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Fully Practicing the Middle School Concept: A Phenomenological Study of Virginia Middle Schools Re-Designated III As A School To Watch

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Fully Practicing the Middle School Concept: A Phenomenological Study of Virginia Middle

Schools Re-Designated III As A School To Watch

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by

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ABSTRACT

Fully Practicing the Middle School Concept: A Phenomenological Study of Virginia Middle

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of school staff as to the best

practices utilized in successful middle schools. The researcher used the framework of *This We

Believe* and the School To Watch application process to determine schools worthy of the study.

Each school must have been designated three times or more as a School To Watch. Three

schools were selected for the study that were each in three different school divisions and three

different geographical regions in Virginia. The researcher went to each site to conduct

interviews with participants. Fifteen interviews via focus groups were conducted with twenty-

one participants. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

The researcher analyzed interview data and determined there were three emerging concepts

critical to the success of middle schools. Concepts that emerged from participants were: each

school was developmentally responsive to the social and emotional needs of young adolescents,

each school's staff employed strong organizational leadership and structures to coordinate the

school, and each school's staff was purposeful in their creation of each school's master schedule

that allowed for purposeful planning. Practioners may find the results of the study useful as

many of the practices could be employed in other middle schools.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family. To my husband, Matt, for always supporting me. My extra work was extra work for him, too. However, he never complained and he did a wonderful job taking care of me and our boys. To my sons, Hyder and Jackson, both of whom were very understanding of my being away to work. My hope was that by seeing their mom work hard for her education, they will be inspired to work hard for their own education one day. Lastly, to my parents Jeff and Jureta Hyder, for their lifelong commitment to their daughter and for instilling in me the love a learning. I am truly blessed to have such a supportive and loving family. I could not have persevered without them!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

<u>Understanding and Educating Young Adolescents</u>

One of the most challenging periods of childhood is between the ages of 10-15 when children find themselves stuck between being a child and becoming an adult (Santrock, 2014). For children, it is an awkward period of ill-timed growth spurts, uncomfortable changes that come with puberty, and a desire to be acknowledged as an individual while also being accepted by a group (National Middle School Association, 2010; Santrock, 2014). Young adolescents experience physical, cognitive, and behavioral changes that are unprecedented in their life thus far, with the exception of the early childhood years (Santrock, 2014). Change can be difficult for the person experiencing it and for those people closest to them. This is especially true for educators when it comes to the task of teaching young adolescents during a developmentally challenging time.

Given the variation of growth during young adolescents, educators must determine whether they are teaching children or adults. The range of physical development within in a single middle level classroom may include students that have not yet started puberty and others have transitioned out of puberty (Santrock, 2014). The educational needs for such a developmentally diverse group of students requires careful considerations of teaching pedagogy and programing by educational leaders and teachers. For many years, young adolescents were educated in junior high schools which were organized as a smaller version of a high school. In the 1960s, educational leaders and researchers began to understand that this was not a developmentally appropriate way to organize schools for young adolescents (Manning, 2002; Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016). Educators throughout the nation began discussing a

developmentally appropriate educational model for young adolescents and that was the beginning of the middle school concept.

Central to the middle school concept is meeting the academic needs of young adolescent students while also attending to their psychosocial needs. Researchers and practioners realized that learning was connected to young adolescent psychosocial needs and that learning could not occur if students did not feel accepted and supported psychologically and socially (Santrock, 2014). For over 40 years American educators have been practicing the middle school concept, researching the middle school approach to education, determining effective practices, and reporting results (Schaefer et al., 2016). Although debated, educating adolescent learners in a framework associated with the middle school concept has been widely accepted as the best approach for adolescent education. The advent of the standardization movement in education shifted the focus to proving student learning as verified by state standardized test data and has been a challenging environment for the middle school concept to survive.

Response to the Struggle

The middle school concept has been criticized by educational leaders, politicians, and researchers in the age of accountability as focus centered on achievement determined by testing data, rather than a whole-child approach to educating young adolescents (Anfara & Lipka, 2003). In 1999, The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Level Reform was created with support from Board of Directors of the Association of Middle Level Educators (AMLE), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), in response to the need to focus national attention on middle level education (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2018). Results from the National Forum polling of educators were used to develop support and reform for middle

schools. In part, the National Forum's members determined that the best support would be achieved by acknowledging individual middle schools were practicing the core tenets of the middle school concept while also achieving academically. The Forum's program for doing so is called Schools To Watch (STW) (National Forum, 2018).

The goal of the Schools To Watch program is to assess middle schools in order to determine the degree to which core tenets of the middle school concept are being implemented. The success of implementation must be apparent in student achievement as measured by standardized testing scores. By acknowledging schools that implement the middle school concept at a high level, the National Forum can advocate for middle level reform, influence educational policy, and promote successful middle level educational practices (National Forum, 2018). The forum also can provide support through publishing middle level focused resources for educators, providing professional development opportunities for practioners, and connecting middle level educators throughout the nation (National Forum, 2018). School staffs that apply to be acknowledged as a School To Watch must prove through an application process and site visit that they academically challenge their students, are developmentally responsive to young adolescents, provide a learning environment that is socially equitable, and have in place organizational structures that support the sustainability and continued growth of their middle level school (The National Forum, 2018; Schools to Watch, 2018).

<u>Statement of the Problem</u>

Over the past fifty years, researchers and practioners have debated the effectiveness of the middle school model (Beane, 1999; Bunting, 2005; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Flowers, 2003; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Quattrone, 1990; Schaefer et al., 2016). Much of the research methodology in this area has been survey research and qualitative

inquiry with practioners. Clark (1992) indicated that researchers have questioned the level of

implementation of the middle school concept in schools involved in prior research studies.

Standardized test scores are a commonly used statistic to make assumptions or correlations

between overall middle school effectiveness and best practices for middle school programs

(Musoleno & White, 2010). The result of many of these studies is that it is difficult to precisely

determine what is working in middle school programs that are identified as successful.

<div align="center">Purpose Statement</div>

The purpose of this study is to identify practices that are essential to student success

occurring in Virginia middle schools. The Schools To Watch program provides a framework for

identifying successful practices by recognizing middle schools that implement key elements of

This We Believe (National Middle School Association, 2010; School To Watch, 2018). The

process for a school to be recognized as a School To Watch involves assessing four areas critical

to the middle school concept: Academic Excellence, Developmental Responsiveness, Social

Equity, and Organizational Structures (Schools To Watch, 2018).   The application process

completed by school staff requires the reporting of specific data, stakeholder data, program

justification, and descriptions of organizational processes (School To Watch, 2018). The criteria

for analyzing what a Schools To Watch implements to address the varied needs of young

adolescents allows researchers to determine best practices. This study will analyze three Schools

To Watch Re-designated III schools in Virginia. A Schools To Watch Re-designated school has

been recognized three consecutive times, with designations being every three years. Central to

this study is to understand the practices utilized in a Re-designated III School To Watch which

impact academic excellence, implement developmentally responsive programs, and assure

school equity for students.

Research Questions:

1.) What factors do school staff members perceive to influence young adolescent social and emotional outcomes?

2.) What factors do school staff members perceive address that young adolescents have successful academic performance?

3.) What organizational structures and processes do school staff members perceive as being developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents?

4.) What practices do Re-Designated III Schools To Watch staff members perceive to support social equity for students?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this research study regarding the performance of Schools To Watch in Virginia will inform practitioners of best practices implemented by the schools used in the study. The hope is that by reporting best practices other middle schools might be able to implement similar practices and experience the same long-term success. There have been studies conducted in Kentucky; this study will enhance the transferability of these similar studies (Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2010). Thus, this study will support the existing body of research surrounding the success of middle level education. It will also provide a model for research replication that could be utilized in other states to evaluate middle level education. Lastly, this study will provide insight into the Schools To Watch process and that schools participating in the application process for Schools To Watch are provided with an opportunity to self-reflect on their practices. The site visit portion of the process affords school the opportunity to be evaluated by individuals outside their school division in order to offer insight in how they

can grow. Thus, other states and school divisions may want to explore the utilization of the

Schools To Watch organization to determine best practices.

<div align="center">Definition of Terms</div>

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study.

Academic Excellence: Defined as the establishment of a learning environment that

challenges students to use their intellect for deep learning (NMSA, 2010; School To Watch,

2018).

Advisory: A programmatic structure where students can meet with an assigned adult

advocate to discuss any issues or concerns a student might have (NMSA, 2010).

Common planning time: Designated by teachers who are grouped and have a common

planning period (NMSA, 2010).

Developmental Responsiveness: A term used to describe programming within a school

that responds to the unique psychosocial and physiological needs of young adolescents.

(National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2018; School To Watch, 2018).

Exploratory: Opportunities created within a curriculum for students to explore diverse

areas of content, special interests, learn new real-world skills, or explore potential careers

(NMSA, 2018).

Organizational Structures and Processes: A school learning environment that involves all

stakeholders in creating a vision for success. School leadership provides a collaborative

atmosphere that is aimed at continual improvement in all areas. The school partners with the

school division and community to meet the needs of students and continue a path of success

(NMSA, 2010; School To Watch, 2018).

Middle Grades: Grade levels that target students between the ages of eleven to fourteen. Refers to grades sixth through eighth grades, but may include additional grades depending on the chronological age of students (Russell, 1997).

Social Equity: School staffs that are socially equitable provide programming that meets the needs of all learners (NMSA, 2010; Schools To Watch, 2018).

Teaming: "Two or more teachers working with a common group of students" (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 31).

Young adolescent: The terminology used to describe students between the ages of ten and fifteen and are often characterized by having tremendous physical, intellectual, emotional, and social growth during that specific time period (NMSA, 2010; Lounsbury, 2009).

<center>Limitations and Delimitations</center>

Qualitative design methods are exploratory and are dependent upon participant responses detailing their own perspectives (Siebler & Tolich, 2013).   And, limitations and delimitations are considered present in this research study; the study was not weakened or limited by such. Limitations of this study include that each of the selected schools involved in the study were Schools To Watch and it could be argued that Schools To Watch phenomenon outcomes might not apply to other middle schools. Also, only one school in each of the school divisions was chosen for the study, thus limiting the scope of the study in each school division. Lastly, the participants of the study had to have knowledge of the Schools To Watch process and needed to have been employed at their respective middle schools during at least one application process and site visit. The principal investigator needed for each participant to have knowledge of the standards of School To Watch, however, this limited the perspectives of staff members that may be new to the school and did not experience a Schools To Watch application process and visit.

Delimitations of this research study involve the very nature of a phenomenological study. Given the essence of a phenomenological study, participants have a unique perspective of a lived event (Patton, 2015). Thus, the researcher must take participant accounts of events and opinions of outcomes as presented by the participant in the interview. The researcher interviewed multiple participants at each school to ensure that information presented in each participant interview could be cross-referenced with other participant interviews at the same school. The coding analysis conveyed similarities in participant perspectives that helped to validate events and perspectives in each school.

Qualitative research involving participant interviews, coupled with the nature of a phenomenological study may be limited by participant responses and interpretation of questions, events, and experiences (Patton, 2015). Participants are asked to respond as to their own experiences and perspective, and this can result in interviews going off the topic of the presented question (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). The researcher used the Interview Protocol as a guide for keeping the interview on topic. The researcher chose the research designed method so that information of specific group of people involved in the specific program could be revealed in order to better understand successful middle school practices utilized by school staffs.

<u>Summary</u>

The purpose of this study is to ascertain practices that are essential to student success occurring in Virginia middle schools. Using the lens of the School To Watch program provides a context for identifying such practices. Included in this study are five chapters. Chapter one establishes the purpose for this research study, the research questions, definitions of important terms, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter two, is a literature review detailing the development of the middle over the decades, criticisms of the middle school concept, and a

explanation of the Schools To Watch process. Chapter three, presents the research methodology

and study design. Chapter four, submits the data analysis of participant interviews through

coding and the findings of the study. Chapter five, summarized the finds of this study, submit

conclusions of the research study, presents implications for practices, and proposes future

research

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

<u>A Chronology of the Middle School Movement</u>

In 1963 William Alexander, in a speech at the 10th Annual Conference for School

Administrators: A National Conference on the Dynamic Junior High School, introduced the

middle school concept (Schaefer et al., 2016). Alexander (1963) identified that the school

structure of the 1960's; elementary, junior high school, and high school did not address the

unique needs of young adolescent students. The elementary to junior high transition forced

students to conform to high school expectations when they were not at a cognitive or

developmental level to handle tasks assigned to them (Schaefer et al., 2016).

After Alexander's (1963) presentation, other educational researchers, reformers, and

leaders began to examine the need for a more developmentally appropriate, intermediate level of

schooling. In the 1970s, *The Middle School Journal* was established and the idea of middle

school became more clearly defined. Researchers published articles within *The Middle School*

Journal and other scholarly publications that stated that adolescents had a unique set of needs

that should be addressed through a distinctive approach to instruction (NMSA, 2010; Schaefer,

2016). However, in reality there was little difference between a middle school and junior high

school other than in the name (Lounsbury, 2009; Schaefer et al., 2016). National studies of

schools with grades Kindergarten through eighth grade compared to schools with sixth through

eighth grades indicated that when young adolescents attended a middle school and were exposed

to middle school core tenets, middle schools better met their unique needs over that of attending

Kindergarten through eighth grade schools. (McEwin & Alexander, 1990) It took time,

however, for school divisions to shift to the middle school concept from Kindergarten through eighth grade schools and junior high schools that were grades seven through nine.

In the 1980s, the movement gained tractions with the publication of *This We Believe, A Nation at Risk*, and *Turning Points: Education Adolescents in the 21st Century* (National Middle School Association, 2010; Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). *This We Believe*, and its subsequent revisions in 1995, 2003, and 2010 outlined the core tenets of the middle school concept (NMSA, 2010). *A Nation at Risk* did little in the way of addressing the middle school specifically as it focused more on how K-12 education was failing (Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Schaefer et al., 2016). However, many researchers used the arguments outlined in the report to support the need to address specific areas of school, such as implementing a rigorous curriculum and using research based instructional approaches; all of which were supported by the middle school concept. *A Nation at Risk* also influenced the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development to publish *Turning Points,* which specifically addressed the middle school concept (Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Schaefer et al., 2016).

Turning Points: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century (1989), published more than twenty years after William Alexander first introduced the middle school concept, addressed two main points concerning the middle school movement. One, junior high schools did not meet the developmental needs of adolescents, thus warranting the need for the middle school concept. Two, middle schools in the 1980s were addressing the needs of adolescents, but often times sacrificed academic rigor to address students' psychosocial needs (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Quattrone, 1990). The Carnegie Council (1989) specifically proposed that middle schools focus on eight areas:

18

1. Create small learning communities

2. Implement a core curriculum

3. Ensure success for all students

4. Give teachers and administrators decision making power

5. Hire staff that had middle school specific preparation

6. Promote healthy lifestyles

7. Engage families

8. Strengthen community ties (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989)

These eight areas were in harmony with the core tenets of *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010).

This We Believe

This We Believe (1982) has continued to be the handbook for middle level educators regarding how to implement the middle school concept. Since its first publication in 1982, *This We Believe* has been amended and republished four times to adapt its core tenets to the needs of the 21st century student (NMSA, 2010). According to *This We Believe*, there are four areas that middle schools need to address in order to remain responsive to young adolescent student needs:

- Middle schools must be developmentally responsive to the unique needs of young adolescents.

- Middle schools must expose students to a challenging curriculum that includes all students.

- Students in the middle level must also be empowered to make decisions and be held accountable for those decisions.

- Middle school students must be provided an equitable learning environment with real world connections to their education (NMSA, 2010, p. 13).

Each of these core tenets are addressed in sixteen characteristics that fall within the categories of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment; Leadership and Organization; and Culture and Community (NMSA, 2010).

<u>Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment</u>

Academically, the authors of *This We Believe* (2010) use a whole-child approach to curriculum and instruction. Middle level educators need to value the unique needs of the young adolescent as they rapidly develop from being children into adults. Rick Wormeli (2001) explains in his book *Meet Me in the Middle: Becoming an Accomplished Middle-Level Teacher*:

> Recent research suggests that the brain continues to grow through puberty.
> During these years, the brain is hard-wired for tasks. To build on that framework,
> adolescents need engaging and relevant learning experiences and typically must
> repeat concepts and skills until the ideas become permanent additions to the basic
> structure. This brings up the idea of brain elasticity, which suggests that the brain
> changes physiologically as a result of experience. The more we learn, the more
> the brain adapts to receive the learning. In other words, the more we learn, the
> more we *can* learn (pg. 21).

Understanding the psychosocial development as Wormeli (2001) describes, allows middle level educators to approach curriculum and teaching appropriately. Thus, middle level educators understand that lessons should not just focus on content, but appeal to the social and emotional developmental stage of adolescents. Educators themselves need to be role models by showing with their own behaviors how to socially interact and work within a learning community, thus creating a collaborative educational environment (NMSA, 2010; Wormeli, 2001).

Teachers need to engage students in active learning where students relate to content in meaningful ways that show them how their learning is connected to the rest of their world (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1996). Marcia Tate (2014) says, "To establish students' need for what you are teaching, give them a purpose for learning. Open your lesson with a reason why the particular objective you are teaching is necessary to master (p. 70)" Teachers should set high expectations for student achievement that promote students engaging deeply with curriculum (NMSA, 2010). This process should also show students that learning is an on-going, collaborative, and active process (Beane, 1997). Teachers are guides for students setting learning goals and they help students to monitor their own progress with relevant, specific feedback. (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, and Stone, 2012) School staffs, and especially teachers, that set high expectations for student learning have been shown through studies to promote student achievement in academics (Clark & Clark, 2004).

