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School Culture and Student Achievement: An Examination of Two High-Achieving, High-Poverty Arkansas Schools

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SCHOOL CULTURE AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF
TWO HIGH-ACHIEVING, HIGH-POVERTY ARKANSAS SCHOOLS

A Dissertation Submitted
to the Graduate College
Arkansas Tech University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in School Leadership

in the Center for Leadership and Learning
of the College of Education

May 2018

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Title: School Culture and Student Achievement: An Examination of Two High-Achieving, High-Poverty Arkansas Schools

Program: School Leadership

Degree: Doctor of Education

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Dedication

This dissertation dedication is two-fold. First, I dedicate this dissertation study to my late father, Lawrence Ray Hasty. Thank you, dad, for telling me I could accomplish anything and everything, and making sure I believed it. Thank you for saying, “I am proud of you,” and “You can do it.” Your late night calls would often end with, “There is nothing you can’t do.” Thank you for the encouragement, the strength you gave me, and for your never-ending positive voice. Your words have carried me through life.

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Abstract

This study was developed to produce qualitative data about the cultures of two high-poverty, high-achieving elementary schools in Arkansas. The research was intended to contribute to the existing information regarding professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-determination/efficacy as related to student assessment data. The focus of this study was provided by a single research question: What features characterize the cultures of low socio-economic schools in Arkansas that enjoy high student achievement? The assessment data was collected and analyzed by reviewing the ACT Aspire scores of third, fourth, and fifth grade students as reported on the My School Info website. This information is drawn from the Arkansas Department of Education. The population of this study was comprised of licensed personnel employed at the two chosen schools in Arkansas. Based on the research findings, it was determined that both schools share similar cultural trends that have led to increased student achievement among high-poverty student populations.

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Chapter I: Introduction

It has long been apparent that school culture is something employees, students, parents, and communities experience in school buildings; however, it is the precise impact of culture that has remained a topic of study among scholars. Schools have stories, symbols, values, mission statements, and ways of doing things that identify them. These items create the culture of the building. Often, the terms “school climate” and “school culture” are used interchangeably, but there is a difference between the two. Climate is how people feel each day and can be easily changed. Culture is rooted deep in the environment and involves the beliefs that make up the persona of the school. Culture is “the way we do things around here” and climate is “the way we feel around here” (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

Culture develops over time. Student and employee success stories serve as inspiration for others and positively reinforce the kinds of accomplishments the organization would like all students and staff to strive toward (Deal & Kennedy, 1999). Symbols are powerful indicators of culture. They include objects, artwork, and events within the school. Deal and Peterson (1999) identify several symbolic artifacts in high-achieving schools: (a) mission statement; (b) student work; (c) banners to help convey values; (d) display of past achievements through trophies or student accomplishment awards; (e) historical collections, such as yearbooks; (f) school mascot to represent spirit, teamwork, and community. Deal and Peterson (1999) explain that symbols reinforce culture by signaling what is important in schools, providing a message of purpose, signaling what is valued, and establishing pride.

Schools and districts are realizing the importance of culture more and more. The new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed into law in December of 2015 and has shifted policymakers' attention from test scores exclusively to also measuring social-emotional learning and school culture. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Under ESSA, states are offered the flexibility to establish indicators of student success that may include school culture. Since 2009, more studies have validated the importance of school culture in student performance; most notably is the work of John Hattie and his Visible Learning research in 2012 (Muhammad, 2017). For years, we did not consider how the varied and diverse human elements from stakeholders – students, parents, and educators – impacted our schools, but now we do (Muhammad, 2017).

Dr. Ivy Pfeffer, Deputy State Education Commissioner of Arkansas, stated the following in personal correspondence:

Arkansas' new ESSA state plan moves away from singular measure of accountability to a multiple-measured approach for determining quality schools. The plan is also centered on a theory that recognizes how adult actions impact students' achievement and growth, and is guided by a cycle of inquiry, focused on continuous improvement (personal communication, August 29, 2017).

Problem Statement

Every school has a culture. It may be collaborative and healthy, or it may be toxic; but it does exist. A school develops its unique personality over time. The culture dictates the way things are done and the way people are “supposed” to act (Gruenert, 2005). School leaders should be concerned about school culture if increased achievement

is the goal. If they are not concerned about this topic, they may not be able to lead effectively, as research indicates that school culture directly impacts student learning (Whitaker, 2017). The purpose of this study is to examine the cultures of two high-poverty, high-achieving schools in Arkansas and to determine if the cultures within them are creating environments for students to succeed.

The specific focus of this study is to determine what trends, if any, exist between the cultures of two selected schools with high student achievement as measured by the percentage of students scoring at least proficient on state assessments. The two schools are similar in demographics, both having at least a 90% poverty rate. Although the required state assessment has changed three times in the recent past, the current assessment, the ACT Aspire, is being used as the source of student data for this study. This exam is given to students in grades three through ten each year in the areas of literacy, math, and science. District leaders need research studies, such as this one, to inform them so that they may understand and enrich school culture and, as a result, increase achievement for all students.

Significance

Educational leaders must acknowledge the impact school culture has on student learning if student success is the goal. Researchers conclude that a relationship exists between school culture and student achievement, as well as how students behave and feel about school, themselves, and others. How students react to school increases their chances of developing a lasting commitment to learning (Arter, 1989). This study is beneficial to any educator wishing to assess and improve school culture. It also provides school districts information they can use to analyze student data and examine it in light of

the culture in their buildings. Moreover, findings from this study will enable higher education programs to include the importance of school culture in teacher and administrator preparation programs. That this study identifies specific cultural themes within schools that serve students from low socio-economic backgrounds, but which nevertheless have high student achievement, is of particular significance in states such as Arkansas, which have many districts and schools that serve large populations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Typically, students living in poverty score lower on standardized assessments than their wealthier peers; however, this is not always the case. “The relationship between poverty and education shows in the students' levels of cognitive readiness. The physical and social-emotional factors of living in poverty have a detrimental effect on students' cognitive performance” (Flannery, 2016). Students who live in poverty come to school every day without the proper tools for success. As a result, they are commonly behind their classmates physically, socially, emotionally or cognitively (LSU Online, 2010). This study is significant because it encompasses the idea that students living in poverty can and sometimes do succeed in spite of their circumstances.

Research Question

The research question that guided this qualitative study was: What features characterize the cultures of low socio-economic schools in Arkansas that enjoy high student achievement?

Assumptions

The specific assumptions of this study are that the participants responded honestly to the survey questions and provided accurate data regarding the cultures of their schools.

Likewise, it is assumed that the survey instrument that was used was appropriate in gathering the kind and amount of information needed to measure schools' cultures.

The School Culture Triage Survey was the instrument that was employed to assess the cultures of the two schools in this study. The development of the survey began in 1996, when the instrument contained 122 items. Over time, the survey creators, Phillips and Wagner (2009), pared the survey down based on feedback from elementary, middle, and high school teachers. The researchers identified trends in the data and ultimately three paths became apparent. Those three school culture markers are used in today's version of the survey. For the present study, the School Culture Triage Survey was slightly modified to include five additional open-response questions to enrich the qualitative data.

Limitations

This study was limited to responses from teachers in two high poverty, high-achieving elementary schools in the state of Arkansas during the 2016-2017 school year. Responses were obtained via an online survey instrument that educators and stakeholders accessed and completed electronically. Although safeguards were in place, participants could have potentially completed the survey more than once. In addition, while personal follow-up interviews were not conducted, such conversations could have added depth to this study. Additionally, personal discussions with individual outliers, if they had been willing to come forward, would further have enriched this study. A clear understanding of the negative comments recorded on the survey and the issues that led to those particular feelings were not analyzed in this study but would have added great value. Nevertheless, the responses to open-ended questions do add to the value of this study, in

spite of the identified limitations. The implications of this study, however limited in scope, are important to the ongoing research on school culture.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are included to clarify information in this study:

Accountability: Arkansas has an accountability system for school districts that includes multiple measures. Accountability concerns the obligation of comprehensive school improvement planning, reporting, explaining, or justifying standards, making these components responsible, explicable and answerable (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.).

ACT Aspire: The state assessment used in Arkansas by which student data is collected, analyzed, and publicly reported. Schools are measured by the data indicated on ACT Aspire assessments. This assessment was adopted by Arkansas to measure student achievement. Arkansas law requires that all public school students shall participate in a statewide program of educational assessments per Ark. Code Ann. §§ 6-15-419, 6-15-433, 6-15-2009 (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.).

Collaboration: Working together to for a common education purpose such as aligning curriculum, analyzing student data, or establishing school goals (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008).

Efficacy: The belief teachers hold about the influence they have over how all students learn. Teachers' confidence in their ability to promote students' learning (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2003).

English Language Learner (ELL): A national-origin-minority student who is limited-English-proficient (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.).

ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act. This act was passed into law in December of 2015 and allows states the flexibility to determine measureable accountability indicators. The accountability indicators may include school climate, assessment scores, and school safety (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.).

