Leading Schools of Excellence *and* Equity:

Documenting Effective Strategies in Closing Achievement Gaps

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Biographical Statements

Kathleen M. Brown is Associate Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a scholar-practitioner with fifteen years of teaching and administrative experience, her research interests include effective, site-based servant leadership that connects theory, practice and issues of social justice in breaking down walls and building a unified profession of culturally aware educators working toward equitable schooling for all. She approaches education from an ethic of social care and works toward changing the metaphor of schools from hierarchical bureaucracies to nurturing communities. Her most recent publications appear in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *Journal of School Leadership*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, Educational Researcher*, and *Equity & Excellence in Education.* Her most recent book, *Preparing Future Leaders for Social Justice, Equity, and Excellence,* was published as part of the Christopher-Gordon School Leadership Series.

Jen Benkovitz graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she completed her doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. Her research interests include the principal's role in leading high-performing schools that ensure equity for all students regardless of race, gender, or disability. With twelve years of experience in elementary education, all in schools that serve a Title I population, she has served as a teacher, assistant principal and principal. She is currently an elementary school principal in North Carolina and continues to advocate for inclusionary and responsive school practices that result in equity for all students.

A.J. Muttillo is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he completed his doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. He researched the principal's role in leading high-performing schools that are equitable for all students. As a practitioner with eleven years of experience in middle and high school education, he has served as a teacher, assistant principal and principal. He is currently a middle school principal in North Carolina.

Thad Urban is currently a school administrator in northwestern Pennsylvania. He was awarded his Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His dissertation, entitled *Closing Achievement Gaps through Faculty Trust,* examines how current principals are creating successful schools for all children. Dr. Urban is currently researching and writing in an effort to assist school leaders with their quest to achieve excellence and equity for all students within their schools.

Article Description

The purpose of this empirical inquiry of state-recognized "Honor Schools of Excellence" was to explore how these schools of distinction are (or are not) promoting and supporting both academic excellence and systemic equity for all students.

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Structured Abstract

Background/Context: In the Fall 2006 issue of AERJ, Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy identified the new construct of academic optimism as a general latent concept related to student achievement even after controlling for SES, previous performance, and other demographic variables. Through structural equation modeling, they found that the collective properties of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust work together in a unified fashion to create positive academic environments. To build a comprehensive theory of academic optimism, Hoy and his colleagues recommended more research in a variety of school settings and more qualitative research to explore roles, experiences, expectations, conditions, and differences of academic optimism in schools.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: The purpose of this empirical inquiry of state-recognized “Honor Schools of Excellence” was to explore how these schools of distinction are (or are not) promoting and supporting both academic excellence *and* systemic equity for all students.

Research Design: In Phase One, quantitative data were collected through equity audits to scan for and then document systemic patterns of equity and inequity across multiple domains of student learning and activities within 24 schools. In Phase Two, the 24 schools were ranked, based solely on minority achievement, and then separated into two types of schools, small gap (SG) schools and large gap (LG) schools. Through site visits (n=16) and the use of semi-structured interviews with principals, assistant principals, teachers, and parent leaders (n=80), qualitative data were then collected to document best practices and effective strategies that principals use to confront and change past practices anchored in open and residual racism and class discrimination. The data were analyzed through the theoretical framework of academic optimism.

Findings/Results: Three differences between the SG schools and the LG schools were found (encouraging academic achievement, offering instructional feedback, and expecting excellence).

Conclusions/Recommendations: To truly honor excellence, we need to embrace equity. As such, in schools where principals support, model, and monitor a teamwork approach, a balanced approach, a strong sense of purpose, and an insistent disposition to assure that all students are served well and that all are encouraged to perform at their highest level, the outcomes of interest are better.

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Executive Summary

Introduction: Although studies have examined schools that make a difference in the lives of marginalized children, there is an absence of literature regarding principals as the unit of analysis and the process of leading for social justice. The purpose of this empirical inquiry of state-recognized "Honor Schools of Excellence" was to explore how these schools of distinction are (or are not) promoting and supporting both academic excellence *and* systemic equity for all students, regardless of any student's race, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, income of parents, or home language. By definition, "Honor Schools of Excellence" in this one southeastern state have at least 90% of their students performing at or above grade level, and the school meets expected growth and federal NCLB requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In many ways, this system of recognition, marked solely by students' attainment of a target score on a standardized test, actually conflates excellence and equity, therefore offering a narrow definition of student achievement and perpetuating the current achievement gap that separates many minorities from their White counterparts.

The purpose of this study was to probe beyond surface-level performance composite scores into deeper, more hidden data associated with these schools. How is "excellence" defined and operationalized in these schools? Are these schools "excellent" for *all* students? Can a school really be classified by the state as "excellent" and yet still have considerable disparities in student performance? If so, is the state's formula used to identify exemplary schools too simple, dogmatic, and institutionally flawed? And, what role, if any, does academic optimism play in closing achievement gaps? These and similar questions were investigated through the use of equity audits and semi-structured interviews. The literature review highlights briefly the rationale behind this study, principals' influence on student achievement, and leading for excellence and equity. The theoretical framework of academic optimism is then described in greater depth.

Theoretical Framework of Academic Optimism: In the Fall 2006 issue of AERJ, Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy identified the new construct of academic optimism as a general latent concept related to student achievement, even after controlling for SES, previous performance, and other demographic variables. The structural model of academic optimism supports and builds upon the theory that optimism influences achievement as much as talent and motivation and that optimism can be learned and developed. Academic optimism, as posited by Hoy and colleagues, is made up of three interrelated components—(a) academic emphasis, (b) collective efficacy, and (c) faculty trust—which, according to Hoy et al., collectively enhance learning, improve student achievement, and shape school norms and behavioral expectations. Although the three components are interrelated, each of these three areas is specifically defined and grounded in theory and research. The importance of academic optimism as a theoretical framework is its inclusion of cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains.

Research Design: Through purposeful sampling, 24 schools were selected from a list of 61 "Honor" schools in one large school district using the following criteria: (a) the school was a designated K-5 "Honor School of Excellence" during the 2004-05 school year; (b) the school followed a traditional calendar; (c) the principal had been in place for at least three years; and (d) a critical mass of student diversity existed.

All 24, traditional K-5 Honor Schools of Excellence identified during the 2004-05 academic year recorded proficiency rates of 95% or above for all of their White and Asian/Pacific Islander students on End-of-Grade Reading and Mathematics exams. The proficiency rates for minority students in these same schools ranged from 64.6% to 87.1%. Based solely on minority achievement, the 24 schools were ranked and then separated into two types of schools. The 12 schools that recorded achievement gaps of less than 15% between their White students and their minority students were labeled SG, for "smaller gap schools," and the 12 schools that recorded achievement gaps of 15% or more between their White students and their minority students were labeled LG, for "larger gap schools."

The study was designed to answer the following research question: How do SG schools differ from LG schools in terms of student demographics, teacher quality, programmatic issues, student achievement, and principal leadership? In Phase One, through the use of equity audits, quantitative data were collected. In Phase Two, qualitative data were gathered to provide insight into possible differences in the leadership in SG versus LG schools. Through random sampling, five semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour each were conducted at eight SG schools and eight LG schools (for a total of 80 interviews) with each school's principal, an assistant principal, two teachers and one parent.

Findings/Results:

Results from Phase One Equity Audits: Demographically speaking, all 24 of the schools were located within a 12-mile radius of each other, housed an average of 722 students, and boasted an average daily attendance figure of 95 to 97%. The SG schools and LG schools also served approximately the same percentages of minority students, economically disadvantaged students, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities. The striking similarity of the schools countered one hypothesis that the SG schools would differ from the LG schools with regard to student demographics.

An audit of teacher quality in the sampled schools revealed that teachers' credentials, education, experience, and mobility were also very similar in both the SG schools and the LG schools. In particular, "fully licensed teachers" were at 90%, classes taught by "highly qualified" teachers were at 89.5%, "teachers with advanced degrees" were at 25%, and "National Board Certified" teachers were at 8.5% for both SG and LG schools.

Likewise, SG and LG schools were very similar in terms of programmatic issues, yielding identical or similar results in terms of overcapacity, mobile units, average class size, school safety issues, suspensions/expulsions, library books, and Internet-linked computers. Once again, a hypothesis that the schools would differ with regard to programmatic issues was proven inaccurate.

Although demographic, teacher quality, and programmatic audits all indicated a

fair amount of equity between the SG schools and the LG schools studied, a more in-depth audit of achievement between both types of schools indicated great disparities when academic data were disaggregated and analyzed. Across the board, at-risk students in the SG schools outperformed their LG school counterparts. Although the 11.2% difference in minority student proficiency was initially used to separate the schools into SG schools and LG schools, interestingly, the gap trend continued for economically disadvantaged students, limited English proficiency students, students with disabilities, and students of parents with no college education.