An interdisciplinary approach to curriculum is preferable. Middle schools should offer exploratory opportunities that allow students to discover new fields of study that are related to the core curriculum of math, English, science, and social studies. The authors state that the idea of exploratory "is an attitude and approach, not a classification of content." (NMSA, 2010, p. 20) Exploratory should be understood to be an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum where students interact with all subject areas in order to discuss persistent, real-world problems (Beane, 1996). Wormeli (2001) explains an interdisciplinary approach as follows:

> Subject integration is one of the major benefits of teaming. Students can write
> coherent and object lab reports in science class because they have learned about
> technical writing in another class. They can think abstractly in math class because
> of their work in art and music. They can comprehend a research article in social

studies because they learned how to read for information in the English class (p.

137).

Wormeli (2001) goes on to explain, "When teachers work as a team they can coordinate their

assignments to help students see the connections among topics…" (p. 137). Exploring is critical

to learning and an effective design element lesson and unit of study construction (Wiggins &

McTighe, 1998). Furthermore, problem-based learning allows students to craft their own deep

understanding of their world. Through projects and collaboration with peers, teachers serve as

guides for students to construct their understanding of content and apply it in relevant manners

(Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Silver, 2005; Tomlinson, 1999).

Over the course of the middle school movement there has been growth in exploratory

programs to include career explorations, music, industrial arts, computers, and the arts (McEwin

& Alexander, 1990). Intramural sports are also considered as a way to address exploration of

subjects while promoting health and wellness. Middle schools that had intramural programs for

their students provided one more avenue for students to explore and for their developmental

needs to be met (McEwin & Alexander, 1990). For exploratory programs to work, teachers must

communicate in order to plan such units of study that connect multiple subject areas. During the

1990s, Beane (1996) stated that one approach to interdisciplinary curriculums should be that

teachers work in interdisciplinary teams to organize content around thematic units of study.

However, this approach requires that teachers are grouped in an organizational structure that

allows for such planning. If teachers are not grouped accordingly, interdisciplinary planning is

difficult.

Instructionally, middle level educators must also be well versed in differentiated

instructional practices (NMSA, 2010). Middle school students vary greatly in their cognitive

development, as well as, their learning styles. Middle school teachers need to instruct with these variations in mind (Wormeli, 2001). Teachers must use a variety of instructional strategies to address the needs of all learners (NMSA, 2010; Tomlinson, 1999). Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999) explains:

> In differentiated classroom, teachers begin where students are, not the front of a curriculum guide. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus, they also accept and act on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity. In differentiated classrooms, teacher ensures that a student competes against himself as he grows and develops more than he compete against other students (p. 2).

Wormeli (2001) explains that the approach should be no different at the middle level:

> Multiple pathways to the same high standard of performance do not weaken academic rigor: they strengthen it, taking students farther than they would have gone had the teacher not used differentiated instruction. It's a middle school challenge worth pursuing (p. 88).

Lastly, curriculum and instruction must also be assessed in such a way as to determine if students have achieved true understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Teachers should use formative and summative assessments to gather information on student learning (Wormeli, 2001; 2006). Additionally, such assessment data should be used to measure progress toward meeting learning goals, adjust instruction, and communicate with students and families regarding the student's growth (NMSA, 2010; Wormeli, 2006). McMillan (2018) describes the use of

assessments as, "a multifaceted process that includes the collection, interpretation, and use of information to help teachers make decisions that both document and improve student learning. Conceptualized in this way, assessment is more than testing or measurement…(p.17). School staffs that analyze assessment data, collaborate on how to adjust instruction, and focus professional development based on assessment data were shown to improve by doing so (Clark & Clark, 2004).

Leadership and Organization

Sally Clark and Donald Clark (2004) summarize multiple studies of middle level leadership in "Principal Leadership for Developing and Sustaining Highly Successful Middle Level School" and they review that leadership and organization are critical factors in the success of middle school staffs and students. When school leaders focused on having a cohesive vision, emphasizing effective teaching and learning practices, and building relationships throughout the school community middle level staffs experienced long-lasting success.   The NMSA (2010) states that middle level leaders should establish a shared vision involving all stakeholders in creating and implementing that vision (NMSA, 2010). Peter Senge (1994) advises:

> Shared vision strategies should be developmental. Every stage of the process
>
> should help build both the listening capacity of the top leaders, and the leadership
>
> capacities of the rest of the organization, so that they can move together to the
>
> next stage (pp. 305-306).

The vision of a middle school should be student centered and address the needs of young adolescent growth, health, and educational needs. Research has indicated that there are positive educational outcomes when leadership uses a shared vision approach, and that such a model should also be adopted for middle level leaders (Schaffer et al., 2016; Senge et al., 2000).

Successful middle school staffs focus their vision on setting high expectations for the student learning and behavior, and they are developmentally responsive to the unique needs of young adolescents (Clark & Clark, 2004).

Middle level education also needs leaders that are fully committed to the middle school concept (NMSA, 2010). Research has been succinct that when middle level leaders more fully implement the middle school concept the greater the impacts are for student learning and development (Clark & Clark, 2003). Clark and Clark (2003) compiled multiple studies that reiterated that teaming, strong exploratory curriculums, advisory programs, interdisciplinary units of study, and intramurals were critical components to middle schools that had sustained success. Additionally, middle level principals reported that teaming and exploratory offerings were important and implemented at a high level in schools with sustained success (Clark & Clark, 2003). Middle level leaders should be improving their knowledge of research based methods that promote middle schools (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine, 1999). These leaders should also be strong instructional coaches that understand the cognitive ability of middle school students and the instructional approaches that allow for these students to have positive learning experiences (Brown & Anfara, 2003). These leaders must also be willing to lead change when needed, as middle school student's needs are always changing with the times (Clark & Clark, 2003). Principals should be willing to collaborate with others in and outside the school building as to best approaches (Clark & Clark, 2003; Senge et al., 2000). The culture of the school is dependent upon middle level leaders shaping a school culture that is responsive to young adolescents. (Brown, 2003; NMSA, 2010)

Middle school leaders should also implement an on-going professional development plan that not only continually focuses on the core tenets of the middle school philosophy, but also

addresses the latest research and best practices for middle level education. Faculties should

identify school, teacher, and student needs and create a professional development plan to

strengthen those areas (NMSA, 2010). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) explain:

> Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting (just as students do); by
>
> collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work;
>
> and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning enables teacher to make the
>
> leap from theory to accomplished practice. In addition to a powerful base of
>
> theoretical knowledge, such learning requires settings that support teacher inquiry
>
> and collaboration and strategies grounded in teachers' questions and concerns. To
>
> understand deeply, teacher must learn about, see, and experience successful
>
> learning-centered and learner-centered teaching practices. Sustained change in
>
> teachers' learning opportunities and practices will require sustained
>
> investment…(p. 597)

Professional development should be ongoing throughout a school year, and staff experiences

may involve news roles for staff members or expanding current roles. Such endeavors may

involve staff members networking outside of the school and partnering with other educational

resources that may hold the answers to their questions (Lieberman,1995). There should be clear

goals, rules for engagement, and a collaborative environment that allows all stakeholders a voice

in decision making (Senge, 1994). When professional development is approached correctly it

can lead to growth in researched-based practices performed by staff, as well as, improved student

performance (Parke, Generett, & Ramos, 2017).

The organizational structure of a middle school should also be set up in a way that

supports student needs and learning. *This We Believe* (2010) recommends that teachers be

grouped into two or four member teams that address all four of the core subject areas of English,

math, science, and social studies. The idea of teaming is not reserved for middle level education,

"…teams are recognized as a critical component of ever enterprise – the predominant unit for

decision making and getting things done (Senge, 1994, p. 354). Middle level research continues

to show that "Effective interdisciplinary teams lead to improved student achievement, increased

parental contacts, an enhanced school climate, and positive student attitudes" (NMSA, 2010, p.

31). Grade level, interdisciplinary teams have the same group of students and allow teachers to

collaborate on how to best meet the individual needs of each of the students on a team. Wormeli

(2001) explains:

> Teaming can be done with two or more teacher but usually not more than five. In
>
> many schools, a team consists of the teachers who specialize in English, history,
>
> math, and science as well as a guidance counselor and one or more special
>
> education teachers. Specialist in foreign languages, physical education, music,
>
> the arts, gifted and talented education, speech pathology, or English as a Second
>
> Language can be consulting or full-fledged members of the team (p. 137).

Additionally, teacher teams share a common planning time that allows them to plan

interdisciplinary units, analyze student data, discuss student needs, and make implementation

plans (NMSA, 2010). Flowers, Merten, and Mulhall (2003) reported, "research has

demonstrated that teachers need to meet for common team planning time at least four times each

week for 30 minutes or more per meeting to achieve consistent positive outcomes" (p.55). Clark

and Clark (2006) emphasized the need for common planning time even more and said:

> Common team planning of a least 45 minutes three to four times a week (in
>
> addition to individual teacher planning time) is correlated with higher student

achievement scores, higher frequency of team activities (curriculum coordination,

coordination of student assessments and feedback, parent contact and

involvement, and contact with other building resources staff), and higher

perceptions of the quality of the teaming experience (p. 55).

Teaming also allows for flexible scheduling as teacher teams are able to adjust their own

schedules throughout the school year. Common planning time may result in students feeling

better about their schooling, teams of teachers effectively planning instruction together, and more

interdisciplinary connection between subject areas (Flowers, Merten, & Mulhall, 2003). The

effects of common planning time are considered an advantage of middle schools (McEwin &

Alexander, 1990). Effective teaming practices have also resulted in increased academic

performance in schools that more fully implemented teaming (Clark & Clark; 2006; Flowers,

Merten, & Mulhall, 2003). In short, teams create schools within schools that work as small

learning communities with high levels of relationship connections between students and teachers.

<u>Culture and Community</u>

A successful middle school is a place where students feel that they are safe, included, and

supported during young adolescents (NMSA, 2010). Faculty members should work to create an

environment where people interact respectfully, care for one another, and encourage all persons

within their building. This requires a team approach to creating a school that is responsive to the

needs of young adolescents. Sprick and Knight (2018) advise school staffs to collaborate in the

creation of programs that support a positive and safe school environment for students:

For behavior support practices to be effective, the leadership team must design

policies related to safety, discipline, motivation, and climate that teachers are

willing to adopt and implement. Without teacher support universal practices will

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never become a reality. The team should ensure that every one staff has a voice

through his or her representation on the team and can be a part of the debate when

there are disagreements about proposed policy. Any new policy or procedure

should be treated as provisional until data is collected on its efficacy or lack

thereof (p. 50).

The school environment must have adults working together in an organized fashion while also

being developmentally responsive to the needs of middle level students, thus modeling a true

collaborative environment to students. Wormeli (2001) explains, "Educational systems are

people-centered. Survival in the world requires good people skills. Positive attitudes can change

the world-one young adolescent, and one middle school teacher, at a time" (p. 6).

Given that young adolescents are still learning, they will make mistakes. Effective

school-wide and classroom management is critical to creating a positive learning environment.

Poor student behaviors are corrected, but not necessarily punished as it is understood that young

adolescents will make mistakes and will need guidance about how to correct their behavior

(NMSA, 2010). Middle level practitioner Debbie Silver (2005) explains in her book *Drumming

to the Beat of Different Marchers*:

A classroom management plan should be a well-though-out system that is

grounded in recognized behavior theory. It should be crafted to meet both the

short-range goal of having a class run smoothly and the long-range goals of

having students become self-sufficient lifelong learner who will become

contributing community members (p. 23).

Middle school staffs should also be developmentally responsive to student needs by giving each student an adult advocate. Manning (2002) explains the need for developmentally responsive middle schools:

Middle level school students differ from elementary students and, therefore, deserve a school that addresses their specific needs. A middle school effort emerged and essential middle school concepts were developed. No longer was the middle school to be treated as an upward extension of the elementary school or a downward extension of the secondary school. The middle school acquired its own mission: To provide educational experiences for grades 6-8, and sometimes grade 5, that are designed specifically for young adolescents in light of their unique physical, psychosocial, and cognitive developmental characteristics (p. 225).

It is recommended that middle schools adopt an advisory or advocacy program that assigns students an adult mentor (NMSA, 2010). However, "advocacy is not a singular event or a period in the schedule, it is an attitude of caring that translates into actions, big and small when adults respond to the needs of each young adolescent in their charge" (NMSA, 2010, p. 35). Many middle school educational programs include advisory models that match students with an adult mentor that becomes their personal advocate within the school building (NMSA, 2010; Parke, Generett, & Ramos, 2017). There are a variety of manners in which advisory time can be created within the school schedule. Some school staffs have advisory meetings every day, others meet multiple times a week. "The specific purpose varies, but, in general, the idea is that the advocate becomes familiar with each of their student's social, emotional, and intellectual needs" (Parke,

Generett, & Ramos, 2017, p.19). Wormeli (2001), proposes that advisory activities take place as a day-long experience, but recognizes the value of any advisory period is rich:

> The knowledge gained through these extended advisory activities can help young adolescents learn more about themselves and each other than almost any other experience in the middle grades. Powerful connections occur when we work and play together. Confusing ideas become clear. We are motivated to solve complicated problems and achieve excellence (p.149).

Robert C. Spear, in *Taking the Lead in Implementing and Improving Advisory* (2005), recommends that advisory groups meet multiple times a week, are small in group size, and cover a multitude of topics related to students' self-concept. Multiple quantitative and qualitative study results support a framework of understanding that have shown that when students participate in such programs addressing their psychosocial needs there are positive shifts in their self-concept, they feel more connected with people within their school building, and they have a sense that they are supported by their peers and adults within the school (Arhar, 1992; Parker, 2010; Reed, McMillam, & McBee, 1995). It is also suggested that when students have these supports in place they become more resilient when facing adverse situations (Erb & Stevenson, 1999). Advisory programs, when implemented well, have shown to:

- Improve peer relationships and student-teacher relationships
- Empower students
- Promote social equity
- Improve communication
- Reduce at-risk behaviors
- Improve attendance

- Lower student stress, anxieties, and behavior problems

- Improve teacher attitudes

- Improve overall school culture and climate (Spear, 2005).

Developmentally responsive programs positively impact middle school students and attend to their psychosocial growth (Erb & Stevenson, 1999; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Manning, 2002). Along with advisory programs, school counselors and guidance services are also a critical component of middle schools (NMSA, 2010; Mauk & Taylor, 1993). Guidance or school counselors are trained to address and support students at their developmental level. School counselors can also support advisory programs, help families work with their middle school student, and coordinate services (Mauk & Taylor, 1993). It is critical that middle schools work with families and in some cases may include coordinating services with outside agencies that are also working with a child. School counselors can play an important role in ensuring that the whole child's needs are being met. Included in the realm of schools being developmentally responsive is also addressing health, wellness, and safety (NMSA, 2010). Oftentimes, the roles of a school counselor can be expanded to include more than just direct student counseling, however, when counselor are utilized effectively they can help facilitate many developmentally responsive programs (Mauk & Taylor, 1993; Parke, Generett, & Ramos, 2017). In a recent study of Schools To Watch in Pennsylvania the varied roles of a school counselor were revealed in a multiple school study:

The counselor appears to have many roles which go beyond the historically

typical role of providing career counseling. Newer roles include providing lunch

group counseling sessions and seminars on topics relevant to young adolescent

such as grief/loss, anger management, peer relations, home/school concerns,

handling crisis situations, social skills, behavior, attitude, problem solving, and

decision- making. In one school, the counselor teaches a "Middle School Issues"

class to all seventh graders. Some counselors, as part of the advisory team,

mentor students individually in small and large groups. Many also refer families

to a variety of services and collaborate with them (Parke, Generett, & Ramos,

2017, p.20)

School counselors, when utilized effectively, can play a crucial role in creating a

developmentally responsive middle school.

Developmentally, middle schools not only need to address risky behavior that can

negatively impact student health, but they should also promote positive behaviors. Middle school

students need to understand how their physical development is changing during their young

adolescent years and health and wellness classes can be a forum in which students learn about

these topics. Students that are struggling with health concerns, mental health issues, troubling

family dynamics, and a multitude of other outside factors that can affect their learning need to

have their needs addressed (DuBois, Eitel, & Felner, 1994; Mauk & Taylor, 1993). Effective

middle schools that address students' developmental needs also see overall student improvement

because the two areas are interconnected (Manning, 2015; Parker, 2010; Spear, 2005). Erb and

Stevenson (1999) state:

Every young adolescent needs personal affirmation in a context characterized by

supportive adult relationship in order to grow into a health adult. Some children

are able to satisfy this need from their families, through neighbors, in churches or

other community groups, or in other adult-run activities. However, for the many

youth whose lives are not so well blessed, schools can provide a genuine and

effective antidote to the disorder of antisocial behaviors and alienation (p. 66).

Middle schools that are developmentally responsive must take a comprehensive approach to

meeting students' needs. It is not just one program that is a one-size fits all for every middle

school. School staffs must critically analyze their school demographics and specific needs to

determine the best approaches for their particular middle school. Once their needs have been

identified, then they can begin to determine developmentally responsive approaches that best fit

their students' needs.