Professional Learning Community (PLC): A PLC is a group of educators that gather often to analyze student work and data. During this time, teachers identify strengths and weaknesses in data and in teaching strategies. Collaboration and student focused discussions are an integral part of an effective PLC (Dufour et al., 2008).

Proficiency: The percentage of students scoring a level 3 or above on the ACT Aspire (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.).

School Culture: The beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that determine how individuals treat others and feel included and appreciated. Culture refers to the traditions, rituals, ceremonies, and feelings individuals have about one another and the environment in which they work. Culture is basically the “way we do things around here” (Barth, 2002).

Socio-Economic Status (SES): Socioeconomic status (SES) encompasses not just income but also educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Standards: Standards refers to the Arkansas State Standards. Standards are learning targets for students at each grade level and content area (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.).

Student Achievement: Arkansas has four levels of measurement in terms of the ACT Aspire: Needs Support (1), Close (2), Ready (3), and Exceeding (4). These

indicators are used to determine individual proficiency and growth as well as to determine grade level and special population data (Arkansas Department of Education, n.d.).

Summary

A school's culture must value students above all else in order for educational initiatives to be successful and for student-centered learning and decision making to occur (Muhammad, 2017). A first step in creating a desirable culture is to identify the current cultural status and have honest conversations regarding strengths and weaknesses. Schools that want to produce a healthy learning environment must first and foremost be clear about their collective purpose (Muhammad, 2017). A school's culture touches on the emotional longing in human beings to be part of something bigger than themselves and enables them to perform work for the greater good (Lassiter, 2012). A positive environment may be the driving force that propels students to achieve and educators to be passionate in their work. Educators must understand the depth of their work and school leaders need to believe the following in order to create circumstances for a successful learning environment:

If people are involved in meaningful work, *and* if they feel capable, *and* if they are helped to make even small progress, they become more motivated and ready for the next challenges. Effective organizations foster conditions for these *positive progress loops* to prevail. (Fullan, 2013, p. 22)

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Every school has a culture that develops over time. It may be a collaborative, affirming culture, or it may be a toxic, dispiriting one; but one certainly exists. The optimal setting toward which school faculties should aspire is the collaborative culture (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). School culture is not a function of such demographics as race or socio-economic status, or of geographical features (Phillips & Wagner, 2009). The culture dictates the way things are done and the way people are supposed to act (Gruenert, 2005). School leaders should be concerned about school culture if increased achievement is the goal. If they are not concerned about this topic, they typically will not be able to lead effectively, as research indicates that school culture directly impacts student learning (Whitaker, 2017). The purpose of this study is to examine what features characterize the cultures of schools in Arkansas that serve large proportions of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, yet yield high student achievement.

School Culture

Studying organizational behavior has been of interest to educators and the business world since the 1970s. Being conscious of the symbolic aspect of the school environment, or the school's culture, is essential for educators (Wren, 1999). Having a strong grasp on school culture assists principals in leading their buildings effectively and improving achievement. Culture is defined as the symbols and stories that communicate core values, reinforce the mission statement, instill a shared vision, and build a sense of commitment among staff, students, and parents (Peterson, 2002). As Harvard educator Roland Barth (2002) once observed, "A school's culture has far more influence on life

and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal can ever have” (p. 47). Barth (2002) characterized school culture as a “complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (p. 7).

Wagner and Masden-Copas (2002) described culture as the brace for a bridge, linking previous to future achievement. According to their work, in order for improvement changes to occur, the braces must be firm and strong. Schools must identify their existing cultures and work to optimize them before attempting to implement systemic changes that could increase student achievement. Mission is at the heart of school culture. Shared missions and goals motivate leaders to lead, teachers to teach, and students to learn (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

As culture has an effect on every single aspect of the educational environment, a school leader must be aware of the norms associated with any given culture he or she is attempting to lead. Hoy and Miskel (2001) explained that “understanding culture is a prerequisite to making schools more effective” (p. 220). In a work that has stood the test of time, Deal and Peterson (1999) enumerated the following characteristics as being included in schools that contain positive school cultures:

1. An awareness of the school’s history and goals;
2. A mission that focuses on learning for both students and teachers;
3. Values and beliefs that focus on collegiality, performance, and improvement;
4. Rituals and ceremonies that reinforce these values;

5. A professional community that utilizes knowledge and research to improve school practices;
6. Shared leadership that balances stability and progress;
7. Stories that celebrate the success of others; and
8. A mutual sense of respect and caring for all.

Symbolism is an important aspect in schools with positive cultures. Symbols include artwork, events, mascots, or anything else that conveys meaning or represents something in the school (Fairholm, 1994). Deal and Peterson (2009) listed specific artifacts that they had found in successful schools: (a) mission statement; (b) student work; (c) banners to help convey values; (d) display of past achievements through trophies or student accomplishment awards; (e) historical items; (f) school mascot to represent spirit. Deal and Peterson (2009) indicated that those symbols represent the culture in four ways: signaling what is important, providing a message of deeper purpose, indicating values, and forged school pride.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) described four types of school cultures. *Balkanization* was the term given to schools in which teachers are the rulers of their individual classrooms, and in which each teacher works in isolation. This type of culture promotes competition among its players. Next on the continuum lay cultures marked by *comfortable collaboration*. In such cultures, collaboration is superficial as teachers share lesson plans and materials, but avoid curricular discussions and long term planning, and dismiss conversations related to student achievement. The third type of culture described by Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) was termed *collegiality*. This environment is based on explicit policies and procedures through formal structures but does not require

collaboration to adhere to expectations. At the optimal end of the spectrum was the *collaborative culture*, where career learning occurred. Teachers in this type of environment seek professional development opportunities, demonstrate confidence in their professional abilities, welcome student data analysis, encourage team teaching and open honest discussions where shared decisions are made.

Schools with unhealthy cultures are more likely to produce students who are at-risk of failing and often have teachers with negative attitudes and perceptions of those around them, including the building leader. Schools are more successful when members of the organization work together and are bonded by a set of commonly held beliefs and values (Peterson, 2002). When a school is viewed as a community, the leader is able to depend on others to help carry the load of the challenges associated with the principalship. When there is an “us against them” mentality, in regards to teacher-administrator relationships, the culture is not going to be a positive one.

A healthy organization with a thriving culture will prosper, and its goals will be achieved. This is due to an environment that insists on high expectations for all stakeholders. Hoy et al. (2003) explained the following about effective and positive cultures:

Teachers like their colleagues, their school, their job, and their students and they are driven by a quest for academic excellence. They believe in themselves and their students; set high, but achievable goals. Students work hard and respect others who do well academically. Principal behavior is also positive; that is, friendly and supportive. Principals have high expectations for teachers and go out

of their way to help teachers. Healthy schools have good relationships with the community. (p. 39)

The most important variables in school culture, according to Philips and Wagner (2009), are collegiality and efficacy. “Collegiality is demonstrated through its two main components, professional collaboration and affiliation. Professional collaboration is the degree to which staff members work together to solve professional issues, and to encourage and inspire each other” (Philips & Wagner, 2009, p. 5). The authors went on to explain that affiliation, in terms of school culture, refers to when the “relationships between all members of the school community demonstrate harmony, respect, mutual support and enjoyment of each other’s company” (Philips & Wagner, 2009, p. 5). Both professional collaboration and affiliation must be present for a healthy school culture to thrive.

High-poverty schools that demonstrate success have caught the attention of educational researchers for many years. The term “90/90/90” was originally coined in 1995 based on observations in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where schools were identified as having the following characteristics: 90% or more of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, 90% or more of the students were members of ethnic minority groups, and 90% or more of the students met district or state academic standards in reading or another area (Reeves, 2005). Since that time, the term has been applied to describe successful academic performance in schools with high-poverty percentages and high minority demographics. A common set of behaviors was identified in the extensive research of the 90/90/90 schools. These behaviors, or norms, exhibited by teachers and administrators, established the cultures within those particular schools. The five characteristics were: a

focus on academic achievement; clear curriculum choices; frequent and ongoing assessment and multiple opportunities for improvement; an emphasis on nonfiction writing; and collaborative scoring of student work (Reeves, 2015). The 90/90/90 research suggests that high-poverty schools can deliver high student achievement if the environment lends itself to the idea that all students, regardless of circumstances beyond their control, can learn and succeed.

Measuring School Culture

Among the several tools that have emerged for measuring school culture is one devised by Phillips and Wagner (2009) titled the “School Culture Triage Survey” (SCTS). Those authors define school culture as “how people treat each other, and how they work together in both a personal and professional sense” (Phillips & Wagner, 2009, p. xi). This particular instrument originated in 1996 as a 122-item questionnaire. The researchers were attempting to find a way to determine the health or toxicity of a school’s culture. The first draft of the SCTS was based on the work of Barth (C. Wagner, personal communication, September 2017). Edgar Shine’s organizational culture theory centering on teams was analyzed along with the work of such cultural researchers as Michael Fullan and Thomas Sergiovanni. Rick Dufour’s work with professional communities was also reviewed during the development of the instrument (C. Wagner, personal communication, September 2017). Almost every author/researcher whose work was studied by the instrument’s creators identified professional collaboration, affiliation/collegiality, and self-determination/efficacy in their work (C. Wagner, personal communication, September 2017). From reviewing the literature, Phillips and Wagner (2009), based the SCTS items on those three common cultural themes. The initial 122-

item questionnaire was eventually refined to 17 items ranked on a Likert scale, additional open-ended questions, and an unobtrusive observation inventory. Once the SCTS was fully developed, several pilots were run, including participation from hundreds of individuals, and feedback was gathered from those participants. “As we looked for trends in the data, several paths became apparent and the paths ultimately became our 3-school culture markers” (C. Wagner, personal communication, September 2017).