By controlling for and/or eliminating some of the external reasons (e.g., demographics) and internal factors (e.g., teacher quality and programmatic issues) often cited for the achievement gaps between White, middle-class children and children of color or children from low-income families, the findings from Phase One of this study raised some interesting issues. The gaps challenged the researchers to dig deeper inside the schools for more subtle causes (e.g., principal leadership).

Results from Phase Two Interviews and Site Visits: Knowing that each of these schools was characterized as an "Honor School of Excellence," it came as no surprise when a number of similarities emerged from the data, particularly in how the schools "achieve excellence." As such, policies and practices in both SG schools and LG schools seemed to build upon academic optimism and the beliefs that (a) achievement is a collective and collaborative effort, (b) hiring practices matter, (c) behavioral climate is important, and (d) the state curriculum is non-negotiable. Yet, given our research question, we were more interested in how SG versus LG schools potentially differed from each other than in how they were similar. The qualitative data exhibited several noticeable differences, particularly in how the SG versus LG schools "honor excellence." With the collective properties of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust in mind, we assessed that three major differences emerged from the data. Compared to their LG schools counterparts, principals in the SG schools were much more deliberate in the following actions: (a) they set the stage by recognizing, encouraging, and celebrating academic achievement; (b) they closely monitor teaching and learning by offering instructional feedback and support; and (c) they expect excellence for each and every student.

Conclusions/Recommendations: With this study of "Honor Schools of Excellence" that teach similar populations of students from similar geographical regions with similar resources and yet yield such different academic results, it is impossible to ignore the importance and the impact of schools in general and school leadership in particular. This study provides leaders with data that moves beyond demographics to support school-level characteristics that can and do make a difference in student achievement. Results indicate that, at least on a preliminary level, pursuing, supporting, and advancing a culture of academic optimism may be an effective strategy in closing achievement gaps. For, to truly honor excellence, we need to embrace equity. As such, in schools where principals support, model, and monitor a teamwork approach, a balanced approach, a strong sense of purpose, and an insistent disposition to assure that all students are served well and that all are encouraged to perform at their highest level, the outcomes of interest are better.

Introduction

The evidence is clear, and alarming, that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). When compared to their White, middle-class counterparts, students of color, students of low socioeconomic status (SES), students who speak languages other than English, and students with disabilities consistently experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001; Banks, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Ortiz, 1997). The historic marginalization of underprivileged students and the perpetuation of the status quo have served to benefit the same kinds of students for hundreds of years while simultaneously ignoring the needs of low-income, minority students and their families (Apple, 1993; Larson & Ovando, 2001). As a result, these students often fall into a predetermined mold designed for academic failure and social inequity. They are "left behind" without hope, without vision, and without equal access to the excellent education to which *all* children are entitled.

Although many schools are failing to fulfill their duty to raise achievement levels of all students and to reduce achievement gaps among students (Jenks & Phillips, 1998; Kozol, 1991; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), others are in fact meeting the challenge of serving each and every student quite well (Comer, 1994; Oakes et al., 2000; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Riester et al., 2002). In striving for excellence *and* equity, students from varied racial, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds in these schools are learning at high academic levels. The present study brings to light several such schools by examining state-recognized "Honor Schools of Excellence" and

identifying a subset that has kept achievement gaps between minority and White students to less than 15%. These schools—which have achieved excellence according to state standards while also keeping achievement gaps to a minimum—are analyzed to provide educators with valuable information on what may distinguish small-achievement-gap (SG) schools from those with large achievement gaps (LG) between minority and White students. Schools are analyzed in two ways—quantitatively, to assess possible differences in student demographics, in teacher quality and in programmatic quality, and qualitatively, to assess possible differences in how principals actually lead the schools toward excellence and equity. Qualitative data are analyzed using the theoretical constructs of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust, which make up the larger concept of academic optimism. In the section that follows, we detail the rationale for the present study, provide a review of the literature showing the role of principals in student achievement, and discuss the theoretical framework supporting the study.

Rationale

Designed to deepen the contextualization of schools that are truly excellent *and* equitable, this study is theoretically driven and descriptive, stressing the importance of context, setting, subjects' frames of reference (emic perspectives), policies and procedures, and important strategies that principals employ as they move toward high achievement and systemic equity for all. According to Scott (2001):

> Systemic equity is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner—in whatever learning environment that learner is found—has the greatest opportunity to learn, enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life. (p. 6)

Scott's framework focuses on the ways that systems work in order to ensure all students are successful, including: (a) comparably high achievement and other student outcomes; (b) equitable opportunity to learn; (c) resource distribution equity; and (d) treatment equity. The rationale of this two-phase empirical inquiry of leadership for excellence and systemic equity was to document how schools, and leaders in particular, can and are pursuing, supporting, and achieving such goals via academic optimism. We investigated differences in leadership of schools with small versus large student achievement gaps between various subgroups of students.

Principal Leadership and Student Achievement

Although current school reform efforts use different approaches to improve teaching and learning, all depend for their success on the motivation and capacities of local leadership. For example, recent research points toward principals' affecting student achievement indirectly, through teachers and staff members (see Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005). A meta-analysis by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)—the largest sample of principals, teachers, and student achievement scores ever used to analyze the effects of educational leadership—showed a significant, positive impact of instructional leadership on student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). The analysis also identified 66 leadership practices embedded in 21 leadership responsibilities, each with statistically significant relationship to student achievement.

Leadership not only matters, but according to the Wallace Foundation's "Learning from Leadership Project: How Leadership Influences Student Learning" (Leithwood et al., 2005), it is second only to teacher quality among school-related factors

that affect student learning. In a five-year study involving 180 schools in 45 districts and nine states, the researchers concluded that "The total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of the total school effects" (Leithwood et al., 2005, p. 3). They also found that leadership's demonstrated impact tends to be considerably greater in schools where the learning needs are most acute. In essence, the greater the challenge, the greater the impact of leaders' actions on learning.

As schools are charged with the mission of improving education for *all* children (embodied most recently by the No Child Left Behind Act), the role of the principal has become progressively more and more demanding. School principals are now called, among their many responsibilities, to "understand their ethical and moral obligations to create schools that promote and deliver social justice" (Andrews & Grogan, 2001, p. 24). Foster (2004) also calls school leaders to serve as change agents that analyze the cultural aspects that have permitted long-standing social inequalities to not only proliferate but become institutional ideological belief systems. However, the question of how to accomplish this change remains unanswered; the results of the present study may provide some valuable insight.

Theoretical Framework: Academic Optimism

In the Fall 2006 issue of AERJ, Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy identified the new construct of academic optimism as a general latent concept related to student achievement, even after controlling for SES, previous performance, and other demographic variables. The structural model of academic optimism supports and builds upon Seligman's (1998) theory that optimism influences achievement as much as talent and motivation and that optimism can be learned and developed. Academic optimism, as

posited by Hoy and colleagues, is made up of three interrelated components—(a) academic emphasis, (b) collective efficacy, and (c) faculty trust—which, according to Hoy et al., collectively enhance learning, improve student achievement, and shape school norms and behavioral expectations (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottcamp, 1991; Lee & Bryk, 1989). Although the three components are interrelated, each of these three areas is specifically defined and grounded in theory and research. The importance of academic optimism as a theoretical framework is its inclusion of cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. According to Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006), "Collective efficacy is a group belief or expectation, it is cognitive. Faculty trust in parents and students is an affective response. Academic emphasis is the push for particular behaviors in the school" (p. 431).

Academic Emphasis

Academic emphasis (also referred to as "academic push" and "environmental press") is defined as the "extent to which a school is driven by a quest for academic excellence" (Hoy et al., 2006, p. 427). Schools with high levels of academic emphasis are characterized by high but achievable academic goals for *all* students, a belief that *all* students are capable of achieving these goals, an orderly and serious school environment, and an overall pursuit for academic success (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000, p. 684). Research has demonstrated that academic emphasis is the first component of the larger theoretical framework of academic optimism that is positively related to student achievement, even after controlling for the SES of students (Goddard et al., 2000; Hoy et al., 2006; Hoy et al., 1991; Lee & Byrk, 1989). Shouse (1995) supported this argument and added that educational equity can (and should) be achieved in low-SES schools by utilizing both "human and social capital in more academically focused ways" (p. 19).

Shouse (1995) argued that "all schools, particularly low-SES schools, can increase student achievement by placing their academic mission at center stage and allowing their social mission to play a supporting role" (p. 18). In a study of 398 schools, he offered a framework of three components for academic emphasis that highlights the separate and collective effects of academic emphasis and school community: (a) academic climate, which refers to the school's emphasis on offering students access to a rigorous curriculum as well as on recognizing and honoring outstanding performance; (b) disciplinary climate, which refers to the school's emphasis on establishing appropriate and effective attendance and discipline policies; and (c) teachers' instructional practices and emphasis, which refers to the need for teachers to "establish objective and challenging standards for student performance" (p. 4)—that is, to assign work that is authentic and relevant and provide frequent, purposeful, ongoing feedback for students and parents. Shouse's study suggests that the most successful schools are those in which "a sense of community emerges as a positive result of a strong sense of academic purpose…" (p. 19).

