

ACADEMIC OPTIMISM AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS:
AN EXPLANATORY CASE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

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Increasing student academic achievement continues to be a national call to action. Early student academic success can help prepare future citizens to be college and workforce ready. One construct, academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006a; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006), has been used in quantitative studies to examine increased student achievement. This study aims to contribute to the research on academic optimism by extending the School Academic Optimism Scale (SAOS) survey results through a qualitative case study description of a lower SES middle school. The selected school held a campus rating of Recognized as measured by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) state accountability tests and a high measure of academic optimism according to the SAOS. School staff beliefs, actions and procedures were documented and analyzed. Staff beliefs, actions, and procedures were related to the construct of academic optimism. Specific school interventions were presented and detailed. Academic optimism proved valuable in determining why the selected site achieved academic success.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The success of students will always be at the forefront of K-16 education policy and practice. Raising student achievement levels continues to be one of the most critical goals educators face year after year (James, Jurich & Estes, 2001; Strong, Silver & Perini, 2001). Students at all levels need to leave each grade with skills and abilities to take them to the next level of learning. Jobs of the 21st century require advanced skills, postsecondary training, and often college degrees (Moss & Tilly, 2001; Wilson, 1996). Nearly 90 % of the fastest growing and highest-paying jobs require some postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). The need for remedial college classes (Adelman, 1999; Adelman 2004; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2003) and low college completion rates (Knapp, Kelly-Reid & Ginder, 2011) reflect inadequately prepared high school graduates.

One of the most far reaching and influential national policies supporting and requiring success in elementary and secondary settings is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (NCLB), Public Law 107–110, aims “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (NCLB, 2001, p. 1). In the NCLB purpose statement, one of the law’s main goals is “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and . . . high-quality education” (2001, p. 15-16). The law also calls for schools to follow content standards by “holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students” (2001, p. 16). No Child Left Behind is one of the forces behind high stakes testing environments and the challenge to improve student achievement and preparation for the workforce or college (Baker & Johnston, 2010).

Academic achievement is a quest that is not easily attained or guaranteed. Ways to achieve academic success vary (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005; Lezotte & Pepperl, 1999; O'Donnell & White, 2005). Research on what is making schools effective and helping students become successful includes the research work of Edmonds, Lezotte, Marzano and others. Edmonds' (1979) work focused on searching for characteristics of effective schools. He identified strong administrative leadership, instructionally effective practices focused on basic skills, an orderly environment, and frequent evaluation of performance as significant. Lezotte's (1991) research established what became known as the Correlates of Effective Schools. The correlates include: safe and orderly environment, climate of high expectations for success, instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, opportunity to learn, frequent monitoring of student progress, and home-school relations. Marzano (2003) identified several school level factors that affect school achievement. These factors are a guaranteed and viable curriculum, challenging goals and effective feedback, parent and community involvement, safe and orderly environment, and collegiality and professionalism. Hoy, Tarter, and Kottkamp (1991) in their book *Open Schools/Healthy Schools* added to the Effective Schools movement and the potential for higher student success with additional research on school climate. This research led to development of an Organizational Health Inventory to identify schools as having healthy or unhealthy climates, a component they believe is essential to student academic success. Research on school climate has helped schools focus on making academic success a campus reality.

Research on what is making schools effective and helping students become successful is still necessary. Today's schools need more than just strong instructional leaders, they demand an entire faculty that is always looking for real ways to manipulate and modify, not necessarily the student, but school properties, which have shown to increase student achievement (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

At all levels in education, student achievement is clearly the number one goal. In the pipeline that students move through from kindergarten to college commencement, obstacles can prevent students from achieving (Green & Anyon, 2010). Governing boards, teachers and administrators have invested time and energy supporting various mechanisms designed to positively impact student achievement (Gentilluci & Muto, 2007; Gordan & Louis, 2009; Ward, 2004; Zorn & Boler, 2007).

Despite the best efforts of schools and their personnel, there is no clear cut way to guarantee student achievement. Over 40 years ago, the Coleman report (1966) showed that student background and socioeconomic factors strongly predicted student achievement. Since the Coleman Report, a myriad of research studies have worked to identify influences on student achievement. Student success can be attributed to a variety of reasons, but it is not always clearly known what mechanisms are responsible for the change (Coleman, 1966; Stedman, 1987; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009; Miller, Goddard, Goddard, Larsen, & Jacob, 2010).

Through their research at the high school level, Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a) identified a new construct called academic optimism, their best factor for achieving academic success. Academic optimism is the shared belief that a school's faculty can work with students to succeed academically (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). It encompasses three concepts: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust. Success is achieved when the three components are present and fully developed in a school setting; therefore, ameliorating the socioeconomic hindrance to achievement and rendering it less of a problem in the equation for student success (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006a; Hoy, Tarter, Woolfolk Hoy 2006b; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). Academic optimism has proven to increase student academic success. Harnessing and understanding the power of academic optimism at schools can help ensure success and achievement of all students. The idea of academic optimism can influence

all levels of K-16 education. This study has expanded on the research of Hoy et al. (2006a) by continuing the exploration of academic optimism to advance student academic achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The study's purpose was to understand how individuals in an academically optimistic and academically achieving middle school create student academic success. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to collect data from staff of lower SES, academically achieving middle schools. This research moved beyond the fact that academic optimism exists by potentially answering the questions of how it works and why.

Research Questions

To achieve my purpose the following questions were answered.

1. What beliefs, actions, and procedures are in place in a high achieving/high poverty school?
2. In what ways do beliefs, actions, and procedures support academic optimism in an academically achieving school?
3. What other realities about academic optimism, academic success and high achieving/high poverty schools are revealed in the research?
4. How useful (applicable/helpful/relevant) are the tenants of academic optimism in understanding academic success?

Orienting Theoretical Framework

The construct of academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006a) was used as the basic orienting theoretical framework for the study. Academic optimism is the outgrowth of several theoretical ideas including the work of Seligman, Bandura, and Hoy.

Seligman's (1998) theory of positive psychology was influential in that it claims three aspects of success which include talent, desire, and optimism. His ideas on learned optimism stresses that "Optimism is a tool to help the individual achieve the goals he has set for himself. It is in the choice of the goals themselves that meaning- or emptiness- resides" (Seligman, p.

291). In classroom studies among the talented on talent-test scores, pessimists scored below their potential while optimists exceeded it. Learned optimism can shift pessimistic schools to become positive, assured, and confident schools. Optimism provides a foundation to the construct and motivating spirit of academic optimism in that optimism brings out “views of teachers as capable, students as willing, parents as supportive, and the task as achievable” (Hoy, 2006a, p. 440).

Optimism is an appropriate overarching construct to unite efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis because each concept contains a sense of the possible- Thus, a school with high academic optimism is a collectivity in which the faculty believes that it can make a difference, that students can learn, and academic performance can be achieved. (Hoy et al., 2006b, p. 145)

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a) were also attracted to the term academic optimism because optimism refers to something that can be controlled and learned in schools. According to Hoy et al., “Administrators and teachers have reason to be optimistic. They can be empowered; neither they nor their students are irretrievably trapped by socioeconomic factors” (2006a, p. 432). Hoy et al. believe that all schools need optimism to work to achieve the goals they set.

Bandura's (1993) bidirectional theory was also influential. According to Bandura, “the transactional view of self and society, internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events; behavior; and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bidirectionally” (p. 6). This bidirectional theory forms a triadic reciprocal causation between behavior, internal personal factors, and the environment. Basically the theory states that choices and decisions are made with the understanding of personal, behavioral and environmental factors.

The construct of academic optimism takes this bidirectional idea of triadic reciprocal causation and applies it to the three parts of academic optimism. The cognitive part (collective

efficacy), behavioral part (academic emphasis), and affective part (faculty trust) all work together to make academic optimism the force for change in schools. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a) call the three parts of academic optimism the “dependent triadic set of interactions” (p. 431).

Faculty trust in parents and students lends itself to the natural idea of collective efficacy, and then this group mindset reinforces the academic emphasis and academic press of the school. Each component of academic optimism works through the triadic reciprocal causation and lives and breathes because of the other parts in a tri-symbiotic relationship. Within the tri-symbiotic relationship, all parts of academic optimism must be present for the construct to be meaningful and significant. You cannot have two components for academic optimism; you must have all three together. Academic optimism’s three parts- collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and trust- will be highlighted below.

Academic Emphasis

Academic emphasis of schools is the behavioral component of academic optimism. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a) describe an academic emphasis as “the extent to which a school is driven by a quest for academic excellence- a press for academic achievement” (p. 136). Academic emphasis, often referred to as academic press, involves setting realistic goals for students and requires an orderly learning environment which is respected by all. In schools where there is an academic emphasis, students are ready and cooperative in the learning process, complete homework outside of class, and respect academic learning (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). The school properties labeled as academic optimism have shown empirically to increase student achievement in numerous follow up studies at all levels-elementary, middle, and high. Academic emphasis in turn promotes the other parts of academic optimism, first collective efficacy, which then helps create trust.

Collective Efficacy

Bandura's (1993) social cognitive theory grounds the cognitive part of academic optimism, collective efficacy. Social cognitive theory states that our knowledge is based on the observations we learn from others. One critical element of the theory is human agency or the assumption that humans exercise influence over the acts that they perform (Bandura, 1997). Theoretically, choices are based on what we believe to be the outcome. In schools then, teachers and administrators exercise significant control over their schools and the decisions and actions that take place in the schools. These decisions and actions are intended to result in specific outcomes. For schools, collective efficacy is the group of teachers' perceived judgment of the school system as a whole. Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000) describe collective efficacy and capacity of the entire faculty as an outgrowth of teachers' own sense of self-efficacy. Basically, collective efficacy is the judgment of teachers that, as a group, they can influence students.

Trust

The affective part of academic optimism is faculty trust in students and parents. Research on trust (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998) has shown that trust in students and parents act as one concept and cannot be separated. Hoy (2002) believes that trust is marked with openness and honesty and trust is key to maintaining proper student-teacher-parent interactions. He proposes the following definition of trust: "trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (Hoy 2002, p. 89). Through trust the other components of academic optimism thrive and grow. Again when all parts work together, academic success is possible.

The construct of academic optimism can explain why some schools are able to reach students while other schools are less successful. Effectively identifying school academic optimism levels and specific school characteristics: beliefs, actions, and procedures that have

been implemented which are related to the components of academic optimism will in turn offer all schools opportunities to gain student achievement across the levels of K-16.

Procedures

According to Merriam (1998) in the basic qualitative study process, researchers seek to discover something new and “Findings are a mix of description and analysis—an analysis that uses concepts from the theoretical framework of the study” (p. 11). This study researched academic optimism using quantitative and qualitative methods at the middle level. After initially using quantitative methods to document what was happening at schools, a qualitative explanatory case study approach was used to focus on one school’s characteristics through which academic optimism is examined. According to Merriam, descriptive case studies can “include vivid material-quotations; interviews...obtain information from a wide variety of sources, [and] present information in a wide variety of ways” (p. 31). Such studies are useful in presenting basic information about educational processes that little research has been published or written on (p. 38). This was appropriate for a case study on academic optimism since little has been published qualitatively on the subject.

The Researcher

According to Patton (2002), the credibility of the researcher is critical in qualitative research as this person is the major instrument of data collection and analysis. As the researcher, I am a public school middle level campus administrator in a suburban district in the southwest. Previously, I was a history teacher and coach for eight years at a 6-8 campus. Five years ago, I switched positions in the school district and have served on two separate campuses as an assistant principal. As I have transitioned from the classroom to administration, I understand the importance of school-wide strategies and interventions to help students achieve to their highest potential. I am a good candidate to complete this research because of my unique insight into tactics and day-to-day operations at the middle level.

Data Needs

To answer the research questions guiding this explanatory case study, multiple sets of data were needed. Data were needed on the academic success of middle schools, academic optimism, and school beliefs, actions, and procedures. First, I needed information related to middle school state accountability ratings. State accountability ratings identified a pool of successful schools. Then, I needed information related to the academic optimism levels at the selected middle schools. The above data provided for selection of a case study school. Lastly, I needed data which can show evidence of school beliefs, actions, and procedures from the selected school. Beliefs showed what the school staff “thinks,” actions showed what the school “does,” and procedures showed how the school “operates.”

Data Sources

Given the data needed, I used multiple sources. Three Texas public middle schools (grades 6-8) served as initial data sources. Based on 2008-2009 data, of the 143 middle schools in one Texas Region, 22 middle schools had economically disadvantaged percentages of 30% or greater. Of those 22, 12 had at least 40% disadvantaged, and six had at least 50% disadvantaged. For this study, a convenience sample to total three schools was selected from the existing list, and ranged from successful (Recognized) to less successful (Academically Acceptable). Each campus itself served as a data source. Campus documents such as the campus improvement plan and faculty handbook served as sources of data. In addition, the teachers, counselors, and other staff served as sources of data as well.

Data Collection

The data were collected through a measure of academic success (state accountability ratings), a measure of academic optimism (SAOS survey), collection of school beliefs, actions, and procedures through document analysis (campus improvement plan, mottos, pledges, etc.), focus group interviews, and school observation.

Measure of academic success. Accountability ratings were gathered from the Texas Education Agency's website which gives historical data on school rating statewide.

First, a list of Texas public middle schools (grades 6-8) and public junior highs (7-8) in one Texas Regional Service Center's area was generated. Under the TEA accountability rating system, schools earn a rating status in one of four categories: Academically Unacceptable, Academically Acceptable, Recognized, and Exemplary. The rating is based on annual student performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. The list of regional middle schools was then narrowed down by those that were rated as Exemplary, Recognized or Academically Acceptable for 2009-2010. Schools that are rated Unacceptable did not meet minimum ratings criteria to be considered as a data sources.

Finally, the list of the qualified middle schools was narrowed to schools which have at least 30% of the student population labeled as economically disadvantaged. This helped bring comparability to the quantitative research which maintains that academic optimism goes beyond the SES of the student population. This required permission to have access to academically disadvantaged independent school districts, selected middle schools, and middle school teachers. Once an updated list was prepared, I contacted the independent school district(s) to follow the district research protocol requirement and then individual schools to request access and permission to participate in the study. Although selection was mainly for convenience, care was taken to study settings that were similar and equally representative between the three sites.

Measure of academic optimism. The SAOS (School Academic Optimism Scale) was used to establish levels of academic optimism at each school. The SAOS is a measurement of academic optimism designed by Hoy et al. (2006a) which provides for school level analysis of the three parts of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents. Measuring the three components creates a school academic optimism score.

All three schools participated in a quantitative survey distribution of the SAOS. The SAOS is a valid and reliable measure that has been completed with various school faculties at all levels of education. The instrument has 30 questions and I worked with building principals to administer the survey. After the initial survey of three high achieving schools, the school with the highest SAOS score was selected for further study. Base-line SAOS scores taken from three middle schools will led to one being the selected school to examine in more depth. The school with the highest index of academic optimism was selected for further study. After the quantitative surveys were completed, the selected school served as data source for focus group interviews, document analysis, and school observation. Teachers served as data sources in the focus groups.

The SAOS consists of a measurement of the three parts of academic optimism: collective efficacy, faculty trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis. These three combined parts form an index of school academic optimism. A copy of the SAOS is found in Appendix A.

School beliefs, actions, and procedures. Information regarding school strategies towards creation of an academically optimistic school was gathered in thorough document analysis, focus group interviews, and school observations. Each is detailed below.

Document analysis. Documents were collected through the assistance of building personnel. Documents included the campus improvement plan and the faculty handbook. Through documents, evidence documenting beliefs, actions, and procedures were collected and used to show evidence of academic optimism.

Focus group interviews. Focus group interview strategy was followed using the Krueger and Casey (2000) questioning protocol of opening, introduction, transition, key, and ending questions. Krueger and Casey (2000) recommend using open-ended, simple questions which are sequenced from general to specific. The goal was to interview 12-18

teachers at the selected school. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Focus group interview questions are provided in Appendix B.

School observation. According to Jorgensen (1989), "observation begins the moment the participant observer makes contact with a potential field setting" (p. 82). I spent two days at the school to record events, behaviors, and environmental conditions. This assisted me in getting the feel and understanding of the campus environment and the feel of the condition of optimism on campus. I observed students, teachers, and other staff. Observation was conducted during the school day in mainly classrooms. Other school areas such as the office and common areas were also observed.

Mapping the scene is an initial strategy suggested by Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) to organize arrangement and interaction of people. After mapping, an observation tool based on Murphy's (1997) Constructivist Checklist has been modified to assist me in observations. Appendix C includes the checklist. I then used jot notes to notate my observations to understand the activities and "story line" of the school day, specifically looking a school beliefs, actions, and procedures. Jot notes are "the words, phrases, or sentences that are recorded during the course of a day's events primarily as aids to memory" (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002, p. 144). Jot notes were expanded at the conclusion of each day.

Analysis

According to Yin (2009) "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). This followed an explanatory case study model by linking the theoretical ideas behind academic optimism to a real-life example school.

Documents reviewed were coded and sorted in three categories: beliefs, actions, and procedures. This was followed by focus groups interviews being transcribed, coded and sorted

similarly. Observations of school/classrooms were recorded, coded, sorted as well. This work also involved pattern matching as suggested by Yin (2009).

Once data was organized and coded, patterns were matched with the theoretical framework of academic optimism. Qualitative research is not generalizable, but the triangulation of data sources (documents, focus group interviews, and observation) helped provide sufficient information to allow others to transfer findings from this to other settings by providing sufficient thick description to allow for transferability (Shenton, 2004). According to Yin (2009), “any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information, following a corroboratory mode” (p. 115-116). Results from this research serve as starting points for other middle schools by giving examples to what academic optimism may look like in practice.

Significance of the study

This study contributed to the advancement of theory, research and practice. Each is detailed below.

Theory

The theory of academic optimism is a relatively new idea and this study has expanded the theoretical conversation on academic optimism. Studies on academic optimism have been historically quantitatively based. Since many empirical studies have examined the construct using quantitative approaches, this study took a mixed methods perspective and use qualitative methods to look into academic optimism as suggested by original researchers (Hoy, Tarter & Woolfolk Hoy 2006a). This examination expanded and showed exactly what academic optimism looks like in practice at one middle school in a southern state.

The results of the study have provided an in-depth look into the topic and have given specific examples as to how schools are influencing student results on their campus and using the parts of academic optimism as the vehicle for change. Building on the theory of academic

optimism through a qualitative lens has merit and this examination will assist others in adding to the theory of academic optimism.

Research

Educational research continues to focus on increasing student performance and continues to be at the forefront of K-16 topics. As a campus assistant principal, I am interested in improving academic successes of students. More knowledge was needed in the new area of academic optimism. Studies have been done at elementary and high school but limited studies have been conducted at the middle level. The middle level is important to focus on as it is a pivotal stepping stone to advanced academic work in high school and beyond (*The Forgotten Middle*, 2008). Recently Fahy, Wu, and Hoy (2010) have generated new findings expanding academic optimism to include a measure of individual academic optimism of teachers. Research continues on this new method to achieving student success. Research is needed in the area of academic optimism in the qualitative arena as well.

Practice

School practices and policies are often rooted in the bureaucratic theory and many times run the same way for years and years. As the schools and learning methods change, schools should need to focus on their ways of doing business. Elements of academic optimism provide not only a spirit of hope that all students can learn but a prescription for success following a model. Specific strategies or interventions described in this case can be implemented or altered to fit other middle schools. Teachers or principals can use the study to help them examine certain school practices. Practices based on collective efficacy, academic emphasis, and trust should be the basis for future interventions at schools. How components of academic optimism are implemented at campuses provide important clues to student future successes. Are teachers and principals modeling certain characteristics and not even knowing the full impact that their choices have in terms of student achievement? For example, in a struggling middle school, could a new parent program help build trust between students,

teachers, and parents? If so, can this trust carry on to academic optimism and increase student learning? Academic optimism is a practical and logical way to formulate positive conditions which affect change in a building. School change is possible with a focus on academic optimism.