Professional collaboration is the first indicator assessed on the SCTS. Phillips and Wagner (2009) explain that professional collaboration “is the degree to which staff members work together to solve professional issues and to encourage and inspire each other” (p. 5). Collaboration is not simply a meeting that is held where cooperation among educators exists. Collaboration refers to a group of individuals working together in a professional community, focused on student learning and improvement, and centered around three fundamental purpose questions: Why do we exist? What are we here to do together? What is the business of our business? (Dufour et al., 2008). These three questions relate directly to the work and definition of professional collaboration found in Phillips and Wagner’s (2009) work. Positive teacher interaction facilitates collaboration and impacts the success of those working in the schools and impacts the feeling of the building. There are five questions on the SCTS that measure professional collaboration on the Likert scale.

Affiliative collegiality is the second cultural theme assessed by the SCTS. Phillips and Wagner (2009) describe affiliation as, “when relationships between all members of the school community demonstrate harmony, respect, mutual support, and enjoyment of each other’s company” (p. 5). There are six scaled questions that measure

this indicator of culture on the SCTS ranging from “school celebrations” to support of new ideas by members of the learning community. “People in any healthy organization must have agreement on how to do things and what is worth doing. Open and honest communication, as well as an abundance of humor, ensures that collegiality is strong” (Phillips & Wagner, 2009, pg. 5). Other well-known educator authorities explain collegiality similarly. Dufour et al. (2008), for example, describe collegiality as the collective responsibility that colleagues take for their work.

The third theme of the culture survey is a measurement of self-determination/efficacy. The idea of self-determination and self-efficacy is important when analyzing culture, because it deals with the way people problem solve and how empowered they feel as decision makers within the school. “Efficacy or self-determination is demonstrated when staff members work to improve their skills as true professionals, not because they see themselves as helpless members of a large, uncaring bureaucracy” (Phillips & Wagner, 2009, p. 7). Educators need to have a high sense of efficacy because it can lead to gains in the classroom, teachers’ confidence, and the ability to promote students’ learning (Protheroe, 2008). These individuals own their learning and are committed to the community at large, take responsibility for their work, and choose to stay. “People in this school are here because they want to be” (Phillips & Wagner, 2009, p. 7). Efficacy determines the decision making power that staff members believe they have within a building.

Chapter III: Methodology

The specific purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of the cultures of two selected Arkansas elementary schools whose student achievement, notwithstanding the low socioeconomic status of nearly all of its students, has been high, as measured by the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the ACT Aspire state assessment. District leaders need research studies, such as this one, to enable them to select the most appropriate leaders to enrich school culture and to subsequently increase achievement for all students. The results of this study, combined with the extant research on the importance of school culture, provide valuable tools to researchers interested in how culture impacts student learning. In addition, the results may be used to improve university level teacher and leadership preparation programs.

Research Question

This study addresses the following research question: What features characterize the cultures of low socio-economic schools in Arkansas that enjoy high student achievement?

Population

The population who participated in the present study were faculty members and administrators of two public elementary schools in Arkansas that have been specifically selected because, while they predominantly serve students with low socioeconomic status, their rates of student achievement have been high. For privacy purposes, the elementary schools are referred to throughout as Beard Elementary and Jackson Elementary.

Research Design

This study is qualitative in nature. The qualitative paradigm is appropriate for this work because the researcher was seeking trends in data through the constant comparative method. Data was collected using a 17-item school culture related questionnaire, the School Culture Triage Survey, created by Phillips and Wagner (2009), which employed a Likert scale. Permissions were granted by the authors to use the instrument (see Appendix D). The development of the survey began in the late 1990s, when the instrument contained 122 items. Over time, Phillips and Wagner (2009), reduced the number of items based on feedback from elementary, middle, and high school teachers. The researchers identified trends in the data and ultimately three paths became apparent. Those three school culture markers are used in the current 17-item version of the survey. This researcher created additional open response questions with comment boxes in order to allow participants to include more information and add depth to the survey. According to Creswell (2008), survey research has value because it allows the generalization of findings from a representative sample population to the general target population. The goal for this qualitative research was to determine variations within a topic of interest in a given population (Jansen, 2010). For the purposes of this study, the subject of interest is school culture and how it relates to student achievement. The survey instrument was designed to assess the current culture of schools as perceived by the teachers and administrators involved in them. The instrument was delivered via an online tool to individuals of the selected schools. The questionnaire was also available in paper format; however, there were no requests for the physical form.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument that was employed in this study, the School Culture Triage Survey (Phillips & Wagner, 2009), consists of 17 questions. The questions are divided into three different categories to measure culture. Those categories are Professional Collaboration, Affiliative Collegiality, and Self Determination/Efficacy. A five-point scale was used to record responses (1= never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always or almost always). Prior to beginning the SCTS proper, participants were asked for the following demographic information: the number of years they have taught in their current school and the number of years that they have taught overall. Teachers were then identified either as novice (five years of experience or fewer) or veteran (more than five years of experience). The SCTS, itself, was created using the following procedures: Consulting the literature, developing questions centered around the determined definition of school culture, piloting the survey and collecting feedback, refining the survey instrument, identifying themes supported by survey scores and observed staff behaviors, and administering the survey thousands of times (C. Wagner, personal communication, September 2017). The lowest possible triage score is 17, and the highest score available is an 85. “After utilizing the triage questions in several program evaluations,” Phillips and Wagner (2009) explain that the data suggests the following:

17-40= Critical and immediate attention necessary. Conduct a full-scale assessment of your school’s culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing the culture.

41-59= Modifications and improvements are necessary. Begin with a more intense assessment of your school's culture to determine which area is in most need of improvement.

60-75= Monitor and maintain making positive adjustments.

76-85= Amazing! A score of 75 was the highest ever recorded (p. 127).

Data Collection

The information gathered from the online instrument is reported in the pages that follow using descriptive statistics, percentile ranks, and means scores for each variable. All questionnaires were collected and separated by school, using a numerical code for clear identification of each building.

School information and selection were determined by accessing the My School Info website provided by the Arkansas Department of Education. First, schools serving high populations of low socio-economic students were analyzed.



Figure 1. Beard Elementary and Jackson Elementary poverty rates.

Of those schools, the researcher sought two whose student achievement scores were nevertheless good. Data for the 2016-2017 ACT Aspire state assessment were

reviewed for the highest performing elementary schools. As all of this information was archived and publicly made available, no special permissions were required. The study schools were selected based on proficiency scores and at least a 90% low socio-economic status. The percentage of students scoring a 3 (proficient) in the areas of literacy and math for grades three, four, and five were used in the analysis of the data. Additional information pertaining to the elementary schools was also pulled directly from this service which is managed by the Arkansas Division of Research and Technology. The first school selected for this study, which will be referred to as Beard Elementary, has a student population of 451 and a 98% low-income rate. Beard Elementary School is within a district of approximately 14,000 students. The demographics of the area include an average income of \$32,000 with 15% of the residents living at or below the poverty level. Ten languages are spoken in this community, and less than 20% of the population holds a bachelor's degree.

Proficiency rates for the 2016-2017 school year for Beard were as follows:

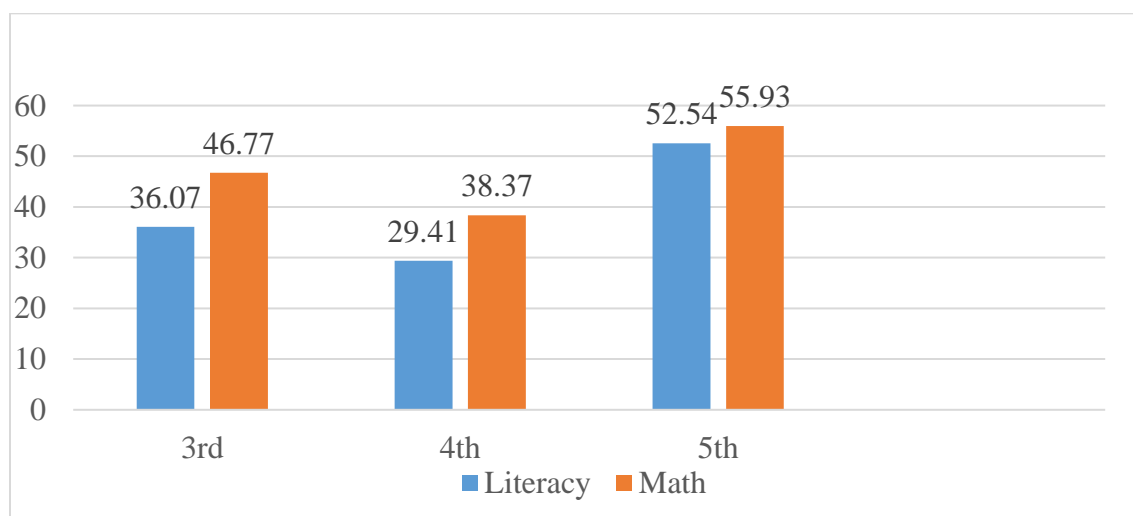


Figure 2. Beard Elementary School assessment data 2016-2017.

