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Success Despite Socioeconomics: A Case Study of a High-Achieving, High-Poverty School

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Success Despite Socioeconomics:
A Case Study of a High-Achieving, High-Poverty School

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Abstract

Effective school leadership is becoming more difficult than ever with the challenges of increased accountability and high stakes testing that are components of federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. These challenges are more pronounced in schools with high rates of poverty. This was a case study of a high performing, high poverty school that has consistently been one of the highest performing elementary schools in the state. The purpose of the study was to describe the leadership that exists at the school, the culture of the school, and programs that contribute to the school's success. The researcher conducted observations at the school site and interviews with school personnel. School personnel also completed the School Culture Survey and the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED). The study revealed school leadership that had high expectations for staff members and emphasized small group instruction, collaboration, and continuous improvement in instructional practices. The culture of the school was that of excellence, continuous improvement, school pride, and collaboration.

Keywords: leadership, high performing schools, poverty, culture, collaboration

Success Despite Socioeconomics:

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The State of Florida, as part of its accountability system for public schools, assigns grades to schools based on student performance on standardized achievement tests. In 2009-2010, all but one of the 96 elementary schools that were rated D or F were high-poverty schools (Florida Department of Education, 2010). This strong correlation between poverty and low academic achievement has been well documented. For example, Harris (2007) found that only 1% of high-poverty schools consistently perform in the top third of their state and that low-poverty schools are 89 times more likely to achieve in the top third than high-poverty schools. Overall, low-income students tend to be lower achievers academically and more likely to drop out of school than their higher income counterparts (Taylor, 2005).

As a result of findings such as these, studies have been conducted regarding high-achieving, high-poverty schools. These studies have contributed to the knowledge base about effective educational leadership, particularly leadership in high-poverty schools. However, no studies have been conducted to assess the leadership, culture, and programs at high-performing, high-poverty schools in Florida since the advent of the accountability movement and the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). Thus, this qualitative study examined in depth a school that bridged the gap, achieving at a high level despite a high-poverty rate. For the purposes of this study, high-poverty schools are

defined as those with greater than 50% of students being eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch (Illinois Board of Education, 2001; University of Texas at Austin, 2002).

Background

The link between poverty and low academic achievement is so pervasive that some educators have resigned themselves to the consideration that effort and hard work are not enough, that the effects of socioeconomic factors are too strong and schools cannot in isolation overcome them (Levin, 2007). However, some high poverty schools have overcome the effects of poverty through careful planning, effective leadership, and the combined efforts of administration, teachers, parents, students, and staff (Harris, 2007). Some key leadership factors have been identified that are frequently present in effective, high-achieving schools, as well as actions commonly taken by effective school leaders. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty's (2005) meta-analysis of educational leadership studies led to the conclusion that there is a significant correlation between leadership and student achievement.

In a specific study of high-achieving, high-poverty schools, Kitchen, DePree, Celedon-Pattichis, and Brinkerhoff (2004) sought to identify the characteristics that contribute to school success, to identify teacher beliefs, knowledge, and practices about curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and to determine the impact of technology resources. They identified seven characteristics of highly effective schools:

1. Teaching and learning are prioritized to support high academic expectations.
2. Supplemental support is provided for student learning
3. A strong and well defined sense of purpose is present in the faculty.

4. Faculty members collaborate and support each other.
5. An explicit focus on test preparation is present.
6. Teaching resources are available.
7. Teachers have regular access to professional development opportunities.

While one would assume that effective schools would display most, if not all, of these characteristics, it is uncertain whether these factors are the only ones that set apart highly effective high-poverty schools from the rest. Highly effective high-poverty schools will undoubtedly display many of the leadership and culture characteristics described in the aforementioned literature. Yet to be determined is the degree to which those characteristics are displayed and if any other critical or pertinent characteristics are evident in highly effective high-poverty schools.

Method

For a qualitative case study of this nature, a formal hypothesis is typically not developed prior to the study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Therefore, a grounded theory methodology was implemented instead, which involved collecting data from multiple sources, coding, grouping the codes to identify themes, and forming theories to explain the phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After conducting extensive observations at the school, holding interviews with administration and staff, and analyzing surveys completed by staff members, the researcher was able to describe the leadership and culture present in this high performing school.