Summary

This qualitative case study design answered additional questions on the construct of academic optimism. The study focused on the middle school level where little research has been conducted. Through the mixed method examination of multiple sources of data, new insights have been learned into the valuable idea of academic optimism. Through strong research questions, design, and subject selection, I will describe and give specific examples of one particular school's evidence of components of academic optimism. Learning more about academic optimism and its parts can assist school staff in better preparing students for the future. The workforce of tomorrow needs adequate preparation for 21st century careers. Learning how to overcome SES and instill the academic optimism perspective can help to combat the high school dropout rate, the need for remedial coursework in college and help build student success throughout K-16 and beyond.

Reporting

The remaining chapters include a review of relevant literature, detailed methodology report, presentation of findings, analysis, a discussion of implications of the study and a conclusion relating to the broader implications of the study.

Chapter II will consist of a review of the literature and provides a context to the study. Effective school research, the school environment, and factors influencing success will be discussed. Additionally theoretical perspectives including academic optimism and its three parts: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and trust in students and parents will be presented.

In Chapter III, I will detail all aspects of my methodology as it evolved through the research process. I will document the IRB approval process, site selection, timelines, and procedures.

Chapter IV will be a presentation of the findings.

Chapter V will consist of analysis of the findings. I will relate specifically to how the theoretical frame of academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006a; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006) inform the study. I will examine the data through the three elements of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and trust in students and parents.

The concluding chapter, Chapter VI, will summarize the study and provide conclusions and implications for research, theory, and practice. Future research will also be suggested. The last section of the chapter will be a discussion of the study and its impact on my understanding of the phenomenon under review.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In 1966 an important research report, the *Equality of Educational Opportunity Study*, also known as the Coleman Report, claimed that schools had little to do with student achievement. The Coleman Report (1966) devalued school efforts by concluding that a student's socioeconomic status and family background were the most important predictors in the academic success of the student. This research negatively impacted many educators by devaluing the importance of their work. This seminal work changed the landscape of education by documenting that the efforts made by teachers in the classrooms of America were all trumped by student socioeconomic status and family background. Coleman's study was conducted under the direction of the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and involved a national stratified random sample. Analysis included tests scores and questionnaire responses from first, third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth grade students and questionnaire result from teachers and principals.

Almost 50 years later, building professionals, such as teachers and principals, are still focused on achievement and how to become more skilled at helping students be academically successful. With the high stakes accountability testing being implemented because of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the quest for student achievement and growth as measured by Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) could not be greater. Effective school research has been ongoing since the Coleman Report (Edmunds, 1979; Edmunds, 1982; Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979; Lezotte, n.d.; Lezotte, 1991; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Austin & Reynolds, 1990; Marzano, 2003). Researchers and practitioners have been on the "look out" for strategies and for school level characteristics that impact achievement.

Since this report, school leaders have attempted to understand what school and educator factors influence student academic success. Some have looked at school

administration and leadership (Leithwood et. al, 2004; Brown, Benekovitz, Muttillio & Urban, 2011; Seashore Louis et al., 2010; DuFour, & Marzano, 2009), while others have focused on school environments (Hoy et al., 1991; DiPaola & Hoy, 2005; DiPaola, Tarter, & Hoy, 2005; Roney, Coleman, & Schlichting, 2007; Wikeley, Bullock, Muschamp, & Ridge, 2009) and poverty (Moore, Kohan, Kraska, & Reames, 2011; Chenoweth, 2009; Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2009).

Still others have identified and researched the influence of academic emphasis (Lee & Bryk, 1989; Hoy, Tarter, & Bliss, 1990; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005), teachers' collective efficacy (Bandura, 1993, 1997; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004; Hoy, Sweetland, & Smith, 2002) and faculty trust in students and parents (Hoy, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). These three ideas together represent a new construct, academic optimism (Hoy et al., 2006a, 2006b; Hoy & Smith, 2007; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006) which is heralded as a key factor in student academic success in schools.

In this chapter I provide a background and short history of the Effective Schools research agenda. I then continue by presenting the research on and about school environments and the research around school climate and poverty. I then move to discussing the background research around the supporting parts of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents. The chapter concludes with an examination of the current research on academic optimism.

Effective Schools Research

In this first part of this literature review, I will introduce the beginnings of Effective School Research and the Correlates of Effective Schools. Then research on principal leadership and the ideas behind the roles, actions, and functions of the principal will be presented.

The Beginnings

The Effective Schools Research movement began with work of Edmonds (1979). The first step in this research agenda was the identification of existing effective schools - schools where students were successful academically regardless of student socioeconomic status or family background. Once the schools were identified, common school characteristics were developed. Edmonds reported a list of effective school characteristics which included strong principal leadership, high expectations for student achievement, emphasis on basic skills, an orderly school environment, and frequent and systematic evaluation of students. Schools possessing these qualities were generally considered to be effective.

Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, and Smith (1979) helped to validate Edmonds' research with the completion of a comparative study in England entitled *Fifteen thousand hours*. This research confirmed many of the same effective schools characteristics identified by Edmonds. Rutter et al. (1979) concluded that schools impact children's development.

Correlates of Effective Schools

Eventually many of these additional characteristics of effective schools - instructional leadership, strong sense of mission, effective instructional behaviors, high expectations, frequent monitoring of student achievement, and operation in a safe and orderly manner - became known as the Correlates of Effective Schools (Edmunds, 1982; Lezotte, n.d.). The Correlates have changed through time as they have been studied and stressed in schools. Today's Correlates include instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, safe and orderly environment, climate of high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, positive home-school relations, and opportunity to learn and student time on task (Lezotte, n.d.). The Correlates are still stressed today in principal preparation programs, job descriptions, and in the day-to-day operations of schools worldwide (Lezotte, 1991; Lezotte & McKee, 2006; Lezotte & Snyder, 2011).

Outgrowths of Edmonds' and Lezotte's work prompted further study into principal leadership and the roles principals and other school leaders play in the academic success of students. Principal leadership is a key part of an effective school and in the quest to promote student achievement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Austin & Reynolds, 1990; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986; Goddard & Miller, 2010; Bickmore, 2011). Austin and Reynolds (1990) contended that assuming an assertive instructional role is one of the most important duties as leader. These instructional roles include activities such as conducting walk-throughs and follow-ups, creating staff development opportunities, and recognizing and crediting excellent teacher and student academic performance (Seashore Louis et al., 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Principal Leadership

Another focus of the Effective Schools Research became school leadership. Lezotte (1994) argued that schools were never designed to educate all students at high levels but it has come to be expected even though schools and school systems operate in a status quo, system of the past. Through the focus on learning for all and the school's vision, a principal can change his or her school into an effective setting. Lezotte asserts that at a school level, leaders are picked by former principals now acting as superintendents, so theoretically schools are educationally "cloning" their leaders.

An immense number of studies have been conducted on leadership in schools. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) reported on the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) study on school leadership, a meta-analysis of school leadership from 70 published studies since 1978. They concluded that school leadership matters and defined 21 key areas of "distinct responsibility" for the principal. Responsibilities included broad ideas such as culture, order, curriculum, instruction and assessment, visibility, communication, and outreach. The framework came to be known as Balanced Leadership and divided the principal's job into three components: focus on leadership, building a purposeful community,

and magnitude of change. The principal is just one person but professional development could be an answer.

In 2010, the Texas A&M University's Education Leadership Research Center received an Institute of Education Sciences U.S. Department of Education grant to study the Balanced Leadership Framework. As a randomized control trial, a total of 78 elementary principals will be involved in the study. Half will attend the 10, two-day professional development sessions focusing on improving school climate, managing change, and improving student learning, and the other half will act as a control group and only be exposed to traditional staff development. This exciting research is currently underway and may help to give additional credibility to the Balanced Leadership Framework. According to Roger Goddard, the primary investigator,

The study is designed to evaluate the causal effects of one of the country's most widely disseminated professional development training programs for school principals on leadership, school climate, instructional practice, student achievement and the closing of achievement gaps. (*Two Education Faculty Awarded School Leadership Research Grant* [Press release], 2010)

The Texas A&M University's School Leadership Improvement Study pairs the Balanced Leadership Framework and the quest for instructional leadership's link to student achievement

Leithwood and Montgomery (1986) developed a principal profile and claim its attributes are those that will improve principal effectiveness. Developed cooperatively between practitioners and researchers, the profile identified four key dimensions of principal practices: goals, factors, strategies, and decision making. Goals can be short or long term school goals, but the factors are parts of the school which impact student experiences, such as the curriculum, instruction, and extracurricular program. Strategies and decision making should go hand in hand. The growth in principal effectiveness moves from the lowest level of administrator level, through the stages of program manager, humanitarian, and to a highest level, systematic problem solver (Leithwood, 1987).

Many principals even today are labeled as “administrator” in the profile and just operate with a “keep the school a float” mentality and are not concerned with student learning as a top priority. Program managers are skilled decision makers who base decisions on student needs and humanitarian principals focus on a positive climate and try and just keep everybody happy. Systematic problem solvers, the highest level, are principals who make sound decisions but also are goal orientated and focus on the entire school community. Leithwood and Montgomery’s (1986) profile included school leader effectiveness as a part of the evaluation of the principal as well.

Leadership can be a shared responsibility, it does not only generate from the principal but from other areas as well. In the Wallace Foundation report, *Learning from Leadership Project: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, authors Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) describe student learning from the frame of school leadership and its relation to district leadership, student and family background, school and classroom conditions, and teachers. Collective leadership refers “to the extent of influence that organizational member and stakeholders exert on decision in their schools” (p. 19). Collective leadership had a greater influence on student achievement than individual leadership. Collective leadership was indirectly related to student achievement because it effects teacher motivation and the teachers’ workplace settings. In higher-performing schools, teachers are influenced by leaders through motivation and improving the working condition. Teacher quality ranks first in affecting student learning, followed by leadership. The effects of school leadership cannot be understated. Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, (2004) concluded that “the total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of the total school effects” (p. 3). Collectivity of leadership and the influence of other staff go beyond the power of the individual, such as a principal or teacher, and moves to a group level.

Principal roles and functions

In their book, *Stepping up: Leading the charge to improve our schools*, Lezotte and McKee (2006) argue that school leadership traits can be learned and practiced. These traits are not dependent on the personality of the leader and the skills and behaviors of leaders can be learned and refined. The authors also identified leadership skills and behaviors that impacted student achievement. According to Lezotte and McKee (2006),

Current and future leaders in education need two things if they are going to successfully navigate the “perfect storm” and successfully lead sustainable school reform: a proven and practical model of continuous improvement, and the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to lead it. (p. 9)

In 2009, DuFour and Marzano reported on high-leverage strategies for principal leadership, recognizing that not everything that a principal does is necessarily effective in raising student achievement. The authors suggest that individual teacher walk-throughs and observations in a traditional bureaucratically organized school do little to help students learn. They argue that principals should change from instructional leaders to learning leaders. Learning leaders focus not on what or how something was taught but on what or how something was learned. When teams of teachers are given support and time to collaborate and focus on evidence of learning, students will grow. The administrative responsibility of supervision is replaced with capacity building, and students learn at higher levels as a result of this shift.

Although success is not the responsibility of solely the school principal, a key tenet of an effective principal's office is working smart to build his or her entire team. As a school principal it is important to base school actions and functions of the principal on research. In his book, *What works in schools*, Marzano (2003) identified eight school level factors that affect school achievement including opportunity to learn, time, monitoring, pressure to achieve, parental involvement, school climate, leadership, and cooperation. Marzano also identified the

factors affecting student achievement - home atmosphere, learned intelligence and background knowledge, and motivation.

Lezotte and Snyder (2011) describe in *What effective schools do*, the final stage of the evolution of the effective schools research as total system alignment (1995-present). This phase has had a consumed focus program of school reform based on effective school research and the correlates. With NCLB's reauthorization, it is on the next horizon for higher education to join the effective school movement of K-12.

Higher education has a great deal of power and influence when it comes to public education. It controls who gets admitted to colleges and it trains and certifies teachers and administrators. Unfortunately, if we are to believe our colleagues in the schools, most of these institutions are not yet doing what needs to be done to prepare students or staff for the schools and districts we need for the 21st century. (Lezotte, n.d., 15)

What the principal does as the leader of the school plays partial role in school academic success but it not the sole answer. School leadership moves beyond the power of the individual and focuses on the collective power of principals, teachers, and students to achieve.

School Environment

According to Hoy, Tarter, and Kottkamp (1991), school environments can be classified as either school culture or school climate. The authors state that culture comes from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology and involves qualitative and ethnographic work, while climate comes from psychology and social psychology and involves mainly survey data and statistical analysis. T.E. Deal, In the Prologue of the book, *Transforming school culture: Stories, symbols, values, and the leader's role*, points out the blurring boundaries between culture and climate and argues that

They [authors Stolp and Smith (1995)] wisely advise practitioners to sort and select whatever ideas they need and use any label they want. Whatever it is called, the

spiritual side of human life is powerful. In today's schools, we desperately need an infusion of passion, purpose and meaning. (pp. xi-xii)

School Culture

According to Hoy et al. 1991, "organizational culture is a system of shared orientations that hold the unit together and give it a distinctive identity" (p.4). An organization's culture could share norms, values, or basic assumptions.

Regardless of the definition, common characteristics of school culture include, common goals, agreement on curriculum and instruction, order and discipline, humor, and trust.

According to Peterson (2002),

Every organization has a culture, that history and underlying set of unwritten expectations that shape everything about the school. A school culture influences the ways people think, feel, and act. Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning. (p. 10)

A schools "norms, beliefs, traditions, and rituals," its culture, according to Peterson and Deal (1998) build over time. Many school cultures have been researched in the past, such as Deal and Peterson's (1990), *The principal's role in shaping school culture*, which offers five case studies of school cultures. Peterson and Deal (2002) provide a framework for improving school culture.

School Climate

Halpin and Croft (1962, 1963) pioneered the study of school climates with the development of the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ). To expand and specifically measure openness of schools at differing levels, the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire for Secondary (OCDQ-RE) and Elementary (OCDQ-RS) were developed (Halpin & Croft, 1962; Hoy et al., 1991). Hoy et al. (1991) in their book, *Open Schools/Healthy schools*, describe the process of creating valid and reliable instruments that measure school climate and openness. The OCDQ-RE, a 42-item question instrument,

measures principal openness by labeling a principal's leadership as either supportive, directive, restrictive or collegial. Additionally it measures teacher's interactions and behaviors as either intimate or disengaged. The OCDQ-RS, a 34-item questionnaire is similar to the elementary version yet simplifies principal leadership as either supportive or directive and measure's teacher openness with the labels of engaged, frustrated, and intimate.

Another climate instrument's pilot study, the Organizational Health Inventory (OHI), revealed seven dimensions of organizational health - institutional integrity, principal influence, consideration, initiating structure, resource support, morale, and academic emphasis. The OHI was later developed into the Organizational Health Inventory for Elementary (OHI-E). An OHI-M was developed for the middle level as well. Effective schools have healthy climates and a healthy climate helps create a school where student growth is expected, nurtured, and evidenced (Hoy et al., 1991).

In brief, healthy school climates are characterized by many of the same attributes stressed in the effective schools literature: an orderly and serious environment, visible rewards for academic achievement, influential principals who blend their behavior to fit the situation, openness in behavior, and a cohesive work unit based upon mutual trust. (Hoy et al., 1991, p. 71)

The idea of school climate or organizational health and its link to improved learning and academic achievement has been studied (Brookover, Schweitzer, Schneider, Beady, Flood, & Wisenbaker, 1978; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Hoy, Hannum, & Tschannen-Moran, 1998). Most recently, Roney, Coleman, and Schlichting (2007) studied student achievement as it relates to organizational health. They sampled five middle schools in North Carolina and administered the OHI-M over the course of two school years. The research hypothesis suggested that as climate score increases, so does the student achievement scores. Only one school did this hold true. Other schools that showed higher OHI-M scores in 2006 than 2005, had lower reading scores in 2006 than 2005. Generally this mixed results showed a positive relationship between OHI-M

index scores and reading standardized tests. Of the subsets of the OHI-M, teacher affiliation, academic emphasis, and collegial leadership, a Pearson $r = .55$ showed a moderate relationship between academic emphasis and student reading scores. Academic emphasis was highlighted by a teacher who reported, "We know they all can learn. We know that. And it's just, if they can't go through the door to learn, then we've got to find a window or something. They've got to get in somehow. So, we'll search every avenue until we find some way" (p. 305).

A school environment, whether it is described as its culture or climate, can help tell the story of a school. The components of a school's environment, can impact school achievement and success.

Poverty

Numerous research studies and reports clarify that children in poverty consistently underperform less disadvantaged students (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Lacour & Tissington, 2011). For example, The United States Department of Education Office of Research and Improvement study, *Poverty and Achievement: Re-Examining the Relationship Between School Poverty and Student Achievement (1992)*, used longitudinal data of eighth grade student achievement to confirm a relationship between average test scores and school poverty levels. Students in poor schools that are lower SES, achieve less than students in other schools. The report identified characteristics of low and high achieving low SES students in high poverty schools.

Recently, Hopson and Lee (2011) looked at the achievement gap of students in poverty and school climates. Not surprising, research showed that poverty relates to poor grades and behavior while a positive school climate relates to positive grades and behavior. The authors state that students in poverty can be buffered from poverty's stressors in schools where there are healthy climates while negative school climates can increase difficulties. The importance that school climate plays in academic achievement should be focused on more than improving

test scores. Administrators and other professionals taking on this responsibility can indirectly affect positive change through campus climate.

Based on survey data from 366 schools in 21 states, Education Trust's report, *Dispelling the Myth: High Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations*, identified six characteristics of higher performing high poverty schools: the state or district holds adults accountable for success of students at school; parental involvement to get students to meet standards; a comprehensive monitoring systems helps students before they fall behind; professional development for teachers in instructional practices; increased instruction time for reading and math, and standards based curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Port Chester Middle School is an Education Trust Dispelling the Myth 2006 Award Recipient. Chenoweth (2006) researched this school in New York where 65 percent of the students are Latino and qualify for free and reduced –price lunch. The school today is described as “successful” and “like a family” mainly from the influence of principal Carmen Macchia. After looking at school data on achievement, the principal decided that all teachers would be English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. Focus on writing and reading in all contents area with aligned curriculum to standards helped get the school's scores up. Lower classes sizes (average ELA of 18) and co-taught Special Education classes, and a middle school small-scale science planetarium helped build a successful program where students must attain success or they are retained. The story of Port Chester Middle School may sound unique, but Dispelling the Myth Awards are given each year to schools throughout the country. This is an example of the ability to overcome poverty and focus on academic success.

In 2009, a Phi Delta Kappan article *It can be done, it's being done and here's how*, reported on the qualities shared by schools that have academically reached minority students in poverty. Chenoweth (2009) reported that these schools focused on student learning and those structures that support learning, including teacher collaboration.

Schools that successfully teach students of poverty and students of color do not begin with the assumption that there are things they don't have to explain. They begin by figuring out what children need to know and be able to do; they assess what their students already know and are able to do; they figure out how to move students from where they are to where they need to be; and then they analyze what students have learned and whether they need further instruction.. They do this systematically grade by grade, class by class, student by student, month by month, and day by day, carefully and relentlessly.(p. 40)

Poverty and trust. Research by Goddard, Salloum, and Berebitsky (2009) focused on trust as the mediator of the relationships between academic achievement, poverty, and racial composition. In a state-wide random survey of elementary schools in Michigan, teachers responded to a likert-type scale survey and achievement data was collected from the state department of education. Results indicated statistically significant relationships between trust and school academic achievements. More importantly, when trust was estimated in a path analysis model, SES “and the proportion of students of color were no longer statistically significant predictors of achievement” (p. 305). In other words, it is trust in students that seems to affect student achievement more than any other factor. Researchers concluded that “trust seems to make a difference to academic achievement above and beyond the influence of school context” (p. 307). Trust seems to mediate the relationship between school disadvantage and academic achievement.

If trust can mediate the relationship between school disadvantage and academic achievement, then there may be other areas that schools can focus on to build trust. Wikeley, Bullock, Muschamp, and Ridge (2009) reported in their study on educational relationships and their impact on poverty, that out-of-school activities are beneficial to students in poverty. By participating in formal out-of-school experiences with adults, students began to understand that

they were a part of the learning process and not just passive recipients of teaching. This better understanding of educational relationships helped improve academic skills of student in poverty.

