation students need to pass the HSAs?
15. Why do you think so many students at Central High School have not passed the HSAs?

16. For the students that did not pass the HSAs, do you think there are factors outside of their academic preparation that affected their performance on the HSAs? If so, what are they? Can you cite examples you have seen to support this?
17. Have you seen Bridge affect one group of students more than another? (for example- by race, SPED status, SES, etc.)
18. Do you think race is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.
19. Do you think a student's economic status is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.
20. Do you think a student's access to resources at home is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.
21. Do you think a student's access to support in their local community is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.
22. What are students' perceptions on the Bridge Plan?

## Appendix C: State or City Bridge Director Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, how long have you worked here? How did you become involved in the Bridge Program?
2. What is your role in working with the Bridge Plan for Academic Validation?
3. What do you understand to be the purpose of the Bridge Plan?
4. Why do you believe the Bridge Plan was developed as an alternative to Maryland State testing requirements?
5. What do you think the state's motivation was in creating the Bridge Plan? Can you provide any anecdotes to support this?
6. Can you please explain what you have seen at the school level when students are working on Bridge projects? What does this process look like? Does this process support the academic success of all students?
7. Can you please explain what you have seen at the scoring of Bridge projects? What does this process look like? Does the process support the academic success of all students?
8. Is the scoring of Bridge projects consistent across time and content matter? Can you provide any anecdotes to support this?
9. How effective do you think the Bridge Plan has been in helping students master Core Learning Goals in each content area? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
10. Do you think Bridge students are as adequately prepared for further education as students who pass HSAs? If yes, how? If not, why not? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
11. How are Bridge students prepared for post-secondary education? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
12. How are students who pass the HSAs prepared for post-secondary education? Can you provide any examples and anecdotes to support this?
13. Do you feel that the Bridge projects are as rigorous as the preparation students need to pass the HSAs?
14. For the students that did not pass the HSAs, do you think there are factors outside of their academic preparation that affected their performance on the HSAs? If so, what are they? Can you cite examples you have seen to support this?
15. Have you seen Bridge affect one group of students more than another? (for example- by race, SPED status, SES, etc.)

16. Do you think race is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.

17. Do you think a student's economic status is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.

18. Do you think a student's access to resources at home is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.

19. Do you think a student's access to support in their local community is a factor in students' eligibility for the Bridge Plan? If yes, in what ways? If not, please explain.

## Appendix D: IRB Determination Letter



### Initial Application Approval

DO NOT REPLY TO THIS EMAIL ADDRESS AS IT IS UNMONITORED

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To: Principal Investigator, Dr. Jing Lin, Education Leadership, Higher Education and International Education  
Student, Brein Bashore, Education Leadership, Higher Education and International Education

From: James M. Hagberg  
IRB Co-Chair  
University of Maryland College Park

Re: IRB Protocol: 11-0239 - The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation: A Case Study at Central High School

Approval Date: May 12, 2011

ExpirationDate: May 12, 2012

Application: Initial

Review Path: Expedited

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The University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office approved your Initial IRB Application. This transaction was approved in accordance with the University's IRB policies and procedures and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. Please reference the above-cited IRB Protocol number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

**Recruitment/Consent:** For research requiring written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped informed consent document will be sent via mail. The IRB approval expiration date has been stamped on the informed consent document. Please note that research participants must sign a stamped version of the informed consent form and receive a copy.

**Continuing Review:** If you intend to continue to collect data from human subjects or to analyze private, identifiable data collected from human subjects, beyond the expiration date of this protocol, you must submit a Renewal Application to the IRB Office 45 days prior to the expiration date. If IRB Approval of your protocol expires, all human subject research activities including enrollment of new subjects, data collection and analysis of identifiable, private information must cease until the Renewal Application is approved. If work on

the human subject portion of your project is complete and you wish to close the protocol, please submit a Closure Report to [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu).

**Modifications:** Any changes to the approved protocol must be approved by the IRB before the change is implemented, except when a change is necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the subjects. If you would like to modify an approved protocol, please submit an Addendum request to the IRB Office.

**Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks:** You must promptly report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others to the IRB Manager at 301-405-0678 or [jsmith@umresearch.umd.edu](mailto:jsmith@umresearch.umd.edu)

**Additional Information:** Please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 if you have any IRB-related questions or concerns. Email: [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu)

The UMCP IRB is organized and operated according to guidelines of the United States Office for Human Research Protections and the United States Code of Federal Regulations and operates under Federal Wide Assurance No. FWA00005856.

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