Some researchers have contributed to the field by suggesting policies, practices, and beliefs that correlate high levels of academic emphasis in schools with increased and equitable student achievement. For example, Goddard, Sweetland, and Hoy's study (2000) using the OHI for elementary schools concluded that academic emphasis was a significant predictor of student achievement in reading and in math for poor and minority students. The researchers were able to conclude from their study that schools with a higher academic emphasis had higher levels of student achievement. They reported that, "although students receiving a free or reduced-price lunch scored on average 2.41 points

below their schools' mean reading scores, the school means averaged 11.39 points higher where there was a strong academic emphasis" (p. 698). Their analysis clearly emphasized that a school climate and culture characterized by high levels of academic emphasis result in higher, more equitable levels of student achievement regardless of the students' race, gender, ethnicity, or SES. While studies such as Goddard et al.'s (2000) and Smith and Hoy's (2007) have offered methods for identifying and measuring academic emphasis, none have specifically explored leadership strategies that promote and support systemic equity as does the present study.

Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy is grounded in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief about his or her capacity to execute the actions required to produce a given level of attainment (Bandura, 1997).[1] Building on self-efficacy, collective efficacy is "the judgment of teachers that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the actions required to have positive effects on students" (Hoy et al., 2006, p. 4). Bandura (1986, 1997) conceptualized four sources of collective efficacy: (a) mastery experience; (b) vicarious experience; (c) social persuasion; and (d) affective state. *Mastery experience* asserts that collective efficacy beliefs tend to rise when a group perceives that their performance of a task has been successful (Goddard et al., 2004). *Vicarious experience* refers to skill modeling by another person. According to Brand and Wilkins (2007), vicarious experiences exist when "individuals are inspired by the success of individuals with whom they personally identify" (p. 304). *Social persuasion* is a way of strengthening people's beliefs that they have what it takes to succeed. Examples of social persuasion include encouragement or

specific performance feedback, discussions in a teachers' lounge, and community discussions (Goddard et al., 2004). The final source of collective efficacy, *affective state*, refers to the level of excitement or anxiety that adds to the organization's sense of collective efficacy (Goddard et al., 2004). An example of this stress might include the pressure from high-stakes accountability testing. Schools with high collective efficacy are able to channel this anxiety and focus on the academic achievement of students.

Research has shown that collective efficacy is a key variable in explaining student achievement—even more so than socioeconomic status (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Hoy, Sweetland, & Smith, 2002). For example, analyzing data from 438 teachers in 47 urban schools Goddard and Goddard (2001) found that past school achievement was a stronger predictor of perceived collective efficacy than race and socioeconomic status. Likewise, in a study of 97 diverse high schools in Ohio, Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) found a positive correlation between the collective efficacy of the school and school achievement in mathematics. They noted that collective efficacy was more important than socioeconomic factors in explaining school achievement. Of particular importance to the present study, Bandura (1993) linked schools where *all* kids are successful with schools that have a high sense of perceived collective efficacy. Specifically, he discovered that:

> with staffs who firmly believe that, by their determined efforts, students are motivatable and teachable whatever their background, schools heavily populated with minority students of low socioeconomic status achieve at the highest percentile ranks based on national norms of language and mathematical competencies. (p. 143)

In this context, the significance of collective efficacy on school improvement cannot be understated.

Faculty Trust

The final component of academic optimism is faculty trust in parents and students, defined by Hoy et al. (2006) as “a willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that that party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (p. 429). According to Hoy et al. (2006), faculty trust involves five facets: (a) benevolence, the confidence that one’s wellbeing will be protected by the trusted party; (b) reliability, the extent to which one can count on another person or group; (c) competency, the extent to which the trusted party has knowledge and skill; (d) honesty, the character, integrity, and authenticity of the trusted party; and (e) openness, the extent to which there is no withholding of information from others. Faculty trust has been found to be positively related to student achievement as a whole (e.g., Hoy, 2002); trust among parents, students, and teachers has also been specifically linked to increasing the achievement of at-risk students (e.g., Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Young, 1998).

Perhaps the largest and best-known current study of trust in schools is Bryk's and Schneider's (2002) analysis of the relationships between trust and student achievement. Based on a 10-year case study of more than 400 Chicago elementary schools, the researchers concluded, “Trust fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity improvements” (p. 116). They found that trust and cooperation among students, teachers, and parents not only influenced learning but regular student attendance and faculty experimentation as well.

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) developed a Trust Scale to measure the level of trust in schools and examined the interrelationships of faculty trust in students, teachers, principals, and parents. The Trust Scale was used in three large-scale studies in elementary, middle, and high schools in Ohio and Virginia. Findings suggested that a greater perceived level of trust in a school also indicated a greater sense of teacher efficacy. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's studies also suggested that faculty trust in parents predicts a strong degree of parent-teacher collaboration. Distrust, on the other hand, causes people to feel uncomfortable and ill at ease, provoking them to expend energy on assessing the actions and potential actions of others (Fuller, 1996).

Faculty trust is an essential ingredient to create the culture necessary to initiate, implement, and institutionalize long-lasting change to promote excellence and equity throughout a school, for it is within trusting relationships that collaboration and problem solving can yield creative solutions. When faculty trust is present, teachers can insist on higher academic standards with confidence that they will not be undermined by parents; and high academic standards, in turn, reinforce faculty trust (Hoy et al., 2006). Such trust can turn the most toxic of school cultures into that of academic optimism, radiating a belief that all students can learn and that teachers and parents can make a difference.

Methodology

Sample

Through purposeful sampling, 24 schools were selected from a list of 61 “Honor” schools in one large school district (140,000 students) in a southeastern state using the following criteria: (a) the school was a designated K-5 “Honor School of Excellence” during the 2004-05 school year; (b) the school followed a traditional calendar; (c) the

principal had been in place for at least three years; and (d) a critical mass of student diversity existed (a minimum minority student population of 18% of the total school population). For this study, “minority” was defined as those students who fall under the NCLB subgroups of African American students, Hispanic American students, Native American students, and multiracial students.

All 24, traditional K-5 Honor Schools of Excellence identified during the 2004-05 academic year recorded proficiency rates (Level 3 or 4) of 95% or above for all of their White and Asian/Pacific Islander students on End-of-Grade Reading and Mathematics exams. The proficiency rates for minority students in these same schools ranged from 64.6% to 87.1%. Based solely on minority achievement, the 24 schools were ranked and then separated into two types of schools. The 12 schools that recorded achievement gaps of less than 15% between their White students and their minority students were labeled SG, for “smaller gap schools,” and the 12 schools that recorded achievement gaps of 15% or more between their White students and their minority students were labeled LG, for “larger gap schools.” Since the range of student achievement in these schools extended approximately 30 percentage points (from 65% to 95%), the authors chose 15% as the cutoff. While any gap, especially a gap of 15%, still indicates an inequity that needs to be addressed, a good starting point for reducing achievement gaps as a whole may be to look at the differences between SG schools and LG schools and attempt to build on the success of the more equitable SG schools in the district.[2]

Study Design

The study was designed to answer the following research question: How do SG schools differ from LG schools in terms of student demographics, teacher quality,

programmatic issues, and principal leadership? In Phase One of the study, quantitative data were collected regarding student background variables, teacher quality, programmatic issues, and student achievement indicators, which could later be used to categorize schools as SG versus LG and then analyze differences between these schools. In Phase Two of the study, qualitative data were gathered to provide insight into possible differences in the leadership in SG versus LG schools. Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly (2004) proposed that "teacher quality equity *plus* programmatic equity *equals* achievement equity" (p. 259). This study began in part to test that assumption. Accepting Scott's (2001) claim that a school cannot have systemic equity if even one part of the system is inequitable, the authors hypothesized that the SG schools would differ from the LG schools in one or more of the key factors discussed above.

Phase One: Equity Audits

In Phase One, through the use of equity audits, quantitative data were collected regarding student demographics, teacher quality, programmatic quality, and student achievement indicators. As a leadership tool, equity auditing is a concept with a respected history in civil rights, in curriculum auditing, and in some state accountability systems (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Data collected during Phase One enabled the researchers to identify which schools were SG versus LG and to capture data on teacher quality and programmatic quality across both types of schools so they could be analyzed for possible differences.

Phase Two: Interviews and Site Visits

Through random sampling (and a need to limit data collection), five semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour each were conducted at eight SG

schools and eight LG schools (for a total of 80 interviews) with each school's principal, an assistant principal, two teachers and one parent (see Appendix A for a copy of the Interview Questions). The principal (P) was selected as a participant because he or she served as the unit of analysis (see Table 1 for participants' demographic data), while the other members of the school and community offered valuable information regarding the impact of the principal's leadership on excellence and equity in the school. Two teachers from each school were interviewed (NT was a new, Initially Licensed Teacher with two to four years of service, and ET was a teacher-leader, as determined by the principal, with preferably more than seven years of experience and above-standard evaluations). An assistant principal (AP) and a parent leader (PL) actively involved in a school-parent organization were also interviewed.