Moore, Kochan, Kraska, and Reames (2011) investigated professional development and student achievement in high functioning Alabama Torchbearer schools. Alabama Torchbearer schools are schools that are identified as high performing yet have enrollments of high-poverty students. Using the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) Self-Assessment Survey, the study authors found that principals in the Torchbearer schools were at higher in the levels of implementation of the (NSDC) standards. Moore et al. (2011), claim that “Researchers have discovered that effective professional development is an essential element in promoting significant change in school leaders’ practices, teachers’ instructional practices and student learning” (p.66). Clearly the Alabama Leadership Academy’s 79 Torchbearer schools are making progress the difference with students in Alabama-students in poverty are learning!

In these studies, students’ level of poverty does not equal or predict their ability to achieve. Whether it is trust, formal out-of-schools experiences, or staff development opportunities, extra ordinary achievement is possible from students in poverty. The school level properties of academic optimism may help further explain why students in poverty are successful.

Supporting Components of Academic Optimism

The overall school environment and poverty are significant ideas related to student academic success yet other factors are worthy of discussion as well. Academic optimism’s three parts: academic emphasis of schools, collective efficacy, and trust in parents and students each have their own research history. This next section briefly outlines these three supporting components of academic optimism.

Academic Emphasis of Schools

Situations where students have achievable goals, are respected in their academic accomplishments, and work cooperatively in class and on homework outside of class describe schools with academic emphasis (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). A school that is emphasizing academics is one where “students work hard on their school work, are highly motivated and respect other students who achieve academically (high academic influence)” (Hoy, Tarter, Kottkamp, 1991, p. 68). Academic emphasis can also be described as the press for academic achievement. Teachers and principals who emphasize academics create schools where students are motivated to work hard and meet high expectations.

Academic emphasis has been studied at all levels. Hoy and his colleagues (1991) engaged in the very first studies on academic emphasis proving academic emphasis as a collective property related to student achievement. In the pilot testing of the OHI, the researchers identified six factors, one of which emphasized academic tasks and accomplishments and was hence labeled by the team as academic emphasis (Hoy et al., 1991).

Hoy, Tarter and Bliss (1990) studied 58 secondary schools and compared the OHI (Organizational Health Inventory) and OCDQ (Organizational Climate Questionnaire) climate surveys. Using multiple regression, only academic emphasis was found to have had an impact on student achievement. The principal only had an indirect influence on student achievement. At the elementary level, Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000) hypothesized that academic emphasis was positively associated with differences between schools in student achievement of both reading and math. Using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) the team sampled 44 elementary schools using part of the Organization Health Inventory for Elementary Schools. The OHI-E is an 8-item Likert scale survey. With the use of HLM, the researchers were able to examine school qualities as well as student prior achievement. Results showed that a climate of academic emphasis was a significant predictor of between-school differences in student achievement in math and reading. Modeling results showed that academic emphasis

accounted for 47.4% and 50.4% of the between-school variability in math and reading, respectively. Academic emphasis is strongly associated with differences in student achievement between schools. Academic emphasis has been shown to be an important part of school climate related to student achievement.

Hoy and Sabo (1998) focused research on middle schools and school climate using two quantitative research instruments, Organizational Health Inventory-Middle school (OHI-M) and the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ-RD). Results of their research analysis demonstrated a significant and positive relationship between school climate and student achievement (p. 88). Hoy and Hannum (1997) used the Organizational Health Inventory for middle schools (OHI-RM) to specifically look at middle school climates related to reading, writing and math achievement. Using multiple regression analysis, the organizational health variables of teacher affiliation, resource support, institutional integrity, and academic emphasis were shown to be important to student achievement. Both of these studies found that academic emphasis is important, but fail to show and give examples of what the press for academics looks like.

Alig-Mielcarek and Hoy (2005) hypothesized that academic press would have a positive effect on student achievement in the school. Results of a path model showed that instructional leadership was not in direct relationship to mathematics achievement. Instructional leadership did have an indirect effect on student achievement through the academic press of the school.

Students, teachers, parents, and administrators all need to be on the same page in encouraging, supporting, recognizing, and rewarding the academic accomplishments of students; it's a collaborative and school-wide effort, not a solo-performance. (pp. 47-48)

These findings are important because they highlight that increasing student achievement was accomplished through the climate piece of academic press of the school and not the instructional leadership of the principal.

Collective Efficacy

Bandura's (1986, 1989) work in social cognitive theory and human agency is the foundation for collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is an expansion of self-efficacy to the group level. Self-efficacy "refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Bandura's understanding of the human agency theory focuses on the choices humans make. The theory holds that individuals do not go through life in isolation but work together to produce desired results. The decisions people make are based on the cognitive, affective, behavioral, and biological factors that individuals think will happen because of their behavior. Sometimes decisions are the result of being in a group. These ideas are the basis of collective efficacy and are cognitive. Collective efficacy, according to Bandura (1993) is not simply the collected product of individual efficacy beliefs, but is a group level dynamic that is highly coordinated (p. 7). Collective efficacy is defined by Bandura as "a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce a given level of attainment" (p. 477). Bandura (1997) goes on to report that group functioning is the result of interactive and coordinate dynamics of team members. Coordinated efforts to produce products are exactly what happen at schools on a daily basis.

According to Bandura (1993), schools are well suited for exploration into collective efficacy on organizational accomplishments and he analyzed the perceived collective efficacy of 79 elementary schools. Findings suggested that the more that a staff held shared beliefs on instructional efficacy, the higher the academic achievement. In the path analysis, student body characteristics influenced school achievement by changing the staff members' beliefs about collective efficacy. Bandura's (1993) research found that the stronger the staff members' shared understandings of their collective power, the better students performed academically. The link between perceived collective efficacy and student achievement was stronger than the relationship between achievement and race or SES. He asserts that collective efficacy is an

important school property because of its linking to student achievement particularly in reading and math.

Goddard, Sweetland and their colleagues (2000) developed an instrument that measured collective efficacy. Later, Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2004) claimed that in schools collective efficacy refers to the idea that the faculty works together to positively affect change on students (p. 4). Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2004) claim that when teachers have some control over instructional decisions, collective efficacy is a natural result. Other consequences such as a teacher's own sense of self-efficacy and satisfaction, commitment, and empowerment come with student achievement (p. 11). In their review of the empirical evidence on collective efficacy, the authors reported that collective teacher efficacy was positively associated with differences in between schools student level achievement. They propose a conceptual model for change of perceived collective efficacy in schools by focusing on analyzing teaching task and competencies and relating these to teacher sense of self-efficacy and perceived collective efficacy. The model presents several outcomes other than student achievement including college attendance and teacher empowerment.

Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2000) tested for collective efficacy at the elementary school level using Gibson and Dembo's 16-item version of the Collective Efficacy Scale. An expert panel reviewed the instrument and a field test was completed as a pilot study. Data was obtained from 47 elementary schools in a Midwest urban district. Results showed that collective teacher efficacy was a significant predictor of student achievement in math and reading. The research showed that a one point increase in a collective teacher efficacy was associated with a 40% increase of a standard deviation in math and reading scores.

Collective efficacy can be used to predict school-level achievement. Hoy, Sweetland and Smith (2002) looked at collective efficacy and academic press together as an idea that would reach beyond the SES of students. This research helped lay the groundwork for the academic optimism construct to come years later. Testing was completed to determine if

academic press and collective efficacy were positively associated with school achievement in mathematics. In 97 high schools in Ohio, surveys were given to faculty agreeing to participate in the study. Parts of the OHI and Goddard's short version of the collective efficacy scale were used. In developing a theoretical path model, the results showed that academic press was indirectly related to math achievement through collective efficacy. According to Hoy, Sweetland and Smith (2002), nurturing the school climate through the successful experiences of teachers and principals is the way to create schools where collective efficacy and academic press are strong.

Goddard and Goddard (2001) tested the multilevel relationship between teachers and collective efficacy beliefs. Using elementary data from a large Midwestern school district, the researchers showed that collective efficacy explained the variances between individual teacher's sense of self efficacy. Collective efficacy is critical to a school's quest for achievement and collective efficacy affects individual teacher's belief in students. Skrla and Goddard (2002) studied collective efficacy in schools serving populations where the majority of students were Hispanic. One teacher in a focus group reported

[W]e're told it so many times, it's just a part of life, we know that to work here you have to do whatever it takes to get [the students to succeed]. To reach our goal. And, you know, I believe there are enough teachers who have bought into that belief to where if you hear a teacher that may not be quite there, I believe that by the time they hang around, either they will be there, or they'll be out the door. (pp. 17–18)

This type of richness is necessary to help understand academic optimism.

Goddard, LoGerfo, and Hoy (2004) tested the perceived collective efficacy of high schools. Researchers used structural equation modeling to test if collective efficacy was a significant positive predictor of student achievement. The researchers surveyed 96 high schools using Goddard's CES scale which was adapted from the Teacher Efficacy Belief Scale (Gibson and Dembo, 1984). Using the highly advanced statistical program, LISREL, the

researchers concluded that perceived collective efficacy was able to explain high school achievement in all tested areas.

Perceived collective efficacy is critical to explaining how well students perform on the mandatory assessments of achievement for which high schools are held accountable by the state. In an era of increased accountability for schools, collective efficacy is worthy of strong consideration by educators and educational reformers alike who seek to effectively support teachers' work and students' learning. Indeed, our results suggest that developing a school in which teachers believe in their collective capabilities to educate students is important to meeting the challenges posed by helping all students learn rigorous academic content. (pp. 419-420)

Trust in Students and Parents

The faculty's ability to trust parents and students is the important third part of the academic optimism construct. Relationships of support and reliability are key to seeing this school collective property realized. According to Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a) define trust as "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (p. 140-141). The authors believe that this collective property must be seen as one and cannot be separated into trust in students and trust in parents (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001).

Hoy (2002) explored the relationship between faculty trust and student achievement. In his study of 97 high schools in Ohio, a trust scale of 15 questions was administered to faculty at a regularly scheduled faculty meeting. A correlational analysis was then conducted between faculty trust in students and parents and student achievement. Hoy found that the higher the faculty trust in students and parents, the better the student achievement. After controlling for SES, he still found a substantial impact stating, "faculty trust in students and parents is an

important aspect of student achievement in schools” (p. 96). According to Hoy, when common learning goals are present, then trust and cooperation follow.

Many elements of trust have been explained and studied. According to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) trust is composed of five facets: benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness. Benevolence could be the most common aspect of the term; it is the calm sense that someone cares about another, will be kind, and brings no harm others. Reliability has to deal with how likely a behavior would continue or be expected. Competence goes beyond the good intentions and means “In schools, if a person’s or team’s project depends on others, principals and teachers may or may not feel an “assured confidence” that deadlines will be met or that the work will be of adequate quality to enhance the teaching and learning goals of the school” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 558). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy call honesty one’s character, integrity, and authenticity. Honesty happens in carrying out deeds, accepting responsibility, and keeping commitments. Finally, trust involves openness – the way in which information is shared with others. In examining trust literature, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) developed a Trust Scale and completed a pilot study where content validity was checked by a panel of experts. The results of the study at both the elementary and secondary level found that faculty and parent trust merged into one. “When teachers trust the students, they also trust their parents, and vice versa” (p. 204). This idea turned into the 26 question Omnibus Trust Scale or T-scale.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) used longitudinal data from Chicago public schools to study relational trust. The authors found that improving academic achievement can be realized over time through an increased trust of the community. In a study by Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy (2001), the research team focused on teacher trust at the elementary level with surveys conducted at 47 elementary schools in a large urban district in the Midwest. Using HLM, the researchers tested whether trust was related to differences between schools in student achievement. Results showed that trust was a significant predictor of student

achievement accounting for 81% of the between variation in math and reading achievement. Analysis showed that the explanatory power of the model did not change even after adding in the variable of SES.

The amount of trust teachers have in students and in parents outweighs the effects of poverty, because school SES is not a significant predictor of differences between schools in student achievement when the effect of trust is considered. Trust seems to foster a context that supports student achievement, even in the face of poverty. (p. 14)

They found that building trust can be a key component to help students achieve at higher levels.

Trust is key for all the other parts of academic optimism to “work” because it is the vehicle that makes the others possible. Through trust a collective culture of academics makes an optimistic school successful. Schools where all three components are present can be viewed as academically optimistic. Administrators and teachers need to know practical pieces to put in the formula for success.

Studies involving Academic Optimism

The above concepts of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and trust unfold together to form one general latent construct called academic optimism. After years of study on school performance and individual and group research, researchers Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a) developed the concept of academic optimism. The three parts of academic optimism (academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and trust) when together in a school, make positive changes to the achievement level of students. Hoy et al. (2006a) contend that

Aggregated individual perceptions of the group, as opposed to the individual, access these perceived properties as emergent organizational attributes, that is, the variables are emergent group-level attributes rather than simply the sum of teachers’ perceived personal attributes. (p. 142)

The concept of academic optimism is one that includes three levels: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Collective efficacy invokes the group belief and is cognitive. Faculty trust in students and parents creates an affective domain. The push for academic emphasis creates the behavioral component of the construct. The working levels are graphically presented as a “triadic set of interactions” which are dependent on the other parts. Figure 2.1 represents the reciprocal relationship between academic optimism’s parts.

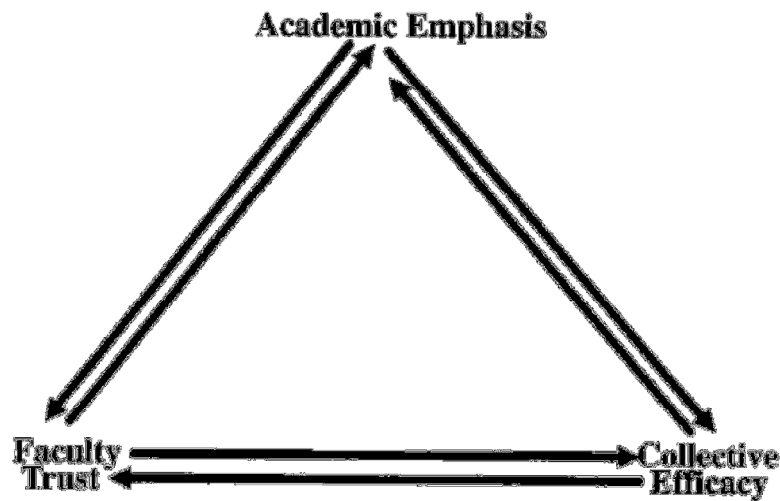


Figure 2.1 The Reciprocal Relationship Between the Three Collective Properties of Academic Optimism (Hoy et al., 2006a, p. 432).

Hoy et al. (2006a) chose the term academic optimism to unite these three powerful school properties into one general latent construct. They state that “a school with high academic optimism is a collectivity in which the faculty believes that it can make a difference, that students can learn, and academic performance can be achieved” (p. 145). Academic optimism’s properties invigorate administrators and teachers to believe in students and their power to achieve.

Using a 12 question Likert scale survey and student test data with a sample of 3,400 teachers from 146 elementary schools, confirmatory factor analysis showed that academic optimism was related to student achievement. Academic optimism had a direct and positive

effect on student achievement in math and science after controlling for factors including SES (Hoy et al, 2006a). This research is important because school leaders have direct control over school properties and can promote a change and the spirit of optimism in their respective campuses.

The school properties labeled as academic optimism have shown empirically to increase student achievement in numerous follow up studies. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006b) surveyed faculties at 96 high schools at regularly scheduled faculty meetings to continue the study of academic optimism. Their valid and reliable measure found that academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students formed a construct, which they named academic optimism, and that it was related to achievement even after controlling for SES.

Smith and Hoy (2007) further examined the construct of academic optimism by sampling 99 poor urban elementary schools in Texas. Using a similar collection manner, findings resulted in proving that academic optimism was a construct. The study also found that with controlling for SES, academic optimism explained student achievement in math.

McGuigan and Hoy (2006) identified aspects of school leadership linked to academic optimism by focusing on the idea of enabling bureaucracy. McGuigan and Hoy sampled 40 elementary schools and found that academic optimism was a construct and that an enabling bureaucratic structure enhances academic optimism (p. 220). This research showed that the organizational properties of schools and control of organization and structure produced academic achievement even with controlling for SES.

Research has focused on academic optimism using quantitative approaches. Kirby (2009) focused on academic optimism and community engagement in urban elementary schools. Using the Norfolk Public Schools Teacher Climate Survey, Kirby was able to test hypotheses regarding academic optimism and student achievement. Academic press had the most significant correlation to student achievement in math. Academic optimism had a

significant independent effect on mean student achievement and was responsible for 52% of the variance on student achievement. Wagner (2011) focused work on academic optimism as it relates to organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) and student achievement. Results of the correlational and factor analysis research found that not only were the three parts of academic optimism correlated with student achievement when controlling for student family background, but that OCBs and academic optimism were correlated. DiPaola, Tarter, and Hoy (2005) describe OCBs as the voluntary things that teachers do that help students and colleagues succeed.

Recently, Brown, Benekovitz, Muttillio, and Urban (2011) studied effective strategies that principals can use to lead schools to excellence and equity using the frame of academic optimism. Researchers were interested in state-recognized "Honor Schools of Excellence" and how these institutions support not only academic excellence but equity. This mixed methods research was an outgrowth of Hoy and his colleague's suggestions to further expand on the theory of academic optimism. In a two phase research project, equity audits were conducted at 24 schools to identify patterns of students learning, specifically looking at equity and inequity. Phase two ranked the 24 schools and identified them as small gap (SG) minority achievement and large gap (LG) minority achievement schools. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews with principals, assistant principals, teacher and parent leaders, differences were found between the SG and LG schools. The findings showed that differences in the schools involved principal actions. In the authors' analysis, it was academic emphasis component of academic optimism that stood in the study's results. The academic optimism theme one included recognizing, encouraging, and celebrating academic achievement as seen in the following highlight

The assistant principal and I look at every report card in the school. –We always make comments to every student in the school. "Love the way you're doing," or "Let's get

going in math. If there's anything I can do, come see me." I think that providing that kind of support for a kid academically is encouraging. (p. 72)

Academic optimism theme two centered around the principal's closely monitoring teaching and learning by offering instructional feedback and support. In a LG school one teacher reported,

In my case it's been really nice, [the principal] leaves me alone and lets me do my job. She is not a micro-manager by any means. In fact, I tell her every once in a while, you need to get out and into the classrooms more. (p. 78)

Academic optimism theme three involved principals expecting excellence from each and every student. This belief can be heard from in one teacher's voice at a SG school,

When I came here nine years ago, the composite for the school was 70 something. I spent about a week here and then I said- that's not reasonable for this school. The children are bright. Those parents are talented and willing to help, and it was just amazing to me that the school was that low. [Since then] we've been above the 90 percentile, while taking on more Free and Reduced Lunch kids. (p. 81)

In sum, SG schools principals and staff were taking active parts in the themes while LG school principals were more passive. Brown et al. (2011) claim that student achievement can be influenced by academic optimism when school leaders focus on a teamwork approach, a balanced approach, a strong sense of purpose, and an insistent disposition and through efforts such as these, all students can achieve at their highest level.

The new idea of academic optimism has strong potential to act as a bridge towards increasing student achievement at all schools middle schools in the United States. Although statistically significant findings have reported that academic optimism is a construct that has overcome the power of SES, qualitative work yet needs to be done. Academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in parents and students each have their own traditions and research. These parts, taken together to form academic optimism, create a way for building

administrators and teachers to affect change on their campus. Through additional research of the topic, including qualitative research, more can be researched for a greater understanding of academic optimism and the ability to change what is within the control of leaders at the school level. The spirit of academic optimism can be present on each campus and it is the goal and desire to build up academic optimism to a working, effective, and instrumental practice at the school that positively affects student outcomes.

