Case study on the journey of an elementary school labeled as a Persistently Low-Achieving School

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CASE STUDY ON THE JOURNEY OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
LABELED AS A PERSISTENTLY LOW-ACHIEVING SCHOOL

An Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Approved:

Dr. Jill Uhlenberg, Committee Co-Chair

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July 2012
ABSTRACT

This study examined an elementary school, located in an urban school district, which was labeled as a Persistently Low-Achieving School (PLAS) by the federal government in 2009 in order to determine how the school planned to change leadership and staff; increase student achievement; and implement new approaches for changes in school climate.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the response of this school in the following areas:

1. Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators: What impact did the PLAS label have on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building?
2. Curriculum and Academic Achievement: What impact did the PLAS label have on curriculum development in this school and plans for assessment of academic achievement?
3. Climate and Culture: What impact did the PLAS label have on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence?

This study was a qualitative case study. The method used for this case study involved researcher inquiry of the qualifying grant plan, school leadership, and teachers. The researcher investigated the school’s grant application including official plans for changes, transcripts of interviews with the administrators, and transcripts of interviews with teachers in order to research the steps the school is taking to raise student achievement. This study’s information was significant because the elementary school researched was the first of two elementary schools in its state to be given the PLAS designation. Schools to be labeled in the future will be searching for models of plans and ideas for implementation that will allow them to make changes in staff, achievement, and climate in order to work towards accelerating their academic performance.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

According to the Department of Education, beginning in 2009, all states were required to identify their persistently lowest-achieving schools based on results of No Child Left Behind’s (NCLB) standardized testing measures. This identification was done in order to determine which schools would receive funding and resources to use towards efforts to improve students’ academic success. In order to receive funding, identified schools had to make specific plans of action before applying for the funding. The funding was made available through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act’s State Fiscal Stabilization Fund as well as resources available from the No Child Left Behind Title 1 School Improvement Grant and the Race to the Top Grant. According to Kaye Pepper (2010):

The current spotlight of accountability has no doubt changed the focus of education in the United States. Goals of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, enacted in 2002 during the George H.W. Bush administration, were to close the gap that existed between the high- and low-achieving students in this nation and to insure that all students met academic proficiency levels. The basic concepts of this legislation—accountability for results, research-based education programs, increased parental options, and expanded local control and flexibility—are fundamental to the improvement of the educational system. (p. 42)

Pepper described the need for leadership in schools to be transformed to meet the high expectations of the NCLB act. Pepper’s study led her to review leadership and leadership styles in order to determine what leadership training is needed to move schools forward in accelerating growth as measured by NCLB’s standardized testing. Pepper agreed with NCLB’s premise of insuring that all students in the United States reach their academic potential and the nation’s schools need to continue to show growth in order to
compete in a global economy. Pepper also contended that “Holding a school accountable for the education of its students was an important and worthwhile goal of NCLB. However, sufficient support was not provided to the school districts to build the capacity for change and effectively accomplish the goal” (2010, p. 52).

The focus of this dissertation examined an elementary school in a metropolitan district that was labeled in 2009 as Persistently Low-Achieving (PLAS) in order to determine how the school planned to change leadership and staff; increase student achievement; and implement new approaches for changes in school climate. Based on the plans submitted, this school was granted 3 years of federal funding in order to make increases in student achievement on NCLB’s state standardized tests. This manuscript presents the research through a traditional dissertation framework. These chapters are organized around the three research questions.

NCLB/National Perspectives

Historical Background of NCLB

Since the launching of Sputnik in 1957, Americans have been concerned about failing to provide adequate schooling in America for their children. The federal government began to feel increasing pressure to invest in education, and as a result passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA, 2006) in 1958. The goal of the NDEA was to shape local educational priorities pertaining to science, technology, and foreign languages. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) replaced NDEA and authorized money for elementary and secondary schools and teacher education.
According to Harold Berlak (2005), it was designed to increase educational opportunities for children of the poor who were seen as disadvantaged. Berlak stated:

The federal government was forbidden to intervene in local school policies, in local pedagogical and curriculum decisions, and ESEA funds flowed directly from the federal government to the local institutions or jurisdictions in effect diluting the authority of state officials and state departments of education. (p. 270)

Curriculum is defined by Marsh and Willis (2007) as “such ‘permanent’ subjects as grammar, reading, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, and the greatest books of the Western World that best embody essential knowledge” (p. 270). According to this definition, the curriculum is limited to only a few academic subjects. This definition assumes that what will be studied in schools will be learned.

During the 1980s, many national curriculum reform proposals were issued. These proposals were subject to and shaped by political forces that reached beyond academic motives. One of these proposals was called “A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform.” The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) was behind this idea for reform but was out of touch with the twentieth-century curriculum and with the development of new curriculum (Marsh & Willis, 2007). Part of this criticism stemmed from this reforms disregard of the grassroots approaches to curriculum based on traditional American values. It put the government in a top-down position over curriculum control. Up until this point, local schools and school boards were making curriculum decisions based on an individual district’s needs. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act. Bush was working to create a movement toward accountability, high-stakes testing, and curriculum
alignment. NCLB made the same assumptions as “A Nation at Risk” when it alleged that we are in an educational crisis.

Authors of NCLB believed that we can cure the educational crisis by emphasizing a few basic academic subjects, spending more time teaching those subjects, more student testing, and measuring the test results more often. NCLB enacts the theories of standard-based education reform. Authors of the law believed that high expectations and goal setting will result in success for all students. The purpose of this legislation was to use a systems approach to close the achievement gap. Districts and/or school buildings must show adequate yearly progress or be negatively sanctioned. The goal of NCLB was to have all students achieve proficiency in reading, math, and science by the year 2014. The Kane (2010) research study examined various teachers’ views on multiple educational changes and acts that have been enacted upon teachers and students and the effects of those changes. Kane reported:

It is important to note that the test scores reported each year do not compare like groups of students; the results may vary because of the diverse groups of students in a given teacher’s classroom or a particular school each year. Yet, these high stakes involved under NCLB mean that educators must find and implement strategies that increase student achievement or face dire consequences. (2010, p. 11)

Kane also discussed schools providing evidence for schools’ yearly progress and stated “With its increased focus on rigorous standards-based education and accountability, NCLB required schools to document that students are making adequate annual yearly progress with an ultimate goal that all students will achieve at proficient levels by the year 2014” (p. 9). As of 2007, Congress has begun considering major revisions.
Intentions and Goals of the NCLB Act/NCLB Initiatives

On December 13, 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) which President Bush signed in 2002. It was legislation that, among other things, proposed the value of scientific research over more qualitative research. This act mandated a quantitative approach to educational research and educational reform. Nearly every school in the country is now subject to the NCLB mandates.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) created a new language with and for educators, while simultaneously drawing attention from politicians, parents, school boards, and media alike. It received bi-partisan support during the legislative process. The Department of Education has identified the curriculum and programs that highly qualified teachers should present to students. Through what is widely understood as sound, scientific research, NCLB is purported to ensure that all students will be held to high expectations for learning based on evidence-based practices, research, and on-going assessments.

The NCLB assessments provided educators with a scientifically-based evaluation system. Its legislation required that all schools make adequate yearly progress and close the achievement gaps by raising scores for all students. A steady rise in achievement is expected for all students regardless of income, race, or gender, to the proficient rating based on standardized testing. The goal proposed by NCLB is to be met in time for the 2013-2014 school years.
In August 2006, Governor Jeb Bush of Florida and mayor of New York Michael R. Bloomberg collaborated to write an article for the *Washington Post*. The article (Bloomberg & Bush, 2006) focused on four main areas that they have said to be the basic lessons to incorporate in order for NCLB to realize its full promise. The first lesson was to make standards meaningful through defining and communicating the necessity of high standard proficiency in every state. They believed "The existing law left room for states to define proficiency levels, and some have dumbed them down to create the illusion of progress" (p. B04). Their second basic lesson addressed student gains. Bloomberg and Bush admitted that the law doesn't define success by whether all students are improving; rather it relies on the total number of students meeting a proficiency standard. This approach focused student gains into two subjects; math and reading. The third lesson was to recognize degrees of progress. They contended "Congress should consider that there are more than just two options for rating schools—passing and failing. Rather than the current all-or-nothing system, the law should reward levels of performance at each school" (p. B07). They perceived NCLB as a tool for the nation to hold schools accountable for their achievement or face pressure to close. Their fourth basic lesson is to reward and retain high-quality teachers. They stated, "The law should go further than ensuring that teachers are qualified. It should also ensure that they are performing well and being paid accordingly" (p. B07). Bloomberg and Bush believed that these four basic lessons would reform the current NCLB law.
The Achievement Gap/Minority and High Poverty Populations

The stated intention of NCLB was to close the achievement gap in our country. The achievement gap was defined as the disparity between the academic performance of subgroups as defined by race/ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status. Schools with any student subgroup failing to meet performance guidelines are now being scrutinized under NCLB legislation.

Kunjufu (2006) is an educational consultant with African American Images. Kunjufu has over thirty different workshops which he offers to parents, teachers, churches, and community residents. He is the author of numerous books that offer solutions to closing the achievement gap for all minority and/or low-income students that educators find struggling with current standardized testing methods. The solutions he provided to school systems are explored throughout his writing and are based on his notion that schools in the United States have systemic inequalities. Kunjufu’s solutions have been compiled in response to White middle class teachers searching for strategies to best meet the needs of children who are suffering from minority and poverty issues in the classroom. Producing critical thinkers is the educational goal of Kunjufu and his strategies work directly toward that goal. Kunjufu’s educational solutions are as follows:

1. Importance of Quality Teaching- Good teaching can overcome income disparities, funding disparities, and segregation. Teacher expectations, not family income, are the most important factors in determining educational achievement.
2. High Achieving Schools- Schools that are successful in closing the achievement gaps have a principal that is the instructional leader, teachers that have high expectations, and students that spend more time on task. There is a positive school climate where testing is used to guide further instruction and not solely for evaluation.
3. Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) - In the KIPP model, schools stay open year round. Eighty percent of what students learn during the school year is lost during
the summer if not properly reinforced. Many schools spend the first one to three months reviewing what was taught the previous school year. There is research that indicates that a large portion of the racial achievement gap is actually a “summer” phenomenon.

4. **Africentricity** - This concept centers on creating multicultural curriculums, not just white-centered curriculums. Students should not relate acting smart to acting white. When you teach African American children their history and culture, academic performance and self-esteem will improve. Addressing discipline problems and violence with a metal detector is a band-aid. You must teach children values to get to the root of the problem.

5. **HBCU’s (Historically Black Colleges and Universities)** - K-12 programs could learn a lot from the HBCU model. HBCUs are successful because they realize that self-esteem is still important. Seventy-five percent of African Americans who earn a graduate degree from a White university were undergraduates at a black college.

6. **Culturally Relevant Teaching** - If we make the curriculum culturally relevant, we can reduce the drop-out rate and work towards successfully closing the achievement gap. Students should be taught to think critically using real life applications and street-based curriculums. Educators can actively engage students in the learning process by using strategies that make connections to students’ background knowledge. (Kunjufu, 2006)

These are just a few of the educational solutions that Kunjufu (2006) suggested to raise achievement for all students. Kunjufu’s strategies are not a cure-all to the inequality that exists at the social and educational level in our country. According to Kunjufu, these strategies have been proven to be an effective avenue to begin to recognize the needs of other cultures and implement curricula that values all cultures.

All of this information indicated a need to the researcher understand how schools designated with the Persistently Low-Achieving labels could restructure their programs in terms of staff, academics, and school climate in order to accelerate their students’ performance on standardized testing based on NCLB standards. This study’s information was significant because this particular elementary was one of the first two elementary schools in their state to receive the PLAS designation. As many schools are approaching
statistical levels that will inevitably put them into this low-achieving category in the near future, studies like this one will prove to be benchmarks in analysis in PLAS reform techniques. Schools will be searching for models of plans and ideas for implementation that will allow them to make changes in staffing, achievement, and climate in order to accelerate their performance as well. The intentions of this study are not to evaluate this school’s plans; but rather, show how one school responded and how others can choose to respond to the same label using researched approaches to implementing school change. This study shows specific implementations but not outcomes of these implementations. The school in this study has 3 years of funding to implement their plan successfully. The outcomes of the effectiveness of their plan can be further researched at that time based on NCLB standards and assessments of student achievement.

Effects on Minorities/Areas of Controversy in the NCLB Act

Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) described how many civil rights advocates favored the NCLB act and saw it as a possible step in the right direction for those who have been traditionally left behind in American school systems. These advocates initially saw this act as a means to close the achievement gap based on race and class. Darling-Hammond explained how the 600-page law has “affected states, districts, schools, and students in ways never envisioned by its authors” (p.245). This law is now being opposed by at least 20 states, members of the Congressional Black Caucus, the Harvard Civil Rights Project, many school districts and parents across the country. She continued with the following:

Furthermore, the act’s regulations have caused a number of states to abandon their thoughtful diagnostic assessment and accountability systems—replacing
instructionally rich, improvement-oriented systems with more rote-oriented systems punishment-driven approaches—and it has thrown many high-performing and steadily improving schools into chaos rather than helping them remain focused and deliberate in their ongoing efforts to serve students well. (p. 246)

Darling-Hammond acknowledged that this law is well-intentioned but asserted that most of our public schools will be labeled as failing in the next few years, even when they are high performing and improving in achievement.

*Time* magazine (Wallis & Steptoe, 2007) asked questions about the following five areas of controversy in the NCLB Act are as follows:

1. Is Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the reading and mathematics test the right tool for measuring learning and raising achievement in the nation’s schools?
2. Are the 50 states, each of which devises its own annual tests and curriculum standards, setting the bar high enough for students, and if not, what should be done about it?
3. Is the focus on reading and math distorting and narrowing education?
4. Do the law’s requirements for teacher qualifications make sense and are they raising the quality of the U.S. teaching force?
5. Are the directives that are aimed at failing schools having the intended impact? What is the right role for the Federal Government in fixing bad schools?

Proof that every student is making adequate yearly progress (AYP) is a major component of the No Child Left Behind Act. Many educators believed that a more flexible measure of student achievement, such as the growth model, should be implemented (Wallis & Steptoe, 2007). The growth model allows schools to track the progress of each student year to year and success is defined by a certain amount of growth. Growth is measured even if the student is not on grade level. This type of model gives a more comprehensive and accurate look at a students' performance. It also gives the teachers and the schools credit for working with the child towards achievement.
Wallis and Steptoe (2007) questioned whether we can trust the states to set the standards. The authors discussed how NCLB still allows states to devise their own exams and how evidence is being presented that many states are making their state exams easier so it appears that they are making progress and their students are improving (Wallis & Steptoe, 2007). Their claim is that state tests do not correlate with national test results. The authors believed having uniform tests has been politically unacceptable due to the fact that schools are largely funded and also controlled at state and local levels. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began mandatory biennial assessments in reading and mathematics for fourth and eighth graders. The data from this assessment was a way to examine the rigor and validity of state standards and assessments. NCLB advocated for states to be accountable for their results, seeking a stronger accountability resulting in rigorous scientific research. Federal funding is targeted to support programs in reading and math that will improve test scores. NCLB mandated these scientifically based instruction programs.

Essex (2006) stated that “NCLB creates a culture of accountability, requiring schools to reassess what they are doing to raise achievement of all students and support teaching and learning” (p. 7). Essex recognized that the achievement gap still remains noticeably high. He noted that the most recent NAEP assessment on reading in 2002 only showed 31% of fourth graders reading at a proficient or advanced level. “Achievement among the highest performing students remained stable, and America’s lowest performers have improved only slightly” (p. 8). Is remaining stable considered progress?
Is improving slightly an indicator of a good initiative? The answers to these questions are open to debate and interpretation.

**Midland Elementary’s PLAS Designation**

**Demographics**

According to 2010 state census statistics, Midland Elementary’s community consisted of a population of 65,998 people. Of that population, 81.6% identified White, 13.9% identified Black, 2.6% identified Hispanic, and .9% identified Asian. The percentage of Midland’s population who spoke a language other than English at home was 8.3% (www.census.gov).

According to Midland’s Department of Education, Midland Elementary has an enrollment of 465 students. Of those 465 students: 85% are eligible for free or reduced priced meals; 8% of Midland’s students are enrolled in the English Language Learning (ELL) Program, 18% of students are enrolled in Special Education programs, and 10% of students that are labeled as homeless. This school defines Homeless as someone who is living with another family or is in critical danger of losing their place to live. There are 38.3% African American students, 37.2% White students, 11.4% Mixed Race students, 11.1% Hispanic students, 1% Asian students, and 1% Pacific Islander students. Midland Elementary School is located in a low socio-economic section of its urban community.

**Funding Formula**

Persistently lowest-achieving schools were identified so that they could receive national funding. By identifying the lowest-achieving schools, the state’s Department of Education was able to allow the schools in need to have funding that was not previously
available to these schools; the purpose of the funds was to implement new initiatives that would help to raise student achievement. Funds were made available through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act’s State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. Other resources for funding are available through the Race to the Top as well as the No Child Left Behind Title 1 School Improvement Grant. Funding from the U.S. Department of Education was awarded to the state’s Department of Education through a School Improvement Grant (SIG). Midland Elementary School was labeled as a Tier 1 school under the SIG’s grant’s guidelines.

Tier 1 schools are defined as schools that can answer positively to the following questions:

1. Is the school a Title 1 SINA (School in Need of Assistance) school with 30, or more, full academic year (FAY) students tested in the 2009-2010 school year?

2. Does the school fall in the lowest ten percent of Title 1 SINA schools for all students proficient and average less than 67 % proficient for the last 3 years in reading and math combined from 2007-08 to 2009-10?

3. Does the school rank in the bottom 5% of Title 1 SINA schools based on combined rank in (a) the 3 year average of percent proficient in reading and math combined, and (b) the rank in percent change of percent proficient from 2007-2008 to 2009-2010?

The School Improvement Grant gave the state $18,710,222 in order to reform the schools that were labeled as low-achieving. This three year grant began in the 2010-2011 school year. Schools that applied had to implement one of four intervention models designed by the federal government. The following potential intervention models are listed on the state’s Department of Education’s website:

1. Turnaround Model: Replace the principal, screen existing school staff, and rehire no more than half the teachers; adopt a new governance structure; and improve
the school through curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies.

2. Restart Model: Convert a school or close it and re-open it as a charter school or under an education management organization.

3. School Closure: Close the school and send the students to higher-achieving schools in the district.

4. Transformation Model: Replace the principal and improve the school through comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time, and other strategies.

Midland Elementary School answered positively to the Tier 1 schools’ three questions and applied to implement the Transformation Model. Funding was granted and was put into place for this school beginning in the 2010-2011 school year. Midland Elementary quickly began to follow the precise guidelines that were identified by this grant. The grant was identified as a 3 year allotment based on several criteria designed to increase student achievement as measured by the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, as well as other growth model criteria. Midland Elementary presented a detailed plan of how the requested $2,201,180 in grant money over three years would align with the needs of the building in order to raise student achievement.

Plan for Transformation

Recent declining trends in student achievement in both reading and math have created urgency around comprehensive reform efforts. The building is in Year 1 of School in Need of Assistance (SINA) status for both reading and math. The recent designation of Persistently Low-Achieving status has prompted a serious consideration of intense efforts to turn the achievement trend around.

In collaboration with their local education association, the district selected the Transformation Model as the model most aligned to the needs of the school.
Conversations began in February 2010 and continued to occur as the details of the reform effort were confirmed. The major actions include:

1. Extended school day/school year
2. Intensive professional development with a focus on fidelity of implementation
3. Evaluation tied in part to student growth
4. Leadership realignment
5. Financial incentives for reaching achievement target goals
6. Clear expectations, job descriptions and contract parameters to support changes
7. Grant funding to support the intense, direct engagement of students in extended instructional time and teachers in collaborative professional development time.