Chronology Continued

The middle school concept body of research strengthened during the 1990s. The

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) found that rigorous curriculum and sound

instructional practices lead to student achievement. These findings further supported middle

school staffs to continue providing interdisciplinary units of study, increasing student

engagement, and assessing for learning (Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development, 1989;

Schaefer et al., 2016). Also, The Carnegie Council (1989) emphasized the needs of young

adolescents and further supported the middle school concept as being developmentally

responsive to those students' needs (Schaefer et al., 2016).

Throughout the 1990s, further research on the benefits of strong advisory programs,

teaming, cooperative learning, and student engagement was published. (Arhar, 1992; Reed et al.,

1995; Schaefer et al., 2016) With increased attention placed on instructional practices,

differentiated learning teaching practices were utilized more frequently in middle schools

(Schaefer et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 1999). Whereas there were positive strides made in

curriculum and instruction, it was the middle school concepts weakest point. Beane (1996)

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argued that curriculum could be relevant to students while also remaining rigorous, but critics

would continue to attack middle schools whole-child approach. Their argument was that

programs that take time away from academic programs had adverse effects on student

achievement. Programs such as exploratory courses, advisory, and intramurals were said to be

taking teaching minutes away from core subject areas. This argument would only be heightened

by the age of accountability (Beane, 1996).

The 2000s would present the middle school concept's biggest challenge. With the

implementation of No Child Left Behind (2001), middle school staffs were challenged to be

more content focused as the standardization movement took hold on the nation's K-12 education

system. Many educational leaders determined that to increase student performance, class time

needed to be extended and time spent on tested content must be increased. As a result, many

programs were determined to cost too many instructional minutes and were shortened or cut all

together. Many middle school leaders eliminated advisory programs, intramural athletics, clubs,

and limited exploratory offerings. Conversely, proponents continued to argue that the middle

school concept should be practiced holistically and could be done so while also meeting the

standardized curriculum requirements (Schaefer et al., 2016). Despite the arguments to shift

program focus to the standardized curriculum, research during this time period flourished with

continued scholarly proof that the core tenets of the middle school concept were relevant and

essential to teaching and learning in the 21st century.

During 2010-2015, researchers were able to use data gathered through the National

Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform Schools to Watch program to determine that there

was still value in these concepts. For instance, middle schools that implemented teaming could

be shown to have higher student achievement data on standardized tests (Flowers et al., 1999).

Yet, many middle level educators felt that the middle school movement was "stagnant" and "without energy" (Schaefer et al., 2016; Smith & McEwin, 2011). Middle level educators and leaders placed blame on the emphasis of standardized curriculums and required state testing as to why the middle school concept was losing traction (Smith & McEwin, 2011).

<center>The Disappearing Middle School Concept</center>

For more than 40 years middle level educators have witnessed the growth of the middle school concept only to watch it wither in the second decade of the 21st century. Ironically, the 21st century was much of the inspiration for the creation of the middle school movement. The middle school philosophy contains so many of the facets that make up what researchers believe to be sound educational pedagogy.

In 1999 James Beane, a leading researcher and proponent of middle level education, outlined many of the criticisms that would come to fruition in the 2000s. The first is that the middle school concept is "child-centered" and, as Beane (1999) pointed out, many critics argued that middle schools overemphasized the emotional, social, and psychological needs of young adolescents while neglecting to meet rigorous academic standards. These critics even went so far as to say that middle schools were failing academically, although, Beane (1999) counter argued that those critics used data that did not disaggregate the type of middle school students attended.

Middle schools that fully implemented the middle school concept have been found to academically excel (Beane, 1999; George & Shewey, 1994). Critics have argued that the middle school was being attacked by parents who wanted more focus on academic programs that they felt were not being offered in middle schools. Parents wanted programs that were academically competitive (Beane, 1999). These programs would track students into honors programs that

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appeared to be more prestigious and would group students with what was assumed to be like-minded families with high educational attainment (Kohn, 1998). Tracking is counter to the middle school concept in that the belief is to keep students grouped heterogeneously (Beane, 1999; NMSA, 2010). It should also be noted that parents also reported that they value schools that build relationships and offer developmental support for students (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

Lastly, Beane (1999) pointed out that the standardization collected and reported data that rarely looked at the true picture of student achievement, school make-up, and teaching and learning. The reporting of student achievement by use of standardized test scores rarely showed the other aspects of learning provided by middle school staff's attention on the psychosocial needs of adolescents (Beane, 1999). The issue of how to measure student success and achievement became a central point of disagreement between middle school proponents and researchers that criticized the middle school concept (Beane, 1999).

The enactment of No Child Left Behind (2001) resulted in emphasis being placed on the implementation of standardized curriculum and the assessment of that curriculum through yearly testing (Schaefer, et al., 2016). For middle schools, the emphasis placed on core subject areas has also deemphasized other subjects that would have been a part of exploratory course offerings (Musoleno & White, 2010; Schaefer, et al., 2016). Instructional practices, such as interdisciplinary units of study and cooperative learning, are often sacrificed because some educational leaders determined them to be too costly timewise or that such projects did not directly relate to the tested curriculum (Musoleno & White, 2010). Musoleno and White (2010) conducted a mixed qualitative and quantitative study of Pennsylvania middle level educators and their feelings on whether or not standardized testing had impacted middle school practices. The

study looked at student groupings for instruction, instructional practices, interdisciplinary curriculum, teaming, and extra-curricular opportunities. The results were that some of these areas were more impacted than others by high stakes testing. Student groupings for instruction were relatively unchanged and remained mostly heterogeneous. Instructional practices were impacted when teachers used less developmentally appropriate teaching practices in order to fit in more direct instruction aimed at test preparation. As for curriculum, educators reported that tested subjects received more emphasis than subjects not tested (Musoleno & White, 2010).

A *Rand Report* entitled "Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School" (2004) magnified concerns that middle schools isolate developmentally vulnerable adolescents and problems (Anfara & Buehler, 2005; Bunting, 2005, Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). The argument in the *Rand Report* was that when middle level students were developmentally isolated from younger and older peer groups, they did not build their ability to socially interact outside their developmental confinement (Juvonen et al., 2004). Thus, instances of negative behaviors, such as bullying, prevail in an environment void of positive peer role models (Bunting, 2005). As a result, The *Rand Report* (2004) recommended that school divisions return to a Kindergarten through eighth grade configuration (Anfara & Buehler, 2005; Bunting, 2005; Juvonen et al., 2004) The Association of Middle Level Educators responded by attributing problems to a lack of teacher training, but as Bunting (2005) pointed out many educational leaders believe placing the blame on poor teacher preparation and professional development is flawed (Schaefer et al., 2016). The *Rand Report* was produced despite evidence that middle schools were successful (Anfara & Buehler, 2005; Bunting, 2005; Felner et al., 1997). Some school districts moved back to Kindergarten through eighth grade

structured schools as a result of the *Rand Report* (2004) recommendations (Anfara & Buehler, 2005; Juvonen, et al., 2004).

Despite the criticisms of the middle school concept focusing too much on student development rather than academics, research studies over the past three decades determined that middle schools that fully implement middle school best practices have measurable success in student achievement (Brackes, Ralston, & Ingwalson, 1999; Felner et al., 1997). Many of these studies focus on the best practices outlined in *This We Believe* (2010) and the recommendations of *Turning Points* (1989) as a framework for which to research best practices, such as teaming, common planning time, advisory programs, and exploratory curriculum (Felner et al., 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993). The results of these studies can be used by practitioners in the field to implement researched based practices to improve student outcomes.

One such Illinois study in 1997 followed 97 schools that were in the process of transitioning into middle schools not only in name, but in practice (Felner et al.). Researchers found that it was not just important to implement best practices as described in *This We Believe* (2010) and recommended in the *Turning Points* (1989) publication, but that the degree of implementation was important to outcomes. For instance, the study found that teams that were comprised of 120 students or less, had teacher advisory programs, and were given their own designated area (meaning team classrooms were kept in close proximity to each other) had significantly positive effects on students transitioning through the middle grades (Felner et al., 1997). In fact, in multiple studies interdisciplinary teaming, with a strong emphasis on team teaching, showed evidence of higher levels of student engagement and improved achievement on standardized tests (Arhar, Johnston, & Markle, 1989; Clark & Clark, 1992; Clark & Clark, 2006; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Lee & Smith, 1993).

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The effects of teaming were not just limited to academic achievement. Students reported that despite increased pressure to perform on tests, they felt safer, believed they could meet their academic goals, and had increased self-esteem (Clark & Clark, 2006; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Mertens, 1998). Teachers also reported that they felt that they could better meet the individual needs of each of their students and were able to establish improved communication with students' families when they were effectively teamed (Clark & Clark, 2006; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Mertens,1998). Teaming, when joined with a strong curriculum and developmentally appropriate teaching pedagogy, positively affected learning outcomes (Clark & Clark, 2006; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Russell, 1997).

<u>Implications of Schools To Watch on Middle Level Research</u>

In 2009, Cook, Faulkner, and Kinne conducted an empirical study of middle schools in Kentucky and compared schools designated as Schools to Watch to those without such a recognition. The purpose of the study was to determine if STW schools performed at a higher level of achievement than those that were not. The research team gathered data as to the level of implementation of core tenets such as, teaming, common planning, and advisory, in each of the schools. The results were that Kentucky STW schools more fully implemented middle school best practices as determined by *This We Believe* (2010) than schools that were not designated as STW. Additionally, Kentucky STW performed at higher levels on state standardized tests when compared to schools that were not designated as School To Watch (Cook, 2009).

Paul George (2010), a leading researcher in middle level reform, outlined the predicament of middle school educators in the era of standardization and made recommendations for what should be focused on by middle school leaders. George (2010) proposed that middle level leaders stay true to six core values of the middle school movement. George (2010)

promoted that middle school staffs keep developmentally responsive programs, continue to align curriculum, continue to support relationship building programs (i.e. teaming, advisory, and interdisciplinary curriculum), build collegial trust, and ensure that democratic principles are embedded in the middle school philosophy. George (2010) also proposed that educational leaders keep student needs at the core of their decision making process while providing a school community that enacts social equity and democratic rights.

McEwin and Greene (2010) conducted research comparing schools recognized as Schools to Watch (STW) and National Association of Secondary School Principals' Breakthrough Middle Schools (BMS) with that of a random sampling of middle schools. Their study also concluded that schools which more fully implemented the core tenets of the middle school concept had higher student achievement compared to those middle schools that did not. As part of the qualitative portion of the study, teachers in the random sample reported that teaming and common planning time had been diminished and they felt that it was a detriment to their students. However, STW and BMS schools had higher rates of teaming and common planning time and were reported to have better student achievement. Additionally, this study reported that STW and BMS schools had higher rates of flexible scheduling, which is often times the result of a well implemented teaming approach to the school's organization (McEwin & Greene, 2010). Even though middle level educators reported that standardized curriculum had increased the emphasis on core content areas, the positive result was that sound instructional strategies were being used (McEwin & Greene, 2010). However, instruction alone was not the only indicator of the strength of the middle school concept being implemented. These schools also maintained programs that build relationships and advocacy for students. STW and BMS schools more fully implemented advisory programs than did the random sample of schools.

Researchers concluded that leadership committed to the middle school, teaming, common planning time, flexible scheduling, research based instructional approaches, and fully implemented advisory programs were all key factors that lead to the success of STW and BMS schools (McEwin & Greene, 2010).

Researchers used a prior quantitative study conducted in Florida and replicated the survey study for middle schools in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. The study focused on the eleven core tenets expressed in *This We Believe* (2010) and asked middle level educators about the degree of implementation of instructional practices, teaming, advisory, and intramurals in their middle schools during the age of high stakes testing. The results of the original study conducted in Florida by Paul George (2007) determined that teaming, advisory, exploratory programs, flexible scheduling, flexible grouping, and intramurals were all on the decline as a result of the standardization and high stakes testing movement. Huss and Estep (2011) found similar results in their study of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana as compared to George's 2007 study of Florida. Teachers reported in both studies that interdisciplinary teaming was implemented, but was less executed than in previous years. Educators reported in both studies that there was an increase in active learning instructional strategies post No Child Left Behind (2001). Teachers reported there was far less emphasis placed on building teacher-student relationships. Interestingly, teachers reported that high stakes testing did have some positive effects on middle schools. They reported that remediation opportunities were improved and had a more positive effect on students. Additionally, they reported that best instructional practices were increasingly emphasized and used, which had positive impacts on student learning. Middle level educators surveyed indicated that standardized testing negatively impacted exploratory courses, common planning, advisory time, quality of instruction, professional development, and cooperative

learning opportunities (Flowers et al., 2003; Huss & Estep, 2011). In a similar study, researchers looked at Schools To Watch in Kentucky. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform determines that to be a School To Watch, a school must have fully implemented the core tenets expressed in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010). Those schools deemed as such in Kentucky had higher levels of student achievement on state standardized test as compared to other middle schools (Huss & Estep, 2011). In these multiple research studies, many of which use the Schools To Watch programs framework to study middle schools, middle schools that fully implement the middle school concept have higher rates of student success. Thus, there is merit in studying Schools To Watch designated schools to further understand the implementation of the middle school concept.

<div align="center">The Schools To Watch Process Explained</div>

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform's mission is, "to prepare student to be lifelong learners ready for college, career, and citizenship, the National Forum seeks to make every middle grades school academically excellent, responsive to the developmental needs and interests of young adolescents, and socially equitable" (National Forum, 2018, p.1; School To Watch, 2018). In order to do so, members of the National Forum established the School To Watch Program in order,

> To develop, identify, honor, and nurture school with middle-level grades (those that enroll young adolescents aged 10-15) that are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, an socially equitable, organized and structured for continuous improvement, and are exemplars of the implementation of the National Forum's Schools-to Watch criteria. (National Forum, 2018, p.1)

The vision of the Schools To Watch program is to promote that every student be able to attend a middle level school that implements a strong middle level philosophy, as so outlined in the Schools To Watch criteria (Schools To Watch, 2018).

In order to become a School To Watch, the four areas that middle level schools are evaluated are: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structure (School To Watch Criteria, 2018). These areas are further defined in the Schools To Watch Criteria (2018) and the School To Watch Rubric (2018).

Academic Excellence. Students' should be academically challenged in order that they strive to meet high standards. Curriculums of all content areas should be developed in order for students to engage content in deeply, meaningful ways. Students should understand why they are learning content and how they will use their learning in the future. There should be a variety of instructional strategies used to present content. Learning should be assessed with a variety of instruments and students should be aware of their own learning progress. Also, the master schedule should allow time for learning and for teaching staff to plan accordingly. Interventions should be available to students as a whole group and individually to develop learning in order for all learners to meet their full potential. Teachers are given time to collaborate, plan, and develop their own skills to ensure that there is sustained improvement over time (School To Watch, 2018; School To Watch Criteria, 2018).

Developmental Responsiveness. Learning is personalized for all students to ensure that young adolescents', "intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development" is nurtured and provided an environment in which it can grow. This should be done through the creation of small learning environments that foster close relationships between educators and students. Teachers should receive professional development that prepares them to work with students and

their families. Additionally, teachers should be well-trained in how to use sound instructional

pedagogy, effectively manage middle school students, train students in the use of study skills,

and encourage creativity in the classroom. Middle level educators should also develop students'

ability to make real-world connections between their learning and life outside the classroom.

This would include connecting learning to careers, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Students should be encouraged to set goals inside and outside the classroom and advocate for

their own learning. Students should also have chances to voice their opinions about school so

that they feel that they have representation in the decision making process. Stretching outside

the classroom, teachers should also communicate with families and the community as to what is

being learned in school, and teachers should develop opportunities for the community to become

involved with learning inside the classroom. These learning opportunities should be aimed at the

development of character and interpersonal skills needed as students grow into adults and

become engaged citizens of their community (School To Watch, 2018; School To Watch

Criteria, 2018).

     Social Equity. All students should feel included in every classroom within the school.

Any student with a learning challenge should be given supplemental opportunities to learn. A

multifaceted approach should be adopted to give students a variety of opportunities to express

their abilities. Because students are always changing, schools should be continuously adapting

their programing to meet student needs.   One way schools should be meeting the needs of

individual students is by have a program where every student has an adult advocate in the school

building that knows them personally. No student, nor their family, should feel left out due to

learning ability, socioeconomic capabilities, gender, or ethnicity when it comes to participating

in their learning. Students and families should feel that their culture is respected and included in

the school. Also, the rules of the school should be applied fairly and consistently for all students. Schools should systematically and regularly assess their discipline procedures to ensure that all students are being treated fairly (School To Watch, 2018; School To Watch Criteria, 2018).

Organizational Structures and Processes. Schools should have organizational procedures that support continued success. First, everyone in the school should be aware of the school's vision, goals, and actions being taken to achieve those goals. The principal should have the autonomy to lead the school in making improvements, and should be the primary actor to ensure that the school is accomplishing the goals. There should be a climate of collaboration and continued learning that drives the school to reaching its goals. Professional development opportunities should be robust and educators should be accountable for implementing current best practices. Schools should have communication and support from district level leadership and the greater community. The school should not feel that it is on its own to accomplish its vision. Consequently, the school is also accountable for its own actions and continued student achievement. The school uses data to determine areas for improvement and acts on that information   (School To Watch, 2018; School To Watch Criteria, 2018). Schools that wish to become a School To Watch can access the criteria and rubric by either contacting the state Schools To Watch director or downloading these documents online. The Schools To Watch Criteria is included in Appendix A.

Before a school can apply to become a School To Watch, they must first determine if they meet the requirements to do so. Those requirements are as follows:

1. The school must have been a middle school for at least three years and serve students between the ages of 10-15 years old.

2. State standardized test data should show continued improvement for the past three years. In Virginia, this data would available via the School Profile and include Standards of Learning testing results.