Summary

The answer to school and student achievement still eludes us. Schools making the difference, the effective and “good” schools, are available at all ends of the country to study and emulate. The ideas and research behind school culture, climate, poverty, instructional leadership all cover certain philosophies, ways, methods, or prescriptions to improve student performance. Even with the rich history and development of each of these research agendas, the academic optimism construct proves to be worthy of further exploration. School characteristics and specifically the beliefs, actions, and procedures, are the hard to see, yet these day-to-day functions can shed light on the success perspective of a school. The specific qualitative analysis of one case study school will bring added leverage to the construct of academic optimism and academic success.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study is an explanatory case study (Yin 2009). Yin (2009) describes the case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Because of all the complexities of student academic success as described in my literature review, the explanatory case study approach qualifies as an appropriate method to explain student academic success and relate the overall school success to the new construct of academic optimism.

Case Study

Case studies stem from the fields of anthropology and sociology and have been extensively used in educational research. Stake (1995), Merriam (1998), and Yin (2009) all offer procedures for conducting case study research. In explaining the applications of case studies, according to Yin (2009), “The most important is to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (p. 19). Since, the academic success of one particular school is exactly this, far too complex to explain, this method will provide insights into student achievement. This explanatory case study used the theoretical frame of academic optimism to explain the link between school academic success and school context.

Research Questions

The study design focused on using the case study method as a means to answer the following questions:

1. What beliefs, actions, and procedures are in place in a high achieving/high poverty school?
2. In what ways do beliefs, actions, and procedures support academic optimism in an academically achieving school?

3. What other realities about academic optimism, academic success and high achieving/high poverty schools are revealed in the research?

4. How useful (applicable/helpful/relevant) are the tenants of academic optimism in understanding academic success?

Procedures

The first procedure to be presented in this section is site selection and then Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviews. Data needs, data sources, data collection, and data analysis complete the next section. The chapter finishes with issues of validity and reliability, the steps taken to increase trustworthiness.

Site Selection

In Texas, the governmental control of the public school system is supported by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The state labels schools in four ways: Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable. According to the *2011 Accountability Manual*, school ratings are assigned based on performance of spring state assessments (TAKS), performance of limited English proficient (LEP) students and English Language Learners (ELL), commended performance, completion rate, and annual dropout rate. On state assessments for the TAKS test, for a school to be rated exemplary, 90% of tested students must pass every tested subject. For recognized, 80% of tested students must pass. In an academically acceptable successful school, 70% of tested students must pass reading/ELA, writing, and social studies, 65% pass mathematics, and 60% science. Academically unacceptable schools fall below the academically acceptable standard above.

The TEA divides school districts into regional areas which offer support to local education agencies through regional service centers. The *Lonestar Education Report* provides data to Texas public schools and higher education institutions. The reports include general information including data on enrollment, accountability, and high school completion rate. Based on the TEA's Lonestar Education Reports, one regional service center during the 2009-

2010 school year, had 866 total schools of which 120 were middle schools. This research will involve three of the 120 middle schools in the regional service center. The Lonestar report highlights that 20.2% of schools in the selected region are exemplary, 57.4% are recognized, 14.9% are academically acceptable, and 4.3% are academically unacceptable. One suburban/urban district with multiple middle schools with greater than 30% economically disadvantaged populations was selected as the district to study. A data need called for in this study involved selecting a district with significant numbers of economically disadvantaged students. This matched with previous research that says academic optimism overcame socioeconomic status of students. I call this district Fairfield ISD (a fictitious name). All elements of the district were given pseudonyms although their data are real.

Institutional Review Board Processes

Once the schools were identified, I applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for access to the sites. The process first involved an initial approval from the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent of Fairfield ISD for access to the district. This occurred in March 2012. I contacted each administrator for preliminary approval prior to beginning the IRB process. A copy of this email is located in Appendix D.

After preliminary approval, I designed an exempt research protocol calling for researcher approval for a survey administration, document collection/analysis, and focus group interviews. The IRB consisted of two separate informed consent forms, one for the survey part of the research and the other for the focus group part of the research. Once the IRB was formally approved by the University, the Deputy Superintendent reviewed the research proposal and granted approval for the study. The study was then conducted in various stages. All IRB processes were completed in the spring semester of 2012. The IRB approval is located in Appendix E. Informed consent forms are located in Appendix F and G.

Data Needs and Sources

Data was needed in the three broad categories outlined in Chapter 1: academic success of middle schools, academic optimism, and the beliefs, actions, and procedures. The academic success of the middle schools was determined with state accountability ratings. Through distribution of a survey instrument at three middle schools of Fairfield ISD (Deerfield, Franklin, and Quincy) a measure of academic optimism was taken at each middle school. The school principal provided campus documents evidencing beliefs, actions, and procedures (campus improvement plan and faculty handbook). Campus observations also served as a source of beliefs, actions, and procedures as did the building focus group interviews.

Data Collection

Data for this study was accumulated in several different ways. A quantitative survey was used to identify one school for further qualitative investigation. The quantitative data collection took place in April 2012. The next sections describe the survey part of the research and the additional sources of data and data collection methods at the selected school site.

Measure of academic optimism. The School Academic Optimism Scale (SAOS) is a measurement of academic optimism. The measurement has 30 items and consists of three parts. The first part measures collective efficacy (12 items), the middle part identifies faculty trust in students and parents (10 items), and the final part identified the academic emphasis of the school (8 items). The first two parts, items 1-22 are scored using a using a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree). The final part, items 23-30 are scored using a using a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, 4 = Very Often). When these three measures are calculated, an index of school academic optimism is the end result. Each part of the SAOS is computed using average scores for individual responses then converting these scores to the average component scores for the three parts of the SAOS. The SAOS is found in the Appendix A.

Scoring the SAOS requires specific instructions and must be followed exactly because of averaging and reverse scoring. Scoring followed the precise directions as outlined by Hoy (2010). The SAOS scoring is detailed in Appendix H.

Academic optimism scores fall between 200 and 800 and are based on a normal distribution. The average academic optimism score is 500. The following Table 3.1 represents the range and meaning of academic optimism scores (Hoy 2010).

Table 3.1 SAOS Scoring Detail

SAOS Score	Score Detail
200	Lower than 99% of schools
300	Lower than 97% of schools
400	Lower than 84% of schools
500	Average
600	Higher than 84% of schools
700	Higher than 97% of schools
800	Higher than 99% of schools

Once IRB approval was granted, I contacted the three middle school principals by email to set up a meeting. In the meeting, I explained the research proposal and the survey component of the study. Each campus principal agreed to participate in the study and SAOS surveys were administered to the three selected middle school staffs over the course of one month. Surveys were conducted on site at the schools during April 2012.

Many studies have used the gathering of faculties in faculty meetings as good times to conduct survey research with teachers and other staff. I did as well. I personally visited each school site and scheduled meetings with each campus principal to visit group faculty meetings. In morning or afternoon faculty meetings, I introduced the study overview, the survey directions, and the informed consent document to the school staff. Although no respondents asked questions, I was available to answer questions about the SAOS during the allotted time.

I visited two of the three middle school campuses during morning or afternoon faculty meetings and spoke to the staff about my study. At one school, Franklin, due to a faculty emergency, I informed the school principal on how to conduct the survey and she presented the

survey and informed consent documents to her own faculty. She was trained and able to answer any questions the faculty presented. At the other two sites, I obtained informed consent and stayed to answer questions during administration of the survey. At Franklin and Quincy, faculty meetings were in the morning. The Deerfield meeting was held after school. At Quincy, the collection of the surveys occurred over several days because the staff meeting went long and the teachers did not have time to fill out the surveys during the meeting.

After the SAOS surveys were given on each campus, results were calculated according to the procedures. The middle school with the highest school academic optimism score was selected as the school for further investigation into the topic.

School beliefs, actions, and procedures. Once the selected school was identified, I contacted the school principal by email with the information that the school had the highest academic optimism score of the three sampled district middle schools. The principal agreed to further participate in the additional qualitative parts of the study. I then scheduled document collection, observation, and conducting the focus groups.

The principal prepared the documents for my review. In addition, the principal allowed for me to have visitation privileges to the school including all classrooms. Focus groups were conducted at the end of one school day with teachers from the campus. This phase of the research occurred in May 2012.

Observations. Observations allowed me to visit the school site and look for beliefs, actions, and procedures related to academic optimism. I conducted the observations as a non-participant observer during the course of one entire school day. The observation allowed me to visit and get a feel of the school. I mainly visited classrooms, hallways during passing periods, office areas, and the cafeteria. I developed an observation checklist to organize observations. The observation checklist is provided in Appendix C. I was seeking to observe and see evidence of the three components of academic optimism as outlined in the checklist. According to Yin (2009), this real-life context is important to case study research.

Documents. I asked for two documents. The campus improvement plan (CIP) because this plan outlines all school goals and initiatives. All schools are required to have a CIP by the TEA and CIPs are available to the public. I also asked for the faculty handbook since this is a standard document available at most schools. The documents that were provided by the school principal included the Deerfield Middle School Campus Improvement Plan and Deerfield Middle School Faculty handbook. The handbook documented policies and procedures. In addition, the faculty handbook contained the schools' motto, mission, and belief statements. The CIP also included the mission and beliefs of the school and provided comprehensive needs assessment of the campus. The needs assessment identified six areas of concern. The campus plan included five broad goals for the school year. I also took pictures of several posters, motto, plaques, and informational signs during my observation which served as additional documents. The pictures helped document my observation at the school.

Focus Groups. A total of 10 teachers participated in two focus groups conducted at Deerfield. The following table describes the teacher's subject area, years in education and years at Deerfield. Their names are pseudonyms. The first letter of their last name is the same as their subject area.

Table 3.2 Deerfield Middle School Focus Group Participants

Name	Subject Taught	Years in Education	Years at Deerfield
Mrs. Synder	Science	26	8
Mrs. Easley	English	19	8
Mrs. Holder	History	23	8
Mrs. Morrison	Math	26	8
Mrs. Everman	English	20	8
Mrs. Sharp-Smith	Social Studies	13	4
Mrs. Lindsey-Allen	Language Arts	7	2
Mr. Simmon-Edgley	Special Education	3	3
Mrs. Lancaster-Ali	Language Arts	15	4
Mrs. Henderson	History	22	8

The first focus group had four teachers and focus group two had six teachers. Focus group participants were gathered by the principal and arranged to participate in one of two separate sessions. Each focus group started with a brief introduction to the topic and how the group interview would be conducted. It was disclosed that I would be recording the session and that all participants must agree to being recorded. I then guided the group in completing the informed consent document.

I described how the session would be conducted and asked if the participants had any questions. I used the focus group questions in Appendix B to guide my questioning but did ask follow up questions as necessary during the sessions. Focus group questions centered around the main areas of academic optimism including questions about common beliefs, procedures, and trust. When a term or a concept was referenced by a member of the focus group that I was unfamiliar with, I asked a follow up for additional information and clarification. Focus group data was transcribed and coded for beliefs, actions, and procedures and additional themes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through the lens of the theoretical frame of academic optimism. According to Merriam (1998) data analysis can occur alongside data collection. As I sorted through the data collected, I categorized data by general topics to describe the school realities in terms of beliefs, actions and procedures. I then reread everything, rethought, and compared to academic optimism. This process allowed for new themes to be created and the phenomenon of academic success to be understood in terms of academic optimism.

Trustworthiness

Issues of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), traditionally the validity and reliability checks of quantitative research, help make qualitative research sound and convincing. Validity deals with a clear reflection of the phenomenon. Reliability is the ability for different researchers to come up with the same results when replicated. In qualitative research, reliability is usually described as dependability. This section will review issues of trustworthiness (validity and reliability) in terms of credibility, dependability and transferability.

Achieving credibility

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) credibility “refers to whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them. In other words, has the researcher accurately represented what the participants think, feel, and do” (p. 77)? This study is being conducted by a public school administrator. First of all, I understand that I have this bias as a public school employee. My assumptions include a positive outlook on teachers, administrators, and public school in general. Having been a classroom teacher and a current administrator, I acknowledge this bias upfront in my research design.

During the research process, I wrote field notes and jotted notes and recorded only what I was observing and “seeing.” By spending a whole day at the selected school site, this helped me learn about the students, staff, and culture and climate from the moment students

walked in in the mornings until they were leaving after school. The site visit day allowed me to get a feel for the campus and observe details of a typical day.

To help make the study more creditable, I worked to triangulate data sources.

Triangulation of data sources helps build rich and well-developed conclusions. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation provides a strategy whereby information from one source can be checked against other sources.

Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. But, acknowledging that no observations or interpretations are perfectly repeatable, triangulation serves also to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 443-444).

Multiple sources of data were gathered for the study. In terms of documents for review, I was provided the campus faculty handbook, the campus improvement plan, and the campus mission, motto, and slogan. Another main source of data came from the answers that teachers gave in the focus groups interviews. The final source of data was my own field notes from the site day visit. Triangulation was achieved by including the multiple methods of document analysis, focus group interviews, and observation. Triangulation helps assure that the case is being seen from different perspectives and not relying on one form of evidence or data collection method. Also, the research design accounted for addressing rival explanations by including a research question addressing the other realities revealed. This research question allowed for other explanations to appear in the research process not originally thought of by the researcher. Also, if negative findings or non-expectant results were found, they were reported.

Peer debriefing was also used to enhance accuracy and credibility of the account.

During the analysis phase of research, a colleague reviewed my beliefs, actions, procedures, and developing themes. Comments and suggestions from this person allowed for additional ideas not thought of by me.

Achieving dependability

Dependability has to deal with how easily another researcher could repeat the procedures and processes in the study. Careful details of data collection procedures inform the reader how the research was conducted and provided clear steps for the research to be repeated. Triangulation of data sources also helps to increase dependability. I gathered and have reported an effective audit trail in all steps of the research process. This study described how the data was collected, so that the procedures could be easily repeated.

Achieving transferability

Transferability refers to the likelihood that the research is applicable to other settings. Good case studies provide for thick description. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) describe thick description as “statements that re-create a situation and as much of its context as possible, accompanied by the meanings and intentions inherent in that situation” (p. 451). Care was given in documenting the setting and school site. This aids other schools, with similar characteristics, in using the findings. Similar ideas, specifically beliefs, actions, and procedures, could be modeled at other schools based on this research.

Limitations of the study

Despite efforts engaged in to design and execute a trustworthy study, this study has potential limitations. The first is that I bounded this study to one metropolitan area in the state of Texas. I also conducted research in only one independent school district. This was done because the district held three school sites that were appropriately matched to the study’s needs.

Another limitation included the fact that the selected participants at the middle school study site were aware that I was a public school administrator. Responses may have been affected by this fact. In addition, classroom observation and focus group responses could be affected by participant knowledge of this fact. I also spent a limited amount of time at the study site for observations. My observations included one full day.

Ethical considerations

Protecting human subjects from undue harm is a cornerstone of education research (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Merriam 1998). All formal University procedures were followed in terms of complying with IRB guidelines for research. All research documents were willingly surrendered for investigation in this study. All district and school names were kept confidential and/or changed to protect their identity. All research materials were kept in secure storage throughout the study.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed account of the methodology of the study. After initially reviewing the case study approach and detailing my research questions, I described the procedures I took to complete the study, including timelines. A detailed review of the IRB process was explained and documented. Site selection, data collection and analysis were detailed. The chapter concluded with a description of how I dealt with the three common concerns of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, and dependability.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

This chapter begins with a description of Fairfield ISD and the three middle school study sites within the district. The results of the SAOS survey are reported and then a description of the selected case study school is presented. The story is told with thick, rich description and highlights the beliefs, actions, and procedures of the school.

Fairfield ISD Description

The school district is located in a suburban area in a large metropolitan area of Texas. Based on the Texas Education Agency's Snapshot 2011 District Report, Fairfield ISD had a student population of over 16,000. Although not a randomly selected site, the selected district has a high economically disadvantaged population and must deal with educating students in poverty. The economically disadvantaged percentage of students was 40.1%. In 2011, the district attendance rate was 95%. The annual dropout rate is less than 1%. The district has two high schools, five middle schools, 14 elementary schools, and one alternative school. The district's TAKS passing rate is at or above the state average for all tests. According to the TEA, and federal accountability, Fairfield ISD is an Academically Acceptable district. District TAKS results for the 2010-2011 school year are as follows; math- 85%, reading- 92%, writing- 93%, science- 86%, and social studies- 96%. The average years of experience of teachers in Fairfield ISD is 11.1 years.

Fairfield ISD Middle Schools

The five middle schools of Fairfield serve students in grades 6-8. Campus accountability ratings range from Academically Acceptable to Recognized. All middle schools have significant percentages of students that are economically disadvantaged. Economically disadvantaged student percentages of all middle schools range from 28% to 48%. The middle schools from Fairfield ISD with the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students

were Deerfield Middle School, Franklin Middle School, and Quincy Middle School. These three schools were identified for the study.

According to state Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports, Deerfield Middle School had a 42% economically disadvantaged student population with an accountability rating of Recognized. Franklin Middle School had a 44% economically disadvantaged student population with an accountability rating of Academically Acceptable. Finally, Quincy Middle School had a 48% economically disadvantaged student population with an accountability rating of Academically Acceptable.

Table 4.1 presents the academic optimism score for each of the middle schools.

Table 4.1 Fairfield ISD Middle School Academic Optimism Scores

School name	Academic Optimism score
Deerfield	536.31
Franklin	427.80
Quincy	408.61

Academic optimism scores can range from 200-800. The average score is 500. Deerfield's school academic optimism score was the highest, above average at 536.31 and therefore was selected as the school for further study.

Deerfield Middle School

Deerfield Middle School is a newly constructed building and has been open for just eight years. The campus was built during the 2003-2004 school year and opened for students in the fall of 2004. The school has approximately 650 students in grades sixth, seventh, and eighth. The school's attendance rate was 96.1% for the 2010-2011 school year. The following graph shows the ethnic breakdown of students at Deerfield.

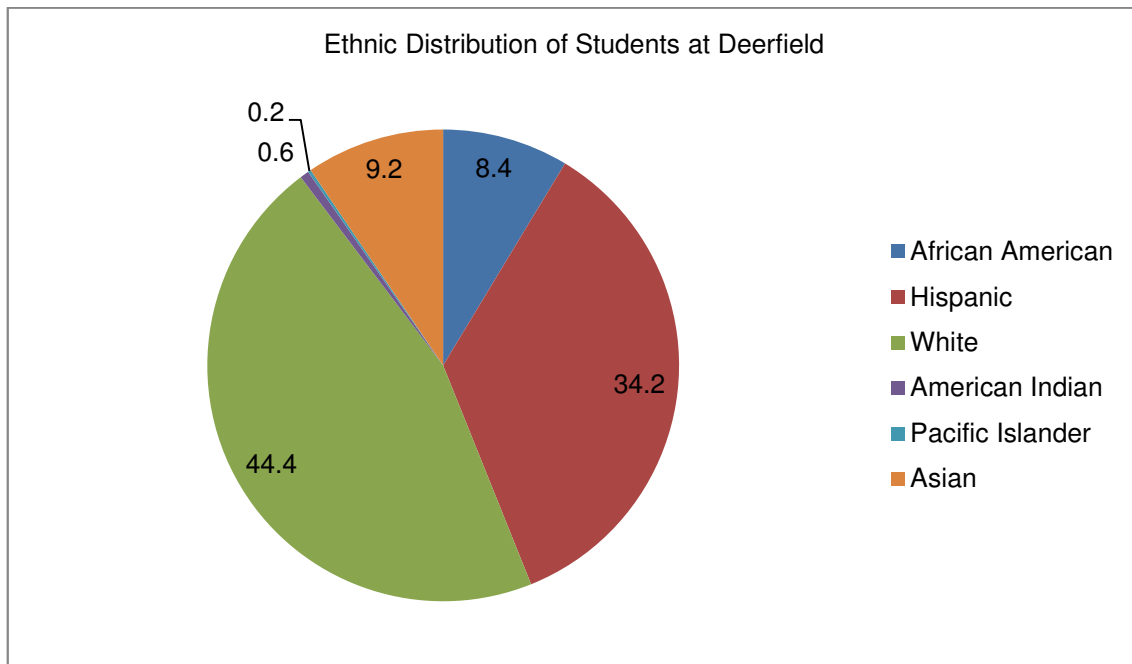


Figure 4.2 Ethnic Distribution of Students at Deerfield Middle School

The school has one principal, two assistant principals, and six professional staff support personnel, of which two are counselors. Deerfield was the third middle school built in the district, and its boundaries were set to have a higher economically disadvantaged population than the other two in existence at the time. The teachers took this as a challenge and reported on Deerfield's status saying "We are competitive" and "We are the best."