Three questions guided the study:

1. What components of school and instructional leadership exist?
2. What is the culture?

3. What programs or other factors contribute to the school's success?

The setting selected for this case study was Cinco Elementary School—a pseudonym for a rural north Florida school that has achieved an A grade on the state accountability grading system for seven consecutive years. In addition, the school has achieved 100% of its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals in accordance with federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. During that same time period, the school has performed in the top 15% of all Florida elementary schools and has performed in the top 7% of all high-poverty elementary schools in the state. The school serves a rural population with approximately 64% of its students qualifying for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Approximately 88% of the student population is Caucasian, 7% is African American, and 5% is mixed race or other ethnicities. Currently, 11% of the population (79 students excluding gifted and speech) receive special education services and have active Individual Education Plans (IEPs). There are two English Language Learners (ELL) at the school.

On-site observations of the following routine events were conducted: academic activities, school and community events, and meetings of the faculty, staff, grade-level teams, and leadership. In so doing, the researcher was able to fill the role of participant-observer. In this role, the researcher observed and interacted closely with participants without engaging in activities that were at the core of the group's identity (Stake, 1995). Field notes were gathered to document data from the observations. An observation protocol (Appendix A) helped clarify the data gathered during the observations.

Interviews. Administrators and teachers were interviewed to gain insight into the leadership, culture, and programs of the school. Interview questions grounded in the

literature addressed the guiding questions of the study. (See Appendix B.) Participants included school administrators, faculty, and other school personnel with professional school experience ranging from less than one year to 34 years. Three were new teachers (zero to five years' experience), four were teachers with a moderate level of experience (five to 10 years), and four were veteran teachers (10 or more years of experience).

Survey. The first of two surveys administered was The School Culture Survey (Valentine & Greunert, 1999). It provided information about collaboration, collegial support, professional development, learning partnerships, and unity of purpose. There were 35 survey items that were rated on a Likert scale from one to five. The survey has reliability coefficients for each factor of the survey ranging from 0.65 to 0.91.

The second survey, the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED; Condon & Clifford, 2010), assessed principal leadership in six processes of leadership: high standards of learning, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and performance accountability. In the aforementioned areas, respondents rated the principal on a Likert scale from one to five. VAL-ED has a 0.98 alpha reliability coefficient (Condon & Clifford, 2010).

Document analysis. In addition to the analysis of school-wide data, standardized achievement test scores were disaggregated by grade level, student disability, and qualification for free or reduced lunch. Other documents, such as the school improvement plan, mission statement, and newsletters provided a comprehensive view of the sample school.

Data Analysis

Case data were subjected to both interpretational and reflective analyses. Interpretational analysis is the process of examining “case study data closely in order to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 466). To accomplish this, data from observations, interviews, and surveys were coded according to the four primary categories of leadership, instruction, culture, and programs. A fifth category entitled “other factors” was also included. In reflective analysis, the researcher relies “primarily on intuition and judgment in order to portray or evaluate the phenomenon being studied” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 472). Because of the nature of the study and the extensive use of observations, evaluation of field notes, and personal interviews, reflective analysis was utilized.

Findings and Discussion

Participants

The three categories of participants in this study were: (a) all students and school personnel, (b) faculty who replied to either of the two surveys, and (c) the 11 school personnel who were interviewed. The first category of participants, all students and school personnel, were observed during normal activities throughout the duration of the observation. Observation settings included classrooms, the general school, parent involvement events, and meetings of the faculty, staff, leadership, and grade-level teams.

Faculty that replied to the two surveys comprised the second category of participants. These participants voluntarily and anonymously completed the surveys. Participants were certified teachers at the school with work experience ranging from 1 to 34 years. Of the 50 School Culture Surveys that were distributed, 36 were completed for

a completion rate of 72%. Of the 30 staff members that were selected to complete the VAL-ED online survey, 16 were completed for a completion rate of 53%. The 30 teachers were randomly selected and provided an anonymous login to the VAL-ED online survey.

The final category of participants included 11 members of the instructional staff who consented to an interview. All participants in the interviews were certified educators with experience ranging from two to 34 years. All of the participants were female and included classroom teachers, a reading coach, an assistant principal, and the principal.