3. At the time of this study, all schools must have been publically funded (Schools To Watch, 2018).

If a school community meets the requirements, they are encouraged to contact their state Schools To Watch director to begin the process of applying. The state directors are available to guide schools through the application process (Schools To Watch, 2018).

Once the school staff determines that they would like to apply to be recognized as a School To Watch, they must complete a written application. This application begins with describing the school, its history, and setting. Then the school must describe how each of the four domains are being met. The explanation of the domains should incorporate how the school plans to carry on and improve in each area in order to show that they are committed to continuous growth. They must also include the following information:

a. Assessment data from the past three years

b. Discipline data

c. Enrollment information that disaggregates ethnicity, gender, second language learners, gifted and talented students, special education students, and students receiving free and reduced lunch.

d. Teacher information that indicates years of service

e. Signature page including members of the application committee and a signed school agreement (Schools To Watch, 2018).

An online survey version of the Schools To Watch Rubric is administered by school stakeholders and is based on the Schools To Watch Criteria (Appendix A). This survey is given to school staff and parents. The Schools To Watch organization administers the survey to ensure the credibility of the results (Schools To Watch, 2018).

Once the school staff submits the application, it is read by a Schools To Watch state team of readers that assesses the application based on the criteria. If the submitted school application meets the criteria, the school will be approved for a site team visit. The state director will call the school principal to determine an acceptable date for the site team visit (Schools To Watch, 2018). The site team members are trained every two years and are made up of individuals involved with middle level education. All Schools To Watch designated schools must have one staff person trained to be a site team member in order to visit schools and support the continuance of the Schools To Watch Program (Schools To Watch, 2018).

On the date of the visit, site team members will be at the school for most of the school day. They will observe students in a variety of settings, including in class, lunch, and during transition times. Site team members can speak to teachers, staff, and students and ask them questions pertaining to the criteria set forth by Schools To Watch. Site teams may even have planned moments to interview students, faculty, and staff that the school application teams arrange so that site team members have an opportunity to ask questions.

Once the site visit team has completed their visit, the membership meets to write a report which their commendations and recommendations for each domain as it relates to the school. The team also makes a recommendation regarding the school should or should not be designated as a Schools To Watch. This report is submitted to the state director (School To Watch, 2018).

If the school is not designated as a School To Watch, the state director will call the school principal and provide a feedback letter outlining why the school was not recognized, and the director encourages the school to reapply in the future. If the school is designated as a School To Watch, the director will contact the school principal and a time will be determined to recognize and celebrate the school as a School To Watch. The celebration portion of the process is to be held during the school day so that staff, students, and parents can participate. Schools may invite school division leaders, community leaders, and the media. The state director, or designee, presents the school with a plaque or banner signifying the school's recognition as being a School To Watch (Schools To Watch, 2018).

After two years, Schools To Watch designated schools are required re-apply to be re-designated in order to remain recognized as a School To Watch. This process is to ensure that the state program and STW schools remain true to the standards of the Schools To Watch Program. The re-designation process is similar to the initial application process. The only difference is that if there were recommendations upon the initial site team visit, the school would need to add to the application a narrative as to how they addressed those recommendations. Additionally, the school will receive a site-team visit conducted in the same manner as their previous visit. If the school is re-designated they will be referred to as a Re-Designated I, II, III, or IV school. Each of these designations is marked with a Schools To Watch celebration and recognition similar to the first celebration (School To Watch, 2018).

<div align="center">Summary</div>

For more than forty years the middle school concept has grown and evolved. Research has shown that when the core tenets stated in *This We Believe* (2010) are implemented, students benefit and schools see higher levels of achievement. Yet, middle level educators currently

battle the era of high stakes testing and accountability. School staffs are faced with having to shift their focus from attending to the developmental needs of young adolescents, to teaching to the test. It remains to be seen whether the core principles of the middle school philosophy will stand the ever swinging pendulum of educational policy and reform.   Members of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and the Schools To Watch program continue to provide acknowledgement and support of the middle school philosophy in hopes to keep the middle level movement an educational practice worth keeping.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Schaefer (2016) indicates that the debate over whether or not the middle school concept is a successful framework for educating adolescent learners is still unresolved. The National Forum, through the Schools To Watch recognition process, has determined that when the middle school concept is implemented well by middle school staffs there are positive student outcomes. The framework determined in the Schools To Watch recognition process creates an instrument closely tied to the vision outlined in *This We Believe* (2009). This instrument encompasses all the facets aimed at successfully educating young adolescents. Re-designated schools provide a clear example of a successful middle for which to study.

"A phenomenological study allows researchers to study the 'essence' of a 'lived experience'" (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010, p. 24). This research method requires the researcher to gather information from participants that have experienced the same phenomenon and determine a framework for understanding how they perceive that experience (Patton, 2015). By interveiwing participants, a phenomonlogical study allows the researcher to embed themselves to determine how partcipants experienced an event and its eventual outcome so as to better understand the true quintessence of such a shared experience (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015).

Research Questions

Research questions are derived from problems or concerns in our society or within groups of people with a shared stake in outcomes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The concern for middle level educators, educational policy makers, and stakeholders in middle

education is whether or not middle level practices are resulting in academic achievement while also meeting the needs of young adolescents (Schaefer et al., 2016). The charge set forth by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform through its School To Watch recognition program is to distinguish schools that exemplify academic excellence through state determined performance standards, developmentally responsive approaches that meet the needs of young adolescents, social equity for all students, and organizational structures that ensure the sustainability of a school's success (National Forum, 2018; NMSA, 2010; Schools To Watch, 2018). Conducting a phenomenological study of three re-designated Schools To Watch in the Commonwealth of Virginia allowed the researcher to determine what participants perceive to be the most effective practices that have led to their continued success and recognition.

Research Questions:

1.) What factors do school staff members perceive to influence young adolescent social and emotional outcomes?

2.) What factors do school staff members perceive address that young adolescents have successful academic performance?

3.) What organizational structures and processes do school staff members perceive as being developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents?

4.) What practices do Re-designated III Schools To Watch staff members perceive to support social equity for students?

Reasoning for Qualitative Design

Studies have been conducted that use state standardized test performance data as an indicator of successful implementation of middle level practices (Cook, 2009, Russell, 1997). Other mixed studies have used the frequency or intensity of the implementation of a particular practice in relationship to the feelings of participants as an indicator of middle level success

(Clark, 1992). The Schools To Watch application process uses quantitative measures, such as, participant surveys and achievement data, as an indicator of success (Schools To Watch, 2018). The application process also uses qualitative measures, such as, self-reporting of programmatic success to determine success (Schools To Watch, 2018). This study used those indicators as a basis for determining schools to be included in this study, and also that the schools chosen have met the Schools To Watch standard three times, thus being recognized as Re-Designated III schools. A phenomenological, qualitative approach allows the researcher to identify common practices among all three schools that determine such success.

The researcher spent a day in each of the three schools in order to become deeply embedded in each phenomenon (Patton, 2015). This time allowed the researcher to meet with selected participants and conduct in-depth interviews. The researcher used qualitative phenomenological design methods to collect data through interviews of school administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers to determine through their shared experiences what practices contributed to their continued success as a School To Watch. Participant interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then coded and combined in order identify themes in responses.

Role of Researcher

As a middle level educator for more than fifteen years, a former reader and site team member for the Virginia Schools To Watch program, and a Regional Director for the Virginia Middle School Association; there is a natural understanding to the topic of middle level success. The researcher's goal is to remain objective in order to obtain authentic understanding of what works for these recognized schools in the hopes that such information will garner new understanding, and perhaps implementation, of practices that benefit the young adolescent student.

The researcher gained access to each school by contacting the Virginia Schools To Watch Director for recommendations of Re-Designated III Schools. Then the researcher contacted school division offices to obtain permission from the superintendent to conduct a study within the school division. When approval was confirmed, the researcher contacted school principals to discuss interview logistics for each school. Working with the school principal, or their designee, the researcher scheduled a day to visit the school. Prior to the visitation of the school, the researcher determined with the school contact designee schedules and participants approved to be interviewed. The researcher then determined an interview and observation schedule for the day of visitation.

In qualitative research the role of the researcher, and in this case the interviewer, is that of, "a neutral medium through which information is exchanged" (McMillan, 2010. p. 206). The researcher used a semi-structured approach to interview questions in which some questions were standard to all interviews and other questions were open-ended in order to further probe participants (McMillan, 2010; Patton, 2015). The researcher used an interview guide to keep interviews on track and to ensure that participants were released to their school duties in a timely manner (McMillan, 2010). The researcher also used a recording device, as well as, notetaking to record participants' responses.

Upon completion of participant interviews, the researcher used recordings to transcribe participant responses. Transcriptions and the researcher's notes were used to decode participant responses. Over the course of visiting and interviewing the three selected schools, the researcher complied recordings and notes. At the conclusion of the visitation and interview portion of the study the researcher compiled all recordings and notes, used coding methods to decipher responses, and determined the themes to report in Chapter 4.

<center>Participants</center>

Sampling was conducted by site selection in order to determine schools that were involved in a "particular event" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346) The following criteria were determined:

1. Schools selected must have been Schools To Watch Re-designated III schools.

2. Schools selected could not be in the same school division.

3. Schools selected should be of varying sizes, have diverse student populations within the state of Virginia, and be from differing geographical locations.

4. Schools selected should have diverse paths to being designated.

To clarify criteria number four, some school divisions require each school apply to become a School To Watch. Other schools apply of their own enterprise. This would be an example of having differing paths to becoming a School To Watch. One path implies a great deal of division level support, while the other path implies that the school must show on their own initiative to apply. At the time of this study, there were only ten Re-Designated III Schools To Watch schools within the Commonwealth of Virginia. Working with the Virginia Schools To Watch Director, three Re-Designated III were determined to meet the selection criteria. Each of the schools have met state accreditation standards and have been continuously academically successful (VDOE, 2018).

The researcher, along with the Virginia Schools To Watch Director, determined the three participating schools and then the superintendent of each school division and the principal of each school was contacted for initial approval of the research study. The researcher consulted with each school's principal to determine one administrator, one guidance counselor, a group of teachers from each grade level, one special education teacher, and one exploratory teacher that

would be beneficial participants to the study. The researcher requested that each of the participants have been employed at the school for three or more years, meaning that they would have been present for the most recent Schools To Watch application process, site visit, and designation. This request ensured that each of the participants would be knowledgeable of the Schools To Watch process.

The researcher, along with the building principal, determined participants by mapping the field to find relevant participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The criteria for the selection of participants were:

1. One building principal.

2. One guidance counselor.

3. One special education teacher that teaches in an inclusion setting.

4. One exploratory teacher.

5. A group of core subject classroom teachers.

The principal, guidance counselor, special education teacher, and exploratory teacher were interviewed individually. The core subject teachers were interviewed as a group.

As with any research involving human participants there is a level of vulnerability that participants will endure, and it is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to protect participants (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). Participants were first notified through a letter that asks for their consent and provides the following information:

1. Identification of the researcher and their institution

2. Explanation of the purpose of the study and how the participants information will be useful

3. Requests the contributor's participation and their right to refuse without penalty at any time

4. Explanation of the interview process, duration of the overall study, and the use of audiotaping

5. Explanation of how the participants confidentiality will be kept

6. A determination of how the results of the study will be shared

(Appendix B)(Sieber & Tolich, 2013)

Participant's identity was protected by the use of pseudonyms, such as, Administrator A, Guidance Counselor A, and Special Education Teacher A, Exploratory Teacher A, and Teachers A in order to attach participants to the correct school. Each teacher participant was given a number in order to distinguish each separate contributor's response within a school (i.e. Teacher A.1).

Data Collection

Data was collected by interviewing individual school staff members, interviewing small groups of teachers, and reviewing school documents. For interviews, the researcher will schedule a day-long visitation of each of the three participant schools that will be subsequently known as School A, School B, and School C. Prior to the day of visitation the researcher acquired and reviewed the Virginia Department of Education 2018 School Profile for each participating school. The School Profile reported assessment data, student demographics, and additional indicators, such as attendance, used by the state to determine the success of schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2018). The researcher also obtained, via the Virginia STW Director, the most recent STW application of each school. This application included the application narrative, reported data, and survey results. The School Profile and STW application

were reviewed for each school prior to the visit in order to aid the researcher in determining interview questions for participants.

The researcher used the research questions as the basis for interview questions. A semi-structured questioning format allowed the interviewer to follow-up depending on participant answers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Interview protocols are outlined in Appendix B and served as the outline for interview format. The purpose of this study is to identify practices occurring in Virginia middle schools that are essential to student success and this interview format will allow the researcher to identify those practices.

The Institutional Review Board of East Tennessee State University provided training and required the submission of research and documentation. With the submission of the required documents, permission was obtained to conduct a study on human participants. The guidelines were that the principle investigator keeps informed consent documents on file and that a copy of the informed consent letter be given to participants. Additionally, any changes to the study be reported to the Institutional Review Board for approval.

"The data collection mainstay of a phenomenologist is the personal in-depth, unstructured interview" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 346). For this phenomenological study, the central question and subsequent questions will serve as the foundational guide for participant interviews. The researcher will ask follow up or clarification questions deemed necessary by the researcher. An interview question protocol is provided in Appendix B. Interview questions were reviewed by a middle school teacher and a middle school administrator from outside schools chosen for the study. Interview notes and transcriptions were coded by the researcher in order to find themes useful to the study's purpose (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Upon participant permission, interviews for each school visit were recorded and transcribed. Notes, interviews transcriptions, and recordings were secured in the researcher's office under lock and key. Digital copies of notes, transcriptions, and recordings were kept on the researcher's computer that can only be accessed via username and password. Participant names and identifying information were also protected, and for the purposes of this dissertation have been changed using a letter and number identification system. For instance, School A participants will be referred to by their role, school letter code, and when applicable a number distinguishing participants that may be serving in the same capacity within the school (i.e. Teacher A.1, Teacher A.2) Any information identifying participants for the purpose of multiple points of contact over time, will be secured in the researcher's office files.

<div align="center">Measures of Rigor</div>

The researcher used triangulation methods in order to validate information collected. The purpose of triangulation is to ensure that there is a union of outcomes that all paint the same picture (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). The use of triangulation protects against not only the subjectivity of the researcher, but also validates participants' responses (Patton, 2015). Along with interviews, the researcher will review School To Watch documents submitted by the school and the School Profile of each school site reported by the Virginia Department of Education. After the initial interview phase of the research is complete, the researcher will transcribe interviews and use member checks to confirm information obtained through interviews, documents, and the School Profile.

Key to any phenomenological study is the researcher's ability to employ Heuristic Inquiry methods to better understand a lived experience (Patton, 2015). This means that the researcher will need to conduct in-depth interviews that bring out the commonalities of that

shared lived experience. Thus, post interview the researcher will need meticulously code

information in order to determine key elements of participants' shared experience (McMillan &

Schumacher, 2010). The researcher will have to synthesize information collected and determine

its implications (Patton, 2015).

Summary

The participants for this study were selected for the purpose of examining perceptions of

middle school best practices that result in academic achievement while also meeting the needs of

young adolescents. The researcher attempted to select participants that had knowledge of the

School To Watch process and their school's current practices. By interviewing participants at

three Schools To Watch re-designated schools, the researcher was better able to analyze the

phenomenon of School To Watch and middle school best practices.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

<u>Introduction</u>

The purpose of this study is to identify practices that are essential to student success

occurring in Virginia middle schools. The researcher investigated the perceptions of school staff

at three Virginia middle schools that had been re-designated three times or more as a Schools To

Watch. The principal investigator traveled to each middle school to personally interview

participants, thus conducting a multi-site study. At each of the three sites the principal

investigator interviewed an administrator, a school counselor, a special education teacher, an

exploratory teacher, and three core subject area teachers. The interview protocol focused on four

research questions while also allowing for follow-up questions that fostered conversations about

middle school best practices. The researcher was able to analyze the interview transcripts to

better understand practices that each school utilized to meet the needs of young adolescents.

Middle school practitioners may find the information in the study useful to analyze, reflect upon,

and utilize within their own middle school.

Three sites were selected by the researcher based on each school having been re-

designated three times or more as a Schools To Watch. At each site four interview sessions were

conducted with a total of seven participants interviewed at each school. Each school

administrator, school counselor, special education teacher, and exploratory teacher was

interviewed separately in order to preserve an environment which they could share their unique

perspectives about the practices of their school. Three core subject area teachers were

interviewed as a group in order to have conversation representative of their perspective. The

interview protocol format was modeled at each school, thus totaling fifteen interview sessions with twenty-one participants (Appendix A).

All participants, with the exception of one, had been at their schools for several years and had extensive knowledge of their school and the Schools To Watch process. The one exception was the School Counselor B who was in their first year at that school. This participant was chosen because the counselor that had been through the Schools To Watch process was out on leave. This participant was still able to share in-depth knowledge about their school because they had been a school counselor for many years thus giving them experience to compare their perspective at the current school.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded. Using the four research questions as a guide, themes emerged between all schools and were documented. Fourteen themes that emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts and the most recent Schools To Watch applications were: academic opportunities, advisory, behavior management, building relationships, challenges, counseling, data-initiated responses, organizational processes and structures, parents, scheduling, skill building activities, student activities, student voice, and teams.   From these fourteen themes, three concepts emerged at each school: each school was developmentally responsiveness to the needs of young adolescents, each school employed strong organizational leadership approaches, and each school was purposeful in the scheduling process. Whereas, the researcher delineates these three themes, the following analysis will show that each of the themes are very interconnected within the participant schools.