Academic performance of Deerfield Middle School. According to the TEA, academically, Deerfield is a Recognized campus. Campus TAKS passing rate results for the 2010-2011 school year are as follows; math- 91%, reading- 93%, writing- 95%, science- 81%, and social studies- 99%. The following table, Table 4.3, summarizes a further breakdown of Deerfield Middle School TAKS results in 2010-2011.

Table 4.3 Deerfield Middle School TAKS Passing Rate Results 2010-2011 (Percentages)

2010-2011	All Students	Hispanic	White	African American	Economically Disadvantaged	LEP	Special Education
Math	91	88	93	87	84	59	73
Reading	93	89	94	88	91	71	79
Writing	95	92	97	100	94	*	72
Science	81	78	90	65	76	*	63
Social Studies	99	99	100	100	99	*	100

The two-story campus is set back from the road and is mainly composed of brown brick. The school is large and impressive in size. The grounds and facility were free of trash and litter. The grass was nicely mowed and windows were clean. The campus space includes two gymnasiums, locker rooms, a fine arts wing, cafeteria, library, technology education room, and approximately 45 classrooms. The campus also has several science and computer labs. The hallways are mainly carpeted and lockers were available for student use. The mascot of Deerfield is a colt and the school colors are purple and yellow.

Upon entry into the school, there are multiple plaques and recognitions posted in the main hallway near the front office. The plaques tell the story of Deerfield's accountability rating, with the majority reading "Recognized." Also, a 12 foot section of the main hallway held about 15 wooden star plaques about six inches in diameter indicating the multiple gold performance ratings the school has received on specific state assessments. One approximately 2 foot by 3 foot poster listed the "A" Honor Roll students names at Deerfield for the fourth six weeks. A very large sign spanning approximately 6 foot by 5 foot was charting Deerfield's academic and attendance goals. The sign read: "Deerfield Middle School: Where the Race for Excellence Begins."

For the current academic year 2011-2012, success goals for each grade and six weeks were charted. The academic goals were at the top of the sign and the attendance goals at the

bottom. Each part of the sign held six columns for each six weeks and three rows for the grade levels. If a goal was met, a colt mascot was placed next to the goal. For instance, the academic goal for each grade level was a 90% class average. Not all grade levels had achieved the goal and the eighth grade had never achieved the goal in any six weeks period. At the time of my visit to the campus, during the last six weeks of the school year, out a possible 30 realized goal achievements indicated by the mascot colts on the sign, there were 10 colts.

Welcome posters direct visitors to the front office. All visitors check in with the main office and get a visitor badges. Seventh and Eighth grade students gather in the morning in the cafeteria where students wait for dismissal to first period. Sixth grade students line the walls of the first floor hallways before school. Each morning, a principal dismisses students by tables from the cafeteria while reminding students to tuck in their chairs. Students file out in an orderly fashion to get to their classes. Generally, sixth graders remain in their area and seventh and eighth graders remain in their assigned areas as well.

The Deerfield day. Deerfield's schedule is composed of eight academic periods. One period, sixth, is called Advisory and is only 35 minutes long. Sixth grade classes, the cafeteria, library, and main office, along with most electives (band, choir, gyms) are on the first floor. Seventh and eighth grade classrooms are upstairs. Athletic periods bookend the day, 7th grade in the morning and 8th grade in the afternoon.

Classrooms were active and learner-centered. Examples of activities present in Deerfield classrooms included group brainstorming for an upcoming essay, conducting organic analysis for a food science lab, singing math songs, creating a Facebook page on a novel, and writing opinion paragraphs. How can this happen? Mrs. Sharp-Smith reported, "If we have 4 or 5 sections of the same class, they are not necessarily all being taught exactly the same way, depending on the make-up of that particular class."

Hallway behavior was controlled and age appropriate. Students did not run in the hallways and the volume level was at an indoor level. The hallways were generally clear at the

tardy bell each period. In the few occasions of hallway misconduct, it was quickly addressed by a staff member and corrected immediately by the student or students.

All students at Deerfield attend an advisory period, a daily 35 minute class. Twice a week, Advisory class starts off with video announcements, the “Deerfield Connection News,” a news style show hosted by students. The show had several segments including joke of the day, teacher of the week, character reading, and school announcements. These video announcements are written, recorded, and produced by students with the assistance of a teacher. After announcements, the students quietly read or worked on assignments.

Many Advisory class lessons and activities were character education related. For example, “Project Wisdom” announcements are given in Advisory class. Project Wisdom is a national character education company; their licensed program is in 17,000 schools nationally.

The Advisory class is also used for tutoring, study hall, and silent reading. One day a week is “help day” and teachers move around the room checking on all the students. This time is capitalized on for tutoring students as Mr. Simmon-Edgley explains,

There are also some staffing flexibility that the administration has created for teachers during Advisory, that there is ongoing pull out tutoring for those students for 35 minutes a day, this is provided every day of the week, based on certain assessments they have done all along in different subject matters so all of that is still transpiring (meaning today mid-May post STAAR).

Mr. Simmon-Edgley also said,

As the advisory teacher, besides doing character education, you really have that time built in to shepherd along and assist each of those students or meet with them on a one on one basis to try and help them catch up where they need to catch up.

In regular classrooms throughout the day, teachers and students were working together. Classrooms were filled with teachers as presenters or facilitators in the learning process. Examples of teacher actions in the classrooms included presenting new information,

giving instructions, reading, explaining, and re-teaching. Mrs. Everman said, “We don’t give up- You get a student that doesn’t want to work or is a behavior problem, we don’t give up on that kid, we keep plowing away.” Mrs. Holder, describes why she cares below,

My kids ask, “Why do you care?” Well one of the reasons I care is that someday I am going to be so old and decrepit that I cannot make decisions for myself. I want you educated and to make good decisions for me. I have a big stake in your education. Then they’re kind of like...oh, ok.

The staff and administration believe that treating kids right is important. Mr. Simmon-Edgley, said,

I think we are always encouraged to treat these children just like our own children- That you love them like they are yours and each teacher really does- They (teachers) do a good job of bringing them (students) in and taking full responsibility for that child’s success.

Student Achievement for All

Deerfield teachers, staff, and administration are committed to student achievement for all. As a key belief of the campus, opportunities abound for students to make the mark and achieve academic success. Deerfield Middle School partners with students, faculty and families to provide the best education for student. There are multiple opportunities for families to be involved with the school. Several campus initiatives and programs help commit staff to increasing student performance and continuing to close achievement gaps in all areas. Deerfield’s student achievement is carried out through faculty opportunities, school opportunities, and family opportunities.

Faculty Opportunities

Mrs. Easley said, “I think we all believe that if we can string the right words together and be more positive or whatever that we can get through to every kid.”

Core campus departments meet regularly at Deerfield. In weekly meetings, teachers study data, set goals, and discuss strategies aimed at continuously improving student performance. Improving student performance also includes administration of common assessments and analysis of assessment results, flexible and small group instruction in core areas, and targeted tutorials. Tutorial assistance is used by the campus to remediate students who have been unsuccessful on benchmarks and CBAs (common based assessments) and TBAs (teacher based assessments). Tutorials are offered during Advisory class, elective classes, after school, and on Saturdays. (Campus Improvement Plan)

Staff development allows teachers to develop opportunities to hone skills and strategies for all students including at-risk, special education, gifted/talented, pre-advanced placement (PreAP), 504, and ESL students. Instructional resources are provided that build listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills for ELLs (English Language Learners). Teachers are versed in the SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) for making content more comprehensible for ELL students. (Campus Improvement Plan)

Language objectives were a focus in the core teaching areas. Language objectives are objectives focused on skills like reading, writing, and speaking that are in addition to the content objectives. Deerfield provides opportunities for teachers to complete Bilingual/ESL certification through staff development, college courses, and EXCET certification. (Campus Improvement Plan)

An effective mentoring system, supported by the district, helps to train new staff and retain highly qualified teachers. New teachers are paired with mentors who assist in helping new teachers. Mentors are able to fill in the gaps for teachers and provide support in multiple ways. Providing a mentor to a brand new teachers gives a sense of comfort to a new staff member. Mrs. Holder explains, "New teachers come with in with excitement and come with an enthusiasm but they haven't learned what works for them yet and that takes a little while."

Deerfield supports new teachers to the campus. The mentoring system at Deerfield allows all students equal opportunity for success.

In addition, Deerfield is an AVID school. AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. AVID's mission is to close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society. This national curriculum focuses on providing the skills necessary for students to increase school wide learning and performance in order to be successful in college. In the 2011-2012 school year, the program was in 4,700 sites in 900 districts in the United States. In the Deerfield AVID classroom, students were completing individual presentations on a career choice of their interest. (Observation/Campus Improvement Plan)

Counselors assist in other actions in the school including the administration of the Readistep test to 8th graders. The Readistep is a tool to help schools look at College Readiness. Other college readiness actions specifically for 8th graders are career interest inventories, career research projects, and career awareness instruction activities in the classroom. Counselors work with students on early intervention strategies through behavior modification sessions. These sessions attempt to reduce the number of students placed in Discipline Alternative Education Placement (DAEP). Counselors and teachers work on character education and use the Second Step curriculum. Second Step is a nationally recognized anti-bullying program. Counselors work with students in advisory classes or small groups. There are opportunities for students to participate in community and school service projects (Campus Improvement Plan).

School opportunities

Grades were consistently updated on a regular basis at Deerfield. A copy of grades was sent home every week with students. Sending regular grades home alerts family of the progress a student is making; it is a simple act of handing the grade report every Friday. Receiving good grades is recognized in award ceremonies that are held at the end of each

year. Mr. Simmon-Edgley said, "Award ceremonies are held at the end of the year, where grades are recognized as well as the most improved student and the strongest in subject matters." Students who have earned the distinction of being on the A Honor roll for the first five six weeks of school are given an academic plaque.

One particular program, ONSTAAR, was available to Eighth grade students and it is sponsored and run by Eighth grade teachers. This was a catchy name for the program related to the General Motors service available on their vehicle models and a play on the new name of the state assessment in Texas, the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). There are posters in the hallways describing the program and details. Mrs. Henderson described ONSTAR,

8th grade has ONSTAR which is an afterschool time every day of the week except Friday where they can come in afterschool (we have it going on right now) and they can stay from 3:50-4:30-that's the set time, if for some reason they need to stay longer that can be arranged. They can work on homework, or if they just need a quiet place to work before they get home they are welcome to come in there instead, there is a teacher in there who monitors. Also, they can use it for tutoring so if they need help in a specific area (maybe they are working on science, history or whatever), they can get help tutoring from the teacher that is actually in there monitoring.

Purple Pride is the name the school has given the program associated with its At-Risk intervention. Generally, At-Risk students are those that fall into a state of Texas category and are in danger, or at-risk, of dropping out of high school. The Purple Pride program was run by two intervention teachers at Deerfield who have been allotted to the campus using State Compensatory Education funds. The Purple Pride Center provides morning and after school tutorials to help students stay on track so they will be ready for high school. The teachers work long days coming in as early as 7:15 to help tutor kids. This was early, as the first instructional period of the day does not start until 8:40. Usually it was about 8 to 10 kids

early but then by 8:30 it jumped to about 25. In the mornings, many of the students worked on homework and used the time to get prepared for the day. Teachers worked inside rooms to assist struggling learners in a push-in fashion as well as pulling kids to work with them in small groups or individually. According to the teachers, the intervention time has been helpful in many ways, but it has specifically been helpful in math. The students who need content area support in math usually need modeling, extended processing time, and re-teaching. Purple Pride tutoring is also staffed by students sometimes, like students in National Junior Honor Society (Observation/Campus Improvement Plan).

Deerfield students who have been unsuccessful on a state assessment are enrolled into a supplemental support class in place of an elective. These classes are basically double blocking core content classes and known by staff and students as TKO or knockout classes. The technical knockout term for the classes suggests that the students can knock this out and move back to their elective once they make progress on the state assessment. TKO classes are supported with specific resources such as success make labs; the Academic Workout Reading program; and Rtl math and reading teachers (Campus Improvement Plan).

Deerfield administrators and staff strive to make sure all students grades are effectively communicated home. Deerfield's Check and Connect program accomplishes this goal. Check and Connect is carried out by staff and students during Advisory. Each week in advisory students follow the Check and Connect procedure with his or her grades. The teacher, or advisor, helps the student locate and find the student's grade for each class by running off progress reports and then the students are to track their grades on a graph. This skill helps not only with graphing but also allows for student conversations with an adult about his or her grades. Mrs. Everman described the value of Check and Connect relating it to multiple intelligences,

We have so many visual students in this school that that really helps them grow up here...Oh I've dropped the last two weeks, so they may not have realized that that's

their average right now and they will see that every Friday. We will sit down and say this is what you are missing in this teacher's class and I say ok do you have those papers, and they will look and if they don't have them I will give them a note and send them down to go get those papers.

Mrs. Morrison said this about Check and Connect,

Going back to grades, every Friday in Advisory we do something called Check and Connect this year where they take their grade for each core subject that week because we give it to them every Friday and they graph it so they can see what their grade is doing on a weekly basis. I keep it for my kids and pass it back to them each week with the grade slip which has all their grades for each of their classes on it.

Family opportunities

Deerfield parents and community members assist in educating the whole child. The community understands the shared responsibility the stakeholders have in the community. Deerfield Middle School sponsors academic activities for families and their children. Mr. Simmon-Edgley reported on the partnership saying,

There really is not a teacher on staff that has not done cumulative file reviews on all their students. The teacher doesn't just know the students but knows their siblings, knows their parents; so certainly every teacher is very well versed on everything that has transpired within a child in order to form a relationship. So that facilitates the relationship building process with each child and it kind of expedites it, by going through and doing that process, the relationship between teacher and student is very, very strong.

The relationship that is built helps when Deerfield communicates assessment results to parents in an understandable language. This communication goes to parents within 10 days of receipt of the reports. If parents have trouble understanding the assessment report,

they may seek assistance with their child's teacher, or may visit the Deerfield Parent Center. Deerfield has a Parent Center where educational and parenting information can be accessed. Both educational and parenting information can be accessed at the Parent Center. Both the counseling staff and the administration are responsible for advertising and "working" the Parent Center. A parent liaison also assists the team. (Campus Improvement Plan)

The school had an orientation for new and incoming students. This orientation was called Camp Deerfield and was open to new 6th grade students and new to the district 7th and 8th graders. The camp was held before the year began to help students get a feel for the school's actions and procedures. They also have a school messenger system to notify parents of announcements and events. This system is used to improve communication between home and school. Additionally, an open house is held each year for parents to meet their student's teachers, traditionally during Texas Public Schools Week. (Campus Improvement Plan)

Expectations and Celebrations

The belief that all students can learn is also an expectation. Mrs. Everman went on to describe her view of the general expectation saying,

I think the big thing is just the general atmosphere that success is not just an option; it is something we expect. I think it is just the general attitude that the teachers have in our classrooms with our students to motivate them that way.

But the notion is not held by all. Mrs. Synder said,

I have a couple (of students) that I have, it's not going to happen, they have shut down... they're done...I mean nothing, everyday even if they do a little bit of work in class, I get nothing from them but they are still not disrespectful, they're not rude. They are going to play a little of the school game but just not play enough to pass so I think they know that we're there to help them, and are not out for them, we are on their side. I think they know that. They just have gotten themselves in a big hole.

Colt Culture

Deerfield students are not only expected to conduct themselves according to the school district policy, but also to uphold tenants of the “The Deerfield Way.” The Deerfield Way is stressed in the classrooms and described on posters throughout the building. The Deerfield Way poster presents the saying in an acrostic that spells out COLTS. These posters were present in most classrooms. The following are the slogans promoting the Deerfield Way: Show respect, work hard, be responsible, be honest, and live safe. One teacher modified the Deerfield Way to her own classroom to correlate with her classroom rules of success. The idea of the Deerfield Way was reinforced in Mrs. Lansford’s class. The following table summarizes the list of Mrs. Lansford’s rules.

Table 4.4 Mrs. Lansford’s Classroom Rules

Responsible	Respectful	Work Hard	Honest	Safe
Bring supplies	Don’t interrupt teaching	Finish work	No cheating	Walk in class
On time	Colt courtesies	Turn in work	No gum	No horseplay
	Follow directions	No Zeros	No cell phones	

The table shows examples for students so that they can be held accountable for choices and behaviors in the classroom. Other teachers had other rules posted in the room such as “You are expected to be prepared, productive, positive, prompt, and polite.”

Deerfield models the Colt Courtesies of Yes Ma’am, Yes Sir; No Ma’am, No Sir; Please, and Thank you. Corrections in class and in the hallways by teachers relate back to these sayings and courtesies. One veteran teacher, Mrs. Synder reported that

The Deerfield Way is something we put on paper this year...I think it is probably something that from day one we have had. Even in 8 years here, I cannot think of a really bad referral...I mean we have had some fights and stuff. I cannot think of

anything major...they know we are on their side, we don't get up every morning to make their life miserable. Some of them wake up every day to...(group laughter)

Celebrations

Student learning and positive choices are celebrated through a program called Colt Cash. Colt cash rewards students for academic successes. Teachers and administrators give out the play money. Mrs. Easley, an English teacher, described the program like this,

We started something this year called Colt Cash. You can actually purchase pens and stuff or save them up and be principal for a day. If you don't have any zeroes in a three week period, you get one. There is a poster in the hall with your name on it.

Ms. Lindsey, had Lindsey Dollars in her own classroom. Just as the Colt Cash money was used for a school-wide rewards program, the Lindsey Dollars was the classroom rewards program. The prizes were candy and other treats. With the system, students get back test papers and quickly look to see if they received Lindsey Dollars. Student celebrations were all around Deerfield Middle School.

There are other ways success is recognized and celebrated at Deerfield. As a celebration of hard work, students can participate in several celebratory programs at Deerfield including Rest & Relaxation (R&R) Day and Tune in Day. The R&R days are reward days for students who have certain grades and no disciplinary actions against them. They go to the gym to watch a movie and hang out with friends. There are signs posted all over campus with details of R&R Day. Mrs. Morrison saw the value in celebrating and doing something non-academic with her students saying,

I went into it thinking this was a way I could kind of get to know my kids more outside of the classroom- just hanging out talking about the movie, and a lot of teachers bring the kids popcorn or water.

The teachers and students are not afraid of having fun at Deerfield, but their fun

always is couched with a competition or academic reward. “Any excuse they can get to listen to their music, they will take” said one teacher referring to Tune in Day. On Tune in Day, they can bring electronics to listen to music during free time. As Mrs. Easley said, “When you reach the goal there is a lot of celebration...lots of pats on the back.”

It is not only the students who celebrate at Deerfield. Every once in a while, the teachers are treated to an afternoon visit by the principal and what she calls the “Cart of Fun.” Ms. A celebrates with the staff and teachers with surprises with the cart. The principal personally comes around and lets teachers select a treat from a wheeled cart. She brings candy and cokes and the teachers get to pick something off the cart. This treat cart is well-liked by the teachers and it has further influence beyond just a nice treat for teachers. Mrs. Holder reported,

I have seen as a good thing with the Cart of Fun, is that it is good for the kids to see that our boss appreciates us. That she appreciates us enough that she brings us something like this around and because I have had my kids many times comment on that, [saying] that’s pretty cool that she’ll give that to you like that, so it is a good thing. Faculty meetings have an instructional focus and also include a sheet cake. Actually, every faculty meeting includes a sheet cake. As Mrs. Sharp said, “We like cake here.”