The second school selected for this study will be referred to as Jackson Elementary School. Jackson has a student population of 566 and also has a low-income rate of 98%. Jackson Elementary shares somewhat similar statistics to that of Beard. Jackson lies within a district of over 20,000 students with a city poverty rate of 39%. Residents are 35% Hispanic and 64% Caucasian. Thirty-six different languages are spoken in the community, and the average income is approximately \$42,000. Only 20% of the residents of this area hold a bachelor's degree.

Proficiency rates for Jackson are found in the chart below:

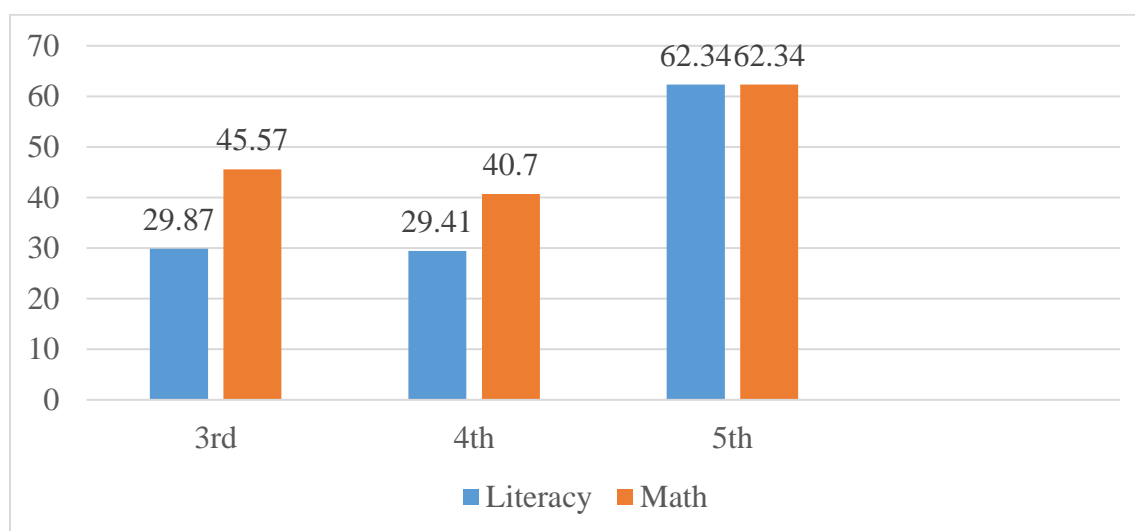


Figure 3. Jackson Elementary School assessment data 2016-2017

While the scores reflected above are clearly not exemplary, the schools described in this study were specifically chosen because their scores reflected higher achievement (using this particular assessment) than other schools with similar demographics. As explained above, both of these two schools have very high rates of student poverty, and the ACT Aspire is only in its third year of implementation in the state of Arkansas.

Permission to conduct the research and collect data was obtained by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Arkansas Tech University (Appendix A). Parent permissions were not necessary due to student data being collected by grade level only. Individual student assessment data was not collected or reviewed. Participation agreements at all participating schools were signed by principals and district superintendents, as required. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and no rewards or incentives were provided.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the Research Question: What features characterize the cultures of low socio-economic schools in Arkansas that enjoy high achievement?

Overall school data was analyzed for each survey item and mean scores were obtained, thereby, providing a score for each school. Trends in data were observed and noted in this analysis. Particular attention was given to the comments participants made regarding each of the open response questions, and that information was analyzed accordingly. These narrative comments created greater richness in the data. In the analysis, references were made to the three categories as suggested by the authors of the instrument. The researcher used the constant comparative method when reading and making sense of participants' narrative responses. This strategy is a process of comparing newly collected data with data that have already been reviewed and analyzed, then iteratively revisiting the data in order to derive full meaning from it (Patton, 2015).

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and procedures that were used to obtain information about the overall cultures of two high performing schools in Arkansas that

predominantly serve populations with low socioeconomic status. The chapter also explained that Archived 2016-2017 ACT Aspire assessment scores were used to identify these schools for inclusion in this study. Qualitative research methods were appropriate for this study about school culture, because the researcher was seeking to identify trends as well as variations on a topic that might be applicable to similarly situated schools.

Chapter IV: Analysis of Data

This qualitative study was developed to gather information about the relationship between school culture and student achievement in schools serving populations of students who hail almost exclusively from families who have low socioeconomic status. The intention was to add value to the existing knowledge base about collaboration, collegiality, and self-determination/efficacy as it relates to student success. A single research question provided the focus for this study; that question was: What features characterize the cultures of low-SES schools in Arkansas that enjoy high student achievement?

Demographic data was collected from participating educators in the way of two questions: How many total years have you been in education? How many years have you been working in this school? School culture was measured using the School Culture Triage Survey, which was designed by Phillips and Wagner (2009) of The Center for Improving School Culture. Student achievement was measured using the percentage of students in grades three through five scoring at the proficiency level on the literacy and math portions of the 2016-2017 ACT Aspire assessment. This chapter contains an outline of the process of data collection for this study.

Participants

The School Culture Triage Survey (Phillips & Wagner, 2009), along with several supplemental questions, was sent electronically to faculty members in two elementary schools in Arkansas. The schools were selected based on their high student achievement, as demonstrated on the 2016-2017 ACT Aspire assessment. All licensed employees were invited to participate in the online survey, which was delivered via *Survey Monkey*®.

Invitations were sent to the building principals, who shared the information and web link with faculty members in each school. In the first school, Beard Elementary, which employs 33 licensed teachers, 21 responses were collected (for a data collection rate of 64%). The second participating school, Jackson, yielded 21 responses out of the 31 faculty members in the building (for a collection rate of 68%). Beard Elementary School has 17 teachers with more than 10 years of experience. Of those 17, nine of them have spent over 10 years at Beard. The average teaching experience in this school is 12.59 years. Jackson Elementary has 11 teachers with more than 10 years of experience. This building's average teaching experience is somewhat less, at 9.08 years.

Data Collection

Data were collected online through the online survey service, *Survey Monkey*®. Building principals distributed the questionnaire link via school email along with an attached letter from the researcher explaining the purpose of the investigation. The letter conveyed that participation was strictly voluntary and that neither monetary compensation nor other incentives would be provided. Additionally, the letter assured participants that information gathered was confidential and that completing the survey would take approximately five to 10 minutes. Contact information for the researcher and chairperson of the research project was also included. Furthermore, a follow-up email was distributed one week after the initial survey link was sent out to encourage participation. Data collection was completed during the period of October 30-November 8, 2017 for Beard Elementary, and from November 27-December 14, 2017 for Jackson Elementary, the other participating institution.

Study Results

The sample consisted of 42 total participants between the two schools with 21 teachers responding from each institution. Questions one through five of the survey instrument focused on Professional Collaboration. The second set of questions centered on the theme of Affiliative Collegiality. The third and final topic was Self-Determination/Efficacy.

The authors of the School Culture Triage Survey, Phillips and Wagner (2009), recommend that a tally form be used to determine average scores for each question. For this study, the online survey resource Survey Monkey© was used to collect data. Survey Monkey© features an automatic averaging mechanism that collects the responses and immediately provides the researcher with mean data. This feature was used in lieu of a manual tally form.

Beard Elementary School. Beard Elementary had an average score of 19.24 on Professional Collaboration, a 20.97 on Affiliative Collegiality, and a 23.67 in the focus area of Efficacy/Self-Determination. Each question had a Likert scale with a range of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The first statement concerning collaboration was “teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.” This statement had the strongest overall score of 4.48 out of 5 on the Likert scale. The second statement read, “teachers and staff work together to develop a school schedule.” A score of 4.00 was indicated on the data. “ Teachers, staff, and community members are involved in the decision making process at this school,” received a rating of 3.76. Next, “the student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among teachers, staff, and families,” received the lowest recorded score on the survey of 2.95. The last collaborative oriented statement

was “the planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams, rather than as separate individuals.” This score was a 4.05.

When measuring affiliative collegiality, the data results were as follows:

“Teachers, staff, and community members tell stories of celebrations that support the school’s values.” This scored an average of 3.90. “ Teachers, staff, and community member’s visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each other’s company.” This statement resulted in an average of 2.95 and was one of the lowest scores recorded. “ Our school reflects a true sense of community,” scored a 3.81 on the scale. “Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers, staff, and community.” This statement rated a 3.43. “Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by stakeholders of our school,” indicated a score of 3.48. “There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events, and goal attainment at this school.” This final statement regarding affiliative collegiality scored an average 3.40.