Insert Table 1 here

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According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), each method of data collection contains strengths and limitations. In this study, it should be acknowledged that the principal selected the four other individuals to whom the researchers had access, thus allowing the principal to select individuals who may be more likely to speak in a favorable manner. However, because all 16 principals had the exact same opportunity, the results from both types of school are assumed to be biased toward the positive and thus, the differences are not affected by this limitation. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for purposes of analysis. A code appears at the end of each verbatim

quote to identify the school and the participant. Data from the semi-structured interviews were supplemented with informal observations, document analyses, and field notes from 16 additional site visits. It should also be acknowledged that, while the school visits were conducted equally by the four researchers (20 interviews each), the categorization as a SG school or LG school was known by the interviewers beforehand. To address this limitation, each member of the research team used the exact same data collection protocol in each school they visited, asking the same questions in as uniform a matter as possible (see Appendix B for a Sample Transcript). During this initial phase of the study, the researchers were singularly focused on simply learning what made each site a "School of Excellence." It was not until after all data collection was complete, that the researchers shifted their attention to data analysis and began interrogating the theoretical connections and differences between the two types of schools.

Data Analysis: Template Analysis

The recorded interviews were subject to a systematic procedure of data analysis based on template analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This qualitative content analysis model involved four different researchers using an a priori codebook developed from the lens of academic optimism to first independently analyze, describe, and interpret all 80 transcriptions. The authors then met in what Wasser and Bresler (1998) refer to as the "interpretive zone" to discuss patterns and emergent themes. Template analysis focused the analysis on data relevant to the research questions and made comparisons between the theoretical framework (academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust) and the experiences of the participants as they described them (see Appendix B for a Sample). The use of a priori and iterative category development followed Constas' (1992) method

whereby veneers of phenomenological representation are removed so we may become acquainted with subjective understanding and the meaning of human interactions.

Results from Phase One: Equity Audits Findings

Demographically speaking, all 24 of the schools were located within a 12-mile radius of each other, housed an average of 722 students, and boasted an average daily attendance figure of 95 to 97%. The SG schools and LG schools also served approximately the same percentages of minority students (@ 33%), economically disadvantaged students (@ 29.5% eligible for free or reduced lunch), students with limited English proficiency (@ 7%), and students with disabilities (@ 16.5%). As a result, both sets of schools had the same number of AYP goals to meet (20). The striking similarity of the schools countered one hypothesis that the SG schools would differ from the LG schools with regard to student demographics.

An audit of teacher quality in the sampled schools revealed that teachers' credentials, education, experience, and mobility were also very similar in both the SG schools and the LG schools. This too was counter to one of the authors' hypotheses. In particular, "fully licensed teachers" were at 90%, classes taught by "highly qualified" teachers were at 89.5%, "teachers with advanced degrees" were at 25%, and "National Board Certified" teachers were at 8.5% for both SG and LG schools. An interesting, albeit small, difference was noted in that half (51%) of the teachers in the SG schools had 10+ years of experience, compared to 43% of the teachers in the LG schools. The LG schools seemed to employ more teachers in the 4- to 9-year range of experience (34%) compared to the SG schools (29%). Overall, both types of schools seem to employ an

appropriate balance of new teachers, mid-career teachers, and very experienced veteran teachers.

Likewise, SG and LG schools were very similar in terms of programmatic issues, yielding identical or similar results in terms of overcapacity (5% vs. 10%, respectively), mobile units (seven), average class size (21 students), school safety issues (one more act per 100 students at LG schools), suspensions/expulsions (one more at SG schools), library books (17), and Internet-linked computers (student/computer ratio of 4:1). Once again, a hypothesis that the SG schools would differ from the LG schools with regard to programmatic issues was proven inaccurate.

Although demographic, teacher quality, and programmatic audits all indicated a fair amount of equity between the SG schools and the LG schools studied, a more in-depth audit of achievement between both types of schools indicated great disparities when academic data were disaggregated and analyzed. Across the board, at-risk students in the SG schools outperformed their LG school counterparts (and the district, for that matter). Although the 11.2% difference in minority student proficiency was initially used to separate the schools into SG schools and LG schools, interestingly, the gap trend continued for economically disadvantaged students (9.4% difference), limited English proficiency students (7.2% difference), students with disabilities (4.9%), and students of parents with no college education (13.3%). And, even though 95% of all students were tested in all 24 schools and each school noted some growth, an analysis of six years' growth indicated a greater difference of 6.3 percentage points for students in the SG schools versus the LG schools. Also, nine percent of the students in the LG schools scored below proficiency at Level 1 or 2, while only 6% of the students in the SG schools

scored at Level 1 or 2 (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

By controlling for and/or eliminating some of the external reasons (e.g., demographics) and internal factors (e.g., teacher quality and programmatic issues) often cited for the achievement gaps between White, middle-class children and children of color or children from low-income families, the findings from Phase One of this study raised some interesting issues. The gaps challenged the researchers to dig deeper inside the schools for more subtle causes (e.g., principal leadership).

Results from Phase Two: Interviews and Site Visits

Knowing that each of these schools was characterized as an "Honor School of Excellence," it came as no surprise when a number of similarities emerged from the data, particularly in how the schools "achieve excellence." As such, policies and practices in both SG schools and LG schools seemed to build upon academic optimism and the beliefs that (a) achievement is a collective and collaborative effort, (b) hiring practices matter, (c) behavioral climate is important, and (d) the state curriculum is non-negotiable. Yet, given our research question, we were more interested in how SG versus LG schools potentially differed from each other than in how they were similar. The qualitative data exhibited several noticeable differences, particularly in how the SG versus LG schools "honor excellence." With the collective properties of academic emphasis, collective

efficacy, and faculty trust in mind, we assessed that three major differences emerged from the data. Compared to their LG schools counterparts, principals in the SG schools were much more deliberate in the following actions: (a) they set the stage by recognizing, encouraging, and celebrating academic achievement; (b) they closely monitor teaching and learning by offering instructional feedback and support; and (c) they expect excellence for each and every student (see Table 3 for an outline of the themes that emerged).

Insert Table 3 Here

Academic Optimism Theme #1: Principals Set the Stage by Recognizing, Encouraging, and Celebrating Academic Achievement

From an academic emphasis perspective, a large discrepancy surfaced between the SG schools and LG schools with regard to student growth and achievement. Principals of the SG schools employed a number of practices, including quarterly rewards, positive reinforcement related to academic achievement, academic notes on report cards, phone calls to parents, student data notebooks to monitor learning, and postcards from the principal, to highlight academic achievements. One SG school parent leader reported that her principal “knows most of the kids by name … probably all … and encourages the kids because he is so involved” (SGS2–PL), while another described her principal as “very much a child’s advocate” (SGS5-PL). Similarly, an experienced teacher at another SG school revealed that her principal “offers lots of positive reinforcement to the children, and it carries into the classroom” (SGS6–ET). In each of these examples, it was clear that the principal valued student achievement and supported

and encouraged the recognition of student success—a press for learning. Other comments underscored this expectation:

> 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. I have these Purple Panda Postcards that I send out, too. I tell the teachers that, when someone is doing a great job, I want them to jot something down and we'll pay for the postage. (SGS2–P)

> Every child has a data notebook. We conduct at least one student-led conference per year, usually in the spring, from kindergarten up through 5th grade. Children keep charts and graphs on … behavior, attendance, reading performance … and they keep it in this notebook. In the spring, the child sits down with the parent and the child conducts the conference. (SGS8–AP)

Although some practices of academic acknowledgement were in place in the LG schools, they did not seem to be as deeply embedded in the schools' instructional cultures and the principals did not seem to have a plan for school-wide implementation. For example, one LG school parent expressed a desire for "more of a recognition of academic achievement in some way" (LGS7 -PL), and another LG school participant explained that "communicating with students about their level of performance or goal-setting … [is] not something that's particularly widespread" (LGS5-AP). One LG school teacher lamented:

> [The principal] really liked seeing [student-led conferences], so we had some of the kids conference with her … But she just respects each grade level and what they want to do. We [a teammate and I] tried to get more people to do it but they won't. (LGS4-ET)

Generally speaking, the LG school principals took a much more passive role in the area of recognizing, encouraging, and celebrating student achievement, while the SG school principals were active and deliberate.