Components of School and Instructional Leadership

High expectations for students and staff. Several clear themes about school and instructional leadership emerged from interviews with staff members, survey results, and observations at the school. A primary finding was the high expectations of the principal for student achievement, teacher performance, and professional growth.

Teachers described the high standards set by the principal in terms of student achievement. The expectations focus on the actions that a teacher should take to ensure learning and improvement for all students. The assistant principal, Ms. Lynn, explained the constant drive for improvement and high expectations held by the principal, Ms. Royal: “She is always striving for improvement. She’ll say, ‘We’re an A school, OK, let’s make it better.’” Ms. Black, the Reading Coach, stated that the principal “knows exactly what it takes for students to succeed and to make the progress that is needed. She is very knowledgeable about good teaching, and she expects it to be evident in teachers’ classrooms.”

On the VAL-ED survey, the Summary of Core Components in the area of High Standards for Student Learning, Ms. Royal received a mean rating of 4.33 on a five point Likert scale, which is in the 96th percentile of school leaders and is considered in the highest range of all leaders evaluated. The survey results lend support to the conclusion that the principal has high standards and expectations for student learning. Staff members perceived the expectations as a contributing factor to the school's success.

The principal's standard made it unacceptable for any student to fail to show improvement or to learn. The expectation was that every teacher would do all he or she could to improve as a teacher, to try different methods to help students learn, and to find ways to motivate, inspire, and encourage their students to achieve. Most teachers related that the principal clearly communicated the message that being complacent was not sufficient. According to the principal, teachers were expected to look continuously for ways to improve.

The principal's expectations had a tremendous effect on the teachers and staff at Cinco. Her expectations influenced the attitudes and actions of the teachers—in particular, the approach to teaching their students and their expectations for what students could achieve. It was evident that the expectations of the principal had a positive effect on the teachers' willingness to take ownership of the success of their students and to strive to improve.

Collaboration. Teachers at Cinco identified collaboration as a critical factor to school success and a strong component of the principal's leadership. Although the development of such collaboration took place over several years, collaboration had not always functioned like it did under Principal Royal. Ms. Topper recalled that

collaboration efforts at the school began with the development of common assessments to ensure that every student at each grade level was being assessed in the same way.

It started several years ago with the development of common assessments, giving the same chapter or unit tests to all students in the same grade. She asked us to plan together, asked us to develop common tests and be on the same page in our grade level. We didn't have to teach it the same way because we have different personalities and styles, but we should be on same pace and on same page as a group. It started from there, with common tests.

Veteran teachers recognized the differences between the current and previous administration. The environment transformed from one with little collaboration to one where collaboration was encouraged and expected. Collaboration greatly influenced the growth and improvement of the teachers at Cinco. One teacher, Ms. Tin, details her experience:

Collaboration between teachers is expected, it's not an option. When I started here there was no collaboration at all. No ideas being shared; everybody did things their own way. Collaboration is good for new teachers because it helps them learn. It also helps veteran teachers because it brings new ideas. Sometimes all the collaboration—weekly—is a bit much because of all the things that I have to do. But I think weekly contact is necessary for us to share and learn.

Despite common assessments, collaboration, and common planning, the manner of instructional methodology varied. Ms. Rain characterized the autonomy she sensed:

We do still have our own individuality, but we work together. I sometimes have a hard time with all of the teamwork, but I still have the liberty to do things

individually, to do the things that work with my kids in my classroom. We teach the same things, same concepts, but we do them different ways, and we share ideas to get better.

Collaboration most frequently took the form of weekly grade level meetings. During meetings, teachers discussed ideas about upcoming lessons and units. They shared resources and activities that had been used in the past, and they brainstormed about other ways to teach. Ms. Lynn recounted how grade level meetings changed from information dissemination and complaining sessions to opportunities for growth.

On the VAL-ED survey, Culture of Learning and Professional Behavior was rated 4.49 on a 5-point Likert scale, which ranked the principal in the 93rd percentile of evaluated school leaders. According to the survey's rating system, this rating placed the principal in the distinguished category, the highest rating possible. On the School Culture Survey, the two statements that had the highest mean rating on the 5-point Likert scale were "Teachers are willing to help out whenever there is a problem" and "Leaders in our school facilitate teachers working together," each with a mean score of 4.61. The next highest rated item on the survey was "Teachers are encouraged to share ideas," with a mean score of 4.58. These statements illustrate the value of and emphasis placed on collaboration at Cinco Elementary.