The next results were collected for the area of efficacy/self-determination.

Results are as follows: “When something is not working in our school, the faculty, staff, and community work in unison to find solutions.” This first statement scored a 3.62. “ School members are interdependent and value each other here.” This efficacy statement received a score of 4.24. “ Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.” This score was a 3.76. Scoring a 4.29 was statement four, which read, “Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.” “The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting on their supervisors to tell them what to

do.” A score of 3.48 was recorded for this statement regarding school culture. “ People work here and send their children to this school because they enjoy it and choose to be here.” The average for this statement was 3.40.

Supplemental open response questions were offered at the end of the questionnaire. The questions were: *(1) Did we fail to ask a question that you feel is important in terms of the culture at this school? (2) Is there anything especially positive that you would like to share about this school? (3) Has anything happened recently that impacted the way you feel about the school at this time? (For example, changes in programs/services, a death, a conflict with a teacher or administrator, or any other event that has led you to feel a particular way at this time?) (4) How do you feel about the communication between yourself and administration? Is it consistent? Do you feel informed about the events and activities within the school? (5) If you have a concern, suggestion, or need information about a topic, do staff members and administration listen to you? Please cite specifics if applicable.*

On open response question number one, a respondent said, “We try to have positive things to help with morale in the building. We have back to school t-shirts for the staff, potluck meals, individual notes, and candy jars.” The other twenty participants answered, “no.” When asked if anything positive was worth sharing about the school, one individual stated, “[This school] is a true community. This school works hard as a team to build students up, help families, and encourage each student to work hard so that they can live the lives they dream.” Another employee explained, “We love our students and go above and beyond to meet the needs of the whole child.” Yet another said, “There

is a lot of family support here.” The remaining participants did not have a positive statement recorded on the survey.

Question three yielded mainly “no” responses, when asking participants to provide information about whether a recent event may have impacted the way the participant was feeling about the school at the time the survey was administered. One person did state, “We have changes with very little consistency.” Another said, “School wide behavior challenges can cause frustration at times.” Last, one respondent simply stated, “It is a good school.”

When prodded about communication, every participant had a comment. One staff member explained:

As a staff member, I do not feel as though communication is consistent. When administration has ideas, opinions, or beliefs in their heads, they are unwilling to listen to teachers. At times, we do not feel like we can be professionals and question things because we know our administration will be upset by the questioning. If there is a conflict or something that needs to be addressed at the administrative level, we are told to handle it ourselves. Admin favors certain grade level teams and teachers and does not treat everyone the same. When faculty wanted to address behavior problems and come up with a school wide plan, it did not feel like administration was on our side. They would not hear our points of view and wanted to make excuses and reasons for the behavior. At times it feels as though they do not trust what we say or don’t believe us. [I] would like to see the administration be more respectful, hear others opinions, and

treat everyone fairly. We are very informed about events and activities at our school though.

Another participant echoed the same negative sentiment by stating, “Communication is poor.” In contrast, other respondents were positive in nature when commenting about communication within the school. One person wrote, “I feel very informed and connected to the administration about activities and events in our school.” Another said, “Communication is consistent and I generally feel informed.” The rest of the participants conveyed positive feelings about communication by writing such one-word comments as, “yes,” “good,” or “consistent.”

The final open-ended question regarding whether or not staff members felt as if they were listened to when voicing a concern yielded mixed results from the educators at Beard Elementary. Three members said, “yes”; two said, “mostly”; and four indicated that they did not have any concerns about the school. One person suggested that administration, “does not listen to us when there is a concern or suggestion. Often times they suggest we are focusing too much on the problem instead of solutions.” Another teacher commented about safety issues within the building, explaining, “ideas are discussed and valued. Safety issues during a recent fire drill were addressed and remedied immediately.” Other answers to this question were positive in nature.

Jackson Elementary School. Jackson Elementary had average scores of 19.2 on Professional Collaboration, of 21.95 on Affiliative Collegiality, and of 23.86 in the focus area of Efficacy/Self-Determination. Data on the cultural theme of Professional Collaboration were determined by the following statements and subsequent scores: The first statement concerning collaboration was “teachers and staff discuss instructional

strategies and curriculum issues.” This statement had an overall score of 4.29 out of 5 on the Likert scale. The second statement, “teachers and staff work together to develop a school schedule,” had a score of 3.48. “Teachers, staff, and community members are involved in the decision making process at this school,” received an average of 3.29. Next, “the student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among teachers, staff, and families,” received a 3.95. The last collaborative oriented statement was “the planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams, rather than as separate individuals.” This score was a 4.19.

In terms of affiliative collegiality, Jackson Elementary had consistent results with the exception of one assessment item. When measuring affiliative collegiality, the data results were as follows: “Teachers, staff, and community members tell stories of celebrations that support the school’s values.” This scored a total of 3.57. “ Teachers, staff, and community member’s visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each other’s company.” This statement resulted in an average of 2.86, and was the lowest score recorded for this school on this survey. “ Our school reflects a true sense of community,” scored a 4.14 on the scale. “Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers, staff, and community.” This statement rated a 3.67. “Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by stakeholders of our school,” yielded a score of 3.95. “There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events, and goal attainment at this school.” This final statement regarding affiliation scored an average 3.76.

Finally, responses were collected for the area of efficacy/self-determination. Participants from Jackson Elementary had the following scores: “When something is not

working in our school, the faculty, staff, and community work in unison to find solutions.” This first statement scored a 3.67. “School members are interdependent and value each other here.” This efficacy statement demonstrated a score of 4.10. “Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.” This score was a 4.30. Scoring a 4.19 was statement four, which read, “Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.” The statement, “The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting on their supervisors to tell them what to do,” averaged a score of 3.9. “People work here and send their children to this school because they enjoy it and choose to be here” had an average score of 3.7.

School Culture Comparison Results

Figure 4 depicts the data from both schools for comparison purposes.

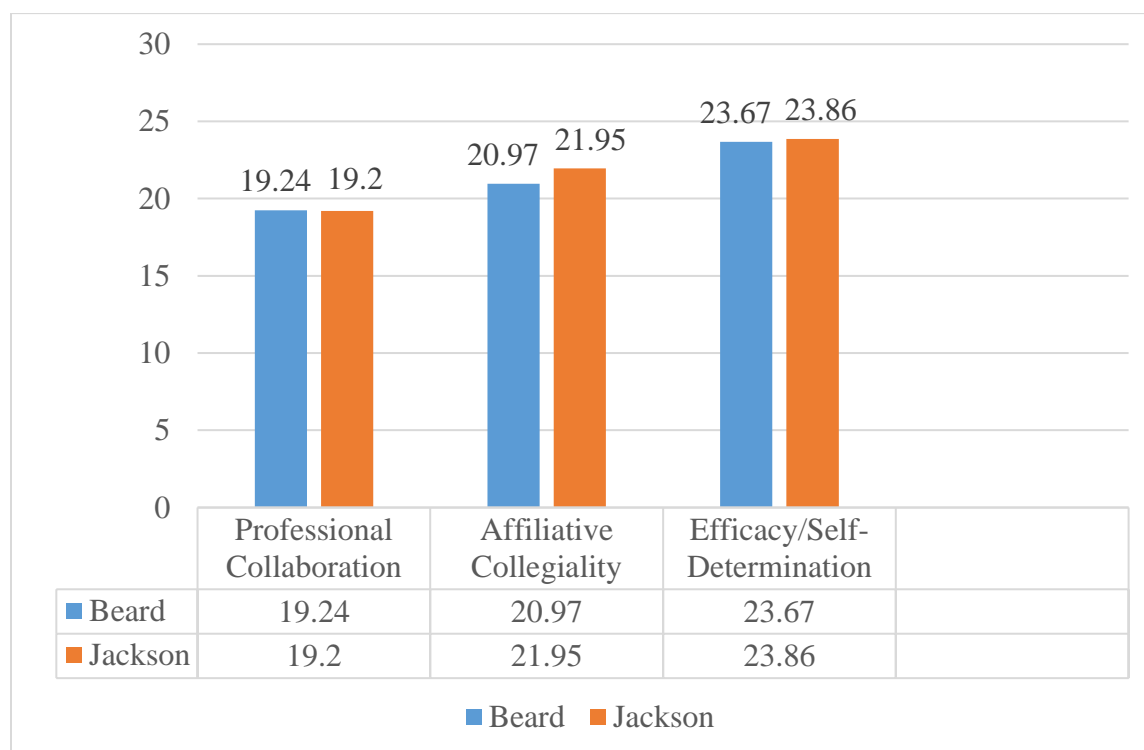


Figure 4. Beard Elementary and Jackson Elementary School culture themes.