<div align="center">Interview Process</div>

Interviews were scheduled after contacting each participant and school to determine the best time for the interviewer to meet. All interviews were held at each school site in a location

that allowed for anonymity of participants to be maintained. Each participant was presented with

the Informed Consent Letter and allowed time to review its contents and ask any questions

before signing (Appendix B). Participants were aware that they were under no obligation to

participate and that there were no penalties to withdraw from the study. Participants were

informed that they were not being compensated for their participation in the study. They also

were informed of the interview format and that their responses were being recorded. Participants

were told that they did not have to answer questions and it was acceptable if they did not know

how to respond to certain questions. Participants were asked if they permitted the researcher to

follow-up with them at a later date in order to validate their comments. All participants agreed to

these terms and signed the Informed Consent Letter.

<div align="center">Interview Data</div>

After interviews were transcribed and sorted based on each school interview set, themes

were color coded for each interview session. Similarities and differences were noted and

examined by the principal investigator to determine information relevant to the study's purpose.

The data presented in this section include a synthesis of participant responses, as well as, several

verbatim comments.

Influencing Social and Emotional Outcomes for Young Adolescents

Four of the participants indicated that out-of-school factors had to be taken into account

when addressing the social and emotional needs of students. Administrator A said,

> So, I think the outcomes that you end up getting are a combination of what they
>
> bring to the table and then the structure and supports we can put in place to help
>
> them work through whatever those things, which are unique for every kid.

All interviewees began with naming programs or procedures they had in place that addressed meeting the social and emotional needs of students, therefore, discussing varying actions that are developmentally responsive to student needs. In all schools, there was acknowledgement that out-of-school factors were an influence in what students came to school with social and emotionally. Additionally, all participants acknowledge that young adolescents had unique needs that schools needed to address.

In all interviews participants discussed the importance of building relationships with students in order to guide students. Administrator B stated:

I think it first comes down to building relationships and ensuring that students feel comfortable. We ask the question at the beginning of the school year of our staff; if a student were absent, do they know that you know they are absent? So, do they know that you care, do they know that their [teachers] are vested, and will they try to find that student who might slip between the cracks?

All participants at some point in their interview spoke of the challenges facing their students. Many of these challenges are out-of-school factors of which the school cannot change. However, participants noted that their schools were aware of these challenges and felt the need to create a school environment that responded to those needs. At the same time, each school's participants had an awareness of what the typical middle school student needs and was able to relate many in-school efforts to addressing those developmental needs. Either directly or indirectly, participant responses pointed to building relationships with students.

All three schools had advisory programs. Eleven of the fifteen interview participants discussed advisory as being an integral program that addressed the social and emotional needs of

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the students. In School A and School B, every interview session participant discussed the role of advisory in addressing the needs of their students. Administrator A stated:

> Last year, and some of this was a result of our School To Watch visit…helped us kind of refine and think through some stuff. A big thing we started last year was an advisory program where kids once a week meet with an advisor. We did some research and found curriculum from a school [in another state], reached out to them and they said you are more than welcome to use our materials, and do anything you want with it. Which was great! So, we actually have a curriculum for three grade levels. And, each advisory session has a theme, a lesson, and every adult in the building …has an advisory group that they meet with once a week to build those relationships. To have those character lessons that they'll go through. This is our first year doing it so we have t been tweaking it a little as we go. We actually made an tweak and adjustment to the schedule. Teachers wanted a little more freedom to have a little more discussion dialog …But, we found [is] that teachers, for the most part want a little extra time to maybe talk to kids about grades or other things outside that prescribed lesson. So that is something we are excited about. What we decided about the model we are [going] to use, and we think is impactful for our kids…[Students] come into sixth grade and have an advisory. [The student] will have that same advisor for three years. So, it gives them an opportunity so when they come back as a seventh grader, they've already go an adult in the build that they are [going to] to see and [going to] meet with regularly that they know. So, its build those adult relations and then purposefully

going through specific issues that we know middle schoolers are [going to] have.

And, discussing those things in a meaningful way.

When asked about meeting students social and emotional outcomes through advisory Teacher B1 gave an example and said:

Well, one thing that comes to mind is through our [advisory] classes, we talk about things to develop skills. Like, for example, one day we will focus on…example scenarios and how would you react. [We would discuss] is this the right way or it this the wrong way? Do you thin k it's the right way or working way? And, then you know, in this scenario, if it is some that has happened to them, how could you have reacted differently? Then we discuss those [in] small groups, large group settings, too.

Teacher B3 added:

And, this year we have used a program called [advisory curriculum] that I think has been more structured. So, last year we had our school counselors create the lesson around some social and emotional learning. But, this year the county purchased [advisory curriculum] for us to use. I [have] said to other people that I think it's a good program…

In School C, the teacher group discussed how advisory played a part in social and emotional outcomes for students. Teacher C2 stated:

Advisory. It's like a twenty-minute advisory or twenty to thirty minutes advisory, and we do it at the beginning of the year…many times to get them structured with [the] routines and things like that. And, now we are doing it once a month and the lessons apply to every single student; equity versus equality, and growth-mindset,

and setting goals is a really important one. So, we are teaching them how to set a

good goal, a measureable goal, a smart goal; so that they can then reflect on it

each month to see what they did and how they are doing it. So, it's new initiative

[goal setting] this year for us and it has worked out pretty well.

Teacher C1 stated:

So, it [advisory] is built in to our first or forth block. Our first block of the day on

A days and B days. And, they adjust the schedule so that it is not taken out of that

one class. Because you certainly don't want to have to rush through that because

you think you then would have a shortened class. So it [time in the schedule] is

spread out throughout the day, so that each class is maybe five minutes shorter.

But, it [advisory] is built in with that class, so there doesn't have to be that

disruption of another class change or another kind of wasted five minutes

[transition between classes]. You are able to work with those kids and you

already know them, so you are already building a good rapport with them.

Teacher C3 summed up the impact of advisory by saying, "[Advisory is] helping kids

emotionally. So, that emotion part isn't just teaching them information, but also socially

to become a better, rounded person."

In School A, advisory groups met weekly, whereas, in School B and C time was

scheduled for advisory to take place multiple time a week if needed. In all of the schools,

advisory lessons addressed social skills, developing one's character, and student skills needed to

be successful in school. In all of the schools there was a designated advisory curriculum, but that

curriculum was oftentimes adjusted to meet the needs of the student body as determined by

school staff. In School B, the teachers used an online advisory curriculum that gave teachers

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flexibility in how they presented lesson topics. Teachers had access to lesson plans, but students could also work individually on topics. Schools A and C had a team of staff members that worked on the advisory curriculum to determine appropriate lessons for each meeting. Also noteworthy, in School A advisory teachers kept their students all three years the students were at the middle school. Special Education Teacher A said, "They [the advisory teacher] will move up with them [the students] grade-level wise, so they really get to know and trust that particular teacher."

In School B, the student population is changing and the school is becoming more culturally diverse as enrollment numbers increase. School B's staff recognized such a transition would call for adjustments in meeting the needs of all students and being culturally inclusive. They used their advisory time to address how to be more inclusive of all diverse groups by focusing on microaggressions, or what seem like small acts or comments that are insensitive. School Administrator B stated:

> So, [advisory] is an on-line, web-based program that will help guide students
>
> through various scenarios and various instances. It can be mindfulness and can
>
> also be racial relations. Or, 'someone's a little bit different,' or 'if some says this
>
> to you.' And, we are starting to build towards the second semester dealing with
>
> microaggressions, complacent bias, and just making sure the students are in tune
>
> with each other. We have seen, just through conversations with teachers, and we
>
> have worked with the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities… and we have
>
> done some parent workshops on microaggressions, as well.

In School B, leader's organized professional development sessions throughout the school year that trained teachers and staff to discuss the topic with students. Administrator B attributed

lower rates of discipline referrals due to conflicts between students, deeper discussions about

inclusivity in advisory, and higher participation rates in school activities as results of having a

specific focus during advisory time in response to a school challenge. School B's administrator

also reported that the initiative was a result of their Schools To Watch site visit that alerted

school staff that this was an area that needed to be addressed. When asked about how their

school staff knew these initiatives were working, Administrator B said:

> From a quantitative basis, we have lower referrals because students are getting
>
> along a little bit better. And, [students] are able to work through their challenges
>
> on a more mature level. And, [we] kind of have those deeper conversations
>
> [because] advisory can kind of unearth some of that, and we have them work
>
> through that. Form a more qualitative, I am seeing students who didn't use to
>
> participate maybe in sports, athletics, and clubs; feel a bit more included.

School B's teachers revealed that although there were not necessary quantifiable data sets to

report, there were qualitative results. Teacher B2 said, "they have learned how to talk to adults,

how to [act in] whatever it [the situation] may be and how to problem solve for themselves…"

Teacher B3 stated, "I think I have seen some students who I have in my normal classes that,

when we have done some of the activities with [advisory], have been more engaged than I

thought." School B's administrator revealed that this change in advisory focus was a result of a

Schools To Watch site visit. Administrator B stated:

> I do feel that School To Watch, [allows the school staff to have improvement] as a
>
> focus and help[s] us to always revamp. That's the great thing about Schools To
>
> Watch. I love Schools To Watch, because it allows others to kind of go through
>
> your medicine closet, you know, and kind of poke around and ask the really hard

questions. And, [Schools To Watch] help[s] us to be introspective and look for

areas of growth, because there are thousands of ways we can grow right now. It is

good to have that insight because there is no such thing as a utopic school and

perfect school. So, it is [about] just constantly striving to get better. And, I think

Schools To Watch helps us to be more [developmentally] responsive in more than

just one area…

In addition to advisory, all three schools had counseling programs that focused on

meeting the social and emotional needs of their students. In two of the three schools, each grade-

level had an assigned counselor who would oversee all of the students in that grade-level. At

School C, each guidance counselor would stay with a group of students all three years they were

in middle school. Again, the focus was on counselors building relationships with students.

School Counselor B reported:

As a school counselor, I just try to make myself really visible. That's just how I

am as a particular professional and, for the most part really our school counseling

department is a very visible department. We are very accessible, very visible, and

very well-known by the students. And, so many times people will self-report [to

the department].

In School A, counselors were recently added to expand the department's capabilities. The result

was that there were additional services being offered to students in School A, such as, career

counseling and small group therapy sessions.

Each school's counseling department staffs oversaw a variety of programs that addressed

a specific need of students within the school. Each of these programs partnered with outside

groups to offer services to students. All schools offered small group sessions that were geared

toward particular groups of students with a specific need. For example, School B's counselors were seeing trends in their reporting data that indicated students were having anxiety about their academic success. As a result, they designed counseling sessions aimed at stress management skills. School B's counselors also designated one day of the week during advisory time to mindfulness and created advisory activities that allowed students to determine their own coping skills. School C's counselors have focused on recognizing student strengths as a way to have students focus on their own positive attributes. School Counselor C said:

> Well, I think one of the newer programs that we have…we have an [counseling program] that is relatively new to us…[focusing on] on more a of positive and emphasizing strengths that individuals have. So this is something that is under an umbrella of a lot of other programs that the county has. And, counselors are responsible [for administering the program]…So, what we have done is we have … a program that is based on three or four times a year that we can get the whole school involved. And, one of the things, one of the strengths, that we talked about last year is having adults that [students] can respond to … a trusted adults. And, we talked about trust to the whole school and what that adult would look like, and who it could be. And, so what we are looking at is trying to get those individuals who don't think they have a trusted adult here and making them think like 'oh, yes, I could go to [staff member's name] if I had a question about something.' It could be a parent, it could be a coach, it could be anybody, but we were looking at individuals in the school where students could go to if they needed to…

This multi-faceted approach teaches specific themes and the counselors have designed events throughout the school year that celebrate these positive self-attributes. Additionally, they have a

peer mentoring program which has students discuss the topics in their own classes and serve as a

resource for students that may need support. School Counselor B explained:

> …the peer mentors go through the training so that they recognize all the different
>
> strengths because they themselves are chosen by teachers and by other
>
> adults…Like, this last month, we broke down [into groups]…[and] we talked
>
> about healthy activities which is one of our strengths. And, so the eighth
>
> graders…made a little video about what healthy activities are…So, again, it's a
>
> group reaching out to the larger group with an activity.

School B's counselors aided in identifying students in need of extra support and paired them

with an adult or student mentor within the school building. Counselors, along with the

designated adult mentor, checked in with these students on a regular basis. Counselors also set

up activities after-school that allowed time for building relationships between adult mentors and

students. Student-student mentorships are created for students new to School B. School

Counselor B explained:

> New students, especial in middle school, I have found …are very anxious about
>
> starting a new school because this is a time when they really understand what it
>
> means to understand a news school and developing new peer relationships. So, a
>
> lot of our mentoring program, I'd say about half, has been new students and just
>
> kind of the fears and anxieties that come along with that. So, the mentoring
>
> program is one thing. I mentioned our [student leader group]. They really help
>
> with that general like first, you know, fear of the unknown anxiety. So, they have
>
> been doing tours for our elementary students. This year has been the first year in
>
> recent years that we invited elementary schools for all five of our feeder

elementary school to come here. They [the student leaders] had a presentation

[for the elementary students] and a [gave elementary students a]tour of the school.

And, that kind of helps some of the initial fears of the unknown.

Sixth graders are introduced to the student mentors so that they know a face of an older student

that can help them if needed. At all three schools, the counseling department staffs were

continuously determining ways to meet the needs of their students.

All three schools also had a variety of school activities for student involvement that were

discussed in twelve of the fifteen interviews. In ten of the interviews, school activities were

determined as meeting the developmental social and emotional needs of students. School

activities could include clubs, sports, and leadership opportunities. All three school staffs

differed in how they offered these activities for their students. For instance, School C did not

have middle school athletics, but they did offer after school activities three days a week with

transportation provided. School Administrator C stated:

> So, any teacher and any student can join, start, or form a club…So, it's been great
>
> that we have a lot of teachers that want to join or form clubs for kids…So, all they
>
> have to do is go on the announcements and tell kids when it is going to start, and
>
> what [the club] is all about, and how you join. So, we have like a large number of
>
> clubs that kids can belong to…[The school division] doesn't have any sports in
>
> the middle schools, so they do sports outside of middle school. So, it is important
>
> for them to have other academic and just social clubs for them to join…We are
>
> fortunate enough that we have an after-school bus program, and we have after-
>
> school buses [certain days of the week]. So, if parents have to work and they
>
> can't pick up their kids, we can still get them home. So, that really helps a lot!

School B had a strong middle school athletics program that participants attributed as being responsive to the needs of young adolescents. It was difficult for the investigator to delineate as to whether these school activities were developmentally responsive or socially equitable, or both, as participants mentioned these student activities in multiple responses.

A common theme in each school's activities was student voice. Each school offered activities because the students wanted to participate in such activities. For instance, all three schools offered clubs because students requested for a club to be created that met their unique needs. School B had an application process for students to request a club with a staff sponsor's support. The applications were reviewed by the school's Leadership Advisory to determine the need and the school's ability to support the program. Exploratory Teacher B said:

> If any student has an interest [in a club], it can be proposed. All they have to do is
>
> get one teacher to sign off and then goes to [Leadership Advisory]. And, that
>
> [group] signs off, [then it goes to administration]. So, it's not just teachers saying
>
> 'hey, we should do this type of club,' but the kids can do it.

School Counselor B also spoke to the fluidity of clubs and said:

> …our principal really made a big to do about [clubs] and kind of got the students
>
> [excited] about our clubs and various organizations and sports that we have here.
>
> [He told students]…if sports are not you thing, then maybe clubs are your thing.
>
> And, if you don't' see a club that you are particularly interested in, then you can
>
> get a few friends and get a faculty sponsor and create your own club. A lot of
>
> students were really excited about having that unique opportunity…A great
>
> example is that a bunch of girls got together and wanted to reignite the dance
>
> team that had been present [last year]. So, they touched base with the math

teacher that had [coached the] dance team in the past [and] started the dance team.

And, then before I knew it, even I was [the] assistant coach of the dance team!

So, it was just nice to see that was just totally student initiated, and staff

[supported] those students' interests.

School A's administrator reported that because the school activities are student initiated and

some clubs and activities are discontinued based on student demand. Whereas, other clubs are

created for the same reasons. School Administrator A said:

…students drive what our clubs are. We've got clubs that have kind of always

existed that are based on teacher interest. But, about this time last year (of

course, school safety was in forefront of everybody's mind)… we had a student

come forward and say that they wanted to start a Student Safety Task Force

here…So, we worked with them and worked with their parents, and found a staff

member. And, since then they have done a lot of cool things…So, it's that

willingness and ability to let students drive our clubs and organizations…[that

gives] students a voice…

Another common theme in each school was when the activities were available. During

School B's advisory period, half of the ninety-minute period was set aside for advisory and the

other half was flexible for student needs. The second half of the class period was a time when

some clubs could meet and perform their activities. Exploratory Teacher B discussed the use of

the flexible class period that was used for advisory, as well as, club meetings. Exploratory

Teacher B said:

[The time period] allows students a lot of opportunity to participate in different

clubs and organizations, and things they choose to study…I sponsor ...an

engineering team. The students dome down [to the classroom] and collaborate on

large engineering projects. But, [the project time is] not like how class is

structured, but is more open-lab oriented. So, they get the social aspect, as well.