From a collective efficacy perspective, these policies of recognizing, encouraging, and celebrating academic achievement carried over to the faculty and staff as well. The

SG school teachers valued the importance of these practices and embraced a collective school culture clearly focused on student success. They even linked their own satisfaction to student learning: “I often tell parents, if I don’t do anything else but teach these children to love to learn then I’ve done my job” (SGS7-ET). While participants in the LG schools wanted students to be happy and enjoy coming to school, the SG schools comments were more focused on wanting students to enjoy learning. This subtle difference in language and emphasis might make a noticeable difference in faculty motivation and student achievement. It might also affect school morale, school climate, and school culture. One SG school teacher explained it this way: “I think that just comes mainly because the administration cares about the teachers and they care for their staff, which then makes the teachers happy, which makes them more involved with like helping with the students and caring for the students” (SGS3-NT). Others agreed:

> She provides such a great learning atmosphere and environment in which to work, nobody wants to leave, so we don’t have the turnover rate. (SGS6-AP)
>
> I think [teachers] work really well together as a team. They are child centered, focused on student learning. But the thing is that they enjoy coming to work every day. That’s kind of been a strength of ours—they work well together and enjoy what they do, and I think that translates over to the kids and their learning. (SGS4-P)
>
> I want them to come into my classroom and if I can get them to love school and love coming every single day, then the academics are going to come. (SGS2-NT)

What is interesting about the staff members in these particular SG schools is that they consistently spoke about caring about their students in terms of learning. Examples included caring about students developmentally, preparing students for a test so they would be happy about the result, and caring about students meeting benchmarks and expectations. Regardless of the specific ways staff members showed they cared, they

always cared about the academic success of students. Although participants of the LG schools also talked about creating a positive atmosphere, their comments referenced things like good manners, character traits, and feeling safe at school. They expressed care for their students by talking about non-academic elements such as buddy programs, dunking booths, and relay races. Even when an LG school principal asked her parents, "'What is the most important thing for your children's education?,' their response to [her] overwhelmingly was, 'I want my kids to be happy.' They did not say anything about their child's education. Not one thing" (LGS8-P).

From a faculty trust perspective, possessing, communicating, and keeping high expectations throughout all areas of the learning community was found in 100% of the SG schools. Because the parents had proven themselves reliable and dependable allies with the teachers, this practice of pressing for academic achievement was accepted and supported. In fact, many of the interview subjects viewed these expectations as one of the most essential ingredients in creating excellence and equity in their school. One principal simply stated, "All kids perform, regardless of their background. Our expectation is that every child will succeed. I think that's a high aspiration but one that's attainable" (SGS6-P). The parents and teachers agreed. They hold high aspirations for their students as well and value the instructional process:

> I have high expectations with academics … The higher your expectations, the more the child's going to rise to that. Because if you give them just a mediocre, average expectation and they meet it, they're never going to perform higher than that. (SGS3-NT)

This sense of urgency and pressure to give every student the access, the opportunity, the tools, and the support needed to achieve success was found to exist throughout all levels of the hierarchy of the SG schools. Such high expectations were communicated through

regular classroom visits or walk-throughs or by having regular team meetings with teachers. Parents and community members were welcomed, and their support was received and appreciated. The follow-through and assistance, academically and socially, helped foster this mutual reliability that ultimately increased the trust level between home and school. The LG schools were not as uniform as the SG schools in providing evidence of the need for high expectations for every child—that is, it was not clear that high expectations were a vital part of their school's culture and/or overall vision. The language used lacked the rich, descriptive data indicating that these schools truly believed that *all* children can learn. Plus, the majority of LG schools failed to speak with the same passion on the topic of parent involvement and the need to make the school feel welcoming.

Academic Optimism Theme #2: Principals Closely Monitor Teaching and Learning by Offering Instructional Feedback and Support

From an academic emphasis perspective, SG school principals were directly involved in offering the teachers instructional feedback and support. These principals viewed teaching as a continuous learning endeavor and modeled this by participating in and/or by facilitating professional development opportunities on-site via staff meetings. One principal explained, "I think when I attend a workshop, that says to the staff that I think learning is important… I participate, and I sit side-by-side with them and learn with them" (SGS2-P). In order for principals to be instructional leaders and provide teachers with specific feedback, they have to not only know the curriculum but also understand the instructional methods that teachers use to ensure students are learning. Consider these comments made about SG school principals:

> She attends almost all staff development that's done here at school. We have early release days, where the kids leave at 12:30, and then we have staff development in the afternoon. She attends every single one of those, because her belief is if we're

> going to have to go through the staff development, then she needs to go through it too, so when she walks in our classroom she can have a feel of what we're expected to be doing. (SGS5-ET)

> She has taken a very different approach to staff meetings than we've had in the past. She brings that staff development piece right into our staff meetings … and she's even pulled people from within the staff to do the staff development. (SGS4–ET)

The SG school principals consistently demonstrated knowledge of best practices in curriculum and pedagogy by talking about vertical teaming, consistent standards-based grading, and curriculum mapping. They knew "what good instruction looks like" (SGS2-P) and framed evaluations as a tool for reflection and continuous improvement, instead of a means of documenting bad performance and making teachers fearful of losing their jobs. These effective leaders used teacher evaluations as a tool for offering specific written feedback and for suggesting additional human or material resources. They had direct involvement with instruction, as opposed to letting someone else handle it, and they "inspected what they expected." Here are more comments from teachers and principals at SG schools:

> She's very much into teachers performing best practice in the classroom. She looks for that when she goes in. She's not afraid on an observation to write down an area of improvement. Actually, I don't know anybody who gets an observation that doesn't have some area in which they need to grow. So I think she's really good about, you know, diplomatically pointing out what area it is that you need improvement in … I appreciate that, and I think a lot of teachers do. (SGS5-ET)

> Evaluations are a wonderful tool to assist with growth and any new ideas. I know when I bring my teachers in I ask them, "Now look back on that lesson. Is there something else that you could have done differently, and if there was, what would that be and how would you have done that?" (SGS8-P)

> Well, I think teacher evaluations are the one thing that probably is the most important thing that we do, because it is an indicator of how they're going to [perform]. It also gives us an opportunity to collaborate with teachers … it helps us partner teachers with knowing somebody that a teacher might want to [partner with]. (SGS1-P)

Using language that refers to observations in a very positive way, where principals are collaborating with teachers to assist them with growth and new ideas instead of cracking the whip sets a tone of improvement instead of judgment. The principals at SG schools consistently provided instructional feedback that was supportive, fostered growth, and provided teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their practice. These practices were much less prevalent in the LG schools. Instead, LG school principals were much less focused in this area and their comments were broader, less explicit. They provided less evidence of actually helping teachers achieve success in the classroom. These principals struggled to explain any clear vision of instruction other than an expectation to teach the curriculum. They seemed almost uncomfortable and paused more often and used unclear expressions like “um,” “you know,” and “whatnot.” For example, instead of naming specific content and/or teaching techniques, a LG school principal said, “Uh, with guided reading, I’m looking to see if they’re giving a guided reading lesson. Obviously, I don’t want to see someone doing something that’s 7th grade. Were they enjoying the lesson?” (LGS6–P). In some cases, LG school principals even delegated the role of instructional feedback to others. This same leader admitted that, “[The Instructional Resource Teacher] does wonderful things for people like me because I don’t have to be that up-to-date on curriculum” (LGS6-P). Likewise, an experienced LG school teacher at another school shared that she didn’t really know how her principal used teacher evaluations: “I’m not really sure because mine have always been really good. So when I go in there to talk with her, we talk about a lot of other things” (LGS3-ET). Similarly, when one LG school principal was asked what type of role teacher evaluations played in her school, she responded by simply saying, “Not much of one” (LGS8-P). An experienced teacher at her

school alluded to the same perception when she commented, “She’s never criticized and she’s never done anything to say, ‘You know, maybe there’s a better way you could teach that lesson.’ That’s never been the case” (LGS8-ET). For beginning teachers at LG schools, support was conventional, whereas the practices in place in the SG schools extended beyond the district requirement and placed a heavy emphasis on instructional support. This support was also offered to struggling veterans in many SG schools but not LG schools, as evidenced by these comments:

> I would say [the principal] spends less of his time in the classroom than maybe some principals do. He does the evaluations as per the county requirement, but … for teachers who are doing well and who know what’s going on, he tends to not be in there very often. (LGS1–AP)
>
> This is an area that I have honestly delegated more to my Instructional Resource Teacher and my Assistant Principal because I don’t have a background in elementary teaching. I never taught in elementary school. All of my experience in education was in the secondary level until I became an elementary school principal. (LGS4–P)
>
> 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. (LGS2-ET)

From a collective efficacy perspective, participants in the SG schools shared a clearer vision of teaching, learning, and excellence than those in the LG schools. Simple mission statements embodied high expectations and a “whatever it takes, we’re in this together” ideology among the SG schools. Through mastery experience, vicarious experience, and social persuasion, faculty members embraced a school-wide expectation of constant growth, change, and life-long learning. For example, SGS3 principal reported that “our curriculum map gets updated every year, and we’re constantly tweaking it and making it better, making changes,” while a new teacher at SGS3 explained that they do “whatever it takes to help the children learn; that’s what we’re here to do.” Such

emphasis on capability bleeds over to teacher confidence as well. When one peer observes another peer being successful, he or she can experience that success vicariously, increasing the belief that he or she can be effective—which leads in turn to an increase in collective efficacy. Other interview subjects shared a similar collective attitude:

> It can't be my school and my way, because it's our school, our success, our decisions, and I think it's very important to have a family atmosphere where everyone's welcomed, everyone's valued, where everyone feels important and everyone feels a part. (SGS1-P)

> Whether she's been teaching five years or two … it doesn't matter. We've got some excellent teachers here … so the one thing I do is find her a mentor. I find somebody who is willing to really take some time helping this person. The other thing that I do is that I try to get her out to see what other teachers are doing. The best learning experience for teachers is to see how other teachers teach. (SGS3–P)

> There is a real emphasis on collaboration and pinpointing, so our teams plan together at least twice a week; and in that planning we recognize that every teacher won't be doing the same thing in the same way, but they're talking about instruction, they're talking about lesson plans, and they're talking about student achievement, and they're looking for ways to help each other be successful, and to share resources. But everybody is not having to do the same work alone, because we share the instructional planning and we share looking for resources, and we share looking at assessments, then you can build on everything. (SGS1-P)

In contrast, the majority of LG schools failed to provide evidence of an institutional goal for every child to experience success, nor did they define what excellence looks like. Instead, they credited a talented faculty and high achievement recognition for their successes. They "provide them the opportunity to be successful" (LGS4–P) but not necessarily all the supplemental means to insist upon and actually do so. Their comments reflect this disconnect:

> For the curriculum, um, I guess what we are looking for … of course I mean when you look at the Standard Course of Study, the state sets the goals and objectives and our job is to provide an instructional program that supports those goals. (LGS1-P)

> If people believe that we're great, then we're great. So, a school of excellence is about … teachers being a real collegial team, and they've got to trust each other, and they've got to be talking nice to each other. And we all of a sudden start attracting really great teachers that want to come work here … You know, it's funny how that happens. I mean it's just about starting out by saying "Don't go out of here and say anything negative about this school, ever!" (LGS8-P)

From a faculty trust perspective, an interesting finding emerged. In monitoring the teaching and learning process, six out of the eight SG schools actually provided evidence that the level of parent involvement in their schools appeared to be "too much." A new teacher in SGS3 stated that "every time you turn around, parents are in the hallway and gym. Sometimes it just seems like too much." Ironically, this strong, and at times uncomfortable, parent presence appeared to fuel excellence and equity within many of these schools. It made teachers and leaders feel vulnerable to the parents and their interests and acted as a strong motivator to challenge one's students and oneself within the classroom. According to one assistant principal, it's the "checks-and-balance effect for many teachers, and it keeps them on their toes" (SGS3-AP). Only one LG school reported "too much" parental involvement, and this principal said she sarcastically asked vocal and critical parents to "send her their resumes" (LGS8). The majority of the LG schools either wanted more parental involvement or were content with the level of support they were receiving. Also in regard to parental involvement, all of the SG schools reported frequent and open communication with parents. They shared a general expectation of keeping parents constantly informed, regardless of any language barriers, and of partnering and connecting with churches and after school programs. They utilized the strengths of their parents to fill the voids within their school and to help strengthen their programs. Many LG schools did show evidence that they tried to communicate openly and frequently with parents, but they provided fewer incidences of traveling into

the children's community or providing transportation to generate more parent partnership.

Academic Optimism Theme #3: Principals Expect Excellence from Each and Every Student

From an academic emphasis perspective, data from each SG school revealed a general consensus that excellence is expected, that excellence is attainable by having high expectations for each and every student, regardless of background, and that excellence is exemplified by academic growth. Taken together, this mentality pressed students to work hard and do well academically. According to one SG school principal, "We really try to constantly challenge the students. We want to make sure that they're showing a year or more of growth … That's our goal" (SGS4–P). A new teacher at another SG school added, "Our expectations here are at a minimum to make a full year's growth no matter where they come in. [The principal] and I share a lot of the same ideals. We are very much optimistic about all kids can learn" (SGS8–NT). Others agreed:

> Excellence is any time a person can maximize their potential. I think one of the most faulty problems with No Child Left Behind is that it ignores the growth factor. I think that every child deserves a year's worth of growth in the standard course of study … and that's at a minimum. So that means that kid that already walks in knowing the 3rd grade curriculum when they're in 2nd grade still deserves to grow. (SGS7–P)

> I think high expectations should exist for everybody regardless of where you come from. I have never seen anybody rise to low expectations. If they're gonna rise, then you have to keep [expectations] high and have them reach for them … but we must be supporting them along the way. (SGS8–AP)

> 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. (SGS6-P)

Unfortunately, data from the LG schools sometimes refuted their belief in the notion that all children can and will be successful. One LG school principal even stated, “I don’t think we can guarantee that every child is going to be successful. But we need to provide them the opportunity to be successful” (LGS4–P), while another added, “It’s a goal. I mean, it’s not 100% all the time with all the kids. It’s not even 100% with a portion of them all the time. It’s hit or miss” (LGS8–P). Data from the LG schools also revealed a much more ambiguous definition of excellence, mostly characterized by grade-level proficiency, as opposed to growth. One LG school principal explained that excellence is “making sure that everyone is happy” (LGS8–P), while another added that “it’s a beautiful building. The staff is committed to excellence and shares ideas” (LGS3–P).

From a collective efficacy perspective, data were used in both SG schools and LG schools to make decisions. However, in the SG schools, data were used to drive decision-making about hiring, resource allotment, professional development, and teaching practices. They used data and combined it with teacher input to select staff development that was tailored to address individual needs. These practices were actively modeled and supported by the SG school principals but were much less evident in the LG schools. The motivation behind data collection in the SG schools was identifying and supporting individual student performance and using this information to modify instruction accordingly. As one principal put it, “Test less, assess more” (SGS3-P). All SG schools used data to measure student achievement and to illuminate the gaps throughout their schools. They were aware that these gaps existed and did not refuse to use data as a way of avoiding the issue. They provided parents with frequent conferences to share data

about their individual child's progress, strengths and weaknesses, and were confident in assigning classwork, projects, and homework.

> As far as the data, that's driving the school. We look of course at data that's provided by the state and the end-of-grade test scores … but we also look at on-going data from assessments that we give and from performance measures that we take throughout the year to assess what kind of job we're doing … and to look at how successful the children are being toward benchmarks that we've set up for them. [Data] also helps us determine how we need to allocate our resources … human and material … We do look at gaps, but you have to look beyond gaps to the individuals … You have to look beyond the group to see what individuals accomplish. (SGS1–P)

> We sit down in January and go through all of our data. Who do we have that's struggling, who do you think is not going to make it, who are we really worried about at this point, and what resources are they getting? We went to each grade level to determine which 12 or 15 children were performing at Level 2 and could be bumped up to Level 3. The principal just dies if she knows [those students] don't qualify for Title I support. When we have enough money, we hire intervention teachers to work with these students. (SGS1–AP)

> We have to have data to back up our decisions … to prove to her (principal) why it would be better. Our grade level was doing flex-grouping, which is basically ability grouping … and while for some students it's probably really good, for others it gives a false impression of themselves. We really wanted to change, but we had to sit down with her with our pros and cons. We actually wanted to change the practice two years ago but at that point the data didn't show … and now this year was the first time that she's like, "Okay, now you have enough data." That's what I mean when I say she wants us to follow through … not for a week but for a year or two! (SGS5–ET)

In contrast, motivation to use data in LG schools was largely to "get teachers talking" and learning from one another. While the majority of LG school leaders shared a similar sentiment for the importance of using and sharing data (for example, LGS7-P shared that "I would be shocked if you thought I didn't use data to make decisions."), it was often used to remediate students in both after-school and pull-out programs. Also, there was no evidence suggesting that the data were used to evaluate these programs. The philosophy

of data use in LG schools seemed to be more of a reactive versus proactive mentality. For example:

> The whole grade level wanted to ability-group last year and I didn't. I just don't feel like it's beneficial for my kids to not get reading and writing and all the other things from me. I feel like I need to know what they're doing. [The principal] took my concerns right away … He let me opt out. (LGS5–NT)

> We look at data all the time. We look at who does the best job, you know, who has the highest percentage. Eventually [teachers] say … I need to know this because I can improve and I see where I'm weak … let me go down there and work with a colleague to see if I can learn some techniques or teaching methods that will help my kids be more successful. (LGS1–P)