Summary

This chapter started with a presentation of the results of the quantitative SAOS surveys administered to the middle school staffs. I described Deerfield Middle School and provided details about teachers in the focus groups. I presented a thick, rich description of Deerfield Middle School highlighting the beliefs, actions, and procedures that are part of the school.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Strong student academic performance is not accidental. Administrators, teachers, staff, and students work hard for academic success to be realized. According to Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a), a school with high academic optimism is one where the faculty believes they can make the academic difference in learning and performance. Prior research has shown the theoretical frame of academic optimism to exist as the collective properties of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006a). The power of these three properties, working together, comes in the ability to overcome socioeconomic status and create a positive academic environment where student achievement is increased. Academic optimism is the lens through which this case study data was analyzed.

The data gathered in this case study were coded by the components of academic optimism, the orienting theoretical framework for this study. The construct of academic optimism has three parts, academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and trust in students and parents. Beliefs were ideas the staff expressed, actions and procedures were the programs and structure found in the school. Other themes that emerged from the data, high expectations, trust in leadership, and celebration are presented.

This analysis is divided into four sections: the Deerfield environment, academic emphasis, collective efficacy, trust in students and parents. In this chapter I will also describe other realities revealed regarding academic optimism in the research process. I argue that academic optimism provides a core focus for school staff to work towards improving the overall academic success of a campus. The ways that academic optimism relates to the Deerfield environment, and the staff beliefs, actions, and procedures are discussed below.

The Deerfield Environment

Deerfield Middle School is only eight years old. Through the analysis of data, it was revealed that the creation of this new school would bring the challenge of educating a large

group of students living in poverty. The school would have more economically disadvantaged students than the other two middle schools in the district at the time. This did not seem to affect the teachers or the principal. Although the environment would be different, all were committed to seeing the success of the school and the students. The staff believed they had the influence to overcome this challenge. This in a sense, laid the foundation for Deerfield's culture. This can do attitude was expressed by Mrs. Morrison who said,

In the beginning, it was we don't want our kids to go to "that" school, we were known as "that" school and that did not make us happy, so we worked really hard not to be "that" school. That has been a good motivator for us. It really has. It has been a good goal to reach.

Deal (1995, p. xii) pointed out in his book on culture and climate that "In today's schools, we desperately need an infusion of passion, purpose and meaning." Deerfield has all three.

Passion

The Deerfield staff believes in the partnership between student, teacher, and parent. This creates an environment that is positive, nurturing and collaborative. The environment at Deerfield Middle School includes teachers who are passionate about learning. Mrs. Henderson said,

Teacher passion has a lot to do with what they are teaching because the administration in this building, I can speak for, has always been very careful, to the best of their ability, to bring in the teachers that really have a passion for their subject matter and I think that makes a really big difference to the students and whether or not they want to learn, they want to grow and participate in what's going on.

Deerfield is a place where teachers and students work hard together. In describing the campus improvement plan, Mr. Simmon-Edgely reported,

There is passion behind the plan, so certainly that we are following scope and sequence but you would not walk into a room and find it cold and sterile, everything

teacher is interjecting their own personality and they are using their own tools to engage the students so it is not automatronic by any standpoint.

Learning and engagement are enhanced because of Deerfield's status as an AVID school.

AVID does not just exist inside the AVID room, but it is a systematic and intentional school-wide emphasis on implementing the AVID strategies of writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading (WICOR). AVID helps all kids grow and realize academic success. AVID flavors the climate of Deerfield and shapes instruction and learning in the classrooms.

Purpose

The purpose of any school is academic learning. The mission statement reads, "It is our mission to create learners who are academically prepared to compete in our changing society while fostering attitudes of respect, responsibility, acceptance of others, service, positive self-esteem, and self-reliance." The unity of staff, student and parents comes out in this statement. It is not the mission of the school but it is a personal mission for them, our mission. This purpose creates a Deerfield family which contributes to the positive school climate. The teachers are Deerfield are not individual miracle workers but a team that works together to make all students successful. Mrs. Henderson said,

We do things outside of school together as teachers and groups and so it is not hard for us to be able to go to one another regardless of the grade difference to get other ideas to help students and want them to be successful.

Meaning

More than academic learning is provided at Deerfield, meaning the school educates the whole child. Deerfield's mission continues with "Through opportunities to achieve academic and personal success in a caring and supportive environment, Deerfield endeavors to develop the whole student- intellectually, emotionally, physically, and socially." It is not just about grades at Deerfield. Learning has meaning to it. Mr. Simmon-Edgely said,

In the academic process they (students) are helping to create goals that are not only meaningful for their respective graduation path and plan but that they own and have ownership in, so it is not one person dictating it, I know they do that outside of special education, they are brought into their educational process and expected to help generate it.

The Deerfield Way helps create a positive culture and climate at the school.

This program focuses on respect and positive behaviors which provide additional meaning to the academic school day. The school had embraced this expectation through posters throughout the school. Some teachers even based their classroom expectations on the major tenants of the Deerfield Way. Most every classroom supported the Deerfield Way through the simple act of putting up the poster. The Deerfield Way was genuine and all-encompassing on the campus.

In addition to working hard, Deerfield's culture values celebration. Celebration is supported by administration and is central to Deerfield Middle School. Before the school's construction was complete, teachers and the principal were already celebrating the start of a new school. Mrs. Everman described the first tour of the school, "She had us come over that Spring, as a group, and take a tour before the building was finished. I mean this building was still being built and we had a tour and we had cake." Cake is a special part of Deerfield. The staff had cake after the first tour of the school and has continued to "eat cake." When I introduced the SAOS to the Deerfield staff at an after school staff meeting, they completed the survey at the end of the meeting and then had cake. The school celebrates with cake, whether it is a birthday party or a special event, Deerfield Middle never shies away from a celebration. There are other ways to celebrate successes like how Mrs. Easley described a simple goal attainment, "Along the same token, we you reach the goal there is a lot of celebration . . . lots of pats on the back." Mrs. Sharp says, "I have seen a lot of high fives. I mean literally you walk by a class and you see a teacher high fiving a kid, 'Great, you did it!' 'Great job.' Simple things like

that.” Sometimes the celebration is even non-verbal like in this example given by Mrs. Henderson,

Sometimes I will be walking around the room looking as they are working, whether it is independent or group work and a lot of times I will have a little post it note pad in my hand and so from time to time I will write a little note because I don't want to break their concentration from time to time. I will just write a big smiley face and just lay it on their desk as I walk by and I mean it is a post it note and you have to keep replenishing your post it notes but you know really from my opinion that is a cheap thing to do just to make them smile and think that they are doing well and they are able plod through whatever it is they are having trouble with or thinking through or hashing through.

In addition, the school celebrates learning with award ceremonies and posting of A Honor rolls. As previously described, the entry of the school is adorned with academic accolades. In a sense, this is celebratory as well. Overall, Deerfield is proud of what they have done, what they are doing and what they will do. All of this creates a positive school climate and culture.

How does Deerfield Middle School emphasize academics?

A key component of academic optimism is the emphasis of academics, often called academic emphasis or academic press. According to Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy (2000), schools that show academic emphasis have high and attainable goals for all students and have a push for academic achievement. Other qualifiers showing academic emphasis have included achievable goals, respect for academic accomplishments, and cooperative student work (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). Many of the day to day actions of the Deerfield staff relate to academic emphasis and correspond with many of the teachers' beliefs, actions and procedures.

High achievable academic goals. The academic success goal chart shows visitors and students that Deerfield is proud of its accomplishments as a school. The key to this chart is that

it is visual, large, and prominently displayed. It serves as a reminder to students of why they are walking in the door each day. The chart encourages students with attainable academic goals. Each grade level academic goal allows the administration, teachers, and students to monitor the status of the grade level and the entire school as a whole. The goal chart gives quick feedback on whether the students are moving up or down. With the goal chart, there is a sense of pressure to perform and achieve. This healthy feeling is supported as one of Marzano's school level factors affecting school achievement. Marzano (2003) contends the pressure to achieve is one of the eight school level factors that affect school achievement.

Academic goals are stressed at Deerfield. The CIP stresses that "By May 2012, 80% of all students and each student group will pass all portions of the state assessment or make at least a 5% gain. The campus will meet AYP in every area measured." The goals are realistic and attainable.

Learning environment is orderly and serious. All individuals in the community work towards giving students what they need in a calm, orderly, and supportive environment. Deerfield's students are orderly and serious, which is a component of academic emphasis. Examples like students following directions of administrators at morning dismissal, walking and maintaining appropriate behavior in the hallways, and getting to class on time all show orderly and serious behaviors. Mrs. Lancaster-Ali says, "Teachers, staff and administration expect us to take what we teach seriously. No matter how it is done, but the way we do it we are serious that the kids are going to learn."

Deerfield Middle School is serious about academics. Deerfield classrooms are academically focused on learning. Classroom observations regularly showed students independently and cooperatively working on lessons and constructing learning. It was apparent that academics were a priority with the teachers and administrators. On-task students and learner-centered classrooms emphasized learning as goal number one at the school. When students and teachers were supposed to be working, they were. Students were attentive to the

lesson or engaged in meaningful work from bell to bell. Lezotte's (1991) Correlates of Effective Schools stress the importance of student time on task. Student time on task is maximized at Deerfield. Academically successful schools take advantage of time allotted in each day. Deerfield shows that this is important and it is highly valued at the school.

Students respect academic achievement. Student achievement at Deerfield is recognized through six weeks academic awards and end of the year academic ceremonies. Students earning A honor roll status are recognized through posted lists in the hallways. End of the year academic ceremonies for each grade level give acknowledgment to the academic success of students. Whether a teacher is recognizing the top performer or the most improved student, Award Days show the entire school community the importance that Deerfield places on academics. Deerfield academics are emphasized in classrooms throughout the building and in multiple systematic and intentional interventions and supports.

Although the school emphasizes academics in the classrooms, built in celebratory and reward days are the "official" days where students and teachers can rest and relax for a minute. These celebratory days are important to Deerfield staff and students because students are respected for their academic achievement. Students respect academic achievement. Given that I did not directly talk with students, I cannot report on specific ways students felt respected academically.

Students are motivated to work hard. In addition to the learning taking place in traditional periods, the Deerfield day is organized with an Advisory class, a class where students work hard with other students and their teacher. This built in time is critical for the overall academic success of students at Deerfield. The Advisory class is sixth period which is late enough in the day so that students have been to the majority of their classes. Many regular and on-going tutorial appointments are kept in Advisory class. The Advisory period allows for embedded time for student extra assistance and re-teaching. The Advisory class is important to student academic success because the students and teacher are working together towards a

common goal. Many procedures are in place so that students work hard but again since this research did not involve students, it was difficult to truly get at what students feel about motivation and working hard.

At Deerfield, the belief is that all students can learn despite economic concerns. Mrs. Everman said, "We have a disadvantaged population but we just feel like these kids can hit the moon you know." Students in poverty often lack adult role models. The Advisory class gives time so that Deerfield Middle School teachers can address concerns with a small group of students. Many students, including students in poverty, need adult mentors to talk about things like character, how to study, and proper behavior. This is accomplished through the Advisory class at Deerfield.

In Advisory class, the Check and Connect program is implemented. The procedure motivates students to track their grades, report on their grades, and predict future grades. Check and Connect directly relates to the Effective Correlate of frequent monitoring of student progress. What is interesting is that this monitoring is led by the student and guided by the Advisory teacher. With the assistance of the advisory teacher, each student graphs his or her grades each week. This weekly action helps promote a healthy school environment and promotes responsible home-school interactions. The Check and Connect procedure puts an emphasis on grades and helps students maintain academic focus. Mrs. Lindsey-Allen said this about Check and Connect, "I get to see their grades, they get to see their grades, and we can go pull up at that point, what are you missing." It is also important for students who do not have support at home to have this adult that cares about them academically. Academics is so important at Deerfield that every week, students and teachers work together to complete the check. Students can carry this skill into high school and college and know how to regularly check on their progress.

TKO classes are doubled blocked reading and math classes. According to Mr. Simmon-Edgley, "If a child is unsuccessful on a state assessment they relinquish an elective

period and are put in another period of that subject for remediation.” These classes emphasize academic support and give additional instruction to students who need it. TKO classes offer differentiated instruction since Deerfield teachers recognize the importance of identifying struggling learners and then reaching out to them in different ways. Deerfield teachers believe that education is not one size fits all. Adding instructional time for reading and math is a characteristic identified by the Education Trust (1999) for higher performing high poverty schools. Deerfield is meeting this characteristic with the TKO classes and students are achieving despite their socioeconomic status.

The culture of Deerfield rewards hard work. Various reward programs are built into Deerfield’s school culture to keep students motivated to work hard academically. Celebration incentives are important to students. The campus is deliberate about providing opportunities for students to celebrate good behavior and good grades. R & R days, Tune in days, and Colt Cash are all incentive programs that students work toward achieving. These programs and events make school a positive place to be for kids. These incentives build in a component necessary for students in poverty who are not always rewarded for doing good in school. The administration and staff support all incentive programs to help bring academic success to students and the entire school. Cooperation is one of Marzano’s factors that affect school achievement. Incentive programs require cooperation. Marzano (2003) also identified home atmosphere as a factor which affects individual student achievement. Deerfield’s incentives attempt to overcome the challenges of some students’ poor home atmosphere. Deerfield’s incentives attempt to overcome this challenge by offering rewards for doing good academically and behaviorally. The administration and staff understand school is not about learning every single minute; the campus takes moments of time to celebrate and reflect on successes.

The Principal’s role in emphasizing academics. Emphasizing academics starts at the top at Deerfield. Deerfield leadership stresses academics and its impact on the overall campus. According to Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004), “Leadership is

second only to teaching among all school related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5).

Goals. Deerfield leadership requires lesson plans to be turned in a week ahead of time. This requirement by the principal is a high standard for teachers. The teachers need to know what they are doing and where they are headed in a unit of study in order to stay a full week ahead in planning. The lesson plans must be submitted early, but the teachers feel supported in creating their lessons. Mrs. Everman said, “The administration, they really support us in having that leeway to teach what we feel is the best way to hit the standards that we teach.” In department meeting teachers talk about lessons and student learning. Mr. Simmon-Edgley said,

Through lesson plan creation and sharing those plans and sharing things that worked well for that particular day, or that particular week, and things that didn’t, they are free to share their successes and failures with one another here, so that helps us make sure we are replicating what needs to be replicated instead of what doesn’t.

Student achievement is the first priority of the principal. Student achievement is a part of every campus decision. Ms. A considers it a personal responsibility to check on student academics. Mrs. Synder reported, “Ms. A will see them at football games and she’ll say, hey I pulled your grades up today and you are failing such and such and they are like wait a minute . . . “That’s right I can still get your grades,” so she keeps tabs on them.”

Using Leithwood and Montgomery’s (1986) principal profile, Mrs. A would qualify as a systematic problem solver. The principal’s concern with the academic achievement of the school is evident the minute one walks in the door. In addition, the principal pays attention to the environment and stay in touch with her students through Colt Crew. Mrs. Everman described the Colt Crew as follows,

I know this year, our principal has done this in 6th so I am sure she has in 7th and 8th, she has kind of like a group of students in each grade level that she has pulled in a

different times during the year to kind of talk about what are some things that you like to see on this campus.

Colt Crew values the students' voices and concerns. Ms. A also supports various school community connections and methods to have parents feel connected and involved in the school.

How does Deerfield Middle School demonstrate collective efficacy?

Collective efficacy is the perceived judgment of a school staff, as a whole, to move and influence students as a team. Bandura (1993) found that understanding of staff members collective power increased achievement.

The staff at Deerfield Middle School has a sense of collective efficacy. Since collective efficacy is itself a belief, it was most identified through teacher comments in focus groups. Actions and procedures helped support collective efficacy.

Belief in high expectations for students. Expectations are central to the mission and day to day operations of Deerfield. The school provides a challenging environment for students. In addition to teacher high expectations, the principal holds students accountable. When it comes to earning your way, Mrs. Synder said,

It is sort of expected. They (the students) pretty much know that she (the principal) is not going to bump you up just because you attended the grade. It doesn't mean you go to the next one (grade).

The principal champions high expectations and then the teachers reinforce it. The climate of high expectations pairs well with the idea of collective efficacy and that the teachers can influence students to achieve.

The culture of the school stresses high expectations. High expectations of students relate to Edmonds (1979) common effective school characteristics and Lezotte's (1991) Seven Correlates of Effective Schools. There is the expectation that students complete work at Deerfield. In speaking on doing the work and the expectation to complete the work, Mrs.

Everman reported, "It is not an option. In 6th grade we have a late work policy that we use and constant reminders, they lose certain points per day up to a certain amount." Mrs. Sharp said,

Even if they have lost all those points and they are not going to get credit, they are still required to do it because they have to learn the concept. That is the whole point. So you are going to learn it one way or the other, and that usually tends to make some of them do their work.

Belief that all students can learn and succeed. Focus group teachers reported the belief that all students can learn. It is the teachers at Deerfield that help make learning for all a reality. This core belief is evidence of collective efficacy. When teachers believe all students can achieve, amazing things can occur. Students at Deerfield are expected to do their best and perform. Learning is expected, it is not an option. High expectations are key at Deerfield. As Mrs. Sharp says,

Even if they have lost all those points and they are not going to get credit, they are still required to do it because they have to learn the concept, that is the whole point so you are going to learn it one way or the other, and that usually tends to make some of them do their work.

Mrs. Synder reported,

We have the three A's and Academics is the first one and so we try pump the kids up, it's great you're playing football/basketball but your number one job here today is to get an education.

Focus group respondents reported that students were not allowed to just fail or not work. This belief relates to collective efficacy. The teachers don't want one student to fall behind. The whole group must progress. Deerfield teachers believe that the students, along with support from teachers and parents, can attain academic success. The teachers say, the bold beliefs of Deerfield staff, such as closing the achievement gap and ensuring academic

achievements at high levels, cannot be achieved by teachers working alone and in isolation- it is and must be a collective group effort.

Belief in and support of a "we can" attitude. Overall, teachers had positive views of their school and the ability of the school to influence and teach students. The teachers supported a "we can, we will" attitude which supports the idea of collective efficacy. The staff at Deerfield understands the Deerfield mission statement "to develop the maximum potential of all students in a challenging atmosphere filled with high expectations for all and opportunities for success." Teachers at Deerfield do not give up on students; they keep on working with them. When teachers believe in students and provide multiple academic support venues, such as Advisory class Purple Pride, success is more easily realized. The belief that all students should learn is emphasized and attacked in a unified method at Deerfield. Teachers believe that giving up is not really an option and seek multiple pathways for success so that success is achievable.

How does Deerfield Middle School demonstrate trust in students and parents?

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) define trust as a willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that that party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open. Hoy (2002) showed that trust is correlated with student achievement. Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006a) believe that trust in students and parents act together as one facet of academic optimism.

Benevolence. According to Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) benevolence deals with "the confidence that one's well-being or something one cares about will be protected by the trusted person or group" (p. 187). To this end, teachers and students develop relationships. Mrs. Lancaster-Ali said,

I think having a personal relationship with the child is important so each child wants to work with you and they want your approval. They want to please you and they don't want to let you down, or that kind of thing, and they are going to seek you out if they have problems. They are going to seek you out and ask for help.

Teachers trust students who believe this. Likewise, students trust teachers like Mrs. Lancaster-Ali when they come to them for assistance with problems.

In classrooms, examples of trust were rare except for a math room where the teacher was singing math songs to complete problems. All students sang a song which told the steps to solving the problem. The students had to have trust with their math teacher that they would not be embarrassed to sing. She herself was singing and it was safe to sing in class. One student would not sing with the class but finally participated after being asked to hang back after the bell to dismiss the class. She participated in a private singing session before the next class. In one science classroom, the teacher called for students to move to their family groups. The groups in this class went by this special name. The word family relates to trust. You trust members of your family just like you should trust members of your family group. A family group is different and carries more responsibility.

At Deerfield benevolent trust is built with teachers, but especially with the Advisory teacher. Student success is enhanced by trust and the positive relationship with the Advisory teacher. The Advisory teachers act as a connection to other teachers for many students. Trust is built and maintained through Advisory teachers because students know that the teacher is working to help students. The Advisory class serves as a time for students to have personal attention from a teacher.