School A and C offered clubs before and after school, and as previously mentioned School C has

been able to provide transportation to students so that they can attend a variety of after-school

activities three days a week. School Administrator A expressed that their school is looking at

ways to include all students by expanding how clubs are offered in response to being more

socially equitable.

Student voice was an interwoven theme throughout several participant responses as

meeting the social and emotional needs of students. In School A, the principal had a Student

Advisory committee that met once a month to represent the voice of the student body. School

Administrator A described how students would bring concerns to administration through these

meetings and then the administration could address any issues:

…about three years ago I started what's called a Student Advisory Council. I've

got about thirty students that I meet with monthly. Teachers help identify

students, but the qualifications [are] that we want kids who aren't usually a part of

other things. We want a diverse group of kids to kind of be the voice of the

student body. I meet with them once a month and we discuss different

things…[The group] voiced some concerns about some bullying that they felt

might be going on in a particular area of the building, which gave [administration

the ability to identify] the issue there and [assess] do we need more staff support

there…So, [that has] been great to have that student group available.

Each of the schools also had student leadership groups that served in a variety of capacities.

In each of the schools giving student choices and hearing their voices was a goal. Administrator C stated:

> …I really do feel like everything you hear about relationships, especially with this age of students, is exactly right on. In terms of they work harder if they enjoy the class and enjoy their teacher. They work harder if they know somebody cares about them and is there for them to support them. So, we have quite a few extra help opportunities built into the day, so that students are able to get that one-on-one relationship with teachers. And, we talk a lot about making learning exciting and relevant, so that we are giving students a lot [of] voice and choice, so that students have some kind of built-in desire to be in that class and learn.

Teacher C2 went on to explain:

> The relationship building, I would say, is number one, right? So, first of all, it lets the kids choose. Like if it's a club, right, they get to choose 'what's my area of interest?' And, then they can develop a relationship with the teacher that is sponsoring that club. I think that it is also a way for them to develop relationships with other students that they might not normally come in contact with…[Clubs are] multi-grade-level and they meet every other week. So, you get sixth graders and eighth graders with similar interest[s] in [a topic] and [they] get to interact with each other. So that builds relationships and I think that all of that is helping…helping students become better socially, emotionally, and in other areas of their life rather just the core subjects and things like that.

Through programmatic offerings such as advisory, clubs, or school activities each school created a variety of opportunities to build relationships between students and teachers in order meet adolescent students' social and emotional needs.

<u>Addressing that all Young Adolescents have Successful Academic Performance</u>

All three school staffs offered students a variety of academic opportunities. Many of these academic opportunities are available through course offerings within the school schedule. At all three schools, time was set aside for students to meet with school counselors to discuss their goals and to create a schedule that helped them to meet their academic goals. Based on these discussions and parental conversations, schedules were determined to meet the academic needs of individual students. Counselor A reported, "it is very much about where is the student and what are the student's needs. And, where [courses] would those best be addressed." Counselor B said:

> …we've really done a great job kind of publicizing this with the student when
>
> they came to visit and with the parents when they came to the meeting…those
>
> initial choices [course selections] that students make in terms of like electives and
>
> in terms of, you know, course leveling and that kind of thing; those initial choices
>
> are really going to drive our staffing and our schedule and the way we organize
>
> things. I think when that is said up front, it's like we do accommodate changes.
>
> Absolutely! But, when we are empowering and giving them lots of information
>
> up front to make those good decisions up front, then we have a really good handle
>
> on how to adjust staffing to meet those needs.

Not only does the schedule allow for a variety of course offerings, in two of the three

schools it allowed for time to address individual student's academic needs. At School C, all

students have a resource class period. During this time teachers can pull individual students or

groups of students for remediation, review, or completing missing work. For students that do not

need to be pulled there is a directed study hall period for working on homework or on-going

projects. Teacher C1 said:

> I think, probably the biggest thing that we have touched on a couple of times is
>
> this idea that when we have our planning block on either A day or B day, one or
>
> the other, that is when our kids have their resource. So, that means that every
>
> child is available to their core set of teachers at that time and that makes a world
>
> of difference. To be able to have forty-five minutes every-other-day where kids
>
> can be working with you to review material that they haven't master yet. I really
>
> think having that time...I cannot imagine teaching without that time…They
>
> [students] are less likely to get lost in the cracks.

School B also had a resource time during their advisory period. The second half of the ninety-

minute advisory period was for students to work on homework, get extra help, work on on-going

projects, and meet with student activities throughout campus. The school schedule helped to

offer academic opportunities to students both in their course choices and a time to receive

academic support.

Measuring academic success also plays an important role for each school. Each school

had participants that spoke to how their staff relies on multiple assessment tools to measure

student learning and to determine overall academic success. Teacher C2 explained:

We do quarterly diagnostics at like the beginning, middle and end of the year. So, we are tracking our kids' progress throughout the year. So, that is really important. And, [we] are making sure that they are meeting certain benchmarks at certain times. We review them as a [department] and we review them with the subject area lead teacher to make sure that students are meeting the benchmarks. And, if they are not then we can work again during our [planning time] with those kids specifically, to make sure they are making their goals.

All three sites had school required assessments and data collection, as well as, required assessments at the school division level. School C even relied on national assessments as a gauge of student learning. Administrator C described the usage of these national assessments and said, "There are tests that show where the kids are nationwide (it's a nationwide achievement test), so that you can see not only where your students are versus other kids in the classroom, but among the county and then among the nation."

Administrator B described that their school is required to give division mandated benchmark assessments, however, there is an effort in the school to assess learning by other means. Administrator B described their school's efforts:

We are under a wave of deeper learning, so we are looking for learning experiences for students. [We are moving away from] worksheets and regurgitation of facts, but {rather] immersing [students] into active, hands-on learning that's [going] hopefully make the life-ready. So, in most classrooms you will see [students] working in pods and there will be a collaborative effort. There will a project and maybe a PBL (Project Based Learning) and with a strong rubric. We are really working now on some stronger rubrics. I think that's [a]

next area of growth. The deeper learning movement is really taking hold and part

of that is student choice and providing students that choice of ownership of their

curriculum.…we are seeing a movement away from just your multiple choice

[assessments] to…that experience [based learning], to creating a project, [and]

being able to demonstrate you r knowledge and master content through other

means than just by multiple choice.

Thus, the Virginia Standards of Learning assessment was not the only indicator of academic

success.

All three school staffs had regular data meetings to discuss assessment results and make

instructional decisions based on the data. Some instructional decisions were based on data which

indicated that content level departments needed to review teaching strategies or pacing to

improve academic performance. Teacher C1 stated:

So, as the subject area lead teacher, I put together a report analyzing the

populations and the scores and the questions that students were not successful

with, looking at any subgroups where the students were not successful, and then I

meet with each [department] to have a discussion about 'here is what I am

seeing', 'what can we do?'

All schools had data teams that analyzed data to determine individual student

performance. These teams also worked to create a plan for particular students who were

struggling academically. For example, School B had a team that met weekly to discuss students

that were not meeting academic benchmarks. Administrator B described their school's process:

So, we have common planning time which will allow our teacher to have the

opportunities to have PLC's (Professional Learning Communities) and to have

meaningful conversations around student learning, around our lessons. They do

have a template that they [the] teachers fill out that will have the essential

questions, the big idea with any kind of minutia of how they are going to

accomplish their goals. But, more importantly, after having those conversations,

they could be collaborating and asking 'well, this worked really well with my

students based on this data' [and] 'what did you do to teacher this because

students didn't perform very well.' So, [these data meetings are] really allowing

them that opportunity to sit down and have meaningful conversations when

necessary.

Each school's data team members discussed individual students and determined plans to help

that student meet their academic goals. This sometimes included a student being placed into a

remediation class to receive specialized instruction and support. Special Education Teacher A

explained:

We have data meetings so each teacher is schedule [to meet] with [testing

coordinator] and then with [administration]. They focus on the areas of needs,

where they see students struggling and what we are going to do to get them where

they need to be and what level they need to be at. And then…it's kind of like a

prescription. We figure out what we need to do to help them…In my directed

study (remediation time), I have several students that are below grade-level, so we

work…[on] just anything I feel like will help them with moving forward and

moving up grade-level wise.

Each of the three schools met at least weekly concerning assessment data. Some schools data

teams were led by administrators while others had instructional coaches, and some were led by a

content lead teacher. Thus, each school was using a variety of assessments to collect data to determine student academic success and meeting on a regular basis to discuss data.

Each school had professional development opportunities that focused on improving academics. In School A and B, the emphasis had been on creating deeper learning in the classroom, whereas, School C focused on personalized learning. Administrator C explained that shifting the teaching focus to personalized learning is an ongoing process that requires allotting time throughout the school year for teachers to collaborate and develop ideas. Administrator C said:

> …personalized learning is…making those connections to the real world and make
>
> sure that kids understand the relevancy of what they are learning. And, giving
>
> them choices. Give them choices not only in maybe how they learn something,
>
> but then how they show us what they've learned and how they demonstrate that to
>
> us. So, it is really difficult for teachers to create those lessons because it takes a
>
> lot of deep thinking. And, it's a lot more complicated with a lot more choices you
>
> have to create and find [resources]. There's just so many resources out on the
>
> internet and having time to explore all of that and find those good resources is
>
> difficult. So, it is a process.

All of these academic initiatives included student choice and voice. Professional development initiatives helped to drive instructional planning and conversations within each school. Administrator B stated:

> I think as they first come with the end in mind and have an understanding of
>
> where their students need to go. And, then having the right conversations about
>
> where the students currently are and then understanding the nuances of each class,

whether its's collaborative, advanced, or whatever the kids happen to be. And,

then working strategically to determine what is the best hands-on approach. And,

again, it should be a focus on deeper learning and making sure that the lesson

does incorporate the student choice…We make sure that novels have, you know,

protagonists that reflect maybe a different type of culture or race, or ethnicity that

maybe is not necessarily a mirror, but a window for them to see the world. The

science department and math and social studies and electives should also be trying

to infuse different backgrounds and experiences within their lessons. So, again,

trying to be responsive, again, [and] true to the changing clientele that we have.

These long-term professional development initiatives allowed for each school staff to

continuously strive to improve academic performance and teaching over the course of a school

year.

Organizational Structures and Processes that Meet the Needs of Students

Each school had organizational systems that aided with decision making and assigning of

roles. First, it is noteworthy to report that in each schools creation of the master schedule, the

school staff played a crucial part in ensuring the schedule was in-synch with overall organization

of the school. The organization structure was the impetus for the schedule and the schedule

allowed for the organizational structure to meet the needs of the school. Administrator B stated,

"the master schedule, to me, there is not a more important document in the school than the

master schedule. That drives the school…" Thus, it is helpful to discuss these two topics in

tandem.

School A has an Administrative Team that meets weekly and is comprised of the

principal, two assistant principals, guidance coordinator, Special Education coordinator,

instructional coach, and occasionally the building manager when needed. This team discussed weekly operational topics such as student issues, staffing issues, and building needs. The Administrative Team feeds into a larger body called the Leadership Council. The Leadership Council meets once a month and is comprised of all the school department chairs, grade-level leaders, and librarian. This group advises the Administrative Team, problem-solves school-wide issues, and can express any concerns. Special Education Teacher A explained:

> Through our Leadership [Council], each individual grade-level is represented and
> also the elective areas are represented with leadership. And, so if there are
> concerns, we meet as a leadership team and discuss those concerns. And, then
> figure out ways to address the concerns in the building.

The Administrative Team also uses the Leadership Council to disseminate information. There are also monthly faculty meetings that include all staff members. All staff members serve on committees that are determined based on school needs. Content departments meet monthly to discuss curriculum related issues. School Counselor A described the importance of department meetings:

> …we had a big curriculum change in math for next year, so in one of the
> department meetings…all those curricular changes were talked about. …the math
> supervisory (from central office) and I sat in on the meeting. So…it's trying to
> involve everyone who is a stakeholder.

Grade-levels meet weekly to discuss student issues. Counselor A went on to explain a grade level meeting:

> There is an eighth grade leader…so, that leader runs the meeting. So, [they are
> going to] have an agenda…and they are [going] to go over things…they are

taking notes and any concerns that they can address and deal with within the

grade level, they will. There may be concerns that may need to go back to

administration or come to guidance…

Administrators, guidance counselors, and instructional coaches could be involved in any of these

meetings if the topic warranted their presence. Communication can be disseminated down to all

staff members and up to administration via the Leadership Council. Although, all participants

interviewed at School A felt that they could approach their administrators at any time if they had

an immediate issue.

The A-day and B-day schedule at School A allows for the grade-levels to meet daily if

needed, but they are required to meet at least weekly. Grade-levels, as well as, departments

shared their notes electronically with administration and all stakeholders. Departments do not

have common planning time during the day to meet, so they must meet after school. Participants

reported understanding the organizational structures of the school and what process they needed

to follow in order to make decisions. Exploratory Teacher A said,

…we meet regularly and discuss problems and issues that come up and they are

addressed freely and openly with the administration who really, at this school, are

very wide-open to listening to suggestions and concerns, and do regularly address

those with our staff and with students.

School B also had a Leadership Team that was scheduled to meet regularly once a week

and then also as needed. The Leadership Team was comprised of the principal, assistant

principals, instructional coach, counseling director, and instructional technology coach. The

administrators met and completed a building walk-through for the first half of the meeting, and

then they met with the additional individuals for the second part of the meeting. Administrator B

stated the purpose of the meeting, "helps us all stay on the pulse of what each other are working on, what the big initiatives are and gets us all on the same page as a well-working team…"

School B's organizational leadership branched out to an Advisory Council made up of the Leadership Team, content department chairs, grade-level leaders, the librarian, instructional technology coach, administrative aids, and occasionally central office staff at the divisional level. This group was responsible for the ongoing review of the school improvement plan and addressing long-range planning. For instance, School B had an increasing population and they were aware that their rising fifth grade class would be much larger and disproportionate to their current class numbers. Throughout the school year the Advisory Council had been discussing and planning how to adjust the school schedule to accommodate enrollment numbers, re-adjust staffing, and meet their scheduling goals. Administrator B explained:

> So, [the Advisory Council] meets once a month and is also a time when we set
>
> aside [time]to review our [continuous school improvement plan]. So, we spend,
>
> always, at least thirty minutes working on that…next year we are adding one-
>
> hundred twenty students. So, I asked the advisory last [meeting to]… look at
>
> what the schedule is [going to] look like and what are some of the challenges of
>
> that schedule. And how is it going to impact sixth the grade…So, it is kind of that
>
> type of conversation. We also talked a lot about social and emotional responses,
>
> and…planned some PD (professional development) or some PD by the advisory
>
> and really determine if this is the right…course of action. If they have concerns,
>
> we will talk it out. Some things are non-negotiable…It's a valuable time and we
>
> have a really strong advisory team…We have had this committee of three

years…I am very thankful for that group because I do feel that everyone has voice and will share that voice so we have good conversations.

School B was also organized by grade-level and content department. Grade-level departments met once a week and were focused on discussing student needs. These meetings included an administrator and guidance counselor assigned to that grade-level. Grade-level meetings allowed for teachers to determine plans for individual students that may be struggling. Electronic notes of these meetings were kept and shared with all stakeholders. Content departments met monthly and were focused on discussing curriculum and data. These meetings were to include content specific professional development when needed. The A-day and B-day schedule allowed for some of these meetings to take place during the school day because common planning time was built into the schedule. Teacher B2 commented that due to some teachers serving in multiple grade-levels not every teacher was available for these meetings during the school day, thus warranting the need for the electronic note-sharing. Teacher B2 and B3 explained that for the most part teachers taught in the same grade-level and even in the same hallway, which was good for communication. However, in School B there were a few teachers that taught accelerated courses in other grade-levels and they did not have the same schedule, thus they could not always be included in the meetings that took place during the school day. Teacher B2 summed up the structures and said:

> …I think that time management is always an issue with teachers so, if we are organized by grade (which we are, for the most part) I think it allows us to have conversations in a more efficient way. Whether, it is through like these council meetings or just in the hallway; when we are going to talk to the teachers or during lunchtime even. I think it is more…efficiently done for where we are.

School B also had professional learning communities that were based on the needs of the school. These groups included a Professional Development Committee responsible for organizing staff development opportunities for the whole school. Administrator B commented, "everyone kind of contributes to the life and culture of the school." As previously mentioned, School B had committees that also met weekly to discuss students that were academically at-risk. Interview participants at School B understood the organizational structures and processes of the school as they all mentioned their role in these groups.

School C also had similar organizational structures as School A and B, but had a few purposeful scheduling components that strengthened their organizational structures. School C had an Administrative Team that met once a week. This team was made up of the principal, assistant principals, and the grade-level administrative deans. This team oversaw everything in the school and as Administrator C explained:

So, what's beautiful about, I mean, it's really, really awesome the way that we have our leadership team organized because it creates a really high level of support for the people that work in the building. So, you know, every building has a lot of just paperwork, management issues that needs to be done. So, my assistant principals are really on top of that. I have one assistant principal who takes care of all the Special Ed needs of our building and that is a huge…that's a huge chunk of time. And, she also does all of the testing which is another huge chunk of time. My other assistant principal does the major discipline work and then he takes care of all the building issues and the professional development. And, that allows me to be the instructional leader. So, I do ninety percent of the observations and evaluations for my teachers. And, I am constantly in the

classrooms. And, I am working with professional development activities and I

really can be an instructional leader in this building. I am not taking care or

putting out fires all of the time and the reason for that is because I have my deans.