Implementation will focus on:

1. Instructional Decision Making (IDM) - a process by which teachers use data from formative assessments to respond to student learning needs to ensure mastery of major skills and knowledge.
2. Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) - a decision making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes for all students. PBIS emphasizes the use of data for decision making, measurable outcomes supported and evaluated by data, practices with evidence that these outcomes are achievable, and systems that efficiently and effectively support implementation of these practices.
3. Intensive Professional Development - extra hours and days will be added to the contract for professional development on research-based instructional strategies, as well as peer observation, collaboration, and data analysis.
4. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment alignment with the state’s Core Curriculum - the alignment process has recently been completed and implemented for literacy with the process to be replicated for Math during the 2010-2011 school years. Precision of instructional delivery aligned to student needs along with the newly adopted curriculums will be monitored frequently by the instructional coach and building administrators. (p. 2)

The three major goals of Midland’s plan include:

1. Implementation of a Comprehensive Literacy Program:
   Provide professional development in areas of Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM) and Gradual Release of Responsibility. Teachers will strengthen the informative writing component of PWIM, including writing in response to reading. Continued training will be provided to all teachers to implement the revised standards and benchmarks. Teachers will move the strategies from the
workshop to the workplace to ensure full implementation of the strategies learned in professional development.

2. Implementation of a Comprehensive Math Program:
Area Education Agency and selected technical assistance providers will facilitate professional development in effective evidence-based mathematics and problem solving strategies. Implementation and monitoring plans will be determined. An Instructional Coach will provide additional supports in the areas of peer coaching and collaboration at grade levels.

3. Implementation of Positive Behavior Supports:
The district was cited for disproportionality in the number of suspensions, expulsions, and special needs classification of African American and Hispanic students. Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) has been identified as a tool in addressing this issue. PBIS is a decision-making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving academic and behavioral outcomes for all students.

Focus for Implementations

Instructional Decision Making, using continuous analysis of student data across reading and math formative assessments, is a major focus for Midland Elementary School. Strong leadership was put into place upon beginning this school’s journey. The staff was provided continuous professional development over reading, math, cultural competency, and ways to provide consistent positive behavior support systems in their building. Monitoring tools include Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) data, Instructional Practices Inventory (IPI) data on classroom engagement; standardized testing scores (ITBS), the state’s Department of Education site visits, documented walk-through observations, documented differentiated instruction, and focus on parent involvement by percentages. The plan that the school developed has led to dramatic changes in the way the school approached education in the elementary setting.

Implementation of the school’s plans began in August 2010 and will continue through September 2013.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and administrators in an elementary school labeled as a PLAS school in 2009. Midland was one of the first two elementary schools in their state to be given the PLAS label due to low student achievement on state standardized test scores. The PLAS designation mandates that schools with this label make a specific 3 year plan complete with measurable goals and specific plans for increasing test scores. Midland’s leadership team and staff responded by implementing various educational strategies in order to increase their students’ achievement in an accelerated time frame. Putting a strong focus on research-based strategies and building the instructional capacity of the staff, Midland put their 3 year plan into action beginning in 2010. The specific focus of this study was to investigate the response of this school in the following areas:

1. Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators: What impact did the PLAS label have on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building?

2. Curriculum and Academic Achievement: What impact did the PLAS label have on curriculum development in this school and plans for assessment of academic achievement?

3. Climate and Culture: What impact did the PLAS label have on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence?
Definition of Terms

Terms used throughout this study are defined for clarification and to enhance reader understanding.

Student Achievement: The amount of learning a student has attained as a result of the educational process. It is typically demonstrated through knowledge of specific facts, understanding, and problem-solving ability (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996).

Achievement Gap: The difference in performance between low-income and minority students compared to that of their peers on standardized tests. Traditionally; low-income and minority children have not performed as well as their peers on the tests (http://www.education.com).

School Climate: “A relatively enduring quality of school environment that (a) is affected by the principal’s leadership, (b) is experienced by teachers, (c) influences members’ behavior, and (d) is based on collective perceptions” (Hoy & Clover, 1986, p. 94).

Cultural Competence: “The ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own. It entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, developing certain bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching” (Diller, 2004).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and administrators in an elementary school labeled as a Persistently Low-Achieving School in 2009. Midland was one of the first two elementary schools in their state to be given the PLAS label due to low student achievement on state standardized test scores. The PLAS designation mandates that schools with this label make a specific three year plan complete with measurable goals and specific plans for increasing test scores. Midland’s leadership team and staff responded by implementing various educational strategies in order to increase their students’ achievement in an accelerated time frame. Putting a strong focus on research-based strategies and building the instructional capacity of the staff, Midland put their three year plan into action beginning in 2010. The specific focus of this study was to investigate the response of this school in the following areas:

1. Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators: What impact did the PLAS label have on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building?

2. Curriculum and Academic Achievement: What impact did the PLAS label have on curriculum development in this school and plans for assessment of academic achievement?
3. Climate and Culture: What impact did the PLAS label have on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence?

**Professional Practices Of Teachers and Administrators**

This section focuses on the professional practices of teachers and administrators. There are four themes in which this section is structured around. The themes include Staff Changes, Professional Pressures, Dynamics of Staff, and Professional Development.

**Staff Changes**

As a result of the PLAS designation, Midland was required to make several changes in staff. The first change made in the building was the replacement of the principal. Changing leadership in urban schools is often the result of the NCLB Act. Orr, Berg, Shore, and Meier (2008) presented an analysis of four different urban schools that were all persistently low-performing schools according to NCLB standards. Orr et al. explored the organizational and leadership changes in these schools. He concluded that developing leadership capacity can transform a school’s culture and values, as well as their capacity for improvement, if they look at the approaches that integrate appropriate resources that foster positive school-district dynamics. He stated “Finally, given the leadership turnover that plagues urban schools, we also believe that these approaches must be coupled with systems for organizational memory for continuous improvement over time, rather than episodic leader-dependent interventions” (2008, p. 690). Orr et al. discussed how transforming a school entails creating a positive culture for both students and staff.
In Midland Elementary School, the principal recognized the need to make several staff changes in response to the designation. Upon designation, this staff was given the option to go to a different district building. Given the new expectations put onto staff in a PLAS building, several staff chose to leave. In Midland School, some of the current staff were asked to find a better fit for them professionally. An assistant principal was also added as a component of this PLAS plan. Money was available for additional paraprofessionals but the principal has not been successful in finding high quality, qualified paraprofessionals to fill those positions.

Midland Elementary School, through PLAS funds, hired an instructional coach along with additional Title I reading support during the first year. Midland Elementary already employed two literacy coaches through regular district funding. A math coach was also added the second year in response to building needs. Stock and Duncan (2010) discussed the approach of hiring instructional coaches to address professional development and peer-coaching programs. Stock was concerned with the lack of training and clarification that is given to instructional coaches prior to their appointments to these state-funded positions. The study demonstrated the need for instructional coaches to receive more preparation and role definition in order to effectively facilitate school reform. Stock and Duncan believed:

As the accountability movement sweeps across the educational landscape of the United States, the pressure on educators has been mounting. As schools search for more effective methods of influencing student achievement we can observe increased spending on alternative ways to address professional development; among these are instructional coaching and peer coaching programs. (2010, p. 57)
Clarifying the role of the coaches in a low-performing school helped to build solid partnerships with the building leaders. Frank (2010) interviewed a principal and a coach at a low-achieving school and concluded “To be effective in providing professional learning that improves student achievement, coaches and principals need to develop a mutual understanding of their roles” (p. 5). Frank contributed the elements of successful relationships to the 3 Cs which are (1) clarity, (2) communication, and (3) collaboration. Clarity is important in order to define the roles of the principals and the coaches. Frank clarified “While the coach may take on different roles with various teachers depending on evolving circumstances, the principal and the coach should hammer out at least the boundaries between the coach and administrator” (p. 6). Communication between the coaches and the principal is essential in reinforcing each other’s work and roles in the building. After having discussions with two leaders in this turnaround school, Frank contended “Those conversations are crucial in establishing a relationship and shared purpose, they said, especially for mapping a direction for the year’s professional learning at the start of the school year” (p. 7). Collaboration was the final component in Frank’s work. “As the leadership team reviews data and clarifies goals, the coach’s efforts home in on those areas and the principal then looks for teachers’ improvements in areas that support those goals, they said, particularly as the principal is conducting walk-throughs” (p. 7).

Orr et al. (2008) examined persistently low-achieving schools and discussed how schools initially respond to change, and determine the schools’ turnaround capabilities. When discussing instructional leadership integrity, the authors stated “A consistent theme
throughout the school improvement research is the centrality of leadership, particularly instructionally focused leadership” (p. 683). The authors continued by claiming that in the low-achieving schools that they studied, it became obvious that the job of school reform requires a shared leadership role in some form of an assistant principal.

Hall and Hord (2011) discussed how implementing change starts with the implementors of that change. The authors agreed that “Change is not only, however, about the implementors—those who will change their practices—but also about those who will facilitate the implementors in doing so” (p. 27). This facilitation process of change can create a context of added pressure for the facilitators as well as the staff required to implement the new reforms.

**Professional Pressures**

The role of the principal is unique in a PLAS setting due to the increased focus on accelerated growth as measured by standardized test scores. Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman and Simicou III (2010) researched the transformation of the principal’s traditional managerial role to that of an instructional leader. Grigsby et al. found that this transformation of roles was a result of the increased accountability and regulations set forth by the NCLB Act, and also found that principals say the implementation of NCLB is now the most pressing issue they are facing. This study found that elementary principals now have the added responsibility as an instructional leader in the following areas:

**Responsibility of the instructional leader:**
1. Analyzing data with the faculty to determine strengths and areas of concern.
2. Searching for best research-based strategies and instruction to improve student achievement.
3. Conducting multiple walk-throughs and providing constructive feedback.
4. Staying informed by attending national conferences, networking with other principals, and reading journals.
5. Knowing where to find answers about curriculum and instruction.
6. Making informed decisions based on the campus needs.

Effective professional development:
1. Should always be purposeful and meaningful to the teachers in attendance.
2. Teachers should be properly trained to increase teaching success.
3. Principals should attend many of the workshops with teachers to stay informed. 
   (2010, p. 3)

Grigsby et al.'s study of principals resulted in the following:

Recommendations for Building Principals
1. Meet with every department after each benchmark test to discuss results and determine strategies that would improve the areas of concern.
2. Have teachers note any suggestions for improvement to the curriculum after each grading period. Compile and send to the person in charge of curriculum writing.
3. Provide meaningful professional development based on analyzed data and teacher need.
5. Conduct walk-throughs and provide meaningful feedback to all teachers.
7. Share the vision of curriculum and instruction with the community. Involve parents/grandparents and businesses in helping the vision come to fruition. (2010, p. 5)

Due to the added PLAS funding, the leadership at Midland Elementary consisted of a principal and an assistant principal. Johnson (2011) discussed how collaborative leadership can be effective in turning low-performing schools around into high-performing ones. Johnson's article focused on shared leadership as that of a principal and what Johnson termed as a “turnaround specialist, turnaround leader, or turnaround principal” (p. 40). The turnaround leader works in a partnership with the school principal to create high-performing buildings. Johnson examined what types of collaboration are needed to make such reforms in low-achieving schools and mapped out the following components for shared leadership:
Steps for Successful Collaborative Leadership:

1. Identify the roles of the two leaders, and establish ground rules for collaboration. This step will help when important decisions need to be made.

2. Set both short- and long-term goals. Plan for outcomes and results both immediate and long term. What is the desired outcome of such partnership?

3. Share decision making. Include others, such as the building leadership team, in the decision-making process and model shared decision making as collaborative leaders.

4. Make decisions on the basis of data and ongoing needs assessments. Keep the main thing the main thing, and let the data drive the decisions of the leadership team.

5. Establish collaboration efforts throughout the school. Facilitate collaboration among teachers to improve instruction.

6. Communicate. This is the most important tool for collaborative leadership. (p. 41)

Johnson also recognized that the leaders new to a building must quickly assess the culture and climate of that building in order to determine what organizational and academic structures need to be implemented. Creating this partnership to be a liaison with the teachers and staff is critical to opening up communication lines and developing a plan of action. Johnson believed that "Every plan must address the importance of data-based decision making; new avenues to win the battle against underachievement; and meeting the needs of growing numbers of English language learners, special education students, and high-poverty students" (p. 42).

O'Donnell, Lambert, and McCarthy (2008) studied 521 teachers in 16 elementary schools to examine the relationship of school and teachers' characteristics to the reported demands in their classrooms. The authors found "There were relationships among minority percentage, the student achievement composite, and perceptions of the availability of instructional resources" (p. 152). The research discussed teachers who experienced stress due to the occupational demands, such as limited faculty input, lack of administrative support, discipline problems with students, and low salaries. The main
purpose of their study was to compare teacher stress in Title I and non-Title I elementary schools to find whether low SES levels and community resources led to higher stress levels. Fall to Spring data was compared to determine if end of grade testing also led to increased teacher stress. O'Donnell et al. measured school characteristics in which eight of the sixteen schools were considered to have a higher number of students living below the poverty level as well as higher minority rates. They also measured teachers' years of experience which ranged from first year teachers to veteran teachers, as well as their education levels. Teacher stress was measured throughout the study by examining perceptions of classroom demands and resources. O'Donnell et al. hypothesized that teachers would be more at risk for burnout in those schools that possess fewer community and family resources; however, they found no statistical relationship between teacher stress and student poverty levels. The researchers found:

At the school level, the building-level minority percentage was positively associated with the teachers' perceptions of the demands associated with the other student-related demands subscale, which focused on teachers' perceptions of language and cultural diversity in the classroom. In addition, as the minority percentage increased, teachers' perceptions of the demands associated with the availability of instructional resources decreased. In other word, teachers felt as though they had sufficient resources to meet the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds, supporting the notion that more resources are provided for Title I schools, often containing higher numbers of minority children. (2008, p. 158)

O'Donnell et al. (2008) found in their research study that when teachers are provided with the sufficient resources they need to meet the needs of their students from different cultural backgrounds and Title I needs, their levels of stress decreased. The authors explained “It is important that effective coping mechanisms are identified at the teacher level, but at the same time, administrators must be on board with monitoring the
environmental conditions that could be contributing to teacher stress and burnout” (p. 158).

Staff from Midland are working towards a financial incentive from the state should they meet growth in annual yearly progress on state standardized testing with their students who qualify as full academic year students. The state standardized tests were completely redone in the second year of this school’s implementation so staff are unsure of what effect or change the new test will have on their staff incentives or student expectations. Because staff had yet to see the new assessments, they were concerned and unsure of how to effectively plan for implementing those tests.

Dynamics of Staff

Patterson and Patterson (2004) discussed the vital role that teacher leaders can play in creating a resilient school culture and the powerful contributions that teachers make in shaping and building school culture and resilience. Schools confronted with difficult challenges, such as being labeled as low-achieving, rely on teachers as leaders to work directly with students and influence each other in a way that administrators cannot. Patterson and Patterson introduced the three components of this teacher influence as credibility, expertise, and relationships. Credibility is when teachers admire and respect each other for their professional values; expertise is when teacher peers recognize superior teaching skills and relationships allow teacher leaders to connect with other colleagues to provide peer support. Recognizing the need for teachers to stay focused, Patterson and Patterson stated:

During times of adversity, resilient teacher leaders emphasize productivity and do not allow themselves or others to get distracted from the main goal of promoting
learning for all students. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, teacher leaders hold others accountable for staying focused on student learning. (2004, p. 76)

The role of the teacher at Midland Elementary School was unique in that 51% of the teaching staff were first-year teachers in year 1 of the 3 year funding. The new teachers at Midland arrived knowing the challenges that they were about to face. Prior to being hired, Midland’s principal administered a type of “fireside chat” where teachers were made aware of the extra professional development involved, the extra hours outside of contract expected, and the option to choose a different school within the district. Each teacher hired made the commitment to implement all of the curriculum changes with fidelity. Ellsasser (2008) discussed the special challenges and turn-over of first-year urban teachers as well as the students in those schools. He stated that “Consequently many students in high-poverty, urban public schools spend their academic careers watching a parade of new teachers pass through their classrooms on their ways to “good schools” with “good students” (Ellsasser, 2008, p. 476). Ellsasser warned that the burden of school reform is too heavy to place on teachers without all staff agreeing to a strong educational philosophy as a school team. “Educational philosophy engages teachers in something larger than themselves. Educational philosophy challenges us to back away from our tinkering and reevaluate our work. It calls on us to think big, to ask essential questions” (p. 490). Ellsasser challenged urban schools to give attention to awakening their students to the reality of urban schools and using those realities as a way to improve the world in which they live in.

Patterson and Patterson (2004) described the vital role that teachers can play in creating a resilient school culture. They studied research on schools facing adversity and
found that when teachers worked with their colleagues to solve problems, share expertise, and shape school culture together, then they were able to make contributions that led to shaping school culture and building school resilience, such as Midland’s staff is working toward as a strong, focused, goal-oriented team. Patterson and Patterson (2004) explained:

Teacher leadership is not about individual “teacher power” but about mobilizing the capacity of teachers to strengthen student performance and develop real collaboration within the school. In our research on resilience in schools, we repeatedly find that in tough times, teachers turn to teacher leaders for help—and teacher leaders rise to the occasion. (p. 77)

Professional Development

Focusing on classroom instruction and student achievement is even more challenging for schools that have been labeled as low-achieving because they have an added sense of urgency to their instructional tasks. Cuban (2004) studied urban schools in an attempt to understand not only the stiff challenges facing these schools, but also to examine how those challenges can produce effective urban leaders. Cuban discussed the differences in environments that teachers and principals face in urban schools than those in middle class settings. He stated:

Although parents in low-income communities want the same opportunities for their children as middle and upper-income parents do, they live in places that threaten their safety and lack the resources to support their aspirations. Moreover, schools in these areas seldom provide the minimum services that middle-class families and districts take for granted. (2004, p. 64)

Cuban believed that teachers in urban schools have a special obligation to have high expectations and push students academically. He explained that this type of setting was...
not a place for tired practitioners, but a place where teachers and administrators must set a high bar for performance as well as student outcomes. Cuban added:

Like their suburban counterparts, urban teachers must deal with mountains of paperwork, arbitrate classroom squabbles, keep conflicts to a minimum, oversee homework, regularly grade students, and hold parent-teacher conferences. But in urban schools where multiple languages, cultures, and values come into play, teachers need exquisitely fine-tuned skills for managing the inevitable rush of conflicts. (p. 66)

Cuban rallied for schools to refuse to accept low expectations from their teachers and to have teachers focus on instructional excellence while insisting on a challenging curriculum for all students.

According to Banks (2008), “We are living in a dangerous, confused, and troubled world that demands leaders, educators, and classroom teachers who can bridge cultural, ethnic, and religious borders, envision new possibilities, invent novel paradigms, and engage in personal transformation and visionary action” (p. 292). Banks discussed how the educational paradigms that were facilitated during the past centuries will be ineffective in the 21st century. He believed that in order for our students to become contributing citizens in the 21st century, they need to experience citizenship within the classroom and school setting. This involved enabling diverse groups to participate in social justice opportunities that are unified around a set of democratic values of justice and equality. Banks stated:

Citizenship education should help students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function in their nation-states as well as in a diverse world society that is experiencing rapid globalization and quests by ethnic, cultural, language and religious groups for recognition and inclusion. (p. 290)

Bank’s hope is for students to desire to commit to building a more just world.
Research studies indicated that students in the 21st century need to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that according to Banks (1994), students will need in order to become caring citizens in their local, national, and in the global communities. As discussions about improving schools in the 21st century arise, leadership became a primary focus in school reform. Johnson (2011) believed that leaders should solicit the support of teachers, students, parents, district leaders, and all community stakeholders in order to strategically select areas to focus on to work toward academic achievement. Johnson contended:

How each principal structures his or her school’s improvement team determines the overall outcome of the school’s improvement plan. Every plan must address the importance of data-based decision making; new avenues to win the battle against underachievement; and meeting the needs of growing numbers of English language learners, special education students, and high-poverty students. (2008, p. 42)

Midland’s teachers and administrators recognized a need to examine their pedagogy and curriculum critically to create specific instructional strategies. Teachers had to make necessary adaptations to curriculum, instructional strategies, and pedagogy in order to meet the needs of all of the students in their classrooms.