Overall average scores for the three over-arching themes of Professional Collaboration, Affiliative Collegiality, and Efficacy/Self-Determination were consistent between the two schools. Two trends emerged from the 17-item assessment. The item that received the highest score for both schools was the first statement under Professional Collaboration: “Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.” Beard Elementary averaged 4.48 on the question, and Jackson scored it at 4.29. Similarly, the question receiving the lowest mark from participants at both schools was found in the area of collegiality. That item read: “Teachers, staff, and community member’s visit/talk/meet outside of school to enjoy each other’s company.” Beard rated this question 2.95, while Jackson indicated a low score of 2.86.

The same open response questions were offered at the end of the survey questionnaire for Jackson Elementary participants. The questions were: *(1) Did we fail to ask a question that you feel is important in terms of the culture at this school? (2) Is there anything especially positive that you would like to share about this school? (3) Has anything happened recently that impacted the way you feel about the school at this time? (For example, changes in programs/services, a death, a conflict with a teacher or administrator, or any other event that has led you to feel a particular way at this time? (4) How do you feel about the communication between yourself and administration? Is it consistent? Do you feel informed about the events and activities within the school? (5) If you have a concern, suggestion, or need information about a topic, do staff members and administration listen to you? Please cite specifics if applicable.*

On open response question number one, all participants at Jackson Elementary said, “no.” When asked if anything positive was worth sharing about the school, one

individual stated, “The needs of the kids come before anything else. My three kids each come to this school with me and I’m comfortable knowing the staff will do their best to ensure their success.” Another employee explained, “Our school is extremely collaborative. We are heavily into the PLC (professional learning communities) process and adhere to those components for collaboration, instruction, and assessments. Also, we have recently developed a new mission and vision for our school.” The remaining participants did not have additional statements recorded on the survey.

Question three yielded mainly answers of “no” from participants, who had been asked to provide information about whether a recent event may have impacted the way they were feeling about the school at the time the survey was administered. One person did state, “We are currently in the PLC pilot. This is changing how we do a lot of things around here! We have always had a good culture, but we are improving upon it every day.” Another participant shared, “We are currently receiving on-site training to become more effective at professional learning communities. As part of the guiding coalition, I feel that I’ve been able to have a voice in our progression.”

When asked about communication, every participant had a comment. One employee described school communication as follows:

Outstanding efforts are made by staff to communicate with parents, coordinate events with community members and mentors, and staff have open lines of communication with one another and school administrators. Morning announcements are made to students, teacher/classroom newsletters to parents, and weekly email newsletters to staff from the

principal are some excellent ways our school excels and helps our students thrive.

Another participant echoed the same positive sentiment by stating:

Communication was part of my professional growth plan. I regularly have students write grade reflections on the back of newsletters (English and Spanish) that are sent home to parents each week. Occasionally, parents write notes on the grade reflections. Any significant behavior issues are resolved by the student calling the parent and self-reporting. This is the first year I've had zero discipline referrals!

One person wrote, "There is rarely any communication between administration and myself." Another said, "For the most part." The remaining comments were positive and indicated "excellent" or "yes" in terms of whether there is healthy communication within the school.

The final open-ended question regarding whether or not staff members feel as if they are listened to when voicing a concern yielded mixed results. Only seven participants answered this question. One said "none" to indicate no concerns, and one wrote "N/A." Furthermore, two respondents simply replied, "no," while another TWO answered only, "yes." One individual had more to say about this particular item and responded in the following manner:

Yes they listen and they respond as they feel appropriate. Example: I needed to be able to collaborate with another math and science teacher during my planning period, but I had [no] one else in my grade level. We (teachers and

administration) changed planning periods one day of the week to allow for vertical alignment between 5th and 6th grade on the same subjects.

Open Response Data Themes

Participants' answers to five open-response items were analyzed and common themes were identified. The areas in which participants had the most to say in terms of written responses centered on behavior and communication. All staff members submitted a response on question five regarding communication within and outside of the schools. Most answers were positive; however, a few were negative and the term "frustrated" was used to describe some participants' feelings about communication. Student behavior was also identified as an area that needed to be addressed.

Summary

This chapter included an analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the respondent schools on the School Culture Triage Survey (modified with five additional open-response items), which was administered between October and December of 2017. Likewise, assessment data from the ACT Aspire for third through fifth graders in literacy and math for the 2016-2017 reporting year for two high achieving, high-poverty elementary schools were presented. Data results for each participating school have been reported by individual questions and by overarching themes. Results for the three cultural themes were displayed in Figure 4 for clarity.

A summary and discussion of these findings are presented in Chapter V. Conclusions drawn from this research are presented, along with recommendations to be drawn upon by educators of all levels for ongoing improvement and future research.

Chapter V: Conclusions

This qualitative study was conducted to answer the following research question concerning school culture: What features characterize the cultures of low-socioeconomic schools in Arkansas that enjoy high student achievement? The study used survey research methods. A link to an electronic survey was emailed to the principals at two selected high-poverty, yet high achieving, elementary schools in Arkansas. The principals, in turn, sent the survey to all licensed employees in each school. The survey included a 17-item questionnaire and five open response items. Demographic data gathered on participants was limited to two questions regarding how many years each respondent has been in education and how many of those years have been spent in the current school. The survey contained a Likert scale to determine participants' perceptions of school culture in three areas: Professional Collaboration, Affiliative Collegiality, and Efficacy/Self-Determination. In addition, five open-response items were administered to give participants an opportunity to provide more information about school culture. There were 42 participants in this study with each school having 21 respondents. The overall response rate was 65%. Beard Elementary had a response rate of 64% (21/33) and Jackson Elementary had a response rate of 68% (21/31).

Summary of Findings

In terms of education, culture sometimes goes unnoticed and unexamined. School leaders and teachers need to understand the role school culture plays in achievement, implementation of new initiatives, and in the overall environment students come to learn in each day. The purpose of this study was to determine what school culture trends, if any, exist at two Arkansas elementary schools with similar high-poverty rates and

comparably high student achievement. This qualitative study examined the schools' cultures using the School Culture Triage Survey (Phillips & Wagner, 2009) and five additional open-response items. Assessment data from the 2016-2017 school year was accessed via My School Info, a website maintained by the Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. The researcher analyzed data for elementary schools in Arkansas by filtering through information regarding socio-economic percentages (poverty rates) and cross referencing that data with high achievement scores. Both schools selected for this study had poverty rates of 98% for the 2016-2017 school year. High achievement is defined as students scoring a 3 or above as established by the Arkansas Department of Education. Students scoring at least a 3 are deemed "Ready" or on grade level.

The researcher completed all analyses of the collected data. The survey data was compiled via Survey Monkey®, and sorted according to respondents' schools. Responses for the 17-item questionnaire were translated into numerical scores using a five-point Likert scale: 1=Never; 2=rarely; 3=Sometimes; 4=Often; and 5= Always. Overall averages were automatically calculated online by totaling the respondents' scores for each item and dividing by the number of participants. This resulted in a mean score for each school.

Beard Elementary had an average score of 19.24 on Professional Collaboration, a 20.97 on Affiliative Collegiality, and a 23.67 in the focus area of Efficacy/Self-Determination. Jackson Elementary had an average score of 19.2 on Professional Collaboration, a 21.95 on Affiliative Collegiality, and a 23.86 in the focus area of Efficacy/Self-Determination. Overall average scores for the three over-arching themes of Professional Collaboration, Affiliative Collegiality, and Efficacy/Self-Determination

were consistent between the two schools. Two trends emerged from the 17-item assessment. The item that received the highest score for both schools was the first one under Professional Collaboration: “Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.” Beard Elementary averaged 4.48 on the item, and Jackson scored it at 4.29.

Teacher collaboration within professional learning communities (PLC) is a current hot topic in the state of Arkansas. The Arkansas Department of Education is stressing the importance of student-focused, data-driven, learning communities in all schools, and funds are being allocated at the state level to ensure appropriate professional development for teachers and administrators. The results from this study serve to affirm the wisdom behind Arkansas’ renewed emphasis on ensuring that each school’s faculty become an authentic professional learning community.

The question receiving the lowest mark from participants at both schools was found in the area of collegiality. The item read: “Teachers, staff, and community member’s visit/talk/meet outside of school to enjoy each other’s company.” Beard rated this question 2.95, while Jackson scored it at 2.86. This score indicates the relative lack of importance, and the minimal impact, that friendliness between teachers beyond the school day has on professional practice, student achievement, and school culture, within the two buildings. This finding emphasizes that principals’ efforts are better spent on fostering professional community among their faculties, than on seeking to cultivate conviviality between them.

Participants’ answers to five open-response items were analyzed and trends were identified. The two areas about which participants had the most to say in the form of

written responses centered on behavior and communication. All staff members submitted a response on question five regarding communication within and outside of the schools. This was the only question that every participant answered. Most answers were positive; however, a few were negative and the term “frustrated” was used to describe some participants’ feelings about communication. Student behavior was also indicated as an area of concern that needed to be addressed.