Knowledgeable instructional leader. The teachers at Cinco characterized the principal as having a high level of knowledge about curriculum and effective teaching. The principal is a hands-on leader in classroom instruction, often working with a teacher or group of teachers to develop lessons, learning centers, or instructional games and materials. Teachers respected the principal's willingness to get personally involved and

help them plan activities. They were confident in her knowledge due to the success of the strategies that she had helped them implement. Ms. Black expounded on the principal's knowledge of effective teaching:

She knows exactly what it takes for students to succeed and to make the progress that is needed. She gives helpful hints, suggestions, and ideas along the way about how to do it and gives them a chance to take care of it on their own. When that doesn't work, she steps in and shows them how to do it. If not, they're not going to get any better.

Ms. Black also shared some of the principal's strategies for helping teachers improve. She talked about a recent time when the principal had identified areas for improvement with several teachers and planned for them to observe other teachers.

She gets a lot out of her walkthrough observations. She gave me a list Friday and said these were the ones that I needed to cover their classes so they could go and observe other teachers, which is invaluable. In her walkthrough, she had pinpointed several things that needed attention. She doesn't get all bent out of shape if they're struggling with something new and we're trying to learn it and trying to make it work. But things that are basic and fundamental to good teaching, they get her attention right away.

The principal demonstrated a strong combination of knowledge of the curriculum, effective instructional strategies, and a willingness and ability to help teachers plan and create lessons and activities to help students learn. These skills directly improved the quality of instruction at Cinco.

Emphasis on small group instruction. The principal's emphasis on small group instruction and differentiation for struggling students was one of the foremost components of her leadership style. Implementing the small-group instructional model, classes were divided into three to five learning groups. One group was a teacher-led group. Teachers often arranged their groups according to ability level or skills and concepts in which students were deficient. In the teacher-led group, the teacher worked with students on specific skills or areas of need. Another example was a computer group in which students practiced skills on websites or on instructional software. Others were groups led by parent volunteers or groups of students playing a game to reinforce skills they had already learned. Occasionally, one of the other groups would be an independent reading group, a listening station for reading, or an independent work group.

Teachers noted that when the school became a Reading First participant, the result was an emphasis on small-group reading instruction. Ms. Topper talked about the implementation of small group instruction at that time:

When we started Reading First in K-3, the principal had to really push the teachers to implement small group instruction. She was very assertive. She told us that she knew that we'd never done literacy centers, but we were going to get trained on how to do them, and she was going to buy the materials to put into them. She stressed to us the importance of small group time and differentiated instruction. She told us that this was effective practice, and something that we were all going to do. When we saw results, she took it right into the intermediate grades.

After seeing the success of small group instruction in reading, the principal pushed for the program to be used in other subject areas. Many teachers had initial frustrations with being expected to design lessons that included small group instruction and differentiated activities for students. Ms. O'Hara, a second grade teacher, voiced the frustrations of many of the teachers:

Teaching in small groups and differentiating, the way Ms. Royal wanted us to, was very different than most of us had ever taught before. If we had used small groups in the past, it wasn't in the way that she wanted it to be done now. Before, small groups were simply chances for cooperative learning. Now, Ms. Royal wanted small group to be for the purpose of reteaching and reinforcing skills that we had already taught, as well as giving us an opportunity to work with a small group of students to address deficiencies and more closely monitor their progress.

Despite initial frustration, the teachers quickly saw impressive results and they too became believers in the method. Small group instruction soon spread from reading to other subjects, and the emphasis on elevating the struggling students became each teacher's passion.

Accountability for teachers. The principal's emphasis on collaboration, small group instruction, differentiation for struggling students, knowledge of curriculum and effective instructional practices, and expectation that they be used were enveloped in the theme of accountability. Teachers were held accountable for nearly everything, and they all reported a feeling of accountability for student performance on FCAT and SAT 10. Ms. Tin gives some examples:

We're accountable with our lesson plans each week, and certainly our FCAT scores. She expects to see what's in your plans to be in your instruction during class. However, because of all that we're asked to do, it's impossible to do all that we're supposed to do at the level that's expected. So, if you want to find fault, you can find it. But I think she understands that we can't do it all. She places higher priority on instruction and the things that matter versus more petty or insignificant things; she expects us to prioritize.