**Curriculum and Academic Achievement**

This section discusses the development of curriculum and the issues surrounding measuring academic achievement. There are three themes in which this section is structured around. The themes include Raising Student Achievement, Walk-Throughs, and Professional Learning Communities.
Raising Student Achievement

Eisner (Marsh & Willis, 2007) understood the ideas of curriculum development as a work in progress and he saw the need for organizing and integrating content in a variety of ways that engage the learner into the process more so than controlling the outcomes of a learner. Eisner understood that students can construct knowledge and that they make different interpretations of material based on how material is presented and on their learning styles. He worked with African American boys while he was in college. He began to look at relevancy and to search for ways to approach curriculum that would be more relevant to his individual students. Eisner noticed that schools were offering an unbalanced approach to education. He believed in providing students with a wide variety of learning experiences. "In keeping with his emphasis on variety, Eisner also asserted that the curriculum developer should provide students with materials and activities that encourage a diverse range of outcomes and experiences" (Marsh & Willis, 2007, p. 85). Eisner believed that teachers who do not develop and use diverse modes of communication with their students are denying students educational opportunities that would enhance their learning experience. Eisner viewed teaching as an art form.

Strengths of his approach are that content is organized and integrated in a variety of ways that engage the learner in the process more so than controlling the outcomes of a learner.

Historically, curriculum development has failed to offer relevant solutions that meet the needs of all students who enter American classrooms. Until recently, this issue has not been addressed on a nation-wide basis. Combining the implementation of best teaching practices for boys and successful approaches for African American students will
help educators, especially those who are White, middle class, and female, work towards closing the achievement gap.

Eisner (2002) examined the three curricula that all schools should teach. These include: the explicit, and implicit, and the null curriculum. Eisner explained how students are in school for the majority of their childhood and the explicit goals of curriculum are the teaching of reading and writing, mathematics, and the history of the nation. Eisner stated:

There are goals and objectives for the sciences, the arts, physical education, social studies, and foreign language instruction. Not only do these goals appear in school district curriculum guides and the course-planning materials that teachers are asked to prepare; the public also knows that these courses are offered and that students in the district will have the opportunity to achieve these aims, at least to some degree should they want to do so. (2002, p. 87)

The school’s implicit curriculum is what it teaches by means of organizational structure and pedagogical rules. It consists of features that are not announced publicly but are easily recognizable components of the school and building environment. The null curriculum is what is not taught in our schools and what has been traditionally excluded. This may include culture, the arts, anthropology, or mass media topics. Eisner found that what is not taught in our schools is as important as what is taught. Eisner believed that content should be organized and integrated in many various forms. He advocated for an artistic approach to teaching that allows for teachers to provide students with a variety of books and materials that come from a diverse range of experiences. He saw the teacher as a facilitator in this process. He believed that teachers can create a variety of meaningful and satisfying learning opportunities for students based on transforming goals and
curriculum content into experiences that are appropriate for their students (Marsh & Willis, 2007).

Eisner (2002) also compared the importance of artistry in the classroom to an automobile assembly line and to a basketball game. He stated “Unlike the automobile assembly line where systemization, orderliness, predictability, and control serve the goals of efficiency, effective teaching, like effective basketball, profits from flexibility, ingenuity, and personal creativity, and the last things desired on the assembly line” (p. 163). Eisner discussed how basketball teams, like curriculums, can have preset goals and pre-planned patterns, but once the players are in action they need to make decisions based on fluid intelligence and recognize opportunities that may present themselves. He believed that if teaching is viewed as an art form, then educators can plan curriculum that allows for a broader view of teaching that is constantly being constructed, evaluated, and reconstructed based on the range of learners within our classrooms. In this way, evaluation is something done throughout the learning process, not just at the end of it. Many curriculums are designed to have the state standardized test be the core piece of evaluation used for reconstruction of curriculum, but Eisner saw evaluation as on-going and constantly utilized throughout the year to modify and organize the curriculum based on need. Eisner expressed the belief that utilizing diverse modes of visual, auditory, and artistic modes of communication will give students opportunities for high academic achievement. Eisner’s type of approach to curriculum development also allowed for the development of a multicultural environment that is able to meet the social and academic
needs of all types of diverse learners. Eisner discussed that on-going evaluation is a key element in a multicultural environment.

**Walk-Throughs**

Providing extensive professional development to staff was a major focus for Midland Elementary School. Midland's leadership team implemented walk-throughs as a way to monitor the staff's implementation of the various professional development strategies. On-going professional development was provided for reading instruction, literacy strategies, math instruction, cultural competencies, higher-order level engagement strategies, behavior support strategies, and training in building professional learning communities effectively. An emphasis had been put on becoming more familiar with the state's Core Curriculum standards in order to enhance core instruction methods. As Rinaldi, Averill and Stuart (2010) stated “This emphasis on the core instruction allowed for enhanced conversation about the core curriculum and cross training on instructional practices to address curriculum standards” (p. 47). Rinaldi et al.'s article discussed educators' perceptions of a three-year collaborative reform effect using the RTI (Response to Intervention) model. Rinaldi et al. continued:

> RTI refers to the practice of providing high-quality instruction and intervention matched to students' needs, monitoring student progress frequently to make decisions about instructional changes, and evaluating regularly collected data on student progress to determine whether to refer the student for special education support. (2010, p. 43)

Much of the professional development, and use of experts in this area, was done during Midland's in-service time. The focus of the professional development sessions were determined based on the specific needs of teachers and students in Midland Elementary.
District officials, building administrators, literacy leaders, instructional coach, and certified staff all had input on specific professional development needs to be addressed on a weekly basis.

Howard (2007) described the challenges of implementing five different phases of professional development based on needs that arise from rapid demographic shifts. Changes in the number of students of color, culturally and linguistically diverse students, as well as students who come from low income families provide schools unique opportunities to learn and grow with and from each other. Howard discussed how some educators, administrators, and parents see these changes as problematic, rather than an opportunity for growth. He mapped out the need to re-examine everything that is done in American schools to prepare educators to raise student achievement in highly diverse environments. Howard’s first focus is on building trust:

Ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are white; most grew up an attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly white communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly white colleges and universities. Thus, many white educators simply have not acquired the experiential and education background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of their students. (2007, p. 17)

The trust phase was a way to allow colleagues to engage in discussions and reflections that help establish positive learning communities in the classrooms.

Howard’s (2007) second phase was to engage in personal culture. Howard stated:

Change has to start with the educators before it can realistically begin to take place with students. The central aim of the second phase of the work is building educator’s cultural competence- their ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences” (p. 18).
Howard’s third phase focused on confronting social dominance and social justice. Recognizing increasingly apparent gaps as diversity grows; Howard believed that educators should directly confront the current and historical inequities that affect education by working toward justice. Engaging in authentic discussions and group visions allow diversity-enhanced districts to establish approaches to school reform that make schools more equitable and inclusive.

Howard (2007) envisioned schools transforming instructional practices in order to be more responsive to diversity as his fourth phase. He stated:

For teachers, this means examining pedagogy and curriculum, as well as expectations and interaction patterns with students. It means looking honestly at outcome data and creating new strategies designed to serve the students whom current instruction is not reaching. For school leaders, this often means facing the limit of their own knowledge and skills and becoming co-learners with teachers to find ways to transform classroom practices. (p. 19)

The final phase of Howard’s (2007) professional development plan involved engaging the entire school community in order to create equitable learning environments for diverse students and their families. This entailed engaging community leaders, playground teachers, secretaries, bus drivers, and all school stakeholders to create an inclusive climate which welcomed and communicated clearly and compassionately with students and parents. Howard demonstrated that schools implementing these five phases have had achievement gaps in test scores narrow significantly along ethnic and economic lines.

According to Kruskamp, Harrison, Opferman and Spikes (2011), a common scenario is the changing demographics of a school revealing teachers failing to adapt instruction to meet changing student needs. Kruskamp et al. focused on giving teachers
professional development that addressed making lesson plans for diverse learning styles, are concerned with cultural differences, and supported and challenged all different levels of learners. Upon reflection on authentic student engagement, Kruskamp et al. stated:

> Reflective planning is necessary to support meaningful and purposeful lessons. Lesson plans are not something to create at the last minute or find on the Internet the night before a lesson is to be delivered. Engaging lessons require an intensive and thoughtful approach so that students have opportunities to learn in ways that stretch their minds and excite their emotions. (2011, p. 56)

Nieto (2001) examined the various conditions that keep teachers in challenging schools and motivated them to struggle through the political inequities that are housed in the urban school systems. Nieto discussed the work of excellent teachers in urban schools and the challenges they overcome to help students succeed. In regards to professional development, she contended:

> We need to find ways to support professional development that engages teachers in intellectual work and that challenges their perceptions and biases without moralizing or blaming. An isolated workshop simply won't do, nor will one conference or university course a year. Teachers need to give sustained attention to the problems and possibilities of their classrooms and schools. This means providing teachers with money, time, books, and other resources. Teachers also need to be involved in setting the agenda for their own progress. Providing workshops, seminars, or other professional development, no matter how timely or well intentioned, in which teachers have had no say is doomed to fail. (p. 14)

Opfer and Pedder (2011) researched the professional development of teachers and concluded “…teachers need time to develop, absorb, discuss, and practice new knowledge” (p. 385). They also found that the traditional professional development models of the onetime workshops, that are more like what they described as "style shows," are no longer relevant in today’s reform movements. They recommend that teachers have significant numbers of on-going contact hours, which has been shown to be
more effective when done with teachers from the same school, grade level, or department.

At Midland Elementary, in year 2, the leaders implemented a new comprehensive literacy program that involved transforming their current reading time into a reading workshop model. This new initiative entailed adding new professional development sessions after principals, coaches, and selected teachers went to conferences, visited model schools, and conducted book studies on this new literacy model. Principals and coaches had a new opportunity and responsibility to work through the implementation of this new literacy model together as a team and then disperse this information to the rest of the teachers.

Providing meaningful professional development in on-going sessions, as opposed to an isolated workshop is most effective, is the premise that Nieto (2001), as well as the creators of the Leadership and Learning Center, base their seminars on.

Leadership and Learning Center training. The Leadership and Learning Center is a consulting service division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt that focuses on professional development and consulting services. The Center provides schools professional development in order to bridge the gap from research to action. The goal of the Center is to provide implementation ideas that create sustainable change in student achievement.

The Leadership and Learning Center's founder is Dr. Douglas Reeves, who is the author of 30 books and many articles on school leadership. His Center serves school districts all around the world. The center provides group seminars and offers to follow those seminars with individual school visits. Reeves believed school visits are necessary
in order to integrate key learning received in their seminars into practice effectively (Reeves, 2000).

The Leadership and Learning Center provides schools with customized visits utilizing professional development in small groups and classroom settings. The visits help leaders and staff to be more accountable for their professional development experiences. These visits focus, specifically, on the needs of the particular school and are differentiated based on those needs. Possible learning objectives of the center are to give leadership support services and classroom implementation services. These can include, but are not limited to, walk-through training, data team support, curriculum review, assessment review, instructional strategy support, and leadership training.

Midland Elementary made a concerted effort to use a significant portion of their PLAS funds to hire representatives from the Leadership and Learning Center. Midland worked with an expert to focus on strengthening data team trainings and student engagement training with their staff. Funds were also allotted to provide after school intensive academic work for students who are not currently achieving on district academic assessments.

Evidence of academic progress is checked yearly through visits from the state’s Department of Education. Midland Elementary collected data on common formative assessments, parent involvement statistics, and statistics on progress towards their PLAS goals. They also collected data on data teams and their strategies. They developed walk-through criteria and are implementing walk-throughs on a regular basis and providing teachers with reflective feedback based on their observations during the walk-throughs.
Midland has a leadership team of six administering walk-throughs on a regular basis, providing regular reflective feedback for teachers. This monitoring of instruction allowed this school to check on the progress of the implementations that were discussed and planned during the data team process each week.

Midland Elementary developed a formal instructional decision making process. Due to the influence of the Leadership and Learning Center conferences and representatives, they utilized the Response to Intervention (RTI) process with their staff. The Leadership and Learning Center focuses on power strategies in the RTI process for schools to analyze and formalize their practices in selecting powerful strategies that help all students learn. RTI data teams review research and evidence-based implementations in order to provide authentic instructional delivery. Data team participants work through reflecting on their instructional strategies and assessments through templates designed to understand student work and progress. Using this type of progress monitoring and connecting the data to the interventions and strategies allowed this school the opportunity to differentiate instruction and to be more responsive to students’ academic and curricular needs.

Midland Elementary implemented new reading and math programs. They started with specific reading and math programs, but recognized the need to be responsive to their teachers and let them make instructional decisions based on student needs. In this school, literacy leaders and coaches are helping to model and assist teachers through best practices for reading and math based on student data. Midland is moving toward a workshop model for both math and reading. As per the Leadership and Learning Center’s
recommendation, this school recognized the need for a focus on non-fiction writing in order to work towards greater academic progress for students. Staff followed their district curriculum though the sense of urgency was higher because of the PLAS label for this school. Midland's need to accelerate growth, based on their three year process to accelerate student achievement, was reflected in the staff and in the academic approaches, as well as the climate of this building.

**Positive Behavior Intervention Systems training.** Staff at Midland was given ongoing professional development training each month on the Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS). These trainings included finding ways for staff to implement a 5:1 policy where for every five positive reinforcements they are giving, there would only be one correction given to a student. All staff, including paraprofessionals, was trained in successful computerized documentation of interventions to establish patterns of time of day and consistency of various behavior incidents by student in order to determine any trends. Staff then problem solve together on particular students who may need additional support from adults in the building other than the classroom teacher. Staff collectively decided what behaviors would be considered minor infractions and which ones would be considered major infractions and then puts the necessary interventions in place to best serve the needs of the students. PBIS is not a punitive system, but rather a way to address students' behaviors systematically in order to establish clear vocabulary, clear expectations, and clear interventions which will best support students, both socially and academically, as the school works to ultimately raise the academic achievement of all students.
Reading and math training. Midland reserved two days per month for professional development: one day for literacy and one day for math. The new reading program, “Good Habits, Great Readers” was implemented in year one of funding. Midland’s literacy coaches led this professional development by having teachers engage in exploration of this program as well as exploring other literature that supports accelerated reading proficiency. Book studies, exemplary teaching videos, reading workshop methods, lesson planning, as well as teacher collaboration on best practices were major components of their professional learning. In year two of the funding, Midland implemented the “Investigations” math program which also used a workshop approach to learning and developing critical thinking skills in math. Midland’s instructional coach provided training for this approach starting in year one in order for teachers to be ready to fully transition to this approach in year two. Professional development for math included article studies, exemplary teaching videos developed within Midland’s staff, math workshop methods, lesson planning, and teacher collaboration on best practices. The literacy coaches and instructional coach had similar approaches to professional development formats, where there was always time for presentation, workshop, and collaboration in order for staff to develop ownership of their individual learning, as well as developing team and building consistency in approaches to reading and math. Ongoing walk-throughs provided Midland’s leadership team and staff a tool to monitor these consistencies in approaches to reading and math. Developing professional learning communities provided Midland an opportunity to strengthen those instructional strategies as a team.
Professional Learning Communities

Midland Elementary School stated in its goals that staff will be following an instructional decision-making process in order to create professional learning communities within their building. This process allows for evaluating common formative assessments and summative assessments through the entire school year, as opposed to waiting for the state standardized testing at the end of the year.

Reeves (2000) stated:

After visiting all of the 90/90/90 Schools, we noticed profound differences between the assessment and instructional practices of these schools and those of low-achieving schools. First and most importantly, the 90/90/90 Schools had a laser-like focus on student achievement. The most casual observer could not walk down a hallway without seeing charts, graphs, and tables that displayed student achievement information, as well as data about the continuous improvement students had made. (p. 186)

Reeves (2000) outlined the Common Characteristics of High Achievement Schools:

1. Focus on academic achievement. Consistently apply focused interventions designed to get students to their desired achievement levels. Focus on differentiation as well as enrichment.
2. Curriculum choices. Spend more time on reading and math and less time on other subjects. Emphasize core skills in reading, writing, and math.
3. Frequent assessment of student progress with multiple opportunities for improvement. Weekly assessments of students’ progress using assessments constructed and administered by classroom teachers. Provide frequent opportunities to improve and succeed based on teacher feedback on performance and adjustment of instruction.
4. Written responses in performance assessments. Place a high emphasis on informative writing. Emphasize written responses in order to provoke student reflection in order to clarify their own thought processes.

Kennedy (2009) researched a high poverty school in order to determine the critical factors needed for raising children’s literacy achievement in reading, writing, and spelling. Kennedy also looked at the program’s effect on motivation, engagement, and
the students' ability to self-regulate learning, as well as self-efficacy. Kennedy discussed
the current pressures of initiatives such as the NCLB Act in influencing schools to act
upon the literacy gap that is evident between high-poverty schools and more affluent
schools with which they are being compared. Kennedy believed “Initiatives such as these
have tended to be rather prescriptive in nature and accompanied by target setting and
high-stakes testing” (p. 1). Kennedy referred to a study by Gamse, Bloom, Kemple and
Jacob in 2008 where they found:

In the United States, an independent review of the effects of the NCLB concluded
that despite the fact that time spent on the essential skills had increased, there was
not a statistically significant increase in children’s reading comprehension or in
the proportion of children reading at or above grade level. (p. 1)

Conclusions from his research showed that teachers who focus on a balanced literacy
framework gradually release responsibility where students use self-regulation strategies
to engage material at a deeper level. This alongside extending time for literacy activities,
with support from parents, will convey to students the need to compose a literate life for
themselves and their future. Kennedy (2009) believed that these conditions, developed
through professional development, provided teachers with effective literacy education
tools and continued:

Knowing they now had the expertise to rise to challenges helped the teachers to
see themselves as critical decision-makers and powerful enablers who could effect
change. Seeing the rise in achievement and the children’s evolution into real
readers, writers, and thinkers developed teachers’ confidence and self-efficacy
and led them to set even higher expectations for the children they served. (p. 9)

Kennedy recognized through this study that teachers could; however, dramatically
improve student achievement through building professional learning communities.
Kennedy stated:

The intervention was designed to give them an opportunity a) to enhance and consolidate their expertise by becoming informed about the research base, and b) to enable them to use the information to design a coherent, effective, and cognitively challenging systematic balanced literacy framework suitable for their own particular context. It was hypothesized that such a framework could be successful not only in raising achievement but in motivating and engaging children by capitalizing on their interests while also building their metacognitive awareness and their creativity and agency. (p. 5)

Kennedy found that professional development is needed to facilitate teacher support in this change process. Kennedy believed professional development needed to be customized, and on-site, in order to fit the specific needs of the teachers.

**Climate and Culture**

This section discusses the issues of climate and culture of schools. There are three themes in which this section is structured around. The themes include Cultural Competency Training, Parent Involvement, and Positive Behavior Intervention Systems.

**Cultural Competency Training**

Midland Elementary responded to the various cultures and needs of students in their building by developing book study groups, where staff explored various professional books together in order to raise awareness of the many multicultural approaches to teaching they could implement or improve upon. They have dedicated some Saturdays and professional development days to training their staff to be more responsive to all cultures as well as developing culturally competent lessons and activities for all students as well as improving the culture and climate for all staff.

Nieto and Bode (2008) discussed the need for a strong multicultural presence and multicultural values in the school setting. The authors believed in order to promote global
unity and strive towards a more global experience, they believed educators must represent global acceptance starting in elementary classrooms and continuing those values throughout secondary classroom settings. Creating multicultural settings and implementing multicultural curriculums into our K-12 schools, the authors posit, cannot happen unless educators first become multicultural people.

Nieto and Bode (2008) classified four levels of multicultural education that must be considered in the process of becoming multicultural. The four levels, as outlined in their model, progress in the following order: tolerance, acceptance, respect, and affirmation, solidarity, and critique. The model proposed ranged from monocultural education to comprehensive multicultural education. Their model examined the various components of the school environment and took different settings into consideration.