The findings from this study will be shared with faculty members from university teacher education and leadership programs in order to help strengthen the abilities of those individuals to have a positive impact on education. In addition, the results will be shared with school leaders in Arkansas as requested and with the Arkansas Department of Education to provide feedback for state leaders to use to understand current educational needs within our schools. The information could also be used as a guide for academically struggling schools that have challenging high-poverty percentages; the data from this investigation could assist those schools as they create strategic improvement plans to address low achievement issues.

Interpretation of Findings

The conclusions drawn from this study, based on the data collected from the school culture survey instrument and assessment data, strongly suggest that student achievement was related to the degree that a positive school culture was found in the building. The two schools in this study had similar results on the school culture assessment, with participants indicating that collaboration, discussions centering on student data and instructional practices, and teaming were strong in their schools. Both schools’ highest scores were in the category of efficacy/self-determination. This data

indicates that faculty members understand the importance of being solutions-oriented and that they value others' opinions. Likewise, efficacy scores indicate that both school communities feel empowered to make instructional decisions, which points to a high level of trust within each building. Scores were similar in the areas of feeling supported, celebrating special events, and being involved in the decision making process. The only weak area noted on the survey was the affiliative collegiality question, which asked if teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of school. Both schools had the lowest average on this particular question. The data on this question indicates that enjoying one another's company outside of the school walls is either of no importance to the participating faculty members, or has no impact on achievement and culture. While professional relationships within collaborative school communities are valuable, according to the data, friendly interactions outside of the workplace do not appear to impact school culture.

Recommendations

It is recommended that both undergraduate and graduate educator preparation programs include the importance of school culture and how to build cultures of collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy within each school. Teacher and educational leadership preparation programs emphasize management, instructional methodologies, and evaluation; however, few of them design coursework specifically related to school culture. Emphasis should be placed on professional learning communities, teaming, and true collaboration. Emerging school leaders should learn that meaningful activities should be planned for faculty members to celebrate and promote positive developments, and interactions during professional learning communities should be collaborative. In

turn, teachers' senses of efficacy would be closely related to the degree to which they feel valued and trusted to be involved in the decision making process. In schools where high degrees of collaboration and efficacy exist, teachers would be more likely to work together for the improvement of all students. It is recommended that more attention be given to the monitoring of school culture and positive culture building strategies in order for student achievement to increase during these times of uncertain funding and in a political climate that is not always friendly toward public education. Fortunately, Arkansas' recently approved plan for meeting its obligations under the Every Student Succeeds Act promises to do precisely this (I. Pfeffer, personal communication, August 29, 2017).

Universities should revisit educational preparation programs to ensure that proper emphasis is given to school culture. Participants in this study clearly indicate that professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality, and efficacy matter. They plainly state in their open responses that feeling valued, respected, and trusted is important. They also explain how professional learning communities have changed the way they work and interact with other educators in a more positive manner. Collaborative planning time, establishing a true sense of community, and reflection is also important in schools with positive cultures.

Limitations

The population of this study was very small; therefore, the results are quite limited in nature. Only 64% of faculty members participated at Beard Elementary, and 68% at Jackson, and those results stem from already small pools of employees. Assessment data was limited to one school year only. Additional assessment data could

have made the study stronger by including historical data to determine if there were trends of success in each school. Another way to improve results on a study such as this one would be to conduct face to face interviews with teachers, parents, and community members. This would add depth and richness to the qualitative study and provide a closer look into the feelings and attitudes of participants as those things relate to school culture.

Suggestions for Future Research

Additional research is still needed to gain better understanding of school culture and how it impacts student achievement. For example, this study could be repeated using a population of middle and high schools and a larger population of teachers and administrators. In addition, further study could include historical assessment data along with further demographic data. A comparison between the selected schools and other elementary schools within the same district would provide more data for this study. There are a variety of surveys available that could potentially be used to measure school culture in future research. Conducting this same study in three years would be a strong indicator of student achievement as more consistent assessment data would by then be available to school culture researchers. Repeating this study with the addition of ACT Aspire Science scores would also add value to future studies.

Conclusion

This qualitative study contributes important information to the research already available concerning school culture and the impact it has on student achievement. The results of this study suggest that a correlation exists between a school's having a positive collaborative culture and its students earning high achievement – even, importantly, when

that school serves mainly students from families with low socioeconomic status. Most professional development opportunities and educator preparation programs fail to recognize the importance a school's culture can have on teaching and learning.

Therefore, curriculum adjustments should be made to include the study and relevance of culture in all academic programs that are preparing new teachers to enter the field, or for those seeking school leadership licensure. If the goal is increased student achievement and student-focused education, it is imperative that the Arkansas Department of Education, local schools and districts, professional organizations, and all higher educational institutions realize – and act upon – the fact that culture drives achievement.

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Appendix A

Dear Principals:

My name is Tammi Davis and I am the assistant superintendent at Huntsville School District. I am working on my dissertation at Arkansas Tech University and my study topic is school culture. The specific title of my study is *School Culture and Student Achievement: An Examination of Two High-Achieving, High-Poverty Arkansas Schools*. (For the purpose of this study, culture refers to "the way we do things around here....belief systems, the way we talk about our school and students, level of collaboration, high standards, etc)

My dissertation chair, Dr. Christopher Trombly, and I have found that **Spradling Elementary** School and **Jones** Elementary are two schools in the state that have experienced high student achievement results, but also yield a 90% or higher poverty rate. I am seeking permission to survey your two schools to determine the cultural trends that may exist between them that are leading to success.

I have a survey questionnaire that I would like to ask teachers and administrators to complete. It will take approximately 5-10 minutes from start to finish. I have a link in survey monkey that I will forward to you and I am also willing to visit your schools during a parent night (or other event) in order to solicit more participation if needed. Identifying information will not be used when collecting the data on the two schools. Participants are completely anonymous as are their responses to the questions.

Please let me know if your schools are willing to participate in this research study. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am looking forward to hearing back from each of you.

Sincerely,

Tammi H Davis

4797387661

tdavis@1hsd.org

Appendix B

Copy of School Culture Questionnaire

Professional Collaboration/Affiliative Collegiality/Self Determination-Efficacy

Directions: Please circle a number to the right of each statement that most closely characterizes the practice in your school.

Rating: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always or Almost Always

1. How many total years have you been in education? (All combined years of experience.)

- ☐ 1-5 years
☐ 6-10 years
☐ 10+ years

2. How many years have you worked in this school?

- ☐ 1-5 years
☐ 6-10 years
☐ 10+ years

3. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. Teachers and staff work together to develop a school schedule.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Teachers, staff, and community members are involved in the decision making process at this school.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among teachers, staff, and families.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams, rather than as separate individuals.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Teachers, staff, and community members tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Teachers, staff, and community members visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each other's company.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. Our school reflects a true sense of "community."

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers, staff, and community.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by stakeholders of our school.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events, and goal attainment at this school.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. When something is not working in our school, the faculty, staff, and community work in unison to find solutions.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. School members are interdependent and value each other here.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting on their supervisors to tell them what to do.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. People work here and send their children to this school because they enjoy it and choose to be here.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or Almost Always
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

20. Did we fail to ask a question that you feel is important in terms of the culture at your child's school?

21. Is there anything especially positive that you would like to share about your child's school?

22. Has anything happened recently that impacted the way you feel about the school at this time? (For example, changes in programs or services, a death, a conflict with a teacher, or another event that has led you to feel a particular way at this time?)

23. How do you feel about the communication between school administration and yourself as a parent, community member, or staff member? Is it consistent? Do you feel informed about events and activities within the school?

24. If you have a concern, suggestion, or need information about a topic, do staff members and administration listen to you? Please cite specifics if applicable.

Appendix C



[REDACTED]
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Director of Accountability
[REDACTED]

TO: Ms. Tammi Davis

FROM: Melody Morgan

DATE: November 17, 2017

SUBJECT: Research Request

Dear Ms. Davis,

Thank you for your submission to the Springdale School District to conduct research in our district.

The committee has reviewed your proposal to study *School Culture and Student Achievement: An Examination of Two High-Achieving, High-Poverty Arkansas Schools*. The committee has approved your research proposal.

We appreciate your interest and desire to include Springdale in this important work.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Director of Accountability and Assessment
[REDACTED]

cc: Dr. Meg [REDACTED]
Dr. Kelly Monette [REDACTED]
Dr. [REDACTED]
Dr. [REDACTED]
Ms. [REDACTED]
Ms. [REDACTED]

Appendix D

CENTER FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL CULTURE
CREATING BETTER PLACES TO LEARN
Box 737
Cloquet, MN 55720-3317

**REGARDING PERMISSION TO USE THE SCHOOL CULTURE *TRIAGE* SURVEY
FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES**

Your request for permission to use the School Culture *Triage* Survey in your research is hereby granted with the following stipulations:

- The School Culture *Triage* Survey is to be used solely for your research study and shall not be sold or used with any compensated consultative activities;
- The copyright shall appear on all copies of the School Culture *Triage* Survey instrument;
- Your research study and one copy of reports, articles, and other printed materials that make use of the School Culture *Triage* Survey data shall be promptly sent to the Center for Improving School Culture;
- This agreement is not transferable to other researchers without the express consent of the Center for Improving School Culture.