Teachers were held accountable for their professionalism, including punctuality, dealing with parents appropriately, personal dress code, and meeting deadlines on time. They were also accountable for student Accelerated Reader achievement, improvement on baseline testing, implementation of effective teaching strategies as observed in classroom visits, and significant attention to the lowest performing students in terms of differentiation. They were expected to handle their professional responsibilities and complete them at a high level. Not to do so risked an address by the principal. Ms. Rain explains:

If you have issues, you will have a discussion with the principal. Depending on the issue, she may be in your room more often. If parents come to her with concerns, she may check on you more frequently to see if the concern is valid.

The principal had high expectations for all teachers and held them accountable to meeting all of their professional responsibilities.

Focus on teaching and learning. The teachers recognized how critical instructional focus was to the principal, and they believed that it was a major reason for the school's success. When asked about the school's success, teachers spoke about how

common planning, collaboration, and the development of common assessments and instructional pacing guides allowed them to pinpoint areas of student weakness, refine their teaching, and share ideas more readily. There was an emphasis on identifying how state standards were taught as well as how they were assessed. The teachers tried to incorporate questions into their lessons that were written and worded like those on the FCAT. Ms. Tin delineates this process:

We spend a lot of time creating activities that prepare our students for the FCAT.

When we make tests, we use questions that are in FCAT format. When we create games and activities for small groups and centers, we are mindful of the way that FCAT skills are assessed.

Teachers identified vertical planning between grade levels as important and as a critical aspect of instructional leadership. Grade level teachers came together to plan and identify gaps in student learning. Through open conversation, they talked about student needs and shared ideas about how best to meet those needs and fill the gaps in instruction. On the School Culture Survey, the statement “Teachers have opportunities for dialogue and planning across grades and subjects” had an average rating of 4.25 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating strong agreement from the faculty.

The principal’s emphasis on literacy was another theme that permeated teacher discussion of teaching and learning. Ms. Black shares with new teachers that a literacy rich environment in the classroom was one of the principal’s non-negotiable items. She said, “I tell new teachers that . . . one [non-negotiable] is having a literacy rich environment; get it up on the walls, get it where they can see it, get some student work up.”

Culture

Pride. Faculty and staff at Cinco Elementary took an immense amount of pride in the school, the students, and the job they did each day. Observations revealed that school pride was evident across the entire campus. One immediately noticeable area was the excellently maintained grounds and immaculate facilities. Inside the building, everything was clean, well maintained, and orderly. The emphasis on a clean and welcoming school environment was evident throughout the school.

After a parent event, several hundred chairs needed to be stacked and stored and tables needed to be collapsed to prepare for lunch the following day. Although no custodial staff was present to clean and set up, teachers and parents began stacking chairs and putting them away, while another teacher mopped the cafeteria floor. Teachers and parents worked together to put away tables so they would be ready for lunch the next day. The scene demonstrated the willingness of staff members and parents doing what needed to be done, regardless of the task or their assigned duties. Both staff members and parents demonstrated their school pride by cooperating and doing a little extra.

In classrooms, teachers worked to create an exciting and welcoming learning environment. Student work was displayed and celebrated throughout each classroom. Learning tools such as posters to remind students of skills, concepts, and rules were handmade by teachers and prominently displayed. Classrooms were bright and vibrant, showing that teachers cared about its appearance just as they cared about the students that came there to learn.

In conversations with staff members, their speech reflected school pride. Teachers quickly pointed out the tremendous accomplishments of their students' daily

work and in their FCAT performance. They also acknowledged their own roles in that achievement, citing the hard work it took to help students succeed. The comments were not arrogant; the teachers were humble about their roles in the school's success, while being proud of how they helped make it happen.

Although the teachers recognized that they were a small piece of the school's success, they all truly desired success for all students, not just their individual classes. On the School Culture Survey, the third highest rated items were "Teaching performance reflects the mission of the school" and "Teachers support the mission of the school" with mean ratings of 4.50.

Teachers' pride stemmed from the effort, commitment, and dedication they devoted to becoming great teachers. They recognized the expectations of the principal and worked hard to meet those expectations. The desire to see their students and their school succeed was strong enough to overcome any feelings of fatigue and frustration that may have resulted from the job. The pride and satisfaction of achieving at such a high level seemed to validate all of the struggles and pressures associated with the job.