From a faculty trust perspective, all of the SG schools provided evidence that the faculty possesses a strong sense of devotion and responsibility to every child; they viewed them as their "babies" and spoke frequently about the practice of individualizing for students, of responding with specific strategies to ensure that students don't "fall through the cracks" (SGS8-P). Because the level of trust appeared to be high, this bond appeared stronger than the traditional professional-client relationship. It went well beyond the minimum requirements of their contractual agreement and involved teaching, communicating, planning activities, meeting needs, exchanging ideas, and sacrificing time and effort. As one principal stated, focusing on the needs of individual students often comes at the expense of the convenience of staff members:

> The child comes first, no matter what. That's why we're here, so as long as we continue to focus on student success … I feel like we're going in the right direction … I have no problem putting aside your needs or my needs or anybody else's, as the students come first. (SGS5-P)

Related to this issue was an interesting finding regarding the discussion of race and achievement gaps. The majority of the SG schools tailored remediation plans and focused professional conversations on addressing the individual child's needs. One SG

school principal explained, “I don’t think it’s right to talk about kids in groups because I don’t think it matters what group you’re in if you’re not achieving. You’re not achieving as an individual” (SGS7-P). Another added, “It doesn’t matter where they come from. You can pull them up … You can’t look at your population and say they’re never going to get it” (SGS1-AP). The principals and other staff members of SG schools consistently focused on the achievement of individual students as opposed to merely stopping at subgroups of students. As one principal stated, “You have to look at every group that comes to the school, but then you have to look beyond the groups at individuals to see what individuals accomplish” (SGS1-P). Perhaps the SG schools evolved past an initial stage of understanding diversity issues and recognizing the inequities that exist in today’s schools:

> We can’t let it be an excuse, we can’t let it be blame, and it has nothing to do with race or anything, literally. You can be from any nationality or any race and come from an abusive family…or from extreme poverty where you are fighting day to day just to eat. How can you expect a kid wanting to come to school bright-eyed and chipper wanting to learn, when they have seen their mother get beat the night before. So we talk about things from a home life perspective, but it never goes into race or anything like that. (SGS7-P)
>
> We’re looking for each child, regardless of what his/her background is, to show growth. We want them to meet the benchmarks and the expectations … regardless of disability, or background or race, or whatever it might be. (SGS4–ET)
>
> [These teachers] give special attention to your children … if your child has a problem, they’re going to let you know it. They just seem so willing to work with each individual child. (SGS4-PL)
>
> Even [students] coming from homes that are mobile and you have one parent or no parents, and you’ve got all that’s going on at home that’s just not good: If you provide the means for success in the class, and send them home with materials or provide in the classroom for computer work, you can make it happen here. (SGS6-ET)

In contrast, the majority of LG schools did frequently discuss race and the gaps in achievement and, in stark contrast, seemed to focus on individual students to a substantially lower degree. In addition to a lack of specific strategies, three LG schools made comments that were clearly anti-individualization. For example, one participant stated to a teacher at the school, “We are seeing that your black pupils are not doing well, and this is the second year or third year” (LGS2-AP) and another added “We have to have an understanding that there is economic diversity, and there is racial diversity, and we’ve got to talk about it in order to make sure that all children are successful” (LGS7-P) This may sound like encouraging rhetoric in addressing the achievement gap. However, going back to what one of the principals from the SG schools stated earlier, “They are not achieving as individuals. We need to go beyond subgroups of students.” To some readers, the difference in SG schools and the LG schools might seem like a mere matter of semantics. However, these passionate quotes quite specifically depict the SG schools staff as being persistent in their education of all students and realizing that absent parents or an unstable home is not an excuse for a child to fail. These schools modified their actions to help *all* students achieve. They speak the language of academic optimism—the actions of the educators are a greater force than the background of the student. This language was absent from the LG schools.

Implications for Practice

Many people, including some educators, still believe that factors such as genetic deficiency, class differences, family background, and access to learning opportunities at home are the most reliable predictors of school achievement. With this view, schools can excuse themselves from any responsibility for inequities and gaps between student

subgroups. However, with this study of "Honor Schools of Excellence" that teach similar populations of students from similar geographical regions and with similar resources and yet yield such different academic results, it is impossible to ignore the importance and the impact of schools in general and school leadership in particular. This study provides leaders with data that moves beyond demographics to support school-level characteristics that can and do make a difference in student achievement. Results indicate that, at least on a preliminary level, pursuing, supporting, and advancing a culture of academic optimism may be an effective strategy in closing achievement gaps.

Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy's (2006) initial research documented quantitatively that academic optimism makes a significant contribution to high school students' achievement, even after controlling for demographic variables and previous achievement. Findings from this two-phase empirical study add rich, descriptive, qualitative data to the theory's application to elementary schools. Results indicate that student achievement can be influenced by academic optimism when the following conditions are supported, modeled, and monitored by school leaders:

1) A teamwork approach. In schools where a combination of staff, students, families, and community members work together to support student achievement, the outcomes of interest are better. This approach includes identifying individual students' needs, seeking out the best candidate for a position, and supporting student behavior.

2) A balanced approach. In schools where principals "walk the talk," the outcomes of interest are better. This balance of espoused and enacted values

applies to student discipline, instructional feedback and support, and data-driven decision-making.

3) A strong sense of purpose. In schools where all actions are directly related to student achievement, the outcomes of interest are better. This applies to the recognition and encouragement of academic success, to the visibility of the principal, and to the use of data-driven decision-making to influence teaching and learning.

4) An insistent disposition. In schools where the principal serves as an advocate for instructional practices that are respectful and responsive, regardless of expectations or mandates that could otherwise serve as barriers to student achievement, the outcomes of interest are better. This applies to hiring only the best candidates, to advocating for a student-centered instructional practices, and, finally, to insisting upon excellence for every child, as measured by growth (versus grade-level proficiency).

Excellence without equity simply reinforces and reproduces the hegemonic practices that plague so many schools across our nation. Without accounting for equity, excellence is merely a title that fulfills a flawed political mandate. In a nation that prides itself in “liberty and justice for all” and bathes itself in political mandates to “leave no child behind,” we have to honor excellence by embracing equity. A school culture that perpetuates the status quo and turns a blind eye to the social injustices that permeate our schools is not really “excellent.” As such, excellence and equity must be pursued concurrently to assure that all students are served well and that all are encouraged to perform at their highest level.

[Note: Two limitations of this study include: 1) the principal selected the four other individuals to whom the researchers had access and 2) the categorization as a SG school or a LG school was known by the interviewers before data was collected. Future research can mitigate these flaws through random sampling techniques and a double-blind design strategy (i.e., subjects and researchers are kept *blind* to the type of school until the data-collection phase of the research is over).]

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

(modified slightly for interviewee audience such as Principals, Assistant Principals, Teachers, and Parent Leaders – all interviewees were asked the exact same 8 questions)

1) Describe _______ K-5 Elementary School. What makes it a “School of Excellence?” Has it always been a “School of Excellence?” Why/why not? How? How do you define excellence? What are your goals? Values?

2) Describe YOUR philosophy of education and schooling and how it impacts YOUR leadership style. What is your focus? Mission?

3) How do you recruit, retain, and support good teachers and good teaching? What are your expectations for your school’s curriculum? What are your expectations for your school’s instructional program? For professional development? Evaluations?

4) Talk about your students and your expectations for their success (academic achievement and personal development). Any discipline issues?

5) Are parents/families involved in your school? Why/why not? How? Is the community involved? Why/why not? How?

6) What are some of the major challenges facing your school community and how do you go about addressing them? How are decisions made? How are resources allocated? Do you use data? How?

7) Do you ever discuss issues of race, class, and/or diversity with the teachers, parents, students, and/or community members? Why/why not? How? ? Do you discuss gaps?

8) Is there anything else we should know about _______ K-5 Elementary School and what makes it a “School of Excellence?”

Appendix B Sample Verbatim Transcript

(Same Interviewer BJ with Principal Interviewees from LGS8-P and SGS2-P)

Interview with the Principal at LGS8-P

INTERVIEWER BJ: What makes this school a School of Excellence? In your opinion? What do you think? Also, how do you define 'excellence?'

LGS8-P: Well, you know, when you look at Schools of Excellence you can look at the *criteria that's set aside by the Department of Public Instruction* **[Phase 1 Code: AE, Phase 2 Theme: Instructional Feedback].** You know that's…I think that's only a part of it, because especially being an Honor School of Excellence, because that means you've met your AYP stuff … But to me a School of Excellence is more than just doing well on EOGs … And I battle with it. I mean, I really, really battle with it, because when I surveyed the parents before the school opened and said, "What is the most important thing for your children's education?" Their response to me overwhelmingly, was, "I want my kids to be happy." They did not say anything about their child's education. Not one thing … To me, it really is making sure that everybody is happy and everybody really is learning. And it's a goal. *I mean it's not 100 percent all the time with all the kids. It's not even 100 percent with…you know what I'm saying. It's not even 100 percent with a portion of them all the time. It's hit or miss* **[Phase 1 Code: AE, Phase 2 Theme: Expect Excellence].** Some days are better than other days, but I think it's real, real important that you keep your perspective, and there are things that go on in schools that are not good. So I think trying to keep your perspective on education, and keeping your perspective on what the job is, and what the school's about, because one of the things that I tell people that work here all the time is, "Don't circle those wagons and shoot at each other. If you can't say anything nice, just don't say anything at all." And that goes for the parents too. My PTA board, I'm real clear with them about the fact that…you know we've got warts, we don't need to share them with everybody. We need to talk about what we do well, because other people will talk about what we don't do well. So I think it's a combination of a lot of different things. And you know what, if you believe it, it sort of becomes the reality.