Tolerance referred to being tolerant to differences, and represents the lowest level of multicultural education. Tolerance may be a part of school policy, but is not adequate as a comprehensive mission statement. Acceptance acknowledged the differences of other cultures and might be reflected in some school activities. At this level, programs might choose to reflect acceptance through activities such as multicultural fairs, development of diverse cookbooks, or time may be set aside for weekly multicultural programs or newsletters.

The third level of multicultural education was respect, which means to admire and hold in high esteem. When examining respect, Nieto and Bode (2008) stated, “In the curriculum, students’ values and experiences would be used as the basis for their literacy development. Students would be exposed to different ways of approaching the same
reality, and as a result, they would expand their way of looking at the world" (p. 427).

The fourth and highest level of support was affirmation, solidarity, and critique. This is the challenging level where the students work through their differences in order to accept and embrace different languages and cultures and learn from each other. Nieto and Bode discussed:

Because multicultural education is concerned with equity and social justice for all people, and because basic values of different groups are often diametrically opposed, conflict is inevitable. What makes this level different from the others is that conflict is not avoided but accepted and an inescapable part of learning. (p. 427)

The authors discussed how educators need to examine their curriculum at each of the four levels in order to begin representing that global experience in the classrooms.

**Anti-bias activities.** According to Derman-Sparks (1993-94), “Effective anti-bias education requires every teacher to look inward and commit to a lifelong journey of understanding her/his own cultural beliefs, while changing the prejudices and behaviors that interfere with the nurturing of all children” (p. 67). Teaches must be ready emotionally and cognitively to address their own journey in order to effectively adapt their teaching style and curriculum approaches to meet their students’ needs. Helping all students to be critical thinkers entails working for social change and creating a community of caring learners in a safe academic environment. Derman-Sparks discussed teaching as a continuous interaction between adults and children and that planning classroom activities should reflect the ideas of the students, not the teachers.

Giroux (1993) explored the critical issues in American education and implied a lack of confidence in the ability of public school teachers to provide the needed
intellectual leadership needed for our nation's youth. Giroux contended that teachers are being reduced to the implementing, not the reflecting and evaluating, that experts are using in creating and organizing the curriculum. He argued for teachers to be at the forefront in developing the necessary conditions for students daily in order to take an active role in what they teach, how they teach, and what the larger goals are for their students. Giroux stated:

Teachers as intellectuals have to be seen in terms of the ideological and political interests that structure the nature of the discourse, classroom social relations and values that they legitimate in their teaching. Teachers should become transformative intellectuals if they are to educate students to be active, critical citizens. (p. 276)

Teachers must create the conditions daily that give students the opportunities to interact as citizens in a classroom community environment.

**Cultural change.** Reeves (2007), a leader in the 90/90/90 movement, stated that “In the last decade, the education standards movement has taught us that policy change without cultural change is an exercise in futility and frustration” (p. 92). Reeves recognized that the school environment is an essential component to the success of schools. Reeves advocated for hiring and retaining teachers who believe in their students, focus on academic achievement, give regular assessments, increase collaboration, utilize creative scheduling, and focus on effective teaching strategies to obtain results—not programs.

Elizabeth R. Hinde (2004) discussed how a culture in schools can affect everything from how the staff chooses to decorate their rooms and how they dress. She
discussed culture including what the staff talks about, willingness to adapt to change, as well as what they emphasize in their curriculum.

Hinde’s Points of Discussion:

1. School culture is constantly being constructed through our interactions with students, parents, the community, and among staff.
2. Administrators set the tone and shape the culture for the building.
3. Building rituals and procedures define a school’s culture.
4. School culture can be a positive influence on learning. Students and staff prefer an environment that is supportive, encouraging, and the physical comforts are optimal.
5. Staff has a shared sense of purpose, commitment, and is willing to take risks to enact reforms. (Hinde, 2004)

Social class and school knowledge. Anyon (1981) made the case for variances in school knowledge and achievement gaps in our society as based on social class settings. The five schools in two districts in her study were from contrasting social class settings. Anyon presented a unique window for examining how curricula can be manipulated from building to building based on social class standing and how these manipulations can widen the achievement gap. The working class schools in Anyon’s study had teachers that used district curriculum; but only at a surface level. They did not attempt to engage in critical thinking with the texts because their expectations for these types of students were low. The middle class school’s instruction was a little more in-depth. The teachers put more emphasis on content over recall. Students from the affluent, professional school had teachers that saw knowledge as involving creativity or discovery, with curriculum including questioning and supplemental materials. The executive, elite school in this study had teachers who referred to knowledge as intellectual processes, such as reasoning
and problem solving. The curriculum in this school allowed students to question, hypothesize, rationalize, and developed higher-order thinking skills.

Anyon (1981) perceived that schools have socially constructed an achievement gap over the years. She presented differences in school expectations, structures, ideas about knowledge, and the use (and misuse) of curricula between schools and social classes. She contended that schools can share similar curricula and not get the same results. Anyon believed that, superficially, it looks as though all schools are getting the same things, but in reality there continues to be an achievement gap that challenges varying curriculum.

Perry and McConney (2010) did a related research study on the relationship of students' socio-economic statuses (SES) and student outcomes by focusing on variations of students from low socio-economic background, to that of students with high socio-economic backgrounds. They examined how those associations varied across schools with different socio-economic levels, focusing on increases in socio-economic levels to degrees of increases in academic achievement. Their samples included over 12,000 students from 320 different schools. The researchers concluded "The two main findings of the study are that increases in the mean SES of a school are associated with consistent increases in students' academic achievement, and that this relationship is similar for all students regardless of their individual SES" (p. 1137). They found students of higher SES levels were more likely to have higher scores on standardized achievement tests, and higher SES students were also more likely to attend secondary schools and universities. Even with the supporting literature to their findings, Perry and McConney's research
leads to even more questions about SES levels and student achievement. They referred to studies that found the lower SES students’ academic levels were more negatively affected by grouping with those of similar SES status than the higher SES students and suggested:

Put another way, the grouping of high SES students into a school seems to create conditions associated with even higher educational outcome outcomes than would be expected from individual students’ SES alone. The opposite is true for lower SES students. When lower SES students are grouped in a lower SES school, their lower educational outcomes can be exacerbated. (p. 1137)

Relevant studies in the field also include Singham (1998) and Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer and Wood (2004). Each of these authors presented current inequities and the challenges facing students who come from low socio-economic environments due to public school legislation failing to address their needs.

Culturally competent lessons. Culturally relevant teaching and closing the achievement gap for minority and low-income students is the key focus in Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1994) book. Culturally relevant instruction is a mode of a teacher’s interactional style of teaching. In order for students to be successful, there is a need to build communities within the classroom. Ladson-Billings discussed how there can be no significant learning without a significant relationship. Ladson-Billings stressed the importance of making the school gang a viable option to the street gang by creating classroom communities. The author contended that teachers with culturally relevant practices believe that all students can succeed. It is this belief, combined with high expectations, that create classrooms where the learning possibilities are immense. Ladson-Billings suggested culturally relevant teachers help students make connections between their community, nation, and world.
Ladson-Billings (1994) discussed how some White teachers claim not to see color. In culturally relevant practices, students’ diverse backgrounds are central to the teaching pedagogy. Teachers need to see color and they need to teach the value of it, if they are to be successful with students from diverse backgrounds. These relevant teachers believe that students already come to school with knowledge, and their knowledge needs to be “explored and utilized in order for students to become achievers” according to Ladson-Billings (p. 52). She also recognized the importance of teachers interacting with students outside of the school or classroom. She stated “Because many African American students live in and attend schools in communities that their teachers neither live in nor choose to frequent after school hours means that few have the opportunity to interact with their teachers outside the classroom” (p. 63). Teachers need to get to know their students. Ladson-Billings believed that you can’t teach what you don’t know. Ladson-Billings also asserted that teachers cannot teach what they do not care about to students they do not care about.

In John U. Ogbu’s article “Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success” (1992), he examined differences in school adjustment and academic performance of minority groups. He suggested that one component to understanding the differences is based on the cultural model a minority group uses to guide their interpretations of U.S. society, the cultural/language frames of reference a group, the degree of trust/mistrust of White Americans and societal institutions, and the educational strategies that are a result of these factors. Ogbu stated:

Some minorities have experienced many episodes in their relationship with Whites that have led them to believe that Whites and the institutions they control
cannot be trusted; their comparative frame of reference is the education in White suburbs and they usually conclude that they are given different and inferior education. (p. 25)

Ogbu stated his assertion that to successfully educate minority students, educators need to examine the historical and structural contexts of events that may explain common minority educational behaviors on social adjustment and academic performance. Ogbu compared voluntary to involuntary immigrants and how these cultural frameworks may differ in regards to how they respond to the U.S. as a whole, including the educational system and cultural behaviors of the school. Ogbu stated:

They differ in the degree in which they trust White Americans and the institutions, such as schools that are controlled by Whites; and they differ in collective identity and cultural frame of reference for judging appropriate behavior and affirmation of group membership and solidarity. (p. 27)

Wells (2009) discussed the increase of immigration in the United States and with approximately 20% of U.S. students now considered immigrants, how K-12 schools are becoming increasingly diverse. He recognized the race-based decision-making in schools is still very limited, despite this phenomenon. Wells (2009) stated:

At a minimum, therefore, schools must begin to examine ways to increase access for immigrant students to non-isolating environments. Schools must address immigrant students’ needs specifically and not rely on existing policies that are not directly targeted at this outcome to somehow result in integration. Schools must be creative in such efforts, perhaps partnering with other schools that have different student compositions, creating programs to purposefully integrate immigrants and non-immigrants even in somewhat segregated schools or taking the issue to the political arena and discussing district zoning and related issues. Such reforms must take into account immigrant students’ race/ethnicity and SES as they ensure that they have equal access to the general curriculum alongside non-immigrants and white students from which they are currently segregated. (p. 147)
According to Cianca and Lampe (2010) in Rochester, Minnesota, at a school also designated as a school under federal review in 2009, the principal chose to focus on systems, cultures, and instruction in order to transform his failing school. Statistics and reform efforts at this school were strikingly similar to those of Midland. This school replaced three-fourths of its staff and hired many first-year teachers. Culture was an area that was immediately addressed, “Creating a sense of community was important in a school where confusion and conflict had reigned. As a result of increased trust, students began making eye contact, smiling, even saying good morning to teachers and administrators in return” (p. 52). Eck and Goodwin (2010) also stressed the importance of school culture: “Such intangibles as school climate and culture likely have as much (if not more) influence on student achievement than the school’s physical assets, such as the number of books in its library, computers per student or student-teacher ration” (p. 25).

Reigeluth (2009) offered various instructional design methods that teachers could utilize in order to ultimately create more culturally relevant curriculums. His designs provided instructional resources and a variety of theories to assist educators in engaging learners from a wide variety of backgrounds. Marsh and Willis (2007) also offered a variety of curricular approaches to address learner needs using various instructional designs and strategies for engagement. Bloomberg and Bush (2006) discussed how to help students from diverse cultures in order to address the racism that exists in the current No Child Left Behind legislation.

Systemic racism. David Wellman (Tatum, 1997) defined racism as a “system of advantage based on race” (p. 2). He contended that Whites benefit from racism by having
an advantage because they have access to better schools, housing, and jobs. Tatum (1997) agreed with Wellman's definition and believed this definition allowed teachers to explore how the United States, and its school system, clearly operated to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color. Tatum explained “Racial prejudice when combined with social power—access to social, cultural, and economic resources and decision-making—leads to the institutionalism of racist policies and practices” (1997, p. 7). Tatum discussed how environmental cues at school are institutionalized. She described the tracking practices at schools and pointed out that there is a recognizable racial pattern to how students are assigned, and believed that Black students were much more likely to be placed in the lower track, and are seldom represented in the honors track. Tatum expressed how high school students feel anger and resentment when they become aware of “the systemic exclusion of Black people from full participation in U.S. society” (1997, p. 56).

According to Spring (2007), “In North America, the clash of languages and cultures has been accompanied by economic exploitation, cultural intolerance, and racism. Educational policies have served the interest of those wanting to take advantage of others” (p. 7). Spring presented United States history as being plagued with cultural and racial conflicts. Spring discussed a growing disconnect between preaching educational opportunity while practicing acts of intolerance throughout our society and in our public schools. Spring stated:

On the surface, it would seem strange that a nation that identifies itself as democratic should have such a long history of racial and cultural conflicts and would have adopted deculturalization policies. These seemingly contradictory beliefs have had tragic results, as measured by the number of lives lost in racial
and cultural conflicts, and represent a deep flaw in the unfolding history of the United States and American schools. (2007, p. 8)

Spring (2007) presented in detail how specific minority cultures have been denied education or experienced segregation, and how this has led to economic and social exploitation as well as continued discrimination within school structures.

Landsman (2001) expressed the need for White teachers to understand the history of other races in order to develop school systems that reflect multicultural values instead of just a White, middle-class viewpoint. Karp (2004) envisioned a system where all gaps would be treated equally and addressed productively, and not based on race or socio-economic level. Kivel (2002) presented the dynamics of racism in American society and how institutions can specifically address racism without further rhetoric or placing blame. Kivel’s ideas were designed towards educating White people about how social injustices within the classroom directly affect, and mirror, the social injustices that exist within society.

**Parent Involvement**

Midland Elementary had an increased focus on parent involvement due to their PLAS designation. They implemented family nights and increased focus on open communication with parents in hopes of ultimately increasing student achievement. Recognizing the fact the many of the families in this building come from different cultures, this school understood the need for parent involvement training along with the cultural competence training for staff.

Epstein (1995) stated:
“If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students” (p. 176).

Epstein outlined the following characteristics of a successful parent involvement program:

1. **Incremental Progress.** With a well-implemented program of partnership, more students will receive support from their families which will make them be more motivated to work hard. Teachers and families can learn to work together for the interests of the children they share.

2. **Connection to Curricular and Instructional Reform.** An important component of parent involvement and instructional reform is to focus on the child’s learning. Help families to understand, monitor, and interact with homework in order to raise student achievement. Improve the content of Parent-Teacher Conferences in order to set goals and provide an accurate assessment of child’s development.

3. **Redefining Staff Development.** Staff needs to be educated on the importance of developing partnerships with parents, families, and communities. Define teacher and administrators roles as professionals in this partnership process.

LaRocque and Darling (2011) discussed how parents need to have different types of options for involvement with the school. Involvement depends on many factors such as socioeconomic status, past school experiences, schooling of the parents, and possibly the teacher demographics. LaRocque and Darling presented the idea that differences among cultural groups may lead to complex issues arising within the classroom, and the teachers at the school may not educated to various cultural norms and beliefs. LaRocque and Darling explained:

The No Child Left Behind Act has brought parental involvement to the forefront. This legislation has formalized the parents’ right to know what is happening in schools. It means that schools have to move beyond talking about involvement to actively facilitating this involvement. However, teachers admit that they have little training in strategies for working with parents. (2011, p. 116)
LaRocque and Darling recognized that all parent involvement does not need to take place within the school setting and that this must be an on-going process. LaRocque and Darling expressed that all parents want what is best for their children though some do not have the time during the school hours to be actively involved. He stated “Teachers and schools need to get to know the community in order to improve understanding and attitude between themselves and parents. They need to understand the needs and opportunities of the families they serve” (2011, p. 121). Recognizing the need to honor parent’s schedules, Midland Elementary implemented home visits for every certified staff member at the school. Staff set up home, or off-site, visits that coincided with parents’ busy schedules. This allowed teachers the opportunity to meet with parents and families in the setting of the family’s choice. Some had teachers visit their home, while others met the teachers at a McDonald’s, park, or student’s extra-curricular activity. Teachers at Midland Elementary participated in professional development in regards to how to best conduct home visits, and what types of homework supplies they could bring along as a gift to the student in order to supplement their learning at home. The PLAS funding allowed for home visit bags to include items such as journals, maps, flashcards, books, pencils, rulers, and writing utensils. Professional development also included some education over cultural differences and how to best involve parents in the learning process in order to raise student achievement. LaRocque and Darling believed “Schools and teachers need to address emotional barriers, physical barriers, and cultural differences to increase parent involvement for all families and in particular families who are from diverse backgrounds” (p. 118). During Year 1 of Midland Elementary’s off site
visit implementation, staff visited approximately 30% of their students’ homes. In Year 2, after seeing success with this implementation, off site visits were conducted with nearly half of all the students’ families.

Midland Elementary School implemented family nights as a part of their PLAS plan in order to raise student achievement. Colombo (2004) discussed developing family literacy nights in order to build a community bridge between teachers and culturally diverse parents. Colombo studied a school that implemented a 3 year program for creating effective learning environments for culturally and linguistically diverse students. This program consisted of family literacy nights that brought teachers, students, and families together in order to help learners succeed academically and more quickly in a mainstream culture. The program allowed families to understand the literary practices of schools and to make teachers more aware of the strengths that culturally diverse families have. Colombo expressed:

Parents want to help their children do well, but they sometimes don’t know how. Unlike mainstream parents, who share the culture of the school and therefore prepare their children to participate in that particular setting, culturally diverse parents often can only guess at the behaviors expected within schools. (2004, p. 50)

Blank (2004) contended that building partnerships with parents, schools, and communities are critical to raising student achievement. He questioned “Can schools take the time to build relationships when failure to meet federal standards on a single test can label them as underperforming? Many educators, local elected officials, and community leaders believe that schools cannot afford not to build such relationships” (p. 62). Blank
understood that partnerships are at the core of community schools and that helping students to succeed academically depends on strengthening families and communities.

Lam (2004) discussed how boosting parent involvement can also raise student achievement in urban schools. He collected data on students by surveying students, parents, and teachers and examining attendance and test data to see if there was a correlation between parent involvement and student achievement. He found that involving students in the test taking process by increasing their knowledge and involvement was an added benefit for student scores. In his research, test scores increased dramatically for students who had parents involved in his outreach program. He stated:

In countless communities and in countless studies of the common elements of successful schools, parent engagement has always been identified as an essential component of school success. Unfortunately, parent involvement frequently isn’t happening, especially in low-performing, under-resourced urban schools. Teachers are ready, willing, but often unable to effectively engage parents. (2004, p. 46)

Lam concluded that parents are an invaluable resource and improving student achievement depends on involving parents in their children’s education regardless of race, economic background, or language.

Positive Behavior Intervention Systems

Midland Elementary implemented Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) which is a program that focused on providing a framework for staff to utilize evidence-based interventions into their curriculum to enhance academic and behavioral outcomes for all students. Midland’s principal explained that the goal of PBIS is to improve the social culture of the school and the academic culture of the classroom.

Outcomes are monitored by the use of a computer system that tracks when and where
problem behaviors occur in order to provide necessary supports for those areas at those times. PBIS interventions are similar to the interventions that are provided by the RTI process as it is in response to student needs. The principal credited the addition of a strong interventionist in year two for making the needed differences in assisting teachers along with the PBIS process.

Midland Elementary School recognized the need to develop a positive behavior system school-wide. The PBIS program they chose had the goal of being able to promote a system where staff and students could focus on respecting each other and promoting social justice within the school setting.

Kohn (1991) explained:

If we had to pick a logical setting in which to guide children toward caring about, empathizing with, and helping other people, it would be a place where they would regularly come into contact with their peers and where some sort of learning is already taking place” (p. 498).