So, my deans; the role of the dean is crucial. It is critical at this age, especially in

working with parents, the teachers, and the students. So, in their grade level, they

are the quasi administrator. They are the administrator of that grade level. So, if

a teacher comes to them with a problem…my dean is right there to do it.

The organizational structure of the administration allows for the delegation of duties, as well as

the efficiency of work flow.

School C was also organized by grade-level and department. School C also has an A-day

and B-day modified block schedule. The difference in School C as compared to Schools A and

B, was that the schedule allowed for all of these groups to meet during the school day. This

schedule allowed for all departments and all of the department's members to meet on one of the

scheduled days. Departments had every-other-day off together as a common planning time and

administration determined the frequency in which each department met. Each department had a

leader that analyzed departmental data, organized meetings, and shared information with

administration. During this time, departments could plan lessons, analyze data, and collaborate

within their content areas. Administrator C explained:

For example, my seventh grade language arts teachers only meet once a week,

which is the requirement. But, my sixth grade math teacher meet every single

day…every single day they are together planning, sharing activities, sharing

ideas, talking about what worked and what didn't work. And, then I have

department chairs [and they] go in and analyze data with [teachers]…They have

common assessments at least once a quarter and they go in together and really

analyze the data, and look at it. And, [the teachers] talk about why the kids may

have missed some questions and how they can make that better. So, it makes

them better teachers and it also just keeps everything flowing. And, it gives us a

lot of data and information about the kids and where we need to help the kids

before we get to the end of the year.

Grade-level counselors and administrative deans were also able to meet with these

teacher groups.

School C is also organized into grade-level teams. Each grade-level has multiple teams

made up of one math teacher, one language arts teacher, one science teacher, and one social

studies teacher. Grade-levels and teams have common planning time in which they would meet

on alternative days to that of the departments. Team meetings are focused on student needs and

interdisciplinary planning. Teams are encouraged to create special activities and field-trips for

their students. Teams followed a meeting template and notes were shared with administration.

Administrator B said,

…teaming is key.   I mean, we have to have both. So,…there is equal emphasis

placed on teaming as there is on subject area planning. So, teachers get to plan

with the same teachers that teach their subject area, but they also get to sit with

the teachers that have the same kids. So, there's a lot of collaboration, there's a

lot of uniformity and structure, which is what middle school kids really need to in

order to feel comfortable and safe and to do well.

Special Education Teacher C said,

So, the team structure is, I think, the base level. You have the team structure that

is interdisciplinary teams. So, you have all of the content teachers and a Special

Education teacher composing a team. And, so there is generally three (teams) per

grade level. They will meet once a week, if not more if the need it. They will

have meeting minutes that will be documented, so every team has a scribe to

document up to, you know, we share through Google Docs, so then after the

meeting. That information is shared directly with all of the administrators, so the

deans, the AP's, and the principal, and other people that need it. Some

department heads would get that, so I get those minutes often from every team.

There are sections within the minutes that are designated, too. So, if there is

student issues or academic issues, program issues; all of that is delineated within.

Then, after that information is given, the administrators are able to return, either

setting up a meeting to work with a team based on their need. And, they go from

there based on that information.

During the teacher interviews, they too reiterated the importance of teaming. Teacher C3 said,

"We have a common planning block, as well as, teachers on the same team will get together and

talk about our kids…" And Teacher C1 said,

And, [Teacher C3] said 'our kids' and I feel like that's huge. Because it is. If you

are in a grade-level, there [are] three different teams and even when those teachers

come together for lunch, you have like a responsibility and feeling towards your

kids. And, these are my one-hundred thirty kids for the school year and you're

looking out for them. And, you want to know how they are doing in their other

class. And, are they having the same struggles there. And, it really does…help

that sense of community.

The schedule, along with teaming, allowed School C to be very intentional about meeting student needs academically and developmentally.

Schools A and B did not have teaming, but it was not for lack of wanting to implement teaming. In School A there had once been teaming, but due to staffing cuts in previous years it was no longer possible to accommodate teaming within the schedule. Exploratory Teacher A said:

But, the teaming concept has gone away. I think it was rather valuable and still

some of the older teachers will lament that that was very valuable and good for

the child. No child gets lost in that because…there was a village teaching them

rather than individual teachers.

For School B, staffing challenges prohibited them from implementing teaming. Fluctuating enrollment numbers and the need for teachers to teach advanced courses did not allow for teaming in the schedule. Administrator B said, "No, I wish we could do teaming. We really logistically can't. Maybe in sixth grade we could, and we are going to kind of investigate that. The challenge we have [is] we have a lot of advanced classes…"

Additionally, all participant schools had systems for communication with staff and parents, although each school did this differently. Some of the schools sent out weekly emails reporting on all the events in the school for that week. Exploratory Teacher A said:

The principal also has a Friday Focus where every Friday he puts out a little alert

about what's been going on and he takes pictures…That newsletter is kind of

neat. There [are] a lot of things going on, and sometimes it get lost, but I think

everything is addressed [in the newsletter].

All schools used their daily announcements via the intercom to keep students and staff informed,

and to promote school-wide initiatives. Exploratory Teacher A explained, "This morning the

person reading the announcements wished luck to the band kids going to district try-outs

tomorrow, so those are the kinds of things that I think makes everybody feel like what I do is

important." As for parents, each school had either email or some form of electronic

communication that parents could access to find out information about the school. Exploratory

Teacher B explained:

…every single teacher has a published homework core which is on the school

website…so that parents can actually go and see [course material]. And, it must

be updated once a week. All grades that are automatically updated online must be

updated once a week.

School C set aside time either within the school day or after school that parents could meet with

teachers. School Counselor C explained that the school is dictating less as to when staff is

available to meet with parents, but rather they are letting the parents dictate when they are able to

meet with the school staff. School Counselor C said, " I am giving them the opportunity to tell

me when they are available, whether its [on the] phone or throughout the day…So, I am letting

them (the parents) dictate what is convenient for them…" Each school found ways to involve

parents in school-wide events either through parent-teacher associations or by reaching out to

specific groups of parents that the wished to be involved.

<u>Practices that Support Social Equity for all Students</u>

Participant interviews revealed that there were strong connections between meeting the social and emotional needs of students while also providing social equity for all students. For instance, in eight of the fifteen interviews, student activities were discussed as being socially equitable for all students. Four themes in particular were mentioned by participants as being social equitable: clubs, advisory, counseling programs, and behavior management programs.

As discussed previously in this chapter, all participant schools clubs were flexible in that any teacher or student could start a club. In participant interviews the flexibility of club offerings was implied as being socially equitable because any student could either find a group to participate, or they could create a club that met their unique needs. School staffs were open to the creation of new clubs and the flexibility of meetings times. Administrator A discussed that during his/ her school's most recent Schools To Watch site visit, site team members called attention to issues of inequity involving the school's club program.

Administrator A explained:

> Also, what came out of [the] Schools To Watch [visit to our school was] that our
> current club structure is before or after school, and there are some kids that can't
> do that because of transportation. So, we've talked about expanding our advisory
> time frame [and] doing it multiple times a week and maybe including clubs in that
> at some [point]. Again that is kind of the next step for us is to make sure that kids
> are involved in that…Again, I think that has got the ability to really change us and
> change our school culture as we move through the process…I think that is one of
> the structures that we [will] have in place [so] we don't have those
> disenfranchised students for whatever reason.

The school's club program had many choices for students and was student driven, but the fact that it met only after school was a deterrent for some students to be able to participate. In response to this, School A had discussions about being more flexible with club times and possibly expanding the advisory meeting to include a club meeting time during the school day.

School activities were not just clubs and athletics. Each school had other activities, such as dances, novel studies, assemblies, and special events. School B used a one school one theme approach to combating issues of social inequity. During the school year in which interviews for this study were conducted, the theme was cultural diversity. All students and teachers were reading books of their choice, but the requirement was that the book was about someone different from themselves. Teacher B2 explained:

..one of the things we are doing is there is an initiative we are starting called Reading Without Walls…that was about simply reading about something that is probably out of your comfort zone. For us, we are focusing on reading about…reading novels, fiction or nonfiction, from authors or about a main character or protagonist who is some who is not like you. And, how that is decided is up to the student. It could be racial, ethnicity, religious, gender, and list goes on. The student is the one that decides how it's different…It is going to lead to a cultural night that we are going to have in April where we have cultural performances…We are [going] to have foods from a lot of different countries and ethnicities and cultures, as well. We are having a lot of different students from different grades create projects, a writer's fair, a reader's fair, and those types of things related to these books that [are] Reading Without Walls…So, we are trying

to make this a formal campus initiative…So, there is equity whether it is

diversity, etc.

Also, throughout the school year there would be assemblies and events related to diversity. In

previous school years at School B, the staff had adopted school-wide reads that address their

school's theme for the year. There were no common practices as to how each school used these

programs, only that they did have extra activities in response to being more inclusive of all

student groups.

Four of the fifteen interview participants spoke about advisory when asked about social

equity. Special Education Teacher A said,

I think, again, the advisory program is a good example of social equity and

making for sure that students feel heard and feel like they are equal. We have

many Special Ed students that are in the advisory group that normally would not

have the opportunity to interact with other students…

When asked about social equity, Special Education Teacher B also referenced advisory and its

connection to school-wide novel studies in past years. In the past years, School B's school-wide

read was focused on understanding and respecting students with disabilities, and more recently it

is focused on understanding and respecting people from different cultural backgrounds. Special

Education Teacher B said in reference to the school-wide reads, "There is a lot of things

encouraging [and] celebrating diversity…I think that…sort of …makes students aware."

Teachers at School B also said that advisory time could be adjusted to address topics of inequity

and that advisory served as a forum to discuss such issues.

Participants stated that the counseling programs in each school addressed issues of

inequity. Given the growing population in School B, the school experienced new students

throughout the school year in all grade levels. School B's staff voiced concerns that new students did not always feel included and did not participate as much in school activities. School B's counseling office addressed the needs of the group by implementing a peer-mentoring program for new students. School C's counseling department responded to a community need that resulted in a growing English Language Learner (E.L.L.) population within their school. Staff reported that E.L.L. students needed more support, were not as involved with school activities, and that their families needed additional outreach from the school. Administrator C explained:

> …EL (E.L.L.) teachers have Saturday schools for the students and their parents to kind of teach them some of the traditions of the U.S….we talk to them about how do you get on to their [parent access to student accounts] which is where you can view the grades. So, there is a lot of greater level of comfort for the EL parents because they like the can come in on Saturday and it is a group of people that are in the same [situation]. And, they are all learning together, so it's very nice…[For parent-teacher conferences] we have interpreters for the parents. So the parents can personally ask any questions and talk personally about their child. And, what their [school] experiences were [previously] and what their challenges are that we may not know. So, it's been a great thing for us to implement…

As a result, the school designated one of the four counselors to the E.L.L. population. This counselor checked in regularly with students and also set up events for the parents to be more involved in the school.

Each school had school-wide behavior systems. In three of the fifteen interviews, participants specifically referenced these programs as being socially equitable for all students.

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All three schools' programs focused on recognizing and rewarding good behavior. Expectations for behavior were discussed early in the school year and reinforced throughout the school year. Participants that focused on behavior systems as being social equitable discussed that the systems were fair for all students. Teacher A2 said, "I think that it levels the playing field." School B had an acronym for their positive behavior program that allowed for a common theme to be consisted communicated to all students. Administrator B said,

> It kind of keeps the entire staff consistent with the way that we do [behavior
>
> management]. It's our roadmap for discipline, as well as, it all falls under PBIS
>
> [Positive Behavior Intervention System] and positive supports…By having a
>
> consistent roadmap for discipline, it really helps the culture of the school because
>
> I think the students see that things are treated fairly.

In all participant interviews that discussed behavior management systems, the consistency provided for students was expressed as being good for students. Clear expectations for student behavior were evident, and students understood how good behavior was rewarded, as well as, the consequences for poor behavior.

<center>Summary</center>

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of school staff at three Virginia middle schools in order to better understand the practices each school used to be continuously designated as a School To Watch. The information complied and analyzed in Chapter Four was provided by interviewing twenty-one participants in fifteen interview sessions at three Virginia Middle Schools. Each school was re-designated as a Schools To Watch three or more times. Each site represented three different school divisions and three different

geographical regions in Virginia.   Participant interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then

coded. Research methods were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Three concepts emerged from the analysis of interview data and review of the Schools To

Watch applications of each school. Those concepts were: each school was developmentally

responsive to the social and emotional needs of young adolescents, each school's staff employed

strong organizational leadership and structures to coordinate the school, and each school's staff

was purposeful in their creation of school schedule that allowed for purposeful planning.   It was

for these reasons that each school staff and student body has had continuously high levels of

achievement and recognition.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

<u>Introduction</u>

The purpose of this study is to identify practices that are essential to student success occurring in Virginia middle schools. The designation criteria to become a School To Watch is aligned with the core tenets outlined in *This We Believe* (National Forum, 2018, Schools To Watch, 2018). Those core tenets are academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes (Schools To Watch, 2018). The central question is: What practices does a Virginia Re-Designated III Schools To Watch use to uphold academic excellence, to remain developmentally responsive to young adolescents, to create a school environment that is socially equitable for all students, and to implement organizational structures and procedures that carry out these goals?

The three Virginia middle schools selected for this study had been re-designated three or more time as Schools To Watch. For this phenomenological study, individual participants at each school were chosen to represent their unique perspectives and roles within the school. For each school an administrator, school counselor, special education teacher, exploratory teacher, and three core teachers were chosen to participate in the study. Each school had seven participants that were interviewed in five interview sessions at each school site. Three core teachers were interviewed as a group. In total, the study included fifteen interview sessions with twenty-one participants.

The interview questions were focused on the four areas of academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes. The format of participant interviews allowed for open-ended questions and follow-up questions as

outlined in Appendix B. Each participant's unique perspective helped to highlight the practices utilized by each school.

The interview data were collected, transcribed, and coded in order to be examined by the principal investigator to determine emergent themes and concepts. The themes and noteworthy concepts that resulted from the data analysis could provide middle school practitioners information and ideas that they may want to implement in their own schools. Information in this study may be of consideration by school divisions as to how best to implement the middle school concept, as well as, their division becoming a part of the Schools To Watch organization. School divisions may be interested in the self-assessment, reflective practices, and reporting that the Schools To Watch organization requires because it supports the use of best middle school practices.

The data analysis revealed fourteen themes between all participant schools: academic opportunities, advisory, behavior management, building relationships, challenges, counseling, data-initiated responses, organizational process and structures, parents, scheduling, skill building activities, student activities, student voice, and teams. Of these fourteen themes three central concepts emerged that were present at each school. First, each school's staff was intentionally developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents. Second, each school's staff used strong organizational leadership approaches to implementing structures and processes to complete the work necessary for the school to operate. Lastly, each school's staff was purposeful in the creation of a master schedule that met the goals and needs of the school.

<u>Discussion and Conclusions</u>

The emerging themes and concepts that resulted in the data analysis presented in Chapter Four provided the researcher with information about best middle school practices. Through

thoughtful consideration of the emerging themes and concepts, the researcher was able to formulate conclusions based on the three emergent concepts. Additionally, the process of data analysis allowed the researcher to also determine recommendations for implications and possibilities for future research.

Research Question 1

What factors do school staff members perceive to influence young adolescent social and emotional outcomes?

Each participant school had multiple programs and events that addressed being developmentally responsive to middle students. However, the theme that emerged from participant interviews was that the goal of any of these programs was to build relationships with students. Building relationships with students through advisory, school activities, and counseling activities created opportunities for staff to work with students on discussing self-concept, developing social skills, or improving academic performance. At the root of all of these efforts was forming a relationship with students.

More specifically, all participant schools had strong advisory programs that were focused on skill building and developing students' self-concept. Research recommends that advisory programs meet multiple times a week, have small group sizes, and be focused on topics related to developing students' self-concept (Spear, 2005). Each of the participant schools met a least once a week and had established curriculum that addressed developing student skills in these areas.

Each participant school had a strong school counseling program. Although each school staff implemented different types of programs, the precipice of each was to address a specific developmental need of students within that particular school. Thus, each school staff had developed programing and opportunities that addressed their unique student body. Schools that

identify areas of need and address students' developmental needs saw improvements in all areas of development (Manning, 2015; Parker, 2010).

Each participating school's staff developed various school activities that offered something that appealed to the needs of nearly every student. Each school had adopted a flexible approach to adding and eliminating activities based on students' demands. All three schools had club programs that were administered differently, but had the same approach. That approach was to offer opportunities for students to work with like-minded peers, develop personal interests, and build a relationship with peers and adults. When these psycho-social needs are addressed by providing outlets for self-expression and relationships, students improve in all areas of self-concept (Manning, 2015).

When asked about how their school staff attends to the social and emotional needs of students, all participants could name many examples of how their school intentionally addressed the developmental needs of young adolescents. It was apparent to the researcher that conversations amongst staff were on-going as to how they could better support students in their personal development. School participants also reported that there was an attitude of flexibility when determining programing and that if something did not work it could be discontinued. Conversely, the researcher gathered directly and indirectly that each participant's school was open-minded about how to address the developmental needs of their students. This attitude speaks to the continued success of each participant school.

<u>Research Questions 2</u>

What factors do school staff members perceive address that young adolescents have successful academic performance?