Reliability. Reliability is key in building trust. When an organization, such as a school, exhibits this face of trust, students count on the system and its teachers to provide assistance. The Deerfield Way of respect, hard work, responsibility, and honesty builds trust at the school between student and teacher. Having a school-wide system in place is predictable for students. Clear goals are outlined and examples are given that help students guide students to appropriate behaviors. Students are counted on to follow the general standards and have been given “the rules” up front. Students can move about the school knowing and trusting that if they

follow the Deerfield Way, they will not get “in trouble.” The Deerfield Way expectation trusts that students do what is right. Mrs. Easley said,

As 8th grade teachers we kind of have an advantage, because we know the ones we really need to keep up with and I think they know that we trust them more than the average teacher at another school might.

Competency. The competent facet of trust involves the situation when someone is dependent on another and his or her level of skill. Teachers at Deerfield are seen as competent professionals. Many teachers have been at Deerfield for multiple years so they know the students’ families and have taught older brothers and sisters. Building and maintaining trust takes time, but Mrs. Easley says,

The parents tend to believe and give support. That way, if a kid goes home, especially if the teacher’s had a sibling and says this teacher is mean to me, the parent says “no, I know them, I have talked to that teacher.

Deerfield has the capacity to keep building trust over time with a consistent staff that has little turn over.

Additionally, teachers rely on others for help including the help of administrators. An assistant principal reported that even late in the year, she had just called in six sets of parents the prior week. The conferences were focused on improving student behaviors in the classrooms. Communication between parents, students, and teachers helps build trust. The discipline concerns were severe enough to warrant phone calls and conferences. The families trust the principal as a competent partner and feel they are part of the team that is working to bring out the best in their children.

Honesty. Honesty relates to character. Honesty helps provide for trust. The Check and Connect weekly update of grades helps build trust on campus by promoting a healthy relationship with an adult. Students are being questioned each week about their grades, so they must be open and honest about their academic progress. Students, teachers and parents

can begin to work on what is important each week since reports come out regularly. This program relates to the honesty facet of trust. With the Check and Connect procedure in place, students are always updated on their progress in school. Mrs. Easley said, "This is the time in advisory when you can say, 'What is going on in ...?' 'Do you have a test you need to make up...?' 'How can I help you?' 'How can you fix it?' Students and teachers must be honest with each other. Students must be honest with their parents. This consistent feedback with Deerfield families opens the door for the development honest relationships built on trust.

Openness. "Openness is the extent to which relevant information is not withheld; it is a process by which individuals make themselves vulnerable by sharing information with others." (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 188) Check and Connect provides for open trust. The honest sharing of information that is shared openly helps make Deerfield a school that has trust in students and parents.

Deerfield's partnership between school and family builds trust in more ways than Check and Connect. The campus encourages parental involvement with school. Mrs. Synder said this about trusting parents, "I think you almost have to until you have a reason not to. I think you are setting yourself up if you don't." Actions and procedures, such as the school orientation, the parent center, and the school messenger system help to build trust between home and school. The school and the community are open with each other. Procedures such as these are usefulness interchanges which help the school communicate with parents. Trust in students and parents act as one unified identity and rely on regular and appropriate communication between student, teacher, and parent.

Trust is something that the teachers and administrators at Deerfield work hard to achieve and maintain. On the academic success goals chart at the front of the school, the eighth grade had never attained their goal of 90% on the class average. This was posted, not hidden, for all to see. Deerfield was going to report the reality, not all grade levels were meeting their goals. This builds trust through the open facet of trust. When trust is developed it is easier

for students to be academically successful since the students, teachers, and parents are all working together. The Deerfield belief that all students can learn is an example itself of trust. Teachers expect and trust that students will learn. With academic optimism, students, parents and teachers work together and trust one another.

What other realities about academic optimism and high achieving/high poverty schools are revealed?

Deerfield Middle School achieves its academic success in multiple ways. The administration and teachers support the components of academic optimism in many of the school's programs, actions, and procedures but some of what is done at Deerfield is outside the realm of academic optimism. These parts of the Deerfield environment, beyond academic optimism will be reviewed as other realities and reported below.

Token economy. The token economy, Colt Cash program, is another way Deerfield emphasizes academics. Students who complete work, score well on quizzes and tests, and pass classes are rewarded with Colt Cash. This token economy helps spark academic emphasis in some students. Even middle school students like to earn prizes and "cash" to spend on items such as candy and school supplies. It is an inexpensive way for the school to promote good grades. Colt Cash can also be redeemed for other items, such as being the Principal for a Day. Deerfield provides students additional means to get school supplies as the year progresses which is important in a school that serves students in poverty. Like many schools in the United States today, the Deerfield faculty cannot count on all the students to have the proper supplies throughout the course of the school year. The Colt Cash reward program supports the academic needs of students in poverty with simple yet necessary incentives. These school wide actions motivate students to produce.

Study center. ONSTAAR focuses on academics by providing the opportunity for students additional study time. The program is available for all eighth grade students. ONSTAAR is an after school study time where students are given the opportunity to complete

academic studies four days a week. During the program, teachers are available to tutor students if assistance is needed. The program is supported by eighth grade teachers who provide the service after their regular work day is complete. The team that runs ONSTAAR gets no additional compensation and rotates through covering the duty each week. The ONSTAAR program seems simple enough, extra time for eighth grade students to get additional academic help, but not all schools offer this support outside the school day. In addition to getting academic help, many of the eighth grade students who participate in ONSTAAR just need a quiet place to study. The student in poverty does not always have a quiet and safe place to study. ONSTAAR serves this need for many eighth grade students, and promotes the development of study skills.

Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Another reality regarding academic optimism at Deerfield is Purple Pride, the school's RTI support model. What is unique about Deerfield is the assignment and prioritization of two full time teachers as intervention, "Purple Pride" teachers. Students could see a negative connotation of going to an intervention teacher, where Purple Pride is seen favorably. The very name of the RTI program, Purple Pride, portrays to students it is okay to need help, and that there are teachers who can help. You do not have to be at-risk to get help because Purple Pride teachers assist all struggling students. This gives regular education teachers an additional support person to carry out tiered interventions in the classroom or students can be pulled out when necessary.

Not all districts and campuses are afforded this type of personnel support to carry out RTI and remediation on a campus. The intervention teachers of Purple Pride are invaluable to the staff at Deerfield and the academic success of students. With this model, Deerfield students showing critical needs consistently get re-teaching and additional academic support. The reality of two full-time intervention teachers on a middle school campus is rare. The unique job responsibilities for Purple Pride teachers offer something different to the students at Deerfield. The support the Purple Pride teachers give students is evidence of a collaborative effort of the

staff. The general education teacher has the support network to make all students successful. This support also correlates with another characteristic of high performing/high poverty schools, a comprehensive monitoring system that helps students before they fall behind. Deerfield teachers who identify and work with struggling students have the additional resource of the Purple Pride teachers to assist in remediation. The team approach of RTI helps build the idea of collective efficacy at Deerfield. Again, it is the collective effort of the entire Deerfield staff to execute the school's mission and make students successful.

Consistent leadership. Another reality revealed regarding academic optimism and academic success is that the Deerfield administration has remained the same for the entire eight year history of the school. Could consistency in the leadership at Deerfield have led to increases in student achievement? It cannot be fully known how much the constant leadership team in place affects the overall academic performance of the entire campus. The principal held the position as the school was being built and hired all the teachers for the school. Both assistant principals have been in their positions for the life of the school as well. The entire administrative team knows the staff and students at Deerfield. They have a history together, as a team, and lead a staff with low turnover. In the focus group interview, Mrs. Synder said, "If you look at that picture up there, there are a lot of the same people, with that we opened with 8 years ago. There is very little turn over." The consistent leadership team creates a team and family environment at Deerfield.

Teachers reported that the school's two assistant principals seem to complement each other, each one knows his or her strengths and weaknesses. One assistant principal is male and one is female. The consistent leadership helps the procedural functions and actions of the school. Administration can spend more time on student achievement and student learning. School actions and procedures are easily fine-tuned each year by a group that understands and knows the teachers and students in their building. In addition to the consistency of the leadership team, teachers trust the team as well.

Teachers trust in leadership. Teachers expressed trust in the principal and overall administrative team. In speaking of what makes Deerfield special, teachers said, “It starts with, Ms. A.,” and “It’s the lady on the other side of this wall right here.” (Ms. A was in her office which was next to the conference room where the focus group was held.) In the opinion of several teachers, the principal is the hardest worker in the building and would not ask the teachers to do anything that she would not do herself. Mrs. Easley reported, “The administrators are very supportive and they know what they are looking for and they help you reach that goal. And they expect you to reach that goal.” Support and trust were seen by one teacher with discipline concerns from her classroom. Mrs. Morrison reported,

They (administrators) also know that if we send a kid to the office we have pretty much had it with them, if they go down, we don’t even get questioned. You have done something and sometimes you don’t even have to do a referral you can say can you talk to this young man and it will make a big difference.

There is a trust between the principals and teachers when teachers are supported and students are respected. In this example, the administrator trusts that the teacher has done all things possible in her power and now the teacher is in need of help. Not all school teams operate this way.

Summary

This chapter used the new construct of academic optimism as the theoretical frame to examine Deerfield Middle School’s academic success. Individuals’ beliefs, as well as school actions and procedures were examined and related to the three parts of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in students and parents. The findings showed that components of academic optimism were present at Deerfield. Data was also related to other ideas presented in the literature review including school environment, instructional leadership, and poverty. The chapter also addressed some other realities about

academic optimism- a token economy, Colt Cash; a dedicated after school study center, ONSTAAR; an RTI support model, Purple Pride; and a consistent and trusted leadership team.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND COMMENTARY

Under No Child Left Behind and the current national agendas of college readiness, closing the achievement gap, and preparing students for jobs of the 21st century, student academic success continues to be a goal. There are no clear cut methods to guarantee student success. Understanding how and why individuals in an academically achieving and optimistic middle school create student academic success was the focus for this study.

This chapter is organized into four sections, summary, conclusions, recommendations and implications, and commentary. The summary section details the purpose, data needs, data sources, and data collection methods that were necessary for the study. This section also describes the analysis and findings of this study. Conclusions, the synthesis of the entire study, are then reported. The chapter concludes with recommendations and implications, and a commentary. In this section, I offer my final thoughts on academic success, academic optimism and the entire project.

Summary of the Study

This study was conducted at three middle schools during the Spring of 2012. The study's purpose was to understand how individuals in an academically optimistic and academically achieving middle school create student academic success. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to collect data from staff of one lower SES, academically achieving middle school.

To achieve my purpose, the following questions were used to focus the study:

1. What beliefs, actions, and procedures are in place in a high achieving/high poverty school?
2. In what ways do beliefs, actions, and procedures support academic optimism in an academically achieving school?
3. What other realities about academic success, academic optimism and high

achieving/high poverty schools are revealed in the research?

4. How useful (applicable/helpful/relevant) are the tenants of academic optimism in understanding academic success?

Three Texas public middle schools with high Texas accountability ratings served as data sources. The school with the highest academic optimism score, (School Academic Optimism Scale (SAOS)), was selected as an interview and observation site.

All data collection strategies attempted to triangulate data to make findings more credible.

Data collection and analysis were interactive and ongoing. The following findings emerged:

1. Staff beliefs, actions, and procedures guide the academically successful school and are related to academic optimism.

2. The academically successful school emphasizes academics in the classroom and through multiple school wide programs and initiatives.

3. The academically successful school staff believes in student success and holds high expectations for students. Teachers believe that they, as a staff, can effectively help all students learn and progress.

4. The academically successful school staff trusts students and parents. Trust is built and maintained through involvement and communication.

5. The academically successful school has a positive school environment with multiple methods to celebrate successes.

6. The academically successful school has an effective instructional leader committed to the success of all students.

In sum, Deerfield Middle School exemplifies academic success. Active classrooms support the academic emphasis of teachers and the expectations of the principals. Through the success goals chart, the Deerfield campus is reminded of the importance that academics plays. Multiple campus interventions, all emphasizing academics, allow students to find success. The principal plays an active role in helping the campus maintain its academic emphasis.

The beliefs that all students can be successful with high expectations are critical to the success of Deerfield students. High expectations are present among the principals and teachers at Deerfield. With a “we can” attitude, teachers believe in their collective effort to achieve student learning. Teachers do not give up on students and this creates the environment where there is a sense of collective efficacy.

Teachers at Deerfield trust students and parents. This trust is built with students through the Advisory teacher, Deerfield Way character and behavior rules, and frequent communication. The beliefs concerning trust help create Deerfield’s positive school environment. School administration supports staff and students at Deerfield. Although Ms. A holds high expectations for students and teachers, both groups are rewarded for working hard through various celebrations.

What beliefs, actions, and procedures are in place in a high achieving/high poverty school?

Individuals’ beliefs are important to moving an organization forward. At Deerfield there is a belief that all students can learn. A part of the CIP reads, “Our campus is committed to increasing student performance and continuing to close achievement gaps in all areas.” Beliefs also centered around student focused decisions and student achievement for all.

Actions were defined in this study as the behaviors that students and staff complete and do on campus. Functions and actions at schools happen all the time. The development of the Colt Culture through implementation of the Deerfield Way is an important action the school team implements. Colt Courtesies are actions that stem from implementation of the Deerfield Way. The Deerfield Way is instrumental in the day to day function of the school.

Regular campus departmental meetings and focused staff development are actions that the school undertakes. These actions relate to student improvement back to the CIP. Other actions the school included were academic recognitions, the academic success chart, Deerfield’s Parent Center, and the “Cart of Fun.”

Procedures are the operational functions of the school, or in other words, the programs that make the school special and unique. I looked at procedures as more complex than just actions. Procedures mirror the different programs at Deerfield. Like any middle school, procedures and operational programs are abundant at Deerfield. Procedures included interventions like TKO classes, Colt Cash program, Camp Deerfield, Advisory class, Purple Pride, ONSTAAR, Check and Connect, R & R Day, and Tune in Day.

In what ways to beliefs, actions, and procedures support academic optimism in an academically achieving school?

Many of the beliefs, actions, and procedures at Deerfield support academic optimism. Characteristics of academic emphasis include the categories of high and achievable goals, the learning environment is orderly and serious, respect for academic achievement, and students are motivated to work hard. At Deerfield achievable goals are set for students and the academic success goal chart is used by the staff and students. Deerfield teachers believe in orderly and serious education and students comply by working hard. Students respect academic achievement in academic ceremonies and follow the Deerfield Way. Students are motivated by regularly updating grades with their Advisory teacher using the Check and Connect procedure. TKO students are motivated to work hard to remediate their deficiencies and return to their elective of choice.

The cognitive concept of collective efficacy is supported with the staff beliefs of high expectations, all students can succeed, and in the “we can” spirit of the building. Teachers don’t give up on students and learning is tackled in various ways to meet student needs. With various academic support interventions, the spirit of collective efficacy is realized.

Generally teachers at Deerfield trust students and parents. Advisory teachers nurture trust between staff and students. Mutual respect outlined in the Deerfield Way helps teachers trust students to behave appropriately at school. Various communication procedures such as Check and Connect and the Parent Center help open communication and build trust. Many

Deerfield teachers have been at the school for a while and they help build the partnership between student, teacher and parent. In this partnership, trust flourishes.

What other realities about academic optimism and high achieving/high poverty schools are revealed?

Several other realities were revealed during this research that did not support the theory and construct of academic optimism. Deerfield's token economy system, Colt Cash, provided something different for students. Students earned "cash" by demonstrating academic achievement or improvement. Colt Cash motivated students to complete tasks, earn good grades, and behave appropriately. The system allowed students to feel like they were getting paid for working hard. Students turned in the cash for rewards that they felt were beneficial to them. Additionally, the system rewarded students for proper behavior. A student might never know when he or she might earn Colt Cash from a teacher or staff member. A good deed or an act of exceptional behavior, such as modeling a Colt Courtesy or following the Deerfield Way could earn a student an unexpected reward. Some students were rewarded for all As while other students were rewarded for passing all classes. This system helped all different kinds of students by motivating them in individual ways with different kinds and levels of rewards.

The dedicated study center, ONSTAAR, was another reality revealed at Deerfield. ONSTAAR provided an after school time that was academically focused for students. The design was to help make students life easier by getting homework done before they got home. Not all middle schools have this type of support for students. There is a need for students to have quiet and appropriate study areas and Deerfield teachers provide this for the students and parents. ONSTAAR was positively publicized on campus. This intervention most helped the students without adequate study environments at home. Available for the entire school year, ONSTAAR kept students focused on what is important, academic success.

Likewise the RTI model, Purple Pride, is unique. With two full-time intervention teachers, student remediation and support becomes a joint venture. Teachers do not feel like

they are on an island all alone with near impossible odds to find rescue. In schools serving students in poverty, academic interventions like Purple Pride helps students become successful academically.

Lastly, Deerfield's consistent and trusted leadership team plays a role in the academic success of Deerfield students. Since the leadership team knows the whole building, students and staff, and also the community, the whole Deerfield community benefits. In its relative short eight year existence, the Deerfield Middle School's administrative team has remained the same. This situation creates significant advantage towards improving the campus environment. The longevity of the leadership team and the school atmosphere retains Deerfield staff and helps create a sense of trust in their school leaders.

Conclusions

Based on the problem, literature review, and data analysis, the results of this study lead to five main conclusions.

1. Academic optimism is a useful theoretical framework for understanding school academic performance in high poverty schools.

Academic optimism provides additional insight into understanding the academic success of Deerfield Middle School. Academic optimism is helpful because it offers a construct for student academic success. Principals and teachers can look at academic optimism as one way towards reaching the goal of academic success for students. Deerfield is partially successful because of active classroom instruction and various academic support networks and programs. These are all beneficial for the learning community, especially students in poverty. This academic emphasis alone, however, does not ensure success for students. The construct of academic optimism provides more than a strong academic focus, but a useful method to achieve student academic success. Academic emphasis, coupled with the spirit of collective efficacy and the idea of faculty trust in students and parents are one answer to achieving

academic success because these insights are brought into the powerful life, climate and culture of a successful school.

Academic optimism provides a framework for understanding academic success. The construct helps school leaders and teachers think about, plan on and execute ideas centered around academic optimism. Many students, including those in poverty, need an optimistic learning environment to be successful. Students need exposure to different challenges and successes in order to be optimistic about discovering their potential. Specifically, at Deerfield, the middle school years serve as an important foundation for future learning and success. When an optimistic learning environment is nurtured, the benefits can stretch beyond the middle school years and help students in high school and beyond.

2. Although academic optimism provides a theoretical frame in helping schools attain academic success, the construct has flaws.

The greatest inadequacy of academic optimism in understanding academic success was that the components of academic optimism were it difficult to directly see, measure, and understand. It is difficult to get at concepts such trust and optimism. It is hard to see and measure collective efficacy and trust in students and parents. These cognitive and affective components of academic optimism are also challenging to shape and mold. Collective efficacy is a group level dynamic that affects all aspects of the school yet this cognitive understanding is difficult to identify and label. Since collective efficacy and trust are both ideas, there were fewer visible pieces of evidence to support their influence at Deerfield. On the other hand, programs that stress academic emphasis are tangible and were more easily seen and identified on campus. Unlike the actions of academic emphasis, trust in students and parents is cultivated through many avenues. Trust cannot be achieved from simple directives such as the principal telling teachers to “trust” students and parents.

3. Staff beliefs, actions, and procedures that relate to academic optimism, affect the overall school environment.

Beliefs, actions, and procedures at Deerfield fit together and unify the school.

Beliefs held by the staff affirm and shape the actions that take place in the school. School actions, coupled with staff beliefs, then guide the school procedures and shape the day to day functions of the school. At Deerfield, these day to day functions create a positive school-wide culture. School procedures work to support students with specific needs and in special programs. Specially designed programs address critical issues and areas which in turn do not allow for students to fall through the cracks.