Please sign and return this document to CISC, Box 737, Cloquet, MN 55720-3317

Best regards,

Christopher R. Wagner, Ph.D.
President and Founder, Center for Improving School Culture

I, Jammi Davis understand the above conditions of use and agree to abide by these terms and conditions.

Signed Jammi Davis Date 9/7/2017

Center for Improving School Culture
CREATING BETTER PLACES TO LEARN

School Culture Triage Survey
Professional Collaboration

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.

Value: 1 2 3 4 5 = 34 + 10 = 3.4

Tally of responses: I I,I I,I,I,I I,I

Product of tally multiplied by value: 1 + 4 + 3 + 16 + 10

Directions:

1. Tally each response from the surveys you have administered.
2. Multiply the total number of tallies under the value of **one** (1) by one. See above. **One person** selected a value of one (1) so the product of that person's selection equals one (1).
3. Multiply the total number of tallies under the value of **two** (2) by two. See above. **Two people** selected a value of two (2) so the product of those tallies equals four (4).
4. Multiply the total number of tallies under the value of **three** (3) by three. See above. **One person** selected a value of three (3) so the product of this tally equals three (3).
5. Multiply the total number of tallies under the value of **four** (4) by four. See above. **Four people** selected a value of four so the product of those tallies equals sixteen (16).
6. Multiply the total number of tallies under the value of **five** (5) by five. See above. **Two people** selected a value of five (5) so the product of those tallies equals ten (10).
7. Add the products ($1+4+3+16+10 = 34$) and divide by the total number of tallies. In the case above, the total number of tallies is ten and the average for this item equals 3.4.
8. Compute the average for each survey item in this manner.
9. Add the means for the three segments of the survey to get a score for each.
10. Then add the total of the means for each of the three segments for the final score.

Explanation:

The first 5 - items deal with professional collaboration.

The first item is: " Organizational members (employees/supervisors/managers/leaders) discuss, know, understand, and support the organization's goals."

- Two respondents ranked the item with a score of 1 hence the two tally marks next to the number 1.
- Eight respondents ranked the item with a score of 2 hence the eight tally marks next to the number 2.
- Three respondents ranked the item with a score of 3 hence the three tally marks next to the number 3.
- Thirteen respondents ranked the item with a score of 4 hence the thirteen tally marks next to the number 4.
- Seven respondents ranked the item with a score of 5 hence the seven tally marks next to the number 5.

Now we must find the value of each ranking.

- Ranking one, with two tally marks multiplied by a value of one yields a total value of 2.
- Ranking two, with seven tally marks multiplied by two yields a value of 14.
- Ranking three, with three tally marks multiplied by three yields a value of 9.
- Ranking four, with thirteen tally marks multiplied by four yields a value of 52.
- Ranking five, with seven tally marks multiplied by five yields a value of 35.

Add all the values $2 + 16 + 3 + 9 + 52 + 35 = 114$

Since there were 33 responses, we divide the 114 by 33 for the mean score of 3.56.

See if you come up with 3.47 as a mean for the second example. (Be sure to check on the number of responses.)

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CREATING BETTER PLACES TO LEARN

SCTS TALLY FORM SCORING EXAMPLE

Professional Collaboration

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.

$$1_n = 2_{\text{|||||}} = 3_{\text{|||}} = 4_{\text{|||||}} = 5_{\text{|||||}} = \underline{114 \div 33} = \underline{3.56}$$

$$(2) + (16) + (9) + (52) + (35)$$

2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.

$$1_{\text{II}} \cdot 2_{\text{IIIII I}} \cdot 3_{\text{IIII}} \cdot 4_{\text{IIII IIII IIII}} = 5_{\text{IIII}} \div \frac{\quad}{\quad} = \frac{\quad}{\quad}$$

$$\frac{1}{(1-x)^2} = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} (n+1)x^n$$

Appendix H

Search

Compare 0

Analyzer

FAQ

Login ?
*Optional

Schools

Districts

Name

City

District

Zip

County

Co-op

ARLEG District

Congressional District

Enter school/LEA

Advanced Filters



MY SCHOOL INFO

SEARCH • COMPARE • INFORM

My School Info allows the public to search and compare public schools and districts from across the State of Arkansas.

The data presented on this website is periodically updated and reflective of information submitted by schools and districts to the Arkansas Department of Education.

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 District Statewide Reports


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What's New?

 How to Identify ACT Performance Trends for Your School



 View on Youtube

Use Case Videos (23)

Click the segment below to view the My School Info Use Case videos

General

Superintendents

Principals

Curriculum Coordinators

Counselors

Bookkeepers


Parents / Community

Appendix I

ACT[®] Aspire[®] Performance Level Descriptors

Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs)

PLDs outline the knowledge, skills, and practices that students performing at any given level achieve in each content area at each grade level. They indicate if the students are academically prepared to engage successfully in further studies in each content area, the next grade's material and, eventually at the high school level to verify that they are college and career ready.

<div>  3rd Grade Reading — Performance Level Descriptors Text Complexity: Basic* </div>				
Reporting Categories	Needs Support	Close	Ready	Exceeding
Key Ideas and Details Students read informational and literary texts to determine central ideas and themes and accurately summarize information. They read closely to understand relationships and to draw logical inferences and conclusions.	<i>A student performing at the Needs Support level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is working toward being able to read to understand a simple purpose and short, basic sentences in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: is working on identifying explicitly stated central ideas. is working on identifying explicitly stated details. is working on making simple inferences about key details. 	<i>A student performing at the Close level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a simple purpose, short, basic sentences, and clearly stated ideas in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: identifies explicitly stated central ideas. identifies explicitly stated details. makes simple inferences about key details. uses key details to make inferences about character traits. paraphrases portions of literary and informational texts. 	<i>A student performing at the Ready level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a clear purpose and organizational structure, some longer and more complex sentences, and clearly stated ideas and concepts in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: identifies central ideas. summarizes texts. connects ideas, events, and characters to make logical inferences. uses key details to draw conclusions about character traits and actions. 	<i>A student performing at the Exceeding level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a clear purpose and organizational structure, some longer and more complex sentences, and clearly stated ideas and concepts in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: identifies central ideas. summarizes texts. analyzes ideas, events, and characters to make logical inferences. uses key details to analyze character traits and actions.
Craft and Structure Students analyze the structure and purpose of informational and literary texts. They interpret authorial decisions rhetorically and differentiate between various perspectives and sources of information.	<i>A student performing at the Needs Support level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is working toward being able to read to understand a simple purpose and short, basic sentences in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: is working on identifying author's purpose. is working on identifying characterization from textual evidence. is working on identifying word meaning from context. 	<i>A student performing at the Close level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a simple purpose, short, basic sentences, and clearly stated ideas in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: connects author's purpose to specific events or information in the text. identifies details that support author's purpose. identifies characterization from textual evidence. identifies word and phrase meanings from context. 	<i>A student performing at the Ready level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a clear purpose and organizational structure, some longer and more complex sentences, clearly stated ideas and concepts in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: makes connections between the structure and content in a text. identifies how structure and content contribute to author's purpose. identifies multiple perspectives in a text. identifies how parts of a text contribute to characterization. identifies word and phrase meanings from context. 	<i>A student performing at the Exceeding level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a clear purpose and organizational structure, some longer and more complex sentences, and clearly stated ideas and concepts in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: identifies how the structure and content shape author's purpose. distinguishes between multiple perspectives. identifies how parts of a text contribute to characterization and theme. identifies word and phrase meanings from context.
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas Students read a range of informational and literary texts critically and comparatively, making connections to prior knowledge and integrating information across texts. They analyze how authors construct arguments, evaluating reasoning and evidence from various sources.	<i>A student performing at the Needs Support level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is working toward being able to read to understand a simple purpose and short, basic sentences in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: is working on identifying an author's explicit claims. is working on citing textual evidence to support claims. is working on identifying sentences with a simple structure as fact or opinion. is working on recognizing similarities and differences between two texts. 	<i>A student performing at the Close level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a simple purpose, short, basic sentences, and clearly stated ideas in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: identifies an author's explicit claims. cites textual evidence to support claims. distinguishes between fact and opinion. identifies a common topic clearly across two texts. 	<i>A student performing at the Ready level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a clear purpose and organizational structure, some longer and more complex sentences, clearly stated ideas and concepts in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: identifies an author's explicit or implied claims. cites textual evidence to support claims. distinguishes between fact and opinion. compares or contrasts two texts. identifies similarities and differences between topics or characters. 	<i>A student performing at the Exceeding level:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs to understand a clear purpose and organizational structure, some longer and more complex sentences, and clearly stated ideas and concepts in literary and informational texts. To demonstrate comprehension of texts with these elements, a student performing at this level: determines an author's explicit or implied claims. analyzes how authors use textual evidence to construct their claims. distinguishes between fact and opinion. compares and contrasts two texts. analyzes similarities and differences between topics or characters. cites textual evidence to support analysis.