Academic opportunity was a theme that emerged when participants were asked what their school staff did to ensure that all students were academically successful. All three school staffs developed schedules that offered student choice in course offerings, exploratory courses that developed students' interests, and flexible time to meet individual student needs. Thus, the theme of scheduling is closely tied with academic opportunities. All three schools had time built into the weekly, if not daily, schedule for students to work on personalized learning goals. In School B and C this time period was available to all students nearly every day. At these two schools students could receive remediation, work on on-going projects, or attend specific student activities throughout the school. Teacher participants spoke to how valuable this time was as they felt that it allowed all students to get the help that they needed. All three participant schools were intentional about finding ways to help students meet their academic potential.

All three participating schools also had professional development directed toward improving teaching and learning. Some of the staff development was possible by creating time for teachers to meet and collaborate on planning, assessing, and data analysis. School-wide professional development was focused on implementing teaching strategies that improved and deepened student learning. Middle schools should be constantly and consistently providing teachers strategies to improve student learning (NMSA, 2010; Scribner et al., 1999).

<u>Research Question 3</u>

What organization structure and processes do school staff members perceive as being developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents?

Interview data analysis revealed that organizational structures and processes were one of the strongest themes and emerged as a concept interwoven throughout all of the research data. Each participant school's staff was very deliberate in how they organized the roles of the staff

and procedures for making decisions. Through organizational structures information and decisions were able to flow down to each staff member and up to the administration which allowed for excellent communication. Each committee, council, department, and team had specific purposes. When a topic did not meet their purpose, they referred the issues to the appropriate staff member or group. However, most importantly is that each of these decision-making groups met regularly, face-to-face. There was not an attitude of staffs meeting together as-needed, but rather that each group met to behave proactively on all issues. Determining goals, fostering collaboration, setting aside time to meet, and sharing decision making are just a few of the components of strong organizational leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Each school participant's master schedule was crafted to set aside time for staff to be developmentally responsive, academically successful, and organizationally purposeful. Each school staff set aside time within the master schedule for student activities, advisory, and academic help. Participant interviews revealed that the scheduling of such student opportunities was intentional. The participant school staffs also included time for staff groups to meet and collaborate. Each school staff did this differently; however, they were all deliberate about making time for staff groups to meet within the school day. Each of these scheduling goals further reiterated the importance of meeting student needs and ensuring that staff collaborated daily, weekly, or monthly on specific topics.

Despite discussion in the Chapter Three Literature Review about teaming, only one of the participant schools utilized traditional middle school teaming. However, the other two participant schools that did not, expressed the desire to find a way to return to teaming after it had been eliminated due to staffing issues. Each administrator participant recognized the

benefits of teaming for students and staffs. When implemented fully, teaming could have

positive effects on academic performance, communication, and school climate (NMSA, 2010).

Research Question 4

What practices do Re-Designated III Schools To Watch staff members perceive to support social

equity for students?

Research question one and four participant responses were closely connected. Three

themes paralleled each: advisory, counseling programs, and student activities. Participants

reported that each of these themes were developmentally responsive, while also being socially

equitable. Advisory was socially equitable in that all students participated and advisory topics

often addressed inclusiveness. When advisory programs address issues, such as inclusiveness,

the program can give students the social skills that help them navigate adverse social situations

(Erb & Stevenson, 1999).

School counselors in each school intentionally reached out to groups of students

struggling socially. Many created social groups that addressed specific interpersonal skills.

Counselors were a part of staff conversations about students and were purposeful to reach out to

individual students for one-on-one counseling sessions. Counselors also worked with families

and would communicate with individual parents concerning student needs. Having trained

school counselors can have a tremendous impact on a school staff's ability to meet student needs

(NMSA, 2010).

Each participant school staff had implemented a school-wide behavior management plan

that focused on positive behaviors. This theme emerged mostly when participants were asked

about social equity as many participants reported that the behavior management system was fair

for all students. For example, all students had opportunities to be rewarded for their positive

behavior. However, behavior management also speaks to being developmentally responsive, and the implementation of such a system depends on organizational structure and processes. Correcting behavior and guiding students to act positively are core tenets of the middle school philosophy (NMSA, 2010). Each school had a system for addressing poor behavior and rewarding good behavior for all students.

Conclusions

The results of this study provided three concepts which a middle level practitioner should consider when implementing middle school best practices. First, middle school staffs should create multiple opportunities to respond to the social and emotional needs of young adolescents. This study has given examples of effective programs that do so. Secondly, school staffs should carefully create organizational structures and processes that produce a climate of collaboration. Such a climate empowers stakeholders to make decisions that help meet the goals that the school staff has determined (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Senge et al.; NMSA, 2010; Schaffer et al., 2016). Lastly, middle school staffs should craft a master schedule that speaks to the goals of the school and creates opportunities for collaboration of staff and students.

Recommendations for Practice

The themes and concepts revealed through data analysis in this research study could provide middle school staffs ideas for implementation that might lead to the same continued success as the participant schools included in the study. The following recommendations for practice will benefit school staffs, students, and individual educators:

1. The findings of this study indicated that schools should be intentional in the creation of organizational structures and processes that lead to shared leadership and communication. School staffs would benefit by scheduling meetings on a regular basis and encouraging open

dialog of the issues within the purview of the designated group. Such organizational structures should encourage open communication down to individual staff members and up to administration. Effective communication is vital in creating a successful organization.

2. All schools in the study had leadership that engaged stakeholders in creating a master schedule. The schools that participated in this study were intentional in setting annual goals and creating a master schedule that helped to meet those goals. The participant schools created master schedules that allotted time for students to receive support in meeting academic goals, as well as, opportunities for school staff to build relationships with students. Each participant schools' master schedules also created time for staff collaboration. Staff collaboration time was crucial to instructional planning, assessment-data analysis, and supporting students academically and developmentally. A critical element of each participant school's schedule was flexibility. The master schedule was flexible from year to year, and the individual student schedule was flexible within the school year in order to meet specific student needs.

3. Middle school staff members should collaborate on ways to be developmentally responsive to young adolescents' unique psychosocial needs. This study references many ways in which school staffs could be responsive. However, participant interviews determined that advisory programs that met often played a significant role in school staffs having the time to develop social skills, build student skills, address school-wide areas of concern, and build relationships. Additionally, each participant school had school activities, such as clubs, that gave students the opportunity to express their individuality. These student activities allowed like-minded peer groups to form and gave each student an opportunity to be involved. At the core of all of these activities was building relationships.

4. The findings of this study may be of interest to school divisions' central office staffs that oversee middle school operations. This study shows the benefits of middle schools applying to become a School To Watch. The process is self-reflective for school staff and allows participants to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses in order to grow. Each administrator participant reported that the Schools To Watch site visit revealed areas in need of improvement and helped to change their school for the better.

<div align="center">Recommendations for Future Research</div>

Additional qualitative and quantitative research studies concerning middle school best practices would be helpful to practitioners that desire to improve their middle school for the betterment of young adolescents. These studies could focus on individual practices, or such studies could continue to use the lens set by the Schools To Watch organization to further analyze best practices for implementation. A component not included in this study would be to gauge parent and student perceptions of middle school best practices.

Future research could include the following:

1. Conducting a quantitative study on specific programmatic experiences, such as teaming, advisory, or clubs, to determine the fidelity of implementation.

2. Continuing this research study to include additional Schools To Watch in Virginia, and possibly other states.

3. A research study that uses mixed methods to determine organizational leadership approaches that support middle school best practices.

4. A research study that determined best practices in teach pedagogy that included personalized learning, deep learning and project based learning approaches to curriculum design.

5. A quantitative study of schools designated as Schools To Watch in Virginia that correlates achievement on state assessments to the implementation of specific scheduling components used in middle school master schedules.

Summary

This research study was conducted to provide information about middle school best practices. The study focused on three middle schools in Virginia that had been re-designated three times or more as Schools To Watch. Using the Schools To Watch lens, the researcher interviewed school staff to determine their unique perceptions as to how the school staff meet the needs of young adolescents while also remaining academically successful. In conclusion, analysis of participant interviews determined that each school was developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescent, each school employed strong organization leadership approaches, and each school was purposeful in the creation of a master schedule. Thus, middle school practioners that focus on these three areas of implementation can become successful middle schools.

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APPENDIX A

THE SCHOOLS TO WATCH CRITERIA

 ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE. High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards.

2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards.

3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.

4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught.

5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios, student conferences).

6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards.

7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards.

8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.

 DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS. High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.

2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

3. All teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment.

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.

5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems.

6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.

7. Students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.

8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well- being of the children.

9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support.

10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom

environment.

SOCIAL EQUITY. High-performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations.

2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.

3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.

4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.

5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures.

6. The school community knows every student well.

7. To the fullest extent possible, the faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school.

8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.

9. To the fullest extent possible, staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of their students.

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES. High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change.

2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication.

3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and the opportunity for reflection are the norm.

4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional learning, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement.

5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system, i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships.

6. The school staff holds itself accountable for student success.

7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students.

8. The school staff and district staff partner with colleges and universities.

9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance.

EVIDENCE OF A HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOL

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE. High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards.

- Expectations are clear for students and parents.

- Teachers provide students with exemplars of high quality work that meet the performance standard or level so that students know what high quality work should be like.

- Students revise their work based on meaningful feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard or level.

2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards.

•The vision guides what students should know and be able to do, and it is coherent.

•Students, teachers and families understand what students are learning and why. In any class and at any time, students can explain the importance of what they are learning.

•The curriculum is rigorous, non-repetitive, and moves forward substantially.

•Work is demanding and steadily progresses.

3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.

•Teachers make connections across the disciplines to reinforce important concepts

and assist students in thinking critically and applying what they have learned to solve real-world problems.

• Teachers incorporate academic and informational literacy into their course work (i.e., reading, writing, note taking, researching, listening, and speaking).

4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught.

•To reach students, teachers draw from a common subset of instructional strategies and activities such as

- direct instruction

- cooperative learning

- project-based learning

- simulations

- hands-on learning - integrated technology

5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios, student conferences).

•Teachers use common, frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the achievement of their students.

•Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards, expectations, or levels.

6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous

academic standards.

•Students are provided more time to learn the content, concepts or skills if needed.

• Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions,

extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning.

7. Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards.

•Teachers know what each student has learned and still needs to learn.

•Students have multiple opportunities to succeed and receive extra help as needed, such as:

- co-teaching or collaborative resource model

- support and intervention classes

- before- and after-school tutoring

- homework centers

8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance

student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and

to improve their standards-based practice.

•Teachers collaborate in making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-

based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of

student work.

•The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer

observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement.

DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS. High-performing schools with

middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early

adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.

•Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (e.g., teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning.

•These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.

•Every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience.

2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

•Teachers are trained to recognize and handle student problems.

•Students with difficulties, and their families, can get help.

•The school houses a wide range of support (e.g., nurses, counselors, resource teachers) to help students and families.

•School staff members offer parent education activities involving families.

3. All teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment.

•Teachers enhance standards-based learning by using a wide variety of instructional strategies.

•Teachers incorporate well-developed procedures and routines for effective classroom management.

•Teachers facilitate learning by deliberately teaching study and organizational skills.

•Teachers integrate creative activities in the lessons (e.g., current technologies,

visual and performing arts, etc.).

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.

•Students talk about daily issues in their own lives, their community and their world.

•Students take action, make informed choices, work collaboratively, and learn to resolve conflicts.

5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems.

•Teachers collaborate to create integrated activities that cross content boundaries.

•Students can work on the same project in several different classes.

6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.

- Teachers and counselors push students to challenge themselves and set high academic and career goals for their future.

- Students are provided with multiple opportunities to explore topics of interest to them.

- Students demonstrate competency in a variety of subjects as well as areas of interest.

7. Students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.

•All students have a real say, or have legitimate representation, in what happens at school.

•School staff members have an "open-door" policy to encourage student involvement and

connection.

•Students take an active role in school-family conferences.

8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.

•Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers; they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school.

•Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision-makers in their children's education.

9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support.

- Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world.

- Members of the community engage in meaningful learning opportunities with the school.

10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment.

•Student co-curricular activities cover a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts.

•Co-curricular programs are infused with activities that help students develop relevant life skills.

SOCIAL EQUITY. High-performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

1. **To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations.**

   •Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work.

   •Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes and other supports.

   •Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid.

2. **Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.**

   • Teachers differentiate instruction in order to give each student equal opportunity to comprehend the standards-based curriculum.

   • Teachers provide a variety of learning experiences so all students have opportunities to master a challenging curriculum.

   • Teachers provide learning activities that represent varying learning styles so all students have opportunities to master standards.

3. **Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.**

   • The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and

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assessment to better meet student needs.

- Teachers assess mastery continuously and modify their instruction to meet current needs.

- The master schedule is developed in a way that provides flexibility for teachers

  to meet specific instructional needs on a daily basis.

4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.

•To the fullest extent possible, students use technology to do research and analyze

  data, read more than textbooks, and understand how to solve complex problems.

•To the fullest extent possible, students with disabilities are in regular classrooms.

•Students have access to interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities.

5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own

and others' cultures.

•The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the

  school, community, and our nation.

•Materials in the media center represent all of the cultures of the students.

•Families often come and share their traditions and beliefs.

•Multiple viewpoints are encouraged.

6. The school community knows every student well.

•Each student is appreciated and respected.

•Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways.

•Every student has an adult advocate and supporter in the school.

7. To the fullest extent possible, the faculty welcomes and encourages the active

participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral

part of the school.

- Transportation, meals, childcare, and translation support are provided so all families of diverse cultures and languages can attend school events.

- Efforts are made to eliminate barriers (e.g., transportation, childcare, translation) to attend school events.

- Multiple forms of communication are used with families and communication is two way.

- Families have a voice in the decision-making process of the school.

- Opportunities are provided for families to engage in supporting student learning (e.g., parenting classes, literacy programs, accessing information about student progress, making meaningful connections to the curriculum).

8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.

•The faculty recognizes the contributions of all its students.

•Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors.

9. To the fullest extent possible, staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of their students.

•The school recruits a culturally and linguistically diverse staff.

•The staff members are a good match to the school's community.

10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.

•Students and parents are informed of school rules and know exactly what will and does happen if students break the rules.

•Staff members routinely analyze and act upon referral and suspension data to make sure that no one group of students is unfairly singled out by classroom and school staff.

•The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive

   interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one

   another.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES. High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change.

• The shared vision drives constant improvement.

• Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose.

• Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions.

2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication.

• Lines of leadership for the school's improvement efforts are clear.

• The school leadership team has the responsibility to make things happen.

• The principal makes sure that assignments for the staff are clear and explicit and are completed in a timely manner.

3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and the opportunity for reflection are the norm.

• School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration.

• Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture.

• Learning is on-going for everyone.

4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional learning, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement.

• Professional learning is intensive, of high quality, ongoing, and relevant to middle-grades education.

• Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e., classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstration lessons, etc.).

• Opportunities for learning increase knowledge and skills, challenge outmoded beliefs and practices, and provide support in the classroom.

5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system (i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships).

• Deliberate vertical articulation and transition programs exist between feeder elementary schools and destination high schools.

• The district supports through funding and time its schools' participation in best practice networks, associations, learning communities, and professional learning focused on middle grades improvement and achievement.

• The school and district work collaboratively to bring coherence to curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, data collection, analysis, and accountability for student achievement.

6. The school staff holds itself accountable for student success.

• The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions.

• School-generated evaluation data is used to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement.

•The school staff intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question.

7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students.

- Barriers are viewed as challenges, not problems.

- District and school staff assess and evaluate current programs regularly and adapt them as needed to maximize the level of student mastery.

8. The school staff and district staff partner with colleges and universities.

- A mentoring program for new teachers is in place.

- The principal contacts colleges and universities when hiring new teachers.

9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance.

- Families and community members are informed about the school's goals for student success and students' responsibility for meeting those goals.

- Representatives of all stakeholders are engaged in ongoing and reflective conversation and decision making about governance to promote school improvement.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

1. What in-school factors do you perceive to influence young adolescents' social and emotional outcomes?

      i. What actions (initiatives, programs, etc.) did school staff make to address the social and emotional outcomes for students?

      ii. What were the benefits of these actions?

      iii. How did you know that these were the benefits of the school's actions?

2. What factors do you perceive address that all young adolescents have successful academic performance?

    Depending on responses:

    i. Is academic performance based only on SOL results, or are there other assessments for learning that school staff use as measure of student learning?

        i. If so, tell me about these other assessments for learning. How does the school use these measures? Why does the school use these alternative assessments? Are these practices school wide or departmental in nature?

3. What organizational structures and processes (i.e. teams, departments, houses, grade levels, etc.) do you perceive as being developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents?

    Depending on responses:

    i. Are their particular areas of concern that your school staff has deemed necessary to address?

        i. How did you determine these areas?

ii.   How were you or other school staff involved in developing and implementing a plan to address these areas of need?

ii.   What do you feel the benefits of these efforts were on meeting the needs of young adolescents?

iii.   Does the school utilize teaming?

       i.   If so, how does this work?

       ii.   How are teams organized?

       iii.   What procedures are in place that ensures teams work together cohesively?

iv.   If teaming is not utilized is there another manner in which students are grouped that helps with overall student management?

       i.   If so, explain how this works to be developmentally responsive.

v.   Are there programs in place that are developmentally responsive that require organizational structure (i.e clubs, advisory,)?

       i.   How were the programs determined to answer this need?

4. What practices does your school utilize to support social equity for students?

       i.   How does the school staff determine if there is an area of need for a particular group of students?

            i.   What is the process to plan interventions to meet this need?

       ii.   What are the benefits of these efforts to improve social equity?

VITA

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