All three, beliefs, actions, and procedures, help make Deerfield successful. It is important for school personnel to think about their beliefs. The beliefs are the driving force behind the actions and choices individuals make as part of the school team. Not all schools have teachers who believe like the teachers at Deerfield. Teacher beliefs affect Organizational Citizenship Behaviors, the voluntary actions teachers engage in to help students. Deerfield teachers stay after school on a regular basis to tutor kids who need it. Most schools do not have designed programs to support students like Deerfield has. I contend that the staff at schools that do not truly believe in the success of students will not voluntarily create an after school program such as ONSTAAR without additional pay. Not only should beliefs be at the center of what the school does, but the beliefs should drive the actions and procedures. School actions and procedures can only be as good as the ideas and beliefs behind them. Academically successful schools constantly focus on students and this focus can be achieved by clear beliefs, linked actions, and intentional procedures. Collective efficacy and trust work through school environments to creating a healthy climate and positive culture that make all the parts of academic optimism come to reality. A campus focus on academic optimism is one recipe for a successful school environment.

4. School staff, especially school leadership, should deliberately emphasize academic optimism to promote student success.

Overall, the idea of academic optimism gives an optimistic sense of the possible for schools (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006a). Academic optimism provides school leaders a theory to use to increase student performance on campus. Even though academic optimism has merit, becoming the reality is the challenge. When students are motivated to work hard, high achievable academic goals are set, students respect academic achievement and the learning environment is orderly and serious, then academic emphasis is present on a campus. Having academic emphasis alone is not enough though since it is through collective efficacy and trust in students that academic emphasis is even possible. School staff are constantly looking for ways to help students overcome obstacles, including many times students from poverty. Academic optimism is a powerful way school leaders can focus on more than just academic press. Instead of focusing only on academics, school leaders should spotlight trust and collective efficacy to fully realize academic success.

Collective efficacy is a powerful cognitive idea that values teachers' great influence in student academic success. If the teachers of a school do not believe they are positively influencing students, then it will be hard for students to reach their academic potential. Finding teachers that do this naturally can be difficult. When teachers subscribe to academic optimism and its potential, they work together for student success.

Trust in students and parents could be the most important part of academic optimism. Trust is individualized to each person and hard to measure and understand. Trust in students and parents touches on the emotional connection that teachers have with students and their families. Without the trust, the community and culture of academic optimism would be impossible to achieve. Additionally, trust is critically important to academic success. Without trust in students and parents, the other components of academic optimism may be present, but cannot be cultivated to produce the desired academic change with students.

5. Targeted additional academic programs contribute to academic success of students in poverty.

Specific targeted academic programs supplement regular and good instruction. At Deerfield programs such as Colt Cash, ONSTAAR, and Purple Pride all contribute to the schools' academic success. There is power to providing and supplementing already quality classroom instruction. Learning in different ways helps contribute to student growth. Limitless possibilities exist for schools to expand targeted academic programs which impact students. For example, a targeted intervention could reteach science concepts with messy experiments rather than drill and practice worksheets.

Teachers develop, plan, and implement additional programs for students. Teachers at Deerfield believe all students can learn. Since some students lack support systems at home, Deerfield provides needed role models and encouragers at school. Deerfield's optimistic teachers serve as significant adults to students in their lives and in their academic success.

Trust according to Rotter (1967) is a critical element in all human learning. Students trust that teachers will help them learn. For students to achieve success, deliberate attention should be paid to academic improvement. Improvement is most easily seen in a trusting environment. When students feel the sense of trust and optimism in their academic program, academic success is more easily achieved.

Recommendations and Implications

A research study should inform three areas: theory, research, and practice. This study has informed each in the following ways.

Theory

This study examined the idea of school academic success through the new construct of academic optimism and this study shows the importance and usefulness of academic optimism in understanding academic success. The new construct of academic optimism has been expanded because of this research. Qualitative case study research was suggested by original researchers (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006a). The study analyzed through the lens of academic optimism, staff beliefs, actions, and the procedures of teachers at one

economically disadvantaged middle school in Texas. Most studies on academic optimism have been quantitatively based, but this study has added to the theory by examining academic optimism qualitatively.

This study has given specific examples of how academic optimism may be defined and carried out in one particular school. The theory has been expanded to expose staff beliefs, actions, and procedures in relation to the construct of academic optimism. The theory could help explain what causes other schools to be academically successful. Future research could look into other school settings and contexts. Are there academically optimistic schools without academic success? What do these schools look and feel like? Schools with higher or lower academic optimism scores than the school in this study could be examined qualitatively. How are these schools similar or different from the selected school in this study?

Research

This study adds to the research already in existence on academic success of schools and academic optimism. Much of the previous research on academic optimism has been focused at the elementary or high school levels, while this study focuses on the middle school level. This study adds depth of research regarding middle schools and middle school cultures and climates.

This study has expanded the usefulness of the construct of academic optimism when evaluating the academic success of a school. The research is expanded to detail and account the setting of an academically optimistic school. This research also adds to the knowledge base on how a school climate and culture are enhanced when academic optimism is present.

There are many possibilities for further research related to this study. The current study could be expanded to include a larger initial set of schools to survey and administer the SAOS. Additional comparative case studies could compare schools with similar make-ups and similar academic optimism scores and compare the beliefs, actions, and procedures that are in existence on each campus. Finally, academic optimism is generally the perception of the staff

at a school. Students and parents could be surveyed and interviewed to explore ways that they view academic optimism and how academic optimism is viewed by other important groups on the school campus.

Longitudinal data on academic optimism would be interesting to accrue and analyze. Could an academic optimism score be related to teacher's individual academic optimism or the beliefs, actions, and procedures of the school principal or a leadership team at the campus? Does it all come down to leadership? If a school were to implement various new actions and procedures, it would be interesting to see if the overall school academic optimism score would increase or decrease and if the school academic performance would rise or fall.

Practice

This case study provides a detailed description of one school's quest for academic success. The qualitative highlights of staff beliefs and school actions and procedures suggest that the academically successful school is shaped by academically optimistic staff members. This study has provided specific examples of how one particular middle school is providing structures for academic success for students. This study's findings and conclusions may be of particular interest to middle school principals and teachers who are looking at new ways of increasing student performance on their campus. The actions and procedures of principals, teachers, and support staff members relate to academic optimism and therefore inform educational practice.

Many recommendations for practice can be learned from this study. These recommendations are categorized by their focus on interventions and communication.

Interventions.

1. Principals and teachers should focus on the increasing academic optimism on their campus by investing ways to focus on academic emphasis, build collective efficacy of the staff, and recommend trust in students and parents. Interventions that relate to academic optimism will result in increased academic success for students.

2. Specific interventions that support students but are outside the realm of academic optimism could be tried and invested in as meaningful ways to increase student academic success. Specific programs at Deerfield augmented teaching in the classroom included Colt Cash and ONSTAAR. These are examples of how Deerfield focused on academic emphasis outside of the traditional classroom and outside academic optimism.

3. Herald and demand high expectations: To focus on academic success and academic optimism, the school must herald the need and demand for high expectations. High expectations for students are necessary in academically successful schools.

Communication.

4. Positive talk: Principals and teacher leaders should focus on speaking positively about the collective efforts of the teaching staff. Healthy, positive talk helps teachers feel like student success is possible. This positive conversation helps build a positive school climate.

5. Communicate with parents: Frequent and regular communication with parents is beneficial to building trust between school and home. Future researchers could specifically relate communication with academic optimism. What communication helps academic optimism exist at schools? Does home communication impact academic optimism?

Commentary

Deerfield Middle School and the staff beliefs, actions, and procedures carry the school to a high level of student and school academic achievement. The various beliefs, actions, and procedures at the school related to academic optimism even though the idea was not heralded by the principal or by the teaching staff. Deerfield's actions and procedures stem from school leadership and staff beliefs and feelings about students and teaching. It would be beneficial for teachers and students to know specifically that they are an academically optimistic school and that they are doing things specifically to address the areas of academic optimism. Why? The school principal and staff can and should prescribe and categorize school initiatives by the parts of academic optimism. All schools should strive to be academically optimistic and focus on the

sense of possible with students. With hope for a better school and better tomorrow, there is reason to continue working for all students to achieve.

Academically optimistic schools are humane, open, and supportive educational institutions focused on what really matters. I want to focus my plans and school-wide initiatives on academic optimism. As a member of a school leadership team, I can focus my decisions on setting up an environment supportive of academic optimism. What beliefs do I have that I may instill in students through my actions and words? What beliefs can teachers in my building instill to students in the same ways? Academic optimism gives me as a leader, three ideas to categorize almost all actions and procedures the school undertakes. I hope to influence staff beliefs by talking about academic optimism. A school principal's deliberate focus and talk regarding academic optimism should contribute to academic success. Principals and staff members at Deerfield were not aware of academic optimism but were carrying out many of its parts. The idea of academic optimism is one that I can mold and shape in various directions. I can think of trying some strategies like Deerfield and modifying other ideas to meet my campus needs.

Students living in poverty need to feel a sense of optimism at school. Often when life is hard outside of school, inside the building a sense of safety is felt. Academic optimism hopes to also provide the sense of the comfort for students through trust between teachers, students, and parents. Students from poverty need to know what exists outside their immediate world and be exposed the optimistic perspective.

With the completion of this dissertation, all this research and writing ends with one question. What kind of school do I want to lead as a principal? Answer: An academically optimistic school. I believe that a school that focuses on academic optimism has a much better chance of academic success than the school that does not champion academic optimism's power and parts. As an inspiring middle school principal, these ideals, without relative costs, should be key methods to meet the challenges of the future. All educational professionals

should realize academic optimism's potential. When we focus positive and collective efforts towards academic achievement as a campus group, build trust in students and parents, and emphasize academics, more students are bound to achieve. Teachers and school leaders looking for the next quick-fix, might instead focus on academic optimism as the best new approach for learning and academic success.

APPENDIX A
SCHOOL ACADEMIC OPTIMISM SCALE (SAOS)

SAOS

Directions: Please indicate your degree of with each of the statements about your school from **strongly disagree** to **strongly agree**. Your answers are confidential.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Teachers in this school are able to get through to the most difficult students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. If a child doesn't want to learn teachers here give up.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Teachers here don't have the skills needed to produce meaningful results.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Teachers in this school believe that every child can learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. These students come to school ready to learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. Home life provides so many advantages that students are bound to learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Students here just aren't motivated to learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with student disciplinary problems.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. Learning is more difficult at this school because students are worried about their safety.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. Drug and alcohol abuse in the community make learning difficult for students here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. Teachers in this school trust their students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. Teachers in this school trust the parents.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. Students in this school care about each other.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. Parents in this school are reliable in their commitments.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. Students in this school can be counted upon to do their work.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. Teachers can count upon parental support.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. Teachers here believe that students are competent learners.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. Teachers think that most of the parents do a good job.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. Teachers can believe what parents tell them.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. Students here are secretive.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Directions: Please indicate the degree to which the following statements characterize your school from **Rarely Occurs** to **Very Often Occurs**. Your answers are confidential.

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
23. The school sets high standards for performance.	1	2	3	4
24. Students respect others who get good grades.	1	2	3	4
25. Students seek extra work so they can get good grades.	1	2	3	4
26. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the school.	1	2	3	4
27. Students try hard to improve on previous work.	1	2	3	4
28. The learning environment is orderly and serious.	1	2	3	4
29. The students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them.	1	2	3	4
30. Teachers in this school believe that their students have the ability to achieve academically.	1	2	3	4

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APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions

1. What is special about Deerfield?
2. What are the common beliefs of Deerfield Middle School?
3. What procedures are in place to ensure academic success?
4. What actions exist to support students who are not being successful?

Collective Efficacy

5. How are students in the school motivated to learn?
6. How do teachers show students that they believe in them?
7. How do teachers rely on each other to get through the tough times with difficult students?

Trust

8. How are students counted on to do their work?
9. How do teachers and students work together?
10. Do teachers at Deerfield trust students? Do teachers trust parents? How?

Academic Emphasis

11. How does the school recognize students who get good grades?
12. Is the learning environment orderly and serious?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share about Deerfield or why you think it is a successful school?

APPENDIX C
OBSERVATION TOOL

Location:		
Date:		
Time:		
Characteristic	S NS NO	Details – How/Where
Academic emphasis		
Collective Efficacy		
Trust		

APPENDIX D
EMAIL TO SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Superintendent,

I am a student at University of Texas at Arlington and I just got approval for my dissertation proposal and am seeking your assistance. I am looking at an idea called academic optimism. Academic optimism is the idea behind my study and provides a theoretical frame to why some students/schools are successful and others may not be. In looking at your district, your middle schools are making progress even with economically disadvantaged campus percentages in the 40% range. In my proposed study, I would like to survey middle schools on their academic optimism and then select the one school that has the highest academic optimism rating to do a further qualitative look at academic optimism using document analysis, a focus group with teachers, and school observations. I think Fairfield ISD will provide a great local sample for my study. I am working on IRB approval from the university now. Do you think this is a possibility and would the district allow an outside researcher to come in the schools? I would be happy to meet with you or present necessary university paperwork (once completed) to you or your representative. Thanks for the consideration.

Jeff Mishoe
UTA Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX E
IRB APPROVAL



Office of Research Administration
 Box 19188
 202 E. Border St., Suite 214
 Arlington, Texas
 76019-0188
 T 817.272.3723
 F 817.272.1111
<http://www.uta.edu/research>
[Experts at UT Arlington](http://www.uta.edu/experts)
<http://www.uta.edu/experts>

March 30, 2012

Jeffrey Mishoe
 Dr. Adrienne Hyle
 Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
 Box 19579

Protocol Title: *Academic Optimism and Academic Success*

RE: Exempt Approval Letter

IRB No.: 2012-0501e

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (UTA IRB) Chair (or designee) has reviewed the above-referenced study and found that it qualified as exempt from coverage under the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects as referenced at Title 45 Part 46.101(b)(2)(4). You are therefore authorized to begin the research as of March 23, 2012.

Please be advised that as the principal investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to this office within 24 hours. In addition, pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b)(4)(iii), investigators are required to, “promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes in the research activity, and to ensure that such changes in approved research, during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, are **not initiated without IRB review and approval** except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.”

All investigators and key personnel identified in the protocol must have documented Human Subject Protection (HSP) Training or *CITI Training* on file with this office. The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Robin Dickey at robind@uta.edu or you may contact the Office of Regulatory Services at 817-272-3723.

Sincerely,

Patricia Turpin

Digitally signed by Patricia Turpin
 DN: postalCode=76019, o=The University of Texas at
 Arlington, street=701 South Nedderman Drive, st=TX,
 l=Arlington, c=US, cn=Patricia Turpin, email=pturpin@uta.edu
 Date: 2012.04.03 19:26:48 -05'00'

Patricia G. Turpin, PhD, RN, NEA-BC
 Clinical Associate Professor
 UT Arlington IRB Chair

BeAMberick

APPENDIX F
INFORMED CONSENT (SURVEY)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Jeffrey Mishoe

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Contact information: 817-305-4802/jeffrey.mishoe@mavs.uta.edu

FACULTY ADVISOR

Dr. Adrienne Hyle

Professor & Chairperson

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Contact Information: 817-272-0149/ahyle@uta.edu

TITLE OF PROJECT

Academic Optimism and Academic Success

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study about academic optimism and academic success. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

PURPOSE

The specific purpose of the research is to provide information on academic optimism and academic success.

DURATION

Participation in this study will last approximately 10 minutes.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 300.

PROCEDURES

Instructions: You are being asked as a research participant to participate in a 30 question survey regarding academic optimism. Complete the survey by marking answers in pencil or ink. Make your answers dark and neat.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

The research is not of direct benefit to the participant. Participation in the research will benefit others by adding to the research on academic optimism and academic success in schools.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There are not perceived risks and/or discomforts of participating in the research study. The participant has the right to discontinue any or all procedures at any time at no consequence.

COMPENSATION

No compensation will be offered for participation in this study.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected [including transcriptions/tapes if applicable] from this study will be stored in Trimble Hall 105B for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Jeffrey Mishoe at 817-305-4802/jeffrey.mishoe@mavs.uta.edu or Dr. Adrienne Hyle, faculty advisor, at 817-272-0149/ahyle@uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent

Date

CONSENT

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER

DATE

APPENDIX G
INFORMED CONSENT (FOCUS GROUP)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Jeffrey Mishoe

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Contact information: 817-305-4802/jeffrey.mishoe@mavs.uta.edu

FACULTY ADVISOR

Dr. Adrienne Hyle

Professor & Chairperson

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Contact Information: 817-272-0149/ahyle@uta.edu

TITLE OF PROJECT

Academic Optimism and Academic Success

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study about academic optimism and academic success. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

PURPOSE

The specific purpose of the research is to provide information on academic optimism and academic success.

DURATION

Participation in this study will last approximately 60 minutes.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 20.

PROCEDURES

Instructions: You are being asked as a research participant to participate in a focus group interview regarding academic optimism and academic success. The focus group interview will be audio recorded. After the focus group interview, the tape will be transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. The tape will be kept with the transcription for potential future research involving academic optimism and academic success. The tape and transcription will not be used for any future research purposes not described here.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

The research is not of direct benefit to the participant. Participation in the research will benefit others by adding to the research on academic optimism and academic success in schools.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There are not perceived risks and/or discomforts of participating in the research study. You have the right to discontinue any or all procedures at any time at no consequence.

COMPENSATION

\$20 will be offered for participation in this study.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence. Your decision to participate in this survey in no way affects your employment, relationship, or experiences with your place of employment. Your responses are anonymous and not linked to your identity.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected [including transcriptions/tapes if applicable] from this study will be stored in Trimble Hall 105B for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Jeffrey Mishoe at 817-305-4802/jeffrey.mishoe@mavs.uta.edu or Dr. Adrienne Hyle, faculty advisor, at 817-272-0149/ahyle@uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent
Date

CONSENT

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER

DATE

APPENDIX H
SAOS SCORING

I. Collective Efficacy (CE) of the School (items 1-12)

1. First, reverse scores on the following items: 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12, that is, score 1=6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3 5=2, 6=1.
2. Next, compute the average score for each individual on the first 12 items; that is, for each person, sum all the scores on the first 12 items and divide by the number of items for which you have responses.
3. Finally, sum the average individual scores for all teachers and divide by the number of teachers in the school who responded; this is the average collective efficacy (CE) score for the school and will be between 1 and 6.

II. Faculty Trust (FT) in Parents and Teachers (items 13-22)

1. First, reverse scores on item 22, that is, 1=6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3 5=2, 6=1.
2. Next, compute the average score for each individual on the items 13 through 22; that is, for each person, sum all the scores on those 10 items and divide by the number of items for which you have responses.
3. Finally, sum the average individual scores for all teachers and divide by the number of teachers in the school who responded; this is the average Faculty Trust in Parents and Teachers score (FT) score for the school and will be between 1 and 6.

III. Academic Emphasis (AE) of the School (items 23-30)

1. Score all the items with a score from 1 to 4.
2. Next, compute the average score for each individual on the items 23 through 30; that is, for each person, sum all the scores on those 8 items and divide by the number of items for which you have responses.
3. Finally, sum the average individual scores for all teachers and divide by the number of teachers in the school who responded; this is the average Faculty Trust in Parents and Teachers score (AE) score for the school and will be between 1 and 4.

IV. Compute Academic Optimism Score - Secondary Schools

1. Create standardized scores (SS) for each component as follows:
 - Standard Score for Collective Efficacy (SSCE) = $[100X(CE-3.96)/.33] + 500$
 - Standard Score for Trust (SSFT) = $[100X(T-3.65)/.39] + 500$
 - Standard Score for Acad. Emphasis (SSAE) = $[100X(AE-2.75)/.26] + 500$

2. Then compute an Academic Optimism Score as follows:

Academic Optimism = [(SSCE)+(SSFT)+(SSAE)] divided by 3

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Jeffrey N. Mishoe graduated from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale earning a Bachelor of Science degree in history. Jeff taught 8th grade U.S. History in Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District (GCISD) at Cross Timbers Middle School in Grapevine, Texas for eight years while he earned his Master of Education degree in Secondary Education from the University of North Texas.

After receiving his Texas Principal Certification, Jeff has served as assistant principal at two different campuses in GCISD, Grapevine Middle School and Heritage Middle School. Jeff is interested in middle school learners, instructional leadership, and academic optimism.