Caring. An attitude of caring, which is closely tied to school pride, permeated the school and was a prominent aspect of school culture. Caring began with how the principal demonstrated her care for the students through words and actions. During observations, she was kind and concerned about their wellbeing. She also demonstrated that she cared about the success of the school by devoting a large amount of time to plan and prepare for school-related activities, such as modifying the instructional practices of fourth grade math teachers, purchasing items for the AR store, or cleaning up after a parent involvement event. Teachers and staff members commented that when they saw

her willingness to pitch in and help wherever she was needed, they knew that she truly cared. This also sent a message to others that it was important to show care and concern for the school and students.

Teachers exhibited that same level of caring when they discussed the jobs that they were given. They readily admitted that it was impossible to do their job at a satisfactory level by working only their contracted hours. Ms. Topper related the time requirements of being an effective teacher:

A lot of people today are still of the mindset that this is an easy profession, and it's not. You can't walk in here and clock in at 7:30 a.m. and go to class and leave at 3:00 p.m. and get the job done. It's a hard job, and it's very demanding. It takes a lot of preparation and a lot of planning to do the job right.

High expectations for staff and students. The leadership of the principal had a strong influence on the culture of the school. High expectations set for teachers and their students by the principal created a sense of urgency at the school as everyone strove to improve. In addition, the principal emphasized continuous improvement and avoidance of complacency in the teaching staff. These two aspects of the principal's leadership, high expectations and seeking continuous improvement, helped transform the school culture.

Teachers were pushed to work collaboratively and change teaching methods as necessary in order to employ the best practices for continuous improvement. Over time, teachers who were unwilling to share the principal's drive either chose to move to another school or job or were removed from the school for unsatisfactory work. The principal aspired to hire teachers who were motivated to excel and who had high

expectations for themselves and their students. Ms. Rain stated that the principal “has very high expectations for staff members. The ones that don’t have similarly high expectations for themselves and their students don’t last.”

Collaboration of teachers. Collaboration was a theme that quickly emerged in every interview conducted with Cinco teachers. They spoke of the importance that the principal placed on collaboration, describing its origin in a reading initiative and the development of common assessments several years ago. The level of appreciation for such extensive collaboration varied among interviewees. However, when asked about the influence of collaboration on teacher effectiveness and student learning, teacher opinion was nearly unanimous. Ms. O’Hara spoke positively about the effect of collaboration on her growth as a teacher:

Without my grade level teachers, I don’t think I ever would have made it. They taught me so much about working with students, about how to teach. Without that sharing, I probably would have survived, but I could never grow and excel like I have with their help.

Parent involvement. The final theme revealed from observations, interviews, and surveys was the involvement and support of parents. Parent involvement was evident in volunteerism at the school. Volunteers were utilized for academic support, working with students on reading and math skills, but not for administrative duties. Parent support was present for events after hours, such as the Read In, a night when the library was opened and parents were invited to come and read with their children. Another big event was Math Night, an event where a meal was provided for attendees and dozens of math games

and activities were available for students to participate in. Attendance at each of those events was in the hundreds.

Likewise, events like the fall festival, a carnival fundraiser for the school, were heavily attended. Bingo for Books was one of the most popular events. At this event, one of the school's business partners provided a meal free of charge for all that attended. Students played bingo to win books and each student went home with four or five new books.

Several teachers emphasized that parents were welcome at their school. They described the staff working to create an environment where parents felt welcomed, wanted, and needed. The large number of volunteers and high attendance at after school events supported that belief.

A related theme under parent involvement was communication. Teachers believed that effective communication was a major contributor to parent involvement and support. Parents were always made aware of what the students were doing and needed to do, most notably through weekly classroom newsletters. Teachers reported that they were required to send home a folder with each student once a week that included work samples and a newsletter. Every teacher interviewed praised the value of the newsletter in keeping parents informed. They all said that parent issues relating to lack of communication were rare because of the classroom newsletter.

School pride, a community of caring, high expectations, collaboration, and parent involvement were all factors that strongly shaped the culture of Cinco Elementary. Each was evident to a different degree, but they all blended to reinforce the commitment to student achievement and academic excellence that was the foundation of the school.