Kohn believed that schools should develop systems based on values and moral reasoning and glue it into their existing curriculums. His concern was that schools are placing so much emphasis on good test-takers that they are missing the opportunity to shape strong character and help children to grow into caring adults. Kohn also recognized that the teachers’ behaviors are as essential to the lesson as the curriculum, and that they need to be a part of the school-wide program as well. Kohn (1991) outlined the following beliefs in regards to developing pro-social school-wide-based programs:

1. Implementing pro-social classroom-based programs promote cooperative learning and enhance academic achievement.
2. It can help our children to develop new perspectives and teach children to think more critically which in turn can lead to higher test scores.
3. Programs should be agreed upon by educators who base their decisions for education on intellectual engagement taking into account morals, values, and social aspects concerning students.
4. Punishment is ultimately ineffective because it teaches nothing about what one is supposed to do; only what one is not supposed to do.
5. Encouraging a commitment to values should be the teacher's goal to help a child see themselves as helping, caring, and responsible. Students learn to own their behavior.
6. Encourage students' to make choices based upon the implications that those choices will have on the group. Kids who have moral autonomy will not want to do things wrong.
7. Implementing programs to promote positive social and moral behaviors are innovative and crucial as we look ahead to school reforms.
8. Changing behaviors and attitudes are needed in this era of focusing on testing and standardized curriculums. (Kohn, 1991)

Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, and Wehby (2010) found “Consistent and appropriate use of teacher praise and increased opportunities to respond may serve as an important 1st step to establish predictable and positive classroom contexts that promote successful primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and intervention supports” (p. 172). Partin et al. believed that many of the disruptive and problematic behaviors that students have exhibited in recent years is due to the classroom environment not being supportive of appropriate student behaviors. Partin et al. found “In general, direct observations of classroom interactions reveal that students identified as having or being at risk for emotional or behavioral disorders encounter high rates of negative or neutral interactions with their teachers and receive high rates of teacher commands” (2010, p. 172). Partin et al. believed that if teachers gave their students more teacher attention for positive behaviors, that it would decrease the inappropriate behaviors and the need to seek negative attention or exhibit problem behaviors. Partin et al. concluded “Teachers working with students in urban educational settings can use this self-monitoring strategy
as a template for evaluating their own behavior to establish and maintain positive classroom environments that prevent problem behavior and promote student learning” (2010, p. 177). The Positive Behavior Support Systems curriculum implemented in Midland followed this same belief system, encouraging teachers to provide positive opportunities for students to remain actively engaged in their own learning while providing multiple opportunities for success.

Whitted (2011) explained how teaching social and emotional skills within the classroom setting is imperative if we are going to promote the development of skills needed for school success, both academically and behaviorally. Whitted suggested that schools use a predesigned curriculum that helps educators to learn classroom management strategies through the effective use of praise, incentives and relationship-building strategies through classroom lessons. “Teachers can help children develop social and emotional competencies by teaching them the following skills: empathy, impulse control, problem solving and coping, and anger management” (2011, p. 13). Whitted stressed that teachers must be careful to incorporate these lessons daily into their curriculum, not just once or twice throughout the year, in order to better equip students and teachers with strategies that enhance the academic setting as well as the building setting. Whitted suggested for teachers to share these strategies with parents in order to have them reinforce them at home. Whitted believed “The quality of interactions with adults during early childhood can either promote the development of skills needed for school success or lead to developmental skills deficits that can be detrimental to school success” (2011, p. 11).
Providing a strong support system at school is especially important for children who are living in poverty. Cuthrell, Stapleton and Ledford (2010) found “In addition to school-wide strategies, creating a positive environment within the classroom is one of the most powerful actions that a teacher can implement to ensure that all children belong, especially children living in poverty” (p. 106). Building strong on-going relationships with families and communities was a strong message from Cuthrell et al. as well. Teachers holding high expectations for all students and building activities to promote team-building were found by Cuthrell et al. to be successful and important for teachers to reinforce positive classroom environments. Cuthrell et al. stated:

The literature clearly shows that poverty has a great effect on a child’s life and subsequently on a teacher’s life. For this reason, it is imperative that teacher-preparation programs and public schools continue to explore the effect and strategies that affect the development of children. (2010, p. 109)

Cuthrell et al. saw the need to target resources to teachers, students, and families in order to work together to close the student achievement gap for disadvantaged schools as well as families.

This chapter summarized the literature relating to the researchers three questions regarding the Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators, Curriculum and Academic Achievement, and Climate and Culture. The following chapter will explain how the researcher continued building on these themes to create a relevant study on creating school reform.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and administrators in an elementary school labeled as a Persistently Low-Achieving School in 2009. Midland was one of the first two elementary schools in their state to be given the PLAS label due to low student achievement on state standardized test scores. The PLAS designation mandates that schools with this label make a specific 3 year plan complete with measurable goals and specific plans for increasing test scores. Midland’s leadership team and staff responded by implementing various educational strategies in order to increase their students’ achievement in an accelerated time frame. Putting a strong focus on research-based strategies and building the instructional capacity of the staff, Midland put their 3 year plan into action beginning in 2010. The specific focus of this study was to investigate the response of this school in the following areas:

1. Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators: What impact did the PLAS label have on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building?

2. Curriculum and Academic Achievement: What impact did the PLAS label have on curriculum development in this school and plans for assessment of academic achievement?

3. Climate and Culture: What impact did the PLAS label have on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence?
Design

This study was designed to investigate how this elementary school responded to being labeled as a Persistently Low-Achieving School. This study focused on the response to the PLAS label in the areas of teachers and administrators, curriculum and academic achievement, and climate and culture in Midland Elementary School. This study specifically investigated the impact that the PLAS label had on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building, the effects the PLAS label had on curriculum development and academic achievement, and the impact the PLAS label had on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence. Currently, the federal government is designating schools across America as Persistently Low-Achieving Schools if they do not meet standards set by “No Child Left Behind” guidelines. This study was also designed to give information about how an elementary school given this label has responded after receiving funding from the federal government to make intensive changes in instructional strategies, staff, and building leadership. This chapter describes the design, the procedures, the study participants and the data analysis collection procedures.

This qualitative research project is designed as a case study of a school designated with the PLAS label. This type of study allowed for an examination of implementations. Yin (1994) stated:

As an interpretive, inductive form of research, case studies explore the details and meanings of experience and do not usually attempt to test a priori hypotheses. Instead, the researcher attempts to identify important patterns and themes in the data. The richness of case studies is related to the amount of detail and contextualization that is possible when only one or a small number of focal cases and issues are analyzed. The writer's ability to provide a compelling and engaging
profile of the case, with suitable examples and linkages to broader issues, is also very important. (p.109)

In a qualitative case study, the researcher can analyze and discuss the case in terms of important themes, programming, and approaches across the implementations. In this design section, the researcher described the four phases of the case study as the school progressed through the PLAS reform.

This qualitative research project began with an investigation of the school’s state grant application. To gain a clearer understanding of this school, the researcher examined the state application, accessible on the state’s Department of Education websites, in order to examine themes found in the school’s plan for improving student achievement based on state standardized testing scores. Three areas that emerged as major goals in this plan guided the creation of the three main research questions. Reviewing the school’s plan led the researcher to see the need to understand staff perceptions on a deeper level, and to investigate their perceptions of their specific implementation plan.

The second phase of this study included interview questions created for the principal and assistant principal at Midland Elementary School. The researcher explained the study to the principal and assistant principal and they signed the research consent form and expressed their excitement to be involved in this type of educational research. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were specifically designed to inquire about this school’s responses to the three areas reflected in each of the research questions. The principal and assistant principal responded to eighteen questions that focused on the three major levels of change that the school had focused on for the 2010-2011 school year. When discussing interviewing for research purposes, Reinharz (1992) stated:
Methodologically, this new approach provides a greater spectrum of responses and a greater insight into respondents, or participants, to avoid the hierarchical pitfall, because it encourages them to control the sequencing and the language of the interview and also allows them the freedom of open-ended responses. (p. 22)

The interview questions for the principal and assistant principal strategically paralleled the three research questions, and have been developed from the PLAS plans. Questions 1 through 6 attempt to gain a deeper understanding of how leadership and staff changed and adapted in response to the PLAS designation. Questions 7 through 13 inquire about academic achievement, curriculum, state expectations and assessments, as well as ways this school has differentiated their school from others in their district. Questions 14 through 18 aim to better understand this school’s focus for developing new approaches to school climate, including behavior systems, parent involvement, and cultural competency. The principal and assistant principal responded to these questions during year 2 of their plan. This allowed them the opportunity to reflect on the first year’s implementations and encouraged them to expand on what further changes are needed in order to meet their state’s expectations for accelerated growth in the area of academic achievement.

The third phase of this study involved interviewing teachers in order to examine individual perceptions of how each of the three research questions affected teachers’ instruction, assessments, and approaches to school climate. Midland’s Instructional Coach, also the researcher of this study, informed teachers about this study. Teachers from this building had the option to participate, or not, without any penalty for not being involved in this study. The selected, certified staff from this school who agreed to participate in the study signed research consent forms. The researcher then contacted the
individual participants through email and asked them to be interviewed using response questions as a format for the interview (see Appendix B). Upon replying to the email, teachers also provided their gender, race, and age as background information. As with the principal’s interview questions, teachers responded individually to the interview questions during year 2 of their plan.

These open-ended interview questions for teachers were also developed and numbered in the order that helped to connect back to the research questions. The first two questions focused on approaches to teaching and individual professional development. The third and fourth questions inquire about student achievement and curriculum. The fifth and sixth questions encourage responses concerning cultural competency, parent involvement, and student behavior. Teachers were asked to respond on an individual basis, rather than for their collective building, in order to determine in what ways this large amount of change also affected certified staff on different levels.

Phase 4 of this case study involved pulling together two focus groups for a continued and more personal discussion of their individual answers. Two separate groups were created and interviewed. The researcher chose to interview the two administrators together after creating questions that further delved into their thoughts on their implementations and the reform changes at Midland (see Appendix C). Questions 1 through 5 focused on the professional practices of teachers. Questions 6 through 10 focused on curriculum and academic achievement; 11 through 14 inquired about the climate and culture of the building.
Based on their individual answers, the researcher chose to put veteran teachers and new teachers into two separate focus groups. Appendix D reflected the questions asked of the veteran teachers. Questions 1 through 3 focused on the professional practices of teachers and administrators. Questions 4 through 6 explored the curriculum and academic achievement perceptions of the veterans and questions 7 through 9 dealt with the climate and the culture at Midland Elementary. Appendix E contains the questions for the new teacher discussion group. Questions 1 through 4 inquired about the professional practices of teachers and administrators. Questions 5 through 9 inquired about the curriculum and achievement at Midland and Questions 10 through 13 explore the perceptions of the climate and culture of Midland.

**Lens of the Researcher**

The researcher in this study is also the instructional coach at Midland Elementary School. In Midland Elementary, the researcher had the role of an insider. The researcher used the school’s PLAS plan and the collection tools shown in the appendices and reported the findings based only on the data collected. The researcher needed to step into the role of a researcher, from the position as Instructional Coach, in order to attempt to be objective. The advantage of being an insider in Midland School was that it gave the researcher a rare opportunity to see the implementations, and to be an integral part of those, from a first person point of view. The researcher was able to have a deeper understanding of the practices in progress in Midland Elementary. The researcher’s knowledge and experience in Midland Elementary School gave an advantage to this study because this school’s journey is being told from the point of view of an actively involved
party. In this aspect, the researcher may even be seen as the ninth participant within this study. The researcher continued to analyze, and report on, only the data received and balance those results based on the professional obligations of research methods.

Procedures

This study was a qualitative study. The method used for this case study involved researcher inquiry of the qualifying grant plan, school leadership, and teachers. The researcher investigated the school's grant application including official plans for changes, interviews with the principal, and interview questions from teachers in order to inquire about what steps the school is taking toward raising student achievement. The data from the grant application suggested the primary plans and goals for the school in this study, and led to the development of the interview questions. The grant application included information about demographics, plan framework, and state expectations for growth. Leadership interview questions were given to the principal and assistant principal in order to discover specific steps taken upon state acceptance of the grant in this school, as well as what changes were implemented for staff, students, and parents. Teacher interviews allowed the researcher to explore what specific steps of the plan were implemented and how those steps affected professional practices, culture, and climate of their buildings. Questions in both the administration interviews and teacher interviews were open-ended and broad in order to cover research questions, and allow respondents to speak freely.

The researcher's plan was to gain specific information on this school's responses to teachers and administrators, curriculum and academic achievement, and climate and culture. Concepts would emerge once all of the collected data is analyzed.
Once individual interviews were completed and transcribed, the researcher used this data to seek themes that were not initially apparent. This was accomplished by creating a matrix that divided the three research questions into the emerging themes from the interviews. After examining data and emerging themes from the matrix, the researcher saw the need for further exploration of responses around these themes. The researcher arranged for focus group meetings with informants divided into three specific groups: administrators, veteran teachers, and new teachers. Questions were developed to further probe into the reflections and responses noted in the individual interviews.

When the focus group interviews were completed and transcribed, the researcher was able to fully develop the answers to the three research questions and ten specific themes fitting into the matrix under the three research questions. Under the "Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators" section, the four themes that emerged were: staff changes, professional pressures, staff dynamic and professional development. Under the "Curriculum and Academic Achievement" section, the three themes that emerged are: raising student achievement, walk-throughs, and professional learning communities. Under the "Climate and Culture" section, the three themes that emerged are: cultural competency training, parent involvement, and positive behavior intervention systems. These are further discussed in Chapter 4 and 5. The following section describes the participants that were a part of this study.

Participants

The researcher recruited leadership from Midland Elementary School. Throughout the course of this study, leadership referred to the principal and assistant
principal. With the assistance of leadership, the researcher then recruited specific
certified staff from Midland Elementary School. The specific certified staff members
were selected based on the researcher's knowledge of the participants' ability to reflect
deeply, their past willingness to vocalize their perceptions, and participants' past
involvement with helping to work toward reform on various committees. The researcher
then contacted leadership and staff in this building by email and explained that this study
look at building initiatives, and not at the results of the implementation of these
initiatives. Participants were made aware that building initiatives or outcomes would not
be examined on an evaluative level. The real school's name or individual staff names will
not be used in published reports or presentations. Every attempt would be made to keep
any designating information anonymous. Staff and leadership in this building had the
option to not participate without any negative consequences.

Participants were informed that all individual and group interviews would only be
heard or seen by the researcher and those serving on the researcher's dissertation
committee so there was no risk for individual repercussions based on answers provided
by staff or leadership. The researcher explained, using state research protocol, the
possible implications, though rare, of communicating through email.

Consent forms were signed by the principal, assistant principal and participating
teachers upon approval of this study. Consent forms contained the invitation to
participate, the purpose and nature of the study, and detailed explanation of procedures.
The consent forms also explained that there would be no foreseeable discomforts or risks
in participating in the study; as well as, explained the benefit of having their school's
journey told as a reinforcement of their innovative efforts. The researcher also included a right to refuse or withdraw section; as well as, contact information for both the researcher and this study's co-chairs. The researcher also attempted to take in consideration the need to choose staff from varied backgrounds. The staff at Midland does not reflect the full diversity of the student population at Midland. The researcher worked to choose staff from different experience levels, gender, race, hometown experience, and time entering the profession. The term "non-traditional teacher" refers to teachers who chose other careers early in their adulthood before choosing to become a teacher. The researcher felt that this distinction was necessary to include because it could change the perception of a participant towards certain reform efforts based on their varied experiences in the workforce. Upon choosing to interview veteran and new teachers, in order to get varying perspectives, the researcher realized the effect it may have on the data analysis in Chapter 4. In reflecting the diversity of the staff of the school, recruited participants, who were interviewed, fit into the following demographics:

**Subgroup 1: Administrators**

1. Monica: African American female, veteran administrator
2. Heather: White female, new administrator

**Subgroup 2: Teachers**

1. Barb: Veteran teacher, White female
2. Morgan: Veteran non-traditional teacher, African American, female
3. Jade: Veteran teacher, White female
5. Shelby: New non-traditional teacher, White, female

6. Owen: New teacher, White male

Data Analysis

The researcher first analyzed data received upon investigation of this school’s grant application and official plans for implementations. The application and plans were analyzed using qualitative methods by researching the criteria that determines how schools are labeled as PLAS schools, and comparing those criteria to the specific plan that Midland put into place in order to determine overlying themes for implementation. Demographic characteristics of this school led the researcher to further explore the replication of this school’s repair plan. The school consists of 38.3% African American students, 37.2% White students, 11.4% Mixed Race students, 11.1% Hispanic students, 1% Asian students, and 1% Pacific Islander students. There are 10% of students that are labeled as Homeless. While the researcher understands that any cultures other than White are considered to be minorities in the school systems, this study will be mainly focusing on students designated as African American students and/or of low socio-economic status, as well as English Language Learners. Upon this finding, the researcher recognized the need to also include demographic information of this study’s participants to determine if that could be a factor in their interview answers. This data led to the researcher to develop questions and design the study in terms of how each question would most effectively be answered. This analysis also led the researcher to understand the need to find more scholarship on minority and diverse populations as described in the second chapter.
The researcher then analyzed data received from building leadership in the form of answers to the interview questions. The researcher did this by creating the matrix, discussed earlier in Chapter 3, where the three research questions led to 10 specific themes and were compared to the plan and across the participants’ perspectives. Responses to the questions were obtained and analyzed during year 2 of their grant funding. Using the framework of the three research questions, the information provided by the building leadership allowed the researcher to examine identified themes. Using data from these open-ended questions also allowed the researcher to better understand leaderships’ role and thoughts on facilitating change of this magnitude at a building level. The results of these analyses are presented in the following chapters.

The next phase of data analysis consisted of examining interview answers from Midland’s teachers. This data also involved analyzing open-ended questions. The questions were broad enough to gain a variety of perspectives, yet specific enough to use to determine common threads between participants from this building. This data was analyzed in order to further understand teacher’s actions, thoughts, and perspectives regarding their experiences in this PLAS journey.

The researcher color coded the transcriptions by how the answers supported each of the three research questions. This data was put into a matrix, which included the eight participants, the three research questions, and the recurring themes that resulted throughout the interviews. Results of this analysis will also be presented in following chapters.
Appendix A contains the individual questions for the administrators. Appendix B is the individual questions for the teachers. Appendix C is the focus group questions for administrators and Appendix D is the questions for veteran teacher focus groups. Appendix E contains the new teacher focus group questions. In order to maintain personal integrity of the participants, the researcher chose not to include the interview transcriptions in the appendices.

The principal investigator retained the original data. The principal investigator, and those serving on the investigator's dissertation committee, had access to the data. Copies were made as a back-up but were not distributed outside of the committee. Data will be kept indefinitely. The principal investigator and the dissertation chairs will determine if others may have access to any data collected for research and instruction purposes only in further research concerning low achieving schools.

Using analyzed data from the grant application and plans, leadership interviews, teacher interviews, and the three focus groups allowed the researcher to design and frame this qualitative study using the three research questions as a way to present the story of the PLAS journey to the reader throughout this study.
CHAPTER 4
THE PARTICIPANTS’ POINTS OF VIEW

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and administrators in an elementary school labeled as a Persistently Low-Achieving School in 2009. Midland was one of the first two elementary schools in their state to be given the PLAS label due to low student achievement on state standardized test scores. The PLAS designation mandates that schools with this label make a specific 3 year plan complete with measurable goals and specific plans for increasing test scores. Midland’s leadership team and staff responded by implementing various educational strategies in order to increase their students’ achievement in an accelerated time frame. Putting a strong focus on research-based strategies and building the instructional capacity of the staff, Midland put their 3 year plan into action beginning in 2010. The specific focus of this study was to investigate the response of this school in the following areas:

1. Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators: What impact did the PLAS label have on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building?

2. Curriculum and Academic Achievement: What impact did the PLAS label have on curriculum development in this school and plans for assessment of academic achievement?

3. Climate and Culture: What impact did the PLAS label have on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence?
This chapter focuses on the points of view of these implementations from two school administrators, three veteran teachers, and three new teachers. The chapter begins with the participants' profiles. The profiles are included to give the reader a sense of who the participants are before they read the various responses they had in the interviews that follow. When answering the interview questions relating to teachers and administrators, curriculum and academic achievement, and climate and culture it is important to understand each participant's background in order to determine his or her context for the answer. The profiles allow the reader to use factors such as age, race, gender, and life experience to get a clearer picture of each participant.