INTERVIEWER BJ: Right.

LGS8-P: You know the organization. *If people believe that we're great, then we're great.* And we all of a sudden start attracting really great teachers that want to come work here, and really great people that…you know it's funny how that happens. I mean it's just about starting out by saying *"Don't go out of here and say anything negative about this school, ever. Ever!" And they don't* **[Phase 1 Code: CE, Phase 2 Theme: Clear Vision].** They don't go out of here saying anything negative. So that's what a School of Excellence is about …

INTERVIEWER: I understand.
LGS8-P: Good, so I told you what a School of Excellence is, good.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, yeah, you did. Talk to me about just your philosophy of education and how that philosophy impacts your leadership style.

Interview with the Principal at SGS2-P

INTERVIEWER BJ: OK, thank you. Um, talk about what makes Upper Providence in your opinion a School of Excellence?

SGS2-P: There's a lot of things. Um, but it really comes back to what I would say is *a collective effort by everyone who's connected to the school* **[Phase 1 Code: CE, Phase 2 Theme: Together Attitude]** [including front office, staff, teachers, assistants, parents, custodians, administrative team, specialists, volunteers, etc.] … when you put that all together, that makes us very strong. One of the things I was thinking about that I think we do a lot of, and we're still getting better at this, I wouldn't say we're where we'd like to be, and that is kind of *a professional learning community.* We do a lot of those things without the namesake.

INTERVIEWER BJ: Right.

SGS2-P: But I think trying to get to the point where *we do more and more focus on the learning rather than teaching* **[Phase 1 Codes: AE and CE, Phase 2 Themes: Monitor Instruction and Clear Vision of Learning].** OK, what are doing? What are they learning? How are we measuring that? *Learning how to measure, learning how to use that data in a very supportive way for kids* **[Phase 1 Code: CE, Phase 2 Theme: Data-based Decisions].** *A philosophy of leaning more toward prevention and remediation* **[Phase 1 Codes: AE and CE, Phase 2 Themes: Monitor Instruction and Clear Vision of Learning]**, there's a lot more success in the way we hired our staff. For instance we got a *literacy teacher* in, because when you're highly successful you only get 5 months from a half time person. Well, that's not good enough. So I worked to get her here full time for the last 4 or 5 years, and *do a lot of prevention*, so that at least that reading will not be the issue when we get into 3rd grade … *there's no reason for them to be struggling* **[Phase 1 Codes: AE and FT, Phase 2 Themes: Expect Excellence and Individualize Instruction]** … I think our reading indicates that we're doing some things right. Our intermediate teachers are expanding their knowledge with good practices, as far as a balanced literacy program. We've also got a system-wide reading trainer right here on our staff who does workshops in writing and in reading.

INTERVIEWER BJ: That's great. Can you talk about how you define excellence? What does that mean to you?

SGS2-P: Um. I think we can all look ourselves in the mirror and say that *we're doing the very best that we're capable of doing for a student that is struggling* **[Phase 1 Codes: AE and FT, Phase 2 Themes: Expect Excellence and Individualize Instruction]**, and they can also look in the mirror, and say, "Look, I've really tried my best, and I'm seeing personal growth and I'm feeling personal growth." It really has to come down to *a personal desire to model what we're expecting of kids*. We want them to be *life-long learners.* That seems very cliché, but in as much as life-long learning is a love for learning, just a life-long of love, that they want to learn. They've been I guess *brain-washed with the philosophy that learning is indeed fun* **[Phase 1 Code: CE, Phase 2 Theme: Clear Vision of Learning]**, and one of those functions that should become very close to our heart as we grow up. And it is something for us, to be successful we have to be learners … we have to do that through *multiple means* … but success is also the affective side. And if it isn't there, then we've failed in our mission to be successful.

INTERVIEWER BJ: All right. Good. Thank you. Can you talk a little bit about just what your goals and values are and how that philosophy impacts your leadership style?

Table 1: Principals' Demographic Information

School	Gender	Age	Race	Years at School	Years of Educational Experience
SGS1	F	48	W	3	26
SGS2	M	51	W	7	30
SGS3	F	59	W	7	27
SGS4	F	45	W	3	21
SGS5	F	41	W	4	14
SGS6	F	61	W	9	39
SGS7	M	32	W	3	12
SGS8	F	35	W	3	15
		@ 47 years		@ 5 years	@ 23 years

School	Gender	Age	Race	Years at School	Years of Educational Experience
LGS1	M	60	W	25	30
LGS2	F	48	W	8	25
LGS3	F	58	W	4	36
LGS4	M	55	W	14	29
LGS5	M	34	W	3	11
LGS6	F	53	W	14	28
LGS7	F	49	W	8	24
LGS8	F	52	B	6	30
		@ 51 years		@ 10 years	@ 27 years

Table 2: Achievement Equity Data for Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS) – Average data set for 2004-05

	% of minority students profic	% of F&R students profic	% of L.E.P. students profic	% of students w/disab profic	% of students w/parent w/no college profic	% of all students profic in 2000	% of all students profic in 2005	Growth from 2000 to 2005 (6 years)
SGS Range	**83.2%** 80.5-87.1	**80.1%** 65.0-85.7	**72.1%** 42.9-91.7	**72.8%** 54.3-91.8	**75.1%** 57.1-90.0	**82.3%** 70.5-89.4	**94.1%** 91.3-96.8	**+ 11.8** 4.1-21.7
LGS Range	**72.0%** 64.6-78.4	**70.7%** 59.2-82.2	**64.9%** 28.6-93.2	**67.9%** 59.0-79.1	**61.8%** 42.9-93.3	**86.6%** 80.5-91.5	**92.1%** 90.3-94.1	**+ 5.5** 0.7-11.8
GAPS	**11.2%**	**9.4%**	**7.2%**	**4.9%**	**13.3%**	**NA**	**NA**	**+ 6.3**
District	76.9%	68.8%	56.2%	61.1%	NA	NA	90.4%	NA

[Note: 95% of all students in all 24 schools were tested.]

Table 3: Emergent Themes

Some SIMILARITIES (with subtle differences) in "Achieving Excellence" in Honor Schools of Excellence

- In both SGS and LGS
- Regardless of gaps

A) Achievement is a Collective, Collaborative Effort
B) Highly Qualified Teachers who Share the Same Vision are Recruited and Hired
C) Safe and Orderly Environments are the Norm
D) The State Curriculum is Non-Negotiable

Noteworthy DIFFERENCES in "Honoring Excellence" in Honor Schools of Excellence

- Between SGS and LGS
- Based on gaps

AO Theme #1: Principals Set the Stage by Recognizing, Encouraging, and Celebrating Academic Achievement

Academic Emphasis = Recognize, encourage, and celebrate academic achievement
Collective Efficacy = Faculty values these practices
Faculty Trust = Parents have high expectations too

AO Theme #2: Principals Closely Monitor Teaching and Learning by Offering Specific Instructional Feedback and Support

Academic Emphasis = Monitor, evaluate, model, provide development and support
Collective Efficacy = Clear vision of teaching and learning with together attitude
Faculty Trust = Parental presence promotes pressure and accountability

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AO Theme #3: Principals Expect Excellence from Each and Every Student

Academic Emphasis = Expect excellence and measure growth
Collective Efficacy = Data-based decision-making
Faculty Trust = Individualize instruction that looks beyond race

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Notes

[1] Self-efficacy beliefs influence how people think, feel, and act through four different processes: (a) cognitive, (b) motivational, (c) affective, and (d) selection processes. For a more detailed analysis of self-efficacy, see Bandura (1993).

[2] The district involved in this study is unique in its focus to keep most schools balanced by subgroups of students identified under NCLB. Approximately 20 years ago, the school board modified its racial-desegregation plan by replacing racial considerations with a new student assignment plan based on a combination of SES and academic performance. Accordingly, no school may have more than 40% of its students eligible for subsidized lunches or more than 25% of its students scoring below grade level on standardized tests. This approach actively resists the demographic trends toward high-poverty, low-performing schools by making decisions based on students' need rather than their race. As a result, the schools in this study have a population of minority students that ranges from 18% to 60% of the total school population. While this demographic trend is not representative of many districts or many schools in districts that essentially remain segregated, it does provide a unique opportunity to study and compare what is actually happening (or not happening) in schools that are similar demographically.