Other Contributing Factors

Supplemental academic support. Teachers and staff believed a number of programs were integral to student achievement and the success of the school. One of the most frequently mentioned programs was after school tutoring provided by paraprofessionals. One teacher shared that a few years ago some school personnel noticed that there was a long period of time after the students were dismissed when personnel were still on duty. Members of the leadership team collectively came up with an idea to use paraprofessionals to provide free tutoring services to students after school during four days each week; tutoring lasted for 45 minutes each day. Designed by the principal, assistant principal, and reading coach, and supervised by the reading coach, paraprofessionals used Carbo Reading in addition to teacher-developed materials to provide a framework for the instruction time. Student participation was voluntary and was only offered to students in third, fourth, and fifth grades, which are grades assessed by the FCAT. Every teacher interviewed mentioned this program as one that had a significant influence on student achievement and school success.

Accelerated reader and incentives. Every teacher interviewed also cited the Accelerated Reader program as having a significant and positive influence on student reading and achievement. Ms. Brown explained that at the beginning of the year, students were tested using the STAR Reading assessment, which provides a reading level for each student. They were then given individual goals for AR points for each nine week grading period. Students were encouraged to read and take tests in order to earn AR points. Teachers were also encouraged and recognized for their students' performance in AR.

School administration had established a number of ways to recognize student achievement in AR. The AR store was the most visible form of student recognition. Toys and prizes were available for students who have earned AR points from reading books. This was a great motivator for the students, and many teachers stated that the days that the AR store was open were some of the most anticipated of the school year.

Students were also recognized each nine weeks by the principal. Those with the top five totals in AR points at each grade level were treated to a lunch by the principal. Students were thrilled to have a chance to enjoy a meal with the principal as a reward for their achievement.

Teachers whose classes have top performers in AR were recognized at faculty meetings. The principal also recognized the teacher whose class made the greatest improvement in AR points compared with the previous grading period. The top classes had their pictures taken and placed on the bulletin board in the cafeteria. This recognition was motivation for teachers to encourage and inspire their students to read more. The principal held a very strong belief in the importance of literacy, and she said that “the ability to read is critical to student success in any subject area, so reading is a very strong area of emphasis in every grade level at our school.”

Websites and software. Teachers identified the use of the IXL Math website as another key to student success. The website was designed to address the Florida Sunshine State Standards and provided individualized learning activities for students based on their demonstrated skill level. Teachers viewed this as an invaluable tool for providing students additional practice opportunities to reinforce skills that were taught in class. Students enjoyed the program because it was computer based. It was also a

valuable tool for working with lower performing students. It allowed teachers to identify areas of weakness and provided students with immediate feedback about their progress when learning a particular math skill. The program was also valuable because students could access the website from home, allowing teachers to assign practice work to students with home computers. The IXL Math website was an excellent tool for identifying student needs and providing useful learning activities. When asked about programs that contributed to the school's success, IXL was mentioned by all but two interviewed teachers.

Small group instruction. Another essential to school success was small group instruction. Teachers spoke highly of its effect on student learning. In the small group instructional model, the class was divided into three to five learning groups, with one teacher-led group. Teachers often arranged their groups according to ability level or skill deficiencies. In the teacher-led group, the teacher worked with students on specific skills or areas of need. Another group was a computer group where students practiced skills on websites or instructional software. Others included groups of three to four students playing a game to reinforce previously learned skills, or a group led by a parent volunteer. Occasionally, one of the other groups may have been an independent reading group, a listening station for reading, or an independent work group.

There were many reasons that teachers at Cinco cited for the effectiveness of small group instruction. One of the reasons was that it gave students an opportunity to learn in different ways. Unlike whole group instruction, the design of small group instruction allowed students to be actively engaged in a learning activity. Students were observed playing games that reinforced skills, concepts, and facts that had already been

taught in reading, science, or math. Students enjoyed the games because they were unique, and a departure from sitting and listening to a teacher or completing questions from the text or a worksheet. Many of the games were not store-bought but were created by the teachers to ensure that the skills that the students practiced when playing the game addressed the necessary content.

The teachers also believed that small group instruction provided students the opportunity to work with instructional technology on classroom computers. Each classroom had three student computer stations, making computer activities for the whole class difficult. Utilizing small groups allowed a group of three students to work on a website or game that required them to practice a skill or concept. Meanwhile, other students were permitted to work in a teacher led group, play a learning game, or complete independent activities to practice skills and concepts.