After individual interviews were completed, focus group interviews were conducted using questions based on the individual responses from interviews. The individual and focus group responses are embedded in the second section of this chapter based on the three research questions and themes found across the interview responses and sessions. The interview section is organized around themes that the researcher discovered during the three focus group interviews based on the original research questions. The themes under "Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators" are "Staff Changes," "Professional Pressures," "Dynamics of Staff," and "Professional Development." The themes under "Curriculum and Academic Achievement" include "Raising Student Achievement," "Walk-Throughs," and "Professional Learning Communities." The themes under "Climate and Culture" are "Cultural Competency Training," "Parent Involvement," and "Positive Behavior Intervention Systems."
Participant Profiles

The following participants range in age, race, gender, life experiences, as well as professional experiences. These profiles begin with Monica and Heather, the two administrators at Midland and continue with Barb, Morgan and Jade who are the veteran teachers at Midland. The new teachers who were interviewed and profiled in this section include Sydney, Shelby, and Owen. The researcher was able to collect information about each participant through individual and focus group interviews. This section was included in order to give the reader possible reasons for why they may have answered a question in a particular way or what it may have been in their experiences to lead them to such conclusions.

Monica

Monica serves as the principal at Midland Elementary. She is a 35 year old African American female who was born and raised in Midland’s city and attended schools in that district from Kindergarten through 12th grade. She is also raising two sons and a daughter near Midland school. Prior to her being asked to take the leadership role at Midland, she served in a variety of roles across Midland’s district. Starting out as a non-traditional student, her educational career began with teaching in a university elementary lab school, where she learned firsthand how to apply the most current research based strategies in the classroom. She then moved to Midland’s larger district and taught high school Spanish at a school with 1,200 students. After obtaining a Master’s degree in Principalship, she became an administrative lead teacher of an elementary school, later, an assistant principal at a high school, and then principal of
another elementary school in the same district. That varied experience led her, after the PLAS designation, to be chosen as the principal at Midland. As a mother of high school student in the district, a former student at Midland and a future student of Midland’s, she spoke in great detail of the need to build the capacity of the teachers and establish solid relationships not only with Midland’s students, but also among staff and with parents as well. Upon being chosen as the new principal at Midland, she chose an assistant principal with similar beliefs and goals.

Heather

Heather is the assistant principal at Midland. She is a 36 year old White female who previously served as Midland’s administrative lead teacher for 4 years before being asked to step up to the role of assistant principal. Her experience with the veteran staff, the students, and the families made her an obvious choice when Monica was looking to fill that position. While interviewing Heather about her goals for the school, it became clear that Heather’s connection to the staff, students, and families at Midland goes beyond just a professional obligation. With her master’s degree in Principalship and a background as an elementary teacher and a special education supervisor, she was a great candidate for working to meet the PLAS goals already in place for Midland’s teachers and students. She became emotional when discussing how the school climate and family involvement at Midland has improved and how she hopes that those systemic changes will have the needed effect on student achievement. Heather is married and is raising a school-aged son and daughter in a nearby district. She acknowledged the challenge of the time commitment it takes to reform a school, and has worked to balance her school and
home life strategically. Heather shared how being a teacher was her lifelong dream and that she loves having the opportunity to have a bigger impact on an entire student body and faculty as an assistant principal.

Barb

Barb is a 51 year old married, White female who has been teaching at Midland school for 25 years in various grade levels and capacities. She’s seen the school go through a great many changes, including the demolition and the construction of the new building at its present location within the past 10 years. Barb was born in the city of Midland but grew up in a small town north of the city. With Barb’s esteemed recognition as a National Board Certified teacher and a Masters in Education, along with her seniority within the district, she could have chosen to teach at any school in the district. Her dedication to Midland was evident when she chose to stay after the school was designated with the PLAS label. Her current role is one of a half-time reading coach and half-time literacy interventionist. Having a husband and two grown sons, she recognized that earlier in her career she may have not been able to give the time commitment that this reform effort now takes. She spoke of the mandatory extra professional development outside of school time and the nights that she stays late voluntarily to collaborate with staff. Barb shared her excitement to be at a school that is working towards leading the way for others in ground-breaking implementations. Barb’s training in Reading Recovery (an intensive one-on-one reading program for first grade students), her background in early childhood, and her variety of experience in the district, have allowed Barb to share her expertise with all of Midland’s staff.
Morgan

Morgan, a 40 year old single, African American female, has been working at Midland for 13 years in various capacities. She began her career in education as a Paraprofessional at Midland, worked towards her degree, and began teaching various grade levels at Midland 8 years ago. After receiving an endorsement from the state in reading, Morgan continues her education in a Masters program at an accredited regional university, hoping to one day become a principal in Midland’s district. Morgan is a lifelong resident of the city where Midland is located. She has worked for years at various daycares, children centers, and multicultural centers throughout the city. Her son previously attended Midland and her daughter currently attends Midland school. She is now teaching second grade and has the extra duty of being a building data team leader. In 2010, the first year of the PLAS designation, Morgan received a prestigious award that recognizes excellent educators across the county. She is actively involved in and often chairs committees that work on various projects within Midland. New teachers often go to her for effective academic approaches as well as behavior strategies. In interviews Morgan, often expressed her personal obligation to the students and the families of Midland. She views her career as her call to duty and sees herself as a lifelong learner leading the way for others.

Jade

Jade is a 38 year old married, White female and is a Special Needs educator at Midland elementary, having served primarily in the lower grades throughout her seven and a half years in the building. She grew up on a farm near a small rural community. She
spent summers during college working with adults with disabilities as a job coach and a
day program provider. Jade’s major was elementary education with a minor in special
education learning disabilities. Along with her many endorsements in the special
education field, Jade received her master’s degree in Professional Development of a
Teacher. Prior to teaching at Midland, Jade was a special needs teacher for 4 years in a
smaller rural community with a diverse population, and then she spent 4 years at another
school in Midland’s district with similar demographics. She remains actively involved in
several various professional committees within Midland’s building and the district, as
well as serving as the Special Needs data team leader for Midland. Her expertise in
differentiation techniques makes her a valuable asset to a school working through various
educational reforms. Jade has a school-aged son in a nearby district who keeps her busy
with activities at his own school. Balancing her roles as a wife, a mother, and a teacher
leader of a PLAS school has been a commitment that Jade takes very seriously. She is
dedicated to meeting the PLAS expectations together with her staff of veterans and new
teachers.

Sydney

Sydney, a 25 year old single, White female, is a new teacher that was hired after
subbing for a short time in the district and surrounding communities. Sydney grew up in a
small town about 40 miles from the city where Midland is located. She has had the
opportunity to student teach in a metropolitan district in the state, as well as overseas in
various cultural settings. She graduated with her elementary education degree with an
English and Language Arts minor, and holds coaching and special education
endorsements. Her leadership in Midland's commitment to conduct home visits led to her being featured on a local cable station discussing her success with home visits and parent involvement. As a new teacher working side by side with other new and veteran teachers, Sydney has had the opportunity with the PLAS funding to attend as many professional development hours as would be needed to obtain an advanced degree. Sydney also works teaching summer school in the district. She has welcomed the extra hours and accredits her current success in the classroom to the professional development sessions she has attended. Sydney started at Midland as a third grade teacher and moved with her students into fourth grade to continue building on her success with the strong classroom community that she was able to build within her first year of teaching. She plans to start her master's program in school psychology this year and works towards being a master teacher every day.

Shelby

Shelby, a White, 29 year old engaged female, is a native to Midland's city. Shelby attributes her success so far at Midland to the fact that she grew up in Midland's city, went to school in the city, student taught in the city, and continues to have a passion for learning about other cultures while helping her students to close the achievement gap between various cultures represented within Midland. She is a self-proclaimed activist and feminist who continues to volunteer regularly for many various local charities, though her commitment to Midland takes much of her free time. She has previous experience working with special needs students at a nearby alternative school in the summers and has traveled overseas to learn about other cultures. Shelby graduated from
college with top honors and holds a minor in reading, but attributes her social science
minor for helping her to recognize that in order to better meet her student needs; she gets
to know them on a deeper level while continuing to hold high expectations for their
academic achievement. Shelby’s experience at Midland is unique; she was hired as a
fourth grade teacher and due to her success in helping her student’s to reach their fourth
grade goals, along with her ability to build bonds with her students, she was asked to
follow her students to fifth grade. After working to raise the student achievement and
unlock the potential of the students at Midland, her lifelong goal is to work in under
developed countries teaching the youth.

Owen

Owen is a 25 year old married, White male, who was hired to teach fourth grade
in the first year of the PLAS designation. Along with Shelby, he also was asked to follow
his students to fifth grade due to his success in raising his students’ achievement in that
first year. Owen grew up in a small rural town and student taught in a small town and in
an affluent community. He majored in elementary and middle level education with an
emphasis on mathematics and social studies. He also minored in social studies. Prior to
coming to Midland, he spoke of his limited exposure in educational settings with anyone
from another race. Owen had the opportunity to work with diverse students and to prove
that he was capable of meeting various challenges the year prior to the PLAS
implementations by serving as a long-term substitute teacher at Midland. This
opportunity helped him to see not only the change in the students, but also the dramatic
change in staff and leadership. He has taken on a leadership role at Midland by serving as
his team’s data team leader. He has taken an active role on the PLAS committee at Midland working to meet staff, student, and school goals as stated by the PLAS plans. Participating in all of the extended professional development hours required by Midland and working endless evenings collaborating with his team at the school has contributed to Owen’s professional growth as well as benefitted the students in his class. He also chose to be a part of cultural competency training that was offered by Midland in order to better understand and meet his students’ needs. Owen does not have his own children yet and admits that it would be a challenge to have children and still give so much time to Midland.

The interview section that follows is organized around themes that the researcher discovered during the three focus group interviews based on the original three research questions. The themes under Research Question #1: Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators are Staff Changes, Professional Pressure, Staff Dynamic, and Professional Development. The themes under Research Question #2: Curriculum and Academic Achievement are Raising Student Achievement, Walk-Throughs, and Professional Learning Communities. The themes under Research Question #3: Climate and Culture are Cultural Competency Training, Parent Involvement, and Positive Behavior Intervention Systems. The researcher has included the thoughts and perceptions of the administrators first over these areas and that is followed by the teachers’ thoughts and perceptions of the PLAS reforms.
Administrators' Views on the Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators

Staff Changes

The first major reform at Midland was a change in leadership and staff. After being appointed as the principal of Midland, Monica recognized that the lead teacher of Midland would be the best choice to hire in the assistant principal position. She explained:

One of the biggest changes of being designated a PLAS is the addition of an assistant principal. I decided to appoint the person that had been in the lead teacher position as the assistant principal. That has been the wisest decision I have made, probably because she has strong instructional leadership skills. She was a very good teacher; she’s a very good assistant principal. She knows what good instruction looks like. She asks great reflective questions of teachers. She is just a real strong component of what we’re doing here at Midland. I think she will be a key part to the success that I know we’ll end up making.

When asked about the dynamic between herself and the principal, Heather asserted:

I guess I would agree I think both [Monica] and I, you know, we both really put kids first and what’s best for kids and I think we were both willing to do whatever needs to be done to make sure that our students at Midland are successful so just having the same goal and working towards that together has been very beneficial to everybody.

Both administrators agreed on their shared mission of putting what’s best for the students over what is best for adults. Monica believed:

[Heather] and I are on the same page whatever decision we make we make for the sake of kids. It may not even be the decision that is best for us we may not like it but it’s not about us. Nothing in this process is about us. It’s about kids plain and simple. And yes, you’ll get teachers, you’ll get parents, you’ll get people who do not appreciate that or do not like that but we’re here to do a job for kids. Our responsibility is to the kids in this building.

Monica had strong convictions about the need to reform staff in order to make school-wide reforms. She began her search for staff by utilizing what she termed as
"fireside chats," which were an interview process that was a non-traditional approach of finding out more about potential staff candidates. She wanted to use the chats as a tool to determine who would be the best fit for a school with such pressure to succeed at an accelerated rate. Monica understood clearly the need to raise academic achievement at Midland, but also recognized the need to create a school climate where staff, students, and families regardless of their background, would be able to work diligently to reach the goals of the PLAS plan as approved by the state.

The leadership at Midland consists of the principal, the assistant principal, a lead teacher, and instructional coach, and two reading interventionists that share a reading coach position. These six members are responsible for conducting I-Observations, which is a web-based communication system for teachers to discuss and reflect on best instructional practices. The principal, assistant principal and lead teachers conduct observations that are evaluative, while the coaches’ role is to conduct observations and provide feedback that assist teachers in delivering high quality instruction. Heather discussed the role of coaches being important when stating that “[Monica] and I can’t do all of that for every team so it’s nice to have other people to lean on that have that great expertise in teaching and just being able to help our new teachers.” Monica continued stating:

Coaches are good because coaches kind of help us especially because we have so many brand new teachers without that role of the coach I think that would just- a lot of our brand new teachers would be lost. I think coaches’ play a key role in building capacity for teachers; provide professional development, in the areas of literacy and math. Not just for new teachers but for everyone; plus their working with teachers in classrooms on a daily basis. So I think that’s definitely a benefit.
Professional Pressures

Both Monica and Heather reflected on how, over the years since they received their degrees in Principalship, the job of principal has gone from the role of a building manager to that of an instructional leader. They agreed that though one needs to know how to run a building, the main focus has to be student achievement. Heather added:

Somebody else can just come in and 'run the building', but if you’re not there to provide feedback on how teachers are teaching or to come in and observe and give feedback then there really wouldn’t be any reason to have a principal in the building, just an instructional leader.

They each discussed how they not only do budget and other leadership duties but their main focus is working with teachers, planning professional development, acting as a liaison for parents, and doing evaluations. They agreed that with so many new teachers in the building, and the need due to PLAS status to evaluate everyone in the building, they couldn’t do it without the shared administration model. There was also a shared agreement that they could have both chosen to work in a less stressful position without the pressures of the PLAS expectation and focus on test scores. The draw for Monica was the desire to improve a school that her toddler would soon be attending, and for Heather it was the desire to continue her hard work at Midland since she already had an investment in the students and families. They were both excited to give Midland a fresh start and be a part of groundbreaking 21st century educational implementations.

When asked if these implementations could have taken place with the previous leadership, they agreed that under the transformation model, it was best to rebuild and start from scratch and that pertained not only to the leadership but also to the majority of staff as well.
Midland’s principal explained:

As far as activities that will improve the climate in our building, we are doing more of those this year. Not that our climate is worse this year, but there is an obvious difference in from what I see in the dedication of staff from last year to this year.

When questioned about what effect the PLAS label has had on the principal personally, the principal explained that along with a concern of lack of sleep, there has been trouble balancing work and family time due to added stress and urgency of being held responsible for the increase of academic achievement of students and the success of new implementations and initiatives by staff. The principal expressed a fear for the future due to the fact that her fate is unknown if the school doesn’t meet the state’s requirements for growth. This fear was reflected in the principal’s statement that:

Realistically, I could be the first one to lose my job if scores are not raised. I know that the state is applying for a waiver if scores are behind and even if that waiver is granted a stipulation is that we will not have a PLA designation on the federal level, but the state will be required to give some type of designation and have some type of plan in place. We wouldn’t be out of the woods.

Dynamics of Staff

Heather shared that more than half of the teaching staff at Midland was replaced with first year teachers. When asked about the dynamic of first year teachers working in a high stakes building, she responded:

Being as I was here before and knowing some of the people who were asked to leave or chose to leave, I believe it was a step in a positive direction. I believe that most of our teachers being first-year hasn’t been a negative. I believe most of the teachers who were hired or who were chosen to be here have done a fabulous job and it’s had a positive effect on the school environment. They’re positive. They’re upbeat. They’re ready to go. I think that it’s been a very positive change.
Monica added:

I would say the impact the new teachers had; they kind of have brought some freshness to the school. It’s easy to say that we changed the school but if you still had all the same staff here if wouldn’t be a changed school. But with so many brand new people here it is like a changed school.

Monica did share her initial concerns of how the teachers in grades 3, 4 and 5 were all first year teachers. The concern stemmed from the fact that the high stakes tests that the state uses to determine their academic growth on would be given at those grade levels.

This added level of pressure for these first-year teachers was a risk that the administration team was willing to take. Monica said “I think it’s a double-edged sword. There definitely are lots of advantages such as their teaching styles because they have just come out of college so they know those effective teaching strategies and they do know the latest research.”

When discussing veteran teachers Heather contended:

I would say as far as the veteran teachers I see even a stronger commitment, not that they weren’t committed before, but just even a stronger commitment. They are here late, they are working hard, come to data team prepared, not that maybe they weren’t doing all of those things before but they chose to stay and we chose to keep them and that says something. I just feel like they have really pumped it up even more so, just been giving 150% and I just think that strong commitment to Midland is there with all those staff members that stayed.

Veteran teachers and new teachers were offered incentives to stay at Midland.

When asked if the incentives of extra pay for raising test scores was an incentive, the administrators felt that those were a nonfactor. Through the PLAS plan, there was an incentive scale that measured student growth and gave a point percentage to raising standardized test scores overall, making a safe harbor with goals, and showing overall growth as compared to the national scores. Monica shared that she didn’t believe that a
cash bonus was the main incentive, and she recognized that there was more of an intrinsic motivation with all of the staff at Midland. She added:

Because you have to be intrinsically motivated to do the work that we do every day. It’s hard work. It’s hard with the students. It’s hard with the curriculum; it’s not easy to implement. The teachers are doing fabulous, but it’s hard work. If you are an 8:15-4:15 teacher, you’re not going to make it here. You’re just not. I mean, that’s all people have to work by contract, so you just walk in at 8:15 and walk out at 4:15, but they’ll realize really quick that you can’t keep your head above water by doing that—not in a PLAS school.

Professional Development

When asked about changes that will be made in this building for the next year, the consensus from Midland Elementary School administration was that they would continue professional development for themselves and their staff, continue to narrow staff focus on reading, mathematics, and writing; and work towards strengthening their staff's data team processes in order to increase student academic achievement across the curriculum.

Monica and Heather agreed that the dynamic between the two of them, as well as the leadership team was of benefit to the staff as they work to administer new initiatives and professional development together as a team. They also perceived the dynamic between new and veteran teachers as having a positive effect for working on professional development goals together, collaborating together, and sharing the on-going pressures that come along with working towards the PLAS goals.

In regards to staff changes, Monica and Heather agreed that in order to reform and transform a school leadership and staff must change. They shared their experiences with the added pressures of leading a school going through the PLAS process and implementations and how it has affected both of them on a professional as well as
personal level. The dynamic they share as a leadership team is one they both agree has been beneficial to both of their professional growth in regards to working toward reforms as a committed team. They also agreed that not only has the professional development provided as a result of the PLAS funding been of great benefit to their staff, they have both benefitted as professionals from these trainings as well.

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Teachers’ Views on the Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators

Staff Changes

Teachers Barb, Jade, and Morgan agreed on the need for transforming the leadership and adding a leadership team component to Midland Elementary. Having served at Midland prior to the reforms and working within the implementations now, they have been witness to a major transformation of staff, academic and curricular goals, and school climate in an intense effort to raise student achievement. Each of them admitted that in the beginning they didn’t see the reason for changing the staff though they recognized the need for replacing the leadership. They were hesitant to accept that changing staff would also impact student achievement. Barb shared:

I think differently now about that than I did at the time. At the time, I though “Why?” But now, I realize it’s because we needed to make a change and by changing our staff we could start over and do things differently. But I didn’t think that at the announcement time.

Morgan supported that statement when saying:

At the announcement time I thought “Why should we, it’s not fair.” I guess I see myself as being a little selfish. I was thinking about us as the teachers and not the students at the time. But where I am today, I see that it was a very important piece of what we’re doing right now.
Jade, in agreement, added:

I would agree. I was also thinking about how this would affect us. It was all about the grown-ups and the big people. I don’t think we really were thinking about how the impact would trickle down to kids as far as changing staffs.

When asked further about the importance of changing staffs along with the leadership, the teachers discussed how there was a need for new energy and new perspectives that they didn’t recognize was missing until it arrived in the new teachers. When change was discussed, the three thought that major changes in educational reform might be hard for some veterans who are set in tradition and not as willing or ready to commit to a transformative change in their instructional approaches. There was a shared admiration of the new teachers for being willing to put in the work that it takes to respond to the designation of a PLAS label. They each knew going into this journey that it would also take a greater commitment from each of them. Jade summarized her thoughts at the time of the fireside chats by sharing:

They made it very clear from up front that there was going to be a different type of commitment. Literally, a commitment of time and also just that commitment to “ok” wipe the slate clean and show me what to do differently. Be open-minded to do things differently. People had to really know if I’m going to teach here than some had to say as much as their desire was to stay and they wanted to be here for the Midland kids, they couldn’t because for their family or personal reasons could not make that time commitment but they were very clear. If you made that time commitment, you knew what you signed on for. A bigger time commitment and at the time we had no clear vision for what that time commitment would be. We were kind of taking a leap of faith by staying.

Sydney, Shelby, and Owen discussed the impact of so many new teachers being put into a building with a PLAS designation. They shared that they were glad to have other new teachers to bond with. Shelby expressed appreciation:
The support. Everybody being on the same page for that support. We all lean on each other for everything. And it's not just our team. Our team is really close but we constantly are going to another grade to see things.

They discussed how they often had opportunities to watch each other teach and learn new ideas from each other as well as the veterans. When discussing the benefits of adding new teachers and how that could positively affect the veteran teachers in a PLAS building, Shelby said:

When I was going to college we learned all of the new ways to teach things. I know when I came here I had a new strategy I had just learned at school that some others didn't have that background on or even learned that strategy yet. In college, they are up to date on everything. For this school, I don't know if it's always been this way but I feel like everyone here is current on everything already. When I student-taught, I felt like I was showing them a lot of new things. I could have them try what I had learned. The benefits of being fresh out of college would definitely be knowing the new ways to do things. If you had had PD, then you are getting the same things I have.

Sydney believed that Midland could have used a few more veteran teachers; possibly at least one per team to learn from and to find out the basics about managing all of the aspects of a classroom as a new teacher. When asked if she thought that having such a large staff change of both veterans and new teachers was a positive initiative for a PLAS school, Sydney indicated:

Yes. I think it's been good to have all the new bodies in here. Having all the teachers not just help with instructional strategies but having each other in terms of survival mode, it's a very positive atmosphere around here. The going gets tough, but the going gets tough together with our teams. We're all just very close. I couldn't ask for anything different than this school atmosphere.

The teachers responded to this new commitment by setting higher expectations for themselves. This was evident when Morgan shared the following when discussing the new expectations set forth through the PLAS label:
What it made me feel like as a teacher is almost like you really had to prove yourself. You had to make sure that you were ready, organized, well prepared, you were ready at any moment to teach those children—that you were ready for those teacher moments that come across. There was a lot of reflection that I was, for myself, doing it correctly and I was meeting all of my students’ needs. I don’t want to say "prove myself", but I wanted to make sure I was giving my students what they needed. They were really looking at us with a microscope, and I really wanted to make sure, for myself, that every piece was put together the right way.

When reflecting on setting higher personal expectations, Barb responded:

I think the PLAS label may have just heightened awareness so we had to just watch what we were doing, and we had to keep track of how kids were making progress and what levels they were achieving at. I think there’s an extra expectation. Do I think there’s extra pressure? I think it’s what we should have and should be doing whether we have the PLAS label or not.

Professional Pressures

Teachers shared some of the added stresses and pressure of working in a school labeled as a PLAS school. When questioned if just anyone could work in a school such as Midland, Owen responded:

I could see it being too much for some—we weed out some teachers and unfortunately I don’t always think it’s their fault because like we talked about before the university did not prepare us for this at all and we did not have the tools coming in. It’s a lot of learning on the fly so if you’re not very quick to adapt you’re just gonna get eaten.

Sydney believed that the added pressure put on her as a PLAS teacher has helped her to grow as a professional and continued:

I guess I’ve been pushed really fast to try and become a master teacher. There’s no room for really thinking and growing. It’s just that you gotta do it and you’ve gotta be a master and you’ve gotta do it now. And my first year was definitely survival mode, jump all in, sink or swim. With the PLAS label, it was much more stressful. My best friend is at a school kind of near here, but not a PLAS school, and she’s just had it very different than I have. She’s not staying until 8 o’clock. She’s not working on weekends. It’s just different, a lot less stressful for her than it is at this school. I knew it was going to be hard, but I didn’t really understand
how hard. Nobody really does as a first year teacher. I’ve just learned as I’ve gone and it’s been very beneficial to have so many people in the same boat.

Morgan confided that the administrators and teachers are all feeling the pressure of the PLAS label and believed that this existing pressure may be trickling down to the students. They discussed when the PLAS label is hanging over a school the uncertainty of the outcome, the pressure is on everyone in the building, and all three veteran teachers agreed that keeping the lines of communication open among staff, administrators, and parents will be a key component of working together. Jade presented the idea that the increased pressure has led to a lot more consciousness about what they are doing and affirmed:

More than ever, we are looking at what we’re doing and how that is working for students and if that is a match. I think in general we feel that the use of our instructional time is so much more precious. There’s such a clarity about it that we don’t have time to dilly dally, to do anything else but use every instructional minute. I think there’s a much more heightened awareness about maximizing all of our instructional time. I know for a fact that wasn’t here before. We were just kind of teaching, moseying along without that sense of urgency. We know now that not only do the instructional strategies have to match the kids, we have to be using them consistently and regularly. We are getting really good at doing that.

Dynamics of Staff

When questioned about the dynamic between new teachers and veteran teachers, Morgan also pointed out that “Just speaking from my team, we have two vets and two new, when we put the four together, in my eyes, we’re rockin’ it.” Barb added in that the administration was a big part of creating a successful dynamic as well. When asked what administrators are doing to facilitate student achievement she related:

Keeping on top of things. They have a good idea of where we are. Very recently, they told us how our reading looks and how our math looks and how we need to
step it up in math so we are taking some action to step it up in math so they are really up on the data.

There was a consensus from the veteran teachers that there had been a need for new leadership at Midland, as well as for major changes in existing staff. Though hesitant in the beginning about the need for this type of major change, they agreed that reforming teachers and administrators was definitely a needed, positive initiative allowing a fresh start for Midland. The veteran teachers spoke to the benefits of the varied professional development opportunities not only for the new teachers but for themselves as well. There was newfound recognition among these veterans of the power of collaboration and teamwork among administration, veterans, and new teachers working together toward shared goals in order to raise student achievement at Midland.

When asked about the dynamics between administration and the teachers, the teachers said that it was beneficial to have new energy and ideas combined with teachers who had experience. Shelby believes that she would recommend hiring new teachers and keeping successful veteran teachers to someone is considering changes for school reform and explained:

We need both obviously. Experienced teachers are still really good to have if they are willing to change. But, I saw at some other schools they are more set in their ways and that's a problem. We are all here late and are all learning from each other. None of us are burned out yet. We have that passion. We love it. In some other schools it didn't seem like all of them wanted to be there. Here you can see it in everyone’s faces, even the ones that were here. They all want to be here. They love it. I do feel that the energy that they have makes a difference. All the veteran teachers here have that passion too and maybe that's why they are still here. When I look at the veteran teachers, I see they have what I have. You don't have to burn out. If you love the people you work with and you work for, then you love coming to work.
Shelby seemed to feel very prepared just out of college to teach at a PLAS labeled school. She was confident that she was up-to-date on the latest research, strategies, and enjoyed sharing those with others, even the veteran teachers. Sydney discussed how though she wasn’t taught about collaboration or co-teaching during college, she felt ready as a first year teacher. She credits her energy and not being set in her ways as the basis of her willingness to try new instructional strategies and approaches. She shared “I’ve been molded and shaped through PD into the teacher this school requires me to be.” Owen discussed his frustration for not being prepared in college to deal with some of the real world issues that he is now facing. He believed:

I think there is a lot missing in college that didn’t prepare me for being in to a PLAS school. The field experiences were at schools where there were no behavior issues, where there was very little Special Ed, and the students that were in Special Ed; I don’t know if they would be in Special Ed at this school. There was not much about inner city teaching at my university. I don’t think they prepared me very well at all for this environment.

When asked if he had any advice to university professors for how they could place student teachers or better prepare their pre-service teachers to meet the varied dynamics at a low achieving school, he replied:

I think it should be a requirement. I think it should be in an inner city and if you need to—do more than one placement. I think it would be great to get a feel for everything. Inner city and maybe a smaller town and really give the teacher a feel of what they are getting into either way. Coming into it is quite a big shock. The first time in here growing up in a small town, I had never experienced anything like it. Growing up I believe I had one African American classmate and that started junior year of high school. No diversity what so ever. And everyone seemed to do pretty well. I could only think of three or four people from my graduating high school class that didn’t go to college. So it was a big shock.

It was evident that these teachers recognized the valuable contributions they were making to a PLAS school based on their energy and excitement, their knowledge of the
newest trends in education, and their desire to meet the challenges presented to them from a PLAS designated school. They agreed that they have found the camaraderie of being new together; they have found value in the contributions of the veteran teachers. They shared that, in hindsight, it could have been beneficial to spread the veteran teachers out throughout the grade level teams in order to share in their experience and knowledge of the basic managerial tasks that go along with being a teacher and the learning of a new building’s atmosphere. Though seen as somewhat effective, the fireside chats had a different meaning to these new teachers as they had not seen the reforms in the same light as the veteran teachers. They agreed on the benefits of the shared professional development for all involved in order to work towards the goals of raising student achievement.

**Professional Development**

Jade described how all teachers at Midland are now expected to implement the latest in research based strategies and collect data on how those strategies are working. She expressed the need to make the greatest impact in the PLAS situation that Midland is now in. She is confident that the leadership team is presenting her with the most effective strategies and she is working diligently to implement them with fidelity. Jade revealed that “I know I trust our instructional leaders to know that any PD that we are getting to know that they have a research base behind them as being effective.” She went on to share that as a teacher she had been affected positively by the professional development opportunities that have come about as a result of the PLAS label. Jade appreciates the time to collaborate during PD and see the collaboration strategies modeled for the
teachers so that they can go back to their classrooms and focus on student collaboration effectively.

Barb echoed the statements of Jade when comparing the past professional development to the professional development hours implemented with the PLAS funding. She explained how the current PD is at a different level, more focused than in the past. Barb is beginning to see the effect of the PD in other staff as well and reported that “I think there has been a positive effect. I think the new teachers are eager to get in there and do what needs to be done. They’re not set on any of their own ideas; they’re willing to consider new ideas. I think that’s been a good thing.”

Morgan appreciated the input that administration gives to the staff on what components of PD they want to focus on and shared that “We don’t go to a PD for something we don’t need, like oh, I heard this one last time. I think that the professional development that we need, we asked for them. And they give us what we need.” The part of the professional development that Morgan discovered to be the most valuable was when the staff is given time to collaborate together to work on effective strategies and went on to say:

My team and I we work together on everything. Team collaboration is a big part with us to make sure it’s not only about our class. You’ll hear us say, “The second grade students…” It’s not just about my students in my room. It’s about our students across the board. Some things that may work in one classroom may work in my classroom for a few of my students. I think that’s a very positive thing to have that team collaboration and working together and coming up with those strategies together. We have a lot of new teachers in our building, so that also helped the beginning teachers fill their toolbox with strategies as well. It’s like we’re all in this together. We don’t want one to fail. If we’re going to fail, we’ll fail together. If we’re going to make it, we’re going to make it together.
All teachers were pleased with the amount of professional development that they had received, once they were hired on at Midland, as a result of the extra PLAS funding and extended school day and school year. Teachers and administrators at Midland have participated in numerous PD hours in the evenings, on Saturdays, and through attending various conferences in order to provide the professional background knowledge that is needed to take a school from low-achieving to high-achieving in an accelerated time frame. When asked if she is seeing the benefits from all of Midland’s PD, Sydney stated that “Yes and also we’re bringing the latest in what research says. So what we’re doing here is based on all the latest research. It’s not anything old school here; it’s all the research-based instruction.” Shelby agreed and added:

It’s only helped my development. Knowing that I am going to be held accountable for these scores, and knowing that I’ve had these kids two years in a row; it’s only put a fire under me. Plus the fact that I’m a new teacher. I have that drive being that I don’t know any other school; I’d be this way either way. I’ve gained a lot from the professional development. Otherwise I don’t know how people would learn anything new. Increased observations don’t bother me though I get nervous. The monitoring, it’s just for reflection. You don’t need to monitor me because I would do it anyway. The professional development though has been huge. I come out of every Wednesday or Saturday PD like I have something new to apply to the classroom.

Collaboration has also been a component at each of Midland’s professional development sessions. Both veteran teachers and new teachers at Midland are expected to collaborate together in lesson planning, data team meetings, professional development sessions, and for problem solving meetings. The teachers agreed that collaboration has been of great benefit to each of them while Owen shared:

I think it’s been great and given me some great ideas and directions to go. The best part of it has just been working with other teachers coming up with ideas and lots of time. We’re given time to work with our teams and the professional
development afterwards. With our planning times like really two and a half hours a week, which is not very much due to data teams and things like that. That’s the biggest part of it I think. I think it’s just talking with people.

Sydney agreed and added that in the beginning she thought that the best approach for their team would be to divide the work by each writing a component of the lessons three ways. After coming to the conclusion, through data team discussions and the sharing of instructional strategies, that the work for the team is better and more complete, as well as ready for all students if it is done together as a team, she added:

One of the things that we really didn’t talk about in student teaching or school was co-teaching and planning together with my teammates. That’s something that was pushed here a lot, and I see the benefit in that highly. It’s an expectation here to collaborate, and that’s not something I ever had to do before, it wasn’t anything ever talked about really in school that collaboration was something that was good and “you’d probably do. And then of course, the data, we’re so data driven. We write all our lesson plans together. Three minds are better than one, and sometimes four; we have one of the special ed teachers in there. We’ll bounce ideas off each other, and it’s three times as good; three heads are better than one. We’ll say “Ooh we should do it this way” and the next thing you know I have a lesson plan I never could have written by myself.

Teachers’ answers followed the same four themes as their administrators when discussing their professional practices. They were agreeable that a combination of experience of the veteran staff and new energy and ideas of the new staff helped to create staff changes that were conducive to implementing major reforms at Midland. Though difficult as times, they share their professional pressures and how they have grown as a result of the added expectations. Not only did the expectations add to the dynamics between staff, it also gave them a better sense of the objectives of the leadership at Midland. The dynamics of staff developed as they went through professional development training together, learning new research-based strategies and collaborating
in a more focused, energized setting in order to work toward raising student achievement at Midland.

Administrators' Views on Curriculum and Academic Achievement

Raising Student Achievement

The second focus of major reform at Midland was in the area of curriculum and academic achievement. The PLAS label provided funding to Midland that allowed them to not only fund academic coaching positions and support staff, it allowed them to purchase materials needed to enhance the district curriculum and the delivery of instruction in hopes of raising academic achievement. When asked if the money provided would be a key factor in raising student achievement, Monica contended:

I’ve never been a believer that it’s stuff that will raise student achievement. It’s the quality of teaching that will raise student achievement. I do believe there are certain things that we’re able to get because of the PLAS funding, such as our consultant with Leadership and Learning center. That’s a huge chunk of money, that without the PLAS funds, we wouldn’t be able to do support that. He is actually building that capacity in our teachers so our teachers can effectively teach. So I think that’s what we need to do. We have to build that capacity in our teachers. It’s not about books, it’s not about things. As much as we like to have those resources, the better we train our teachers and give them the skills they need to meet our students’ need, that’s the key factor in raising our student achievement. It’s not I-Pads. It’s not books. That’s just my personal philosophy. It’s not any of those things. It’s the quality of the instructor in front of those kids.

Midland’s principal put the funding into perspective when asked further about fund utilization by stating:

There are really no things that teachers need that they don’t have to enhance student learning. They are able to order or purchase anything they need. With that said, we know that it’s not about buying more stuff, it’s about quality instruction.

In hopes of raising student achievement, the Midland staff was given extra mandatory and voluntary professional development opportunities through the PLAS
funding. Along with several mandatory Saturdays and an extra half an hour a day added to staffs' contracts, the Midland staff added in an extra eight school days to their calendar. Heather expressed:

We did start eight days earlier than everyone else. Does that make a difference? We got a jumpstart in math. We got a jumpstart in reading. Will that be the complete reason we make growth? I don't know; it can't hurt. We also have our staff here longer during the days of the week, which allows for more collaboration and additional PD if we need it. That half hour a day doesn't seem like much, but that half hour adds up.

Monica understands that the staff has been affected by added professional development hours and the addition of an extended year calendar. She discussed the tremendous effect that the professional development has had on them as administrators also. The principal from Midland stated:

I feel like I know more now about instruction and feel so much more effective as an instructional leader than I have ever been. I always say that if I went back to the classroom now after all I have learned; I would be so much more of an effective teacher. I think our staff is lucky with all the PD they are getting. If you can teach here with all of the strategies that they are learning, you can teach anywhere.

Several of Midland's staff have been able to attend professional conferences due to this PLAS funding. The administrators discussed the great benefits they have received from attending conferences through the Leadership and Learning Center, along with having an expert in school reform come and visit their school and staff. Funding was provided for staff book studies that were designed to ultimately accelerate student achievement. Attending one of the conferences allowed them the opportunity to meet a member of the Leadership and Learning Center that seemed to share their ideas of how school reform should look; He had turned a low-achieving school into a high-achieving
school as measured by his state’s standardized testing measures. This expert traveled to Midland and worked with the staff on the data team process, effective classroom engagement strategies, quality classroom instruction, authentic tasks, for student work, and power strategies for effective teaching.

**Walk-Throughs**

The expert from the Leadership and Learning Center also provided professional development for the leadership team. He participated in the walk-through process with the administrators and the instructional coach. During this process, they would debrief after every walk-through to compare thoughts on what they each observed collectively. Both administrators found this process to be very valuable for their own development as an evaluator of instruction. One aspect of the expert’s walk-throughs that was interesting to both of them was, when he did his first round of walk-throughs, he had no background on any of the teachers. They reflected on how the feedback was similar to what they had already been giving to teachers, so they found it good to have that fidelity check on the walk-through process through collaboration with an expert at school reform.

Heather explained the walk-through process in detail while both administrators agreed that the walk-through has been a valuable tool for administrators and coaches to utilize in order to provide constructive feedback to teachers in hopes of raising the level of instruction. Heather gave more insight into the walk-through process by explaining:

We take our staff list and we kind of split it each week to be able to go. Monica goes to see half the staff one week and I see half the staff that same week. And we switch for the next. So we use the I-Observation and it’s a protocol and there are three main areas that are on the protocol and you have to pick which ones are relevant. When you go into a classroom, I might choose a management piece, an engagement piece, and more of an instructional piece so you kind of pick which
one you want to use. You can do more than one. I generally try to stay in a
classroom right around ten minutes. Sometimes it’s a little less and sometimes
more to kind of get a feel for what’s going on. And then you can either give the
teacher that they are doing what they’re supposed to be doing and it’s going very
well or you might ask a reflective question. You ask that reflective question just
to take a little bit higher and I think that’s where you get the biggest bang for your
buck. Many times teachers are doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing.
You know you give them their feedback on that doing this and have you thought
about this or how could you do this art differently and not that they were doing it
wrong but how can we just bump up that little bit more so that it’s even better
than what it was.

When discussing that feedback component of the walk-through process, Monica added:

I think our teachers are used to getting feedback from the walk-throughs because
we have done them so much, there are people in their classrooms so much, and I
actually think they welcome the feedback. I know in most teachers’ classrooms
they go to their computers right away to see if there is something on the I-
Observation to see if the website has something to respond to. I have very few
people that I have to continuously say “Will you please respond to the questions
that I asked?” So I think they have responded very well. There is accountability
for every one of us. People really understand that there is high accountability for
every single person in this building.

When Midland’s principal was asked if they planned to use the walk-through process for
evaluation, the principal explained:

All walk-throughs that myself and the assistant principal make are evaluative.
The nature of our position is such that whenever we are in a classroom monitoring
instruction, it is evaluative. My charge when I was hired was to increase student
achievement. One way to do that is to consistently monitor the quality of
instruction taking place in classroom, in short, by doing walk-throughs
consistently. The feedback that is given after the walk-throughs is intended
to have the teacher reflect on what was observed.