The primary reason teachers cited for small group instruction success was the ability to work one on one or in small groups with students. Teachers believed that this let them quickly identify problems and allowed them to work closely with their students to solve those issues. Without frequent small group interaction with their students, many teachers feared they may not have known what their students needed to work on until they were tested, which could cost valuable instruction time.

Recommendations

As a result of this research, four recommendations were developed for school leaders. The first recommendation is that school leaders emphasize collaboration and instructional best practices. Review of previous literature in the field reveals the value of collaboration in the development of effective teachers and improvement of student

performance (Goldring, 2002; Habegger, 2008; Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007). This study supports those findings.

A second recommendation for school leaders is utilizing a leadership style with high expectations for student achievement and staff performance. Again, a review of related literature supports this assertion (Edmonds, 1979; Kitchen et al.; West, 1985). Without high expectations from a leader, it is impossible to ensure that the teachers will strive to achieve at a high level. With clear expectations, teachers are more likely to strive for improvement and ultimately excellence.

A third recommendation for school leadership is to create a culture of caring and pride in the school. This is consistent with the literature about creating a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement (Goldring, 2002; Habegger, 2008) and the positive effects of school pride (Van der Westhuitzen, Mosoge, Swanepoel, & Coetsee, 2005). The caring is twofold, caring for students and caring about the success and performance of the school. Caring teachers will strive to meet the high expectations that are set. They are also more likely to give extraordinary effort and commitment to teaching because of concern and care for the school and the students.

A final recommendation for effective school leadership is to identify a means of providing additional academic support to students. This was identified in the literature (Kitchen et al., 2004) as an important factor in the effectiveness of high poverty, high performing schools. Even with exceptional effort, school teachers and staff cannot provide everything that every student needs in a typical school day. Many students will need extra academic support outside of the time constraints of the school day.

Supplemental academic support for students fills a critical gap in the learning of many students.

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Appendix A: Observation Protocol

	Yes	No
1. The campus is clean and well kept.		
2. School awards and student work are on display throughout the school		
3. There is a sense of safety and security on campus		
4. There is a positive interaction between staff and administration		
5. There is positive school spirit displayed by staff and students		
6. Staff members are familiar with the vision of the school		
7. There are reward/recognition programs for staff and students		
8. Leadership style of the administration: Y-Distributive, facilitative N- Top down		
9. There is a positive interaction between staff, students, parents, and community		
10. There is positive interaction between staff and administration		
11. Administration is visible in all areas of the school		
12. The office is welcoming and friendly upon entry		
13. There are rituals and events throughout the year that recognize learning and social opportunities for the community		
14. Teachers are engaged in school activities		
15. The administration has positive interaction with students.		
16. There is a friendly and positive atmosphere in staff meetings		
17. Students are on task in classrooms		
18. Substitutes are considered instructors and academic work occurs when they are present		
19. Content standards for lessons are visible		
20. Students are aware of learning objectives		
21. Student work is displayed in the classroom		
22. Guided practice is observed in the classroom		
23. A variety of learning activities (whole group, small group, technology, hands on, projects) are utilized in classrooms		
24. High level questioning is evident during classroom observations		
25. Assessments demonstrate multiple measures to evaluate student work		

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Why is this school successful?
2. How is your school special, unique, different?
3. What type of support do you give?
4. What type of support do you receive?
5. How are decisions made?
6. What does communication look like among faculty and staff?
7. What does communication look like among school and parents?
8. How are people in the school recognized for accomplishments?
9. How is a new teacher oriented to the school?
10. Are there any programs in place that contribute to student learning?
11. How are they implemented? Top down/bottom up?
12. How do you see accountability in the school?
13. Why are students achieving?
14. Who do you view as school leaders? Why?
15. Describe which experiences and activities have the greatest impact on your teaching practice.
16. Describe which experiences and/or activities have the greatest impact on student achievement.
17. Describe which types of interactions with administration impact your teaching practices positively or negatively.
18. Describe which types of interactions with colleagues and other staff members impact your teaching practices positively or negatively.
19. What do you feel are the most important factors that have contributed to student learning at this school?