Professional Learning Communities

To keep that accountability piece at the forefront of staff development, Midland
has professional learning communities that meet twice a week to refine instructional
strategies, discuss related student data, and plan for differentiation of instruction as grade
level teams. Every Monday is a math data team meeting and every Thursday is a reading data team meeting. The group consists of grade level teachers, administration, and coaches. This instructional decision-making process allows teachers to work towards raising all student achievement as a team and to collaborate on student needs and assess progress on student data. Midland’s district has worked hard to align their curriculum to the state’s core curriculum. The data team process has allowed Midland teachers to evaluate their teaching and their students’ progress to the state’s core standards. Both administrators discussed the push to align their curriculum as an encouraging strategy to work towards raising student achievement on the state’s standardized test, which also aligns with the core state standards. When describing the importance of this increased focus on alignment, Monica contended:

The main reason is that the state assessment assesses their knowledge of the state core. So if our curriculum and the things we’re doing everyday are not aligned with the state core, of course our kids aren’t going to be proficient.

Heather also shared:

During data teams taking those apart and seeing what pieces kids are missing and kind of following up on that and teaching to what students need not only in larger groups but in small groups as well. It really helps with that piece so we’ll know more after we see the tests but I do think that it seems to be more aligned and better.

Both administrators defended their decision to focus on math and reading during those data team meetings and for the majority of the instructional blocks. Midland has focused on an inquiry-based approach to both reading and math. They discussed the increased confidence that staff has towards reading instruction and the formative data they are collecting on reading. This is the second year for the new reading curriculum so
teachers have begun to become more comfortable delivering reading instruction, and administration is more confident that students are showing needed growth towards the PLAS goals in reading. The new math curriculum began this year and Monica asserts:

The biggest area that I see the difference in student achievement would be in the area of math, with the new inquiry-based math curriculum that we have. Because students are not only having to figure out strategies on their own, but they have to defend their strategies. They have to explore more. It’s not being taught to them.

Recognizing that Midland had implemented both a new reading and math curriculum since being designated a PLAS school, they were asked if they would attribute their current success to a program or to a process of building teacher capacity. Monica believed that:

Oh, it always a lot more. It doesn’t matter what program you use; it comes down to the teaching. I’ve seen phenomenal teachers who can teach without one single workbook, not one single textbook, nothing but some pencils and some paper, and their kids could achieve higher than kids who had every single resource that you could imagine with I-Pads and computers and everything. It all comes down to the teaching strategies, plain and simple.

When asked about the lack of achievement before, when instruction didn’t seem to align with the state tests, Monica shared:

I think that’s a piece, but is it the whole piece? No. There were lots of other things: the climate and culture of the building; the parent involvement; the strategies that teachers had in their toolbox to use. There were lots of different pieces. Was that a piece of it? Absolutely.

Monica and Heather felt strongly that the extra professional development opportunities that have been provided through the PLAS funding had been extremely beneficial to their staff or for them personally. They have recognized the benefits through observational data as well as formative data on various types of assessment throughout their first year and a half of their PLAS designation. They spoke of positive predictions
for future standardized testing based on adjustments they have made with their professional learning communities during data team meetings, and adjustments to implementing new curriculum with a new staff. Experiencing the disappointment in their first year test scores has led them to agree that the implementations they are working to perfect depend largely on the delivery of well thought-out, quality instruction based on meeting student needs rather than following a set curriculum. Through observation during walk-throughs, they are confident that teachers are now working together to meet the curricular needs of students at Midland in order to raise student achievement through inquiry-based instruction.

Teachers' Views on Curriculum and Academic Achievement

Raising Student Achievement

Empowered by the possibility of being seen as a low-achieving school to one that may now be blazing the trail for others, Barb finds it interesting that due to all of the new implementations and opportunities from the funding, that Midland seems to be leading the way for other schools to follow. “I think that’s a good place to be. It should be to our benefit to already be doing some things before everyone else is.” She went on to discuss how Midland is seeing early indications in their data that they are moving in the right direction. She has seen some formative data that seems to show evidence the initiatives at Midland are having the intended effect on raising student achievement and confirmed:

I would think we’d be in a better place than we were 3 years ago. I think we held our own last year, which was probably a good thing. I think we’ll see some growth this year, and if we do, we’ll just have to keep that up. We can’t let up. So that by the end of the third year, we’re on a path where we continue to grow.
Morgan shared those predictions as well, based on some of the early data, and agreed that the learning had more meaning because teachers are trying to take the students deeper by focusing on higher level thinking questioning and strategies. She also showed some concern:

I don’t think that just because we have a label—it’s going to take some time. The label is held over our head and we’re always thinking about that. I think it’s just going to take some time to get where we’re trying to go to the standardized test. One thing I know that’s kind of bothersome this year is that, the way we’re teaching our kids—they keep trying to make the connection to the standardized tests. I’m not sure it’s there.

The teachers shared the disappointment that they encountered at the end of the first year of the new program when they received their standardized test scores back. Scores in both reading and math had not increased to the degree that anyone had hoped for, knowing that every member of the Midland team had put in great efforts to raise student achievement. When asked further about the teachers’ and students’ feelings of disappointment Morgan described it this way:

I think it blew the air from them. It made them feel, because we worked really hard last year as an entire building. There were days when teachers were here 7 o’clock, 8 o’clock, and 9 o’clock at night getting prepared. We’d be so excited throughout the day when we’d see all those light bulbs going off with the students. Got to the test and knocked the air out of us. And we thought, “Wow. This is where we are.”

Jade reported from her perspective, as a special needs teacher, that she doesn’t know if her students are collectively making gains at this point in the plan or not. She recognizes that many are showing growth and are meeting some of the proficiency levels but knows that the ultimate goal is for her students, and all students at Midland, to show accelerated growth on the standardized tests. “I would hope that my level of intervention
would have that transfer into the regular education curriculum. The achievement gap is when they are compared to their grade level group so that’s where we need to see the impact.” She also was disappointed by the lack of growth in the first year and echoed Morgan in:

We have had some disappointments. We have this label for 3 years. Our first year, we didn’t see any progress. We have an advantage that we have had 2 years with a new curriculum starting. I heard in a professional development that it takes three or more years to show any growth with a new curriculum. We have that stacked against us. I think that we need to show that we can get over that learning curve. That we got it, we are using it, and we need to show growth with it faster than all the other schools. I know that we are expected to run a way steeper hill that everyone else. It’s disappointing because I think that everyone was working hard trying to teach smarter not harder. Everyone was so dedicated. I believed that some of that would pay off in growth. None of us expected that it would be way off the charts in growth but we expected more than we got.

Teachers agreed that the disappointment was met with a greater sense of urgency for the Midland staff. Barb also believed:

I think it’s pushed us to be reflective too. I think we naturally are, we think about how did that go. I think about how that went. But, sometimes on our own we don’t even think to ask ourselves to ask the questions that are asked by someone else which is good for us to think about. And come to an answer for. While there’s one level of reflection on our own, there’s another level when someone else asks us to be reflective.

Much like the veteran teachers, the new teachers voiced their disappointment in the results of the first year’s standardized tests scores. They discussed the many hours that they put in and had expected that their test scores would increase, though they recognized that major school reform takes times. Sydney explained her disappointment when stating:

It was a real bummer at the end of last year, because everyone really worked really hard. And to see those results was very disappointing. However, I think we’re seeing those results this year, and I think that will show on those tests. Maybe it won’t be what we want to see, but it’s got to be an improvement. It will be an improvement. There’s just no way it can’t be.
Sharing in the first year testing disappointments discussed from the administrators, the teachers also found that their high hopes of making sweeping changes in that first year of the designation were diminished. They shared how they also had to quickly re-evaluate and reflect on what was most important and needed for their students, and begin to focus on quality instruction. Though each of the teachers shared hesitancy in the laser-like focus on primarily reading and math, they did share their dedication to make their instructional strategies align more closely with their states’ standards in order to make those gains on standardized testing scores as needed. Owen shared the extra pressures, and increased knowledge through his role as a grade level data team leader. As they work through their own growth as professionals, they are gaining knowledge on how to best meet their student needs and shared professional goals.

Regardless of the outcome of the standardized test scores, each of the staff members agreed that Midland is a great place to be and they are each glad they made the decision to stay. They are working harder than ever to improve the school and to prove to the community, the state, and the federal government that Midland students are capable of being high achieving students as measured by the various formative assessments as well as the state assessments at the end of the three year PLAS plan. They strongly believed that the correct implementations are now in place, and look forward to not only seeing the academic growth of Midland students but their social and behavioral growth as well.
Walk-Throughs

Teachers feel confident that one of the implementations that show signs of progress is the walk-through, a process where the leadership team observes instruction and provides relevant feedback to teachers causing them to reflect on their delivery of instruction and its effectiveness towards raising student achievement. Morgan discovered the accountability factor in that:

For one, you know that at any moment that door will open and someone is about to walk through so it just makes you more accountable, just like the students. You feel the same way, responsible, not because someone’s watching me, watching me, it just makes you stand up a little more and make sure that you are doing what you’re supposed to do.

On the topic of walk-throughs, the group agreed that the administrative walk-throughs are more evaluative while the coaches’ walk-throughs have the purpose of supporting and guiding the instruction that is occurring and building on the strengths that the teachers are already exhibiting. Jade added:

Just on general walk-throughs, I don’t think that the feedback I have gotten from coaches and administrators is that much different. Sometimes they recognize something positive and that positive reinforcement, so you keep on doing that. But I don’t think it’s even from them felt like heavily evaluative. It’s been constructive and reflective. It’s different. I’ve learned to get used to it. I had to get used to it. As soon as someone walks in and you know they are watching you, of course, you get that increased anxiety.

Shelby’s perspective was:

For me, it’s always helpful. If it’s like a lot of people, we two in particular would always have to say like have you ever thought about trying it this way. I love, love, love getting positive feedback. Like that makes my day to know that I did something right. But to have some question like “Have you ever thought of trying it like this before?” And I think that you are always one that gives positives, and then a suggestion. That I find is very helpful.
Owen found that walk-throughs are most beneficial if they focus on the strengths of a teacher when he shared:

I would say our individual feedback from our coaches has been very beneficial. Yes, from the different coaches. From administration it’s been more of “Don’t do this.” I’ve had a lot of “Don’t do this” instead of “Try it this way.” Coming from the coaches, it’s been more constructive and supportive. Even if the coaches don’t like what we are doing they phrase it in a way that you still feel competent and it makes you want to do better.

Teachers found that the additional walk-throughs, observations, and reflective questioning of instructional strategies were of benefit to them and are hoping that these along with all of the other new initiatives put in place to raise students’ academic achievement will continue to develop, grow, and change as the implementations continually meet the specific needs of staff and students at Midland.

**Professional Learning Communities**

At Midland, professional learning communities, or data teams, meet twice a week to discuss and evaluate student data in math and reading in order to adjust instruction, and create instructional strategies as a grade level team to best meet students’ academic needs. Midland was the first in their district to create a student specific data wall where each student had three data cards, one for reading, math, and writing. The cards hold specific scores on current assessments and cards are moved continuously throughout the year to reflect the students’ proficiency level. The wall serves as a visual for these professional learning communities to see where their students are performing, what interventions and differentiation students are receiving, and where classes compared to other classes and grade levels.
Teachers discussed their excitement to be at a school with so many new initiatives happening. Though overwhelming at times, they see hope for their students’ future and are proud to be a part of a school that is focusing on high student achievement. They agreed collectively that because there is such a strong focus on reading and math, that some other subjects, especially those that may be of high interest to students, are being set aside in hopes of raising standardized test scores. When asked if this was the right direction for students, Owen contended:

We’ve focused on this and at times it has hurt us with social studies and writing. This has maybe made some things a little less engaging because we are so focused on the math and the reading trying to get the scores up. I think that was in our plan and our plan was we wanted to raise math and reading and we were told over and over that if you can’t read you can’t do much else. And sometimes I kind of disagree with that philosophy—you can learn to read through other things and I think when you take the fun out of it kids aren’t gonna want to read. Some of our test scores have been going up but at the same time I don’t know if the kids are learning much else other than what is on the test. I think it has kind of forced us to focus just on the test and really teach to what’s on there and focus on the types of things of what’s on the tests. Where it’s taken longer to get those teachable moments out of the day and we can’t really have fun while learning. The kids get back to where this is what’s important and we’ve got to focus here.

Sydney understood why the main focus at a PLAS school would be reading first and then math because she has seen, at this point in the plan, the benefits of the increased data driven instruction. She explained:

Reading trumps math, and I guess I learned that pretty fast as far as intensive and all of that goes. We have 90 minutes of reading and 90 minutes of math; I never had to do that in student teaching at any other schools. At first that seemed really long. But now that’s just by nature. That’s just how long it is every day. We do reading and math full time all the time and reading after school. You have to be able to read to do the math. That’s a big one. To be able to do the story problems, you have to be able to read. Math is also something, even though you grow off it, every year you have to redo some of it. But you have to be able to read first.
Owen shared concerns about the increased focus on just math and reading and believed that students seem to be missing out on other subjects such as science and social studies that students will need for future jobs and showed concern that:

I think our test scores will definitely go up and they will. The part that I don’t like about it is that I don’t feel that I’m inspiring anybody to be an author or a scientist or to go to fight for civil rights. Because it’s all focused on “Can you comprehend this short piece of text? Can you solve this math problem?” I think we are missing a huge part of it. If you look at school as a whole even over the last few years without a focus on science, our test scores are really high so we know our kids are interested in it. Imagine if they focused on science more, how high that would go because you have to read to do the science. You have to do math to do the experiments. That would be a better approach. We are not teaching concepts in isolation even though we are because we’re not teaching it for life.

At the point of the interviews, Midland was halfway through the second year of their three-year plan. They have already recognized that some minor changes needed to be made in how they were collecting data and planning for instruction. Shelby shared:

I think that we are approaching it differently. Last year, we would look at the goals and what they still need to know but didn’t get to everything. So now we have to look at what they didn’t get last year. Because I have looped and had my students for two years so we know where they lack. We are really dissecting and getting that information from their test scores. If you look back to what they are doing on the tests, it does fit the curriculum. This year has been amazing. Last year I think it wasn’t as useful at all to just fill in a template. It was time-consuming. This year has been so great. We can talk about what one teacher did so that I can apply that to my classroom. Or we are able to talk about where they are struggling, if we need to provide more time for them, or see what the book says we can do if they need extra help to supplement instruction. It’s been really good. This year’s data team has really made a difference. Having that time to collaborate right before we teach a lesson has been really good.

Owen agreed and recognized as a team leader, he needed to really focus on what teachers need to be working on to better help students to develop strategies. Owen and all of the other team leaders received professional development training on how to effectively lead a data team meeting, deconstruct data, and create instructional strategies
collaboratively as a team. The professional development was provided by an expert from the Leadership and Learning Center. When comparing last year's data team meetings to this year's new and improved meetings, Owen stated:

I think we just recognized it wasn't working. It wasn't working at all. We were getting frustrated with the—we were looking at it as a waste of our time and it's just something that we noticed talking with my team that we just need to make a change and luckily it's been working out for us now.

Shelby went on to explain that the Leadership and Learning expert also worked with Midland on how to effectively conduct data team meetings influenced the whole data team process in a positive way. She went on to say that “Now we like going to data team meetings. We know now when we go we are going to gain something. We are going to change something and learn something. Last year it was like “Oh, we gotta do this again.” Before it was busy work.” By following and aligning with the state’s core curriculum, the new teachers expressed their hopes for higher test scores in their second year. They had decided that following their students’ specific needs and deciding where they need to go next will help them to accomplish their academic goals. They also attributed their collective predictions of success to the formative test scores that they are keeping data on throughout the year, such as the development reading grade level tests, the end of unit assessment math tests, the state’s formative monthly tests, building-wide required observation notes, and their students journaling of their thinking processes which has also been a focus for every grade level at Midland.

One component of their predictions that they are hoping to be a factor for success is having students set class, and individual, goals for each formative test that they take. All classrooms have a data wall in the hallway showing graphs of their classrooms’
reading progress, math progress, and the state’s monthly formative tests scores. The data
wall is complete with the class goal line, the graphed score, and various pictures of
students working towards their goals in math and reading workshops. The building’s
grade level teams take pride in their data walls and talk with their students often on how
they can raise the bar for their grade level graphs. It is commonplace at Midland to hear
students discussing their reading levels, their individual goals for improvement, and
where there class is currently at in reaching their goals. The new teachers shared how the
students get very excited when they set a class goal and they fill in the goal graph
together. Shelby shared:

As a class goal, we look at what we did as a class last time and we bump that up
about 5-7 percent. We’d like to go up to 100 percent but we want to be realistic in
our goals. When I go to the board and fill in the goal graph, they get so excited.
It’s made a difference. We also have daily reading goals. They get self-
gratification from it.

Sydney acknowledged that professional development in these professional
learning communities have helped to help her students raise their scores. When asked if
she is seeing any evidence that the initiatives are having the intended effects she
discussed how her students are showing steady increases in their daily and monthly
scores and went on to say:

Obviously, I did something that brought them to that. I just hope that shows on
our next test. But at the same time, I’m not teaching to the test at all. It’s just if the
test happens, awesome. I’m teaching all those other strategies. Really, I just want
them to be able to read and apply what they’re doing, and if they show that on the
test, great.

While everyone shared angst at the thought of not raising student achievement,
teachers in particular seemed confident that the reforms being implemented have been
putting them on the right path to success. The teachers also are seeing the benefit of the
walk-throughs on various levels and see how their reflections are beginning to change the
way they deliver instruction. Midland teachers also shared that participating in the
professional learning communities is an effective tool for collaborating, and that
collaboration has led them to bond together as professionals working toward the same
goal and continuing to improve their building climate.

Administrators’ Views on Climate and Culture

Cultural Competency Training

The third key focus of major reform at Midland was on the climate and the culture
of their building. Understanding that the climate of the building had been an issue prior to
the change in leadership, not only for staff but for students and parents as well, both
administrators set out to focus on building a positive climate that is conducive to learning
both academically and behaviorally for all students and staff represented in Midland
Elementary School. This entailed providing specific cultural competency training for
staff, increased parental involvement, and an implementation of Positive Behavior
Intervention Systems (PBIS) for staff, and students, in hopes of creating and sustaining
strong and positive relationships.

Cultural competency training was provided for all staff on professional
development days. The instructional coach, who is experienced in teaching cultural
competency to adults, led the trainings. The trainings consisted of four Saturdays
dedicated to exploring how to create classrooms that support all students in reaching high
levels of achievement regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, income, or home language.
The sessions were designed to explore ways to address challenges by examining staff beliefs and understanding as well as learning from research and each other regarding strategies for success with all students. There was also an optional book study, led by the instructional coach, held on five consecutive Monday nights that explored closing the achievement gap and the culturally relevant teaching strategies that lead to all students’ achievement. Both administrators defended the time that they allotted for this training as necessary due to the evident achievement gaps that they have with various different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds represented at Midland. Monica contended:

I think especially with our staff being so brand new with a lot of them hadn’t had any training. We had to kind of fill in and give them some of that training especially being in the school that we’re in. So I think that was just something that was necessary, we can’t expect people to have those relationships with families when we don’t give them the tools and background that they need to be able to do that effectively.

When asked about the cultural competency training, Heather added:

I would agree. I think that part of that cultural competency training was how to relate with all kids and I know I keep going back to the relationship but being able to make those connections with students and families. I think that’s a huge part of that.

When asked about if enough is being done to close that achievement gap, they both agreed that they are hopeful that they are continuing to meet the needs of all students. They shared that a big focus now has been the push to accelerate the growth of their special needs population which in the past has been unsuccessful. They accounted the many efforts to try and differentiate instruction in order to meet the needs of all learners and constantly work towards closing the achievement gaps that currently exist. They are
working on a multitude of things, including a push toward more inclusion, in order to continue to show academic growth for all students.

Parent Involvement

Home visits and family nights were implemented at Midland in order to increase parent involvement with the hope of raising student achievement, creating a more inviting climate, and gaining more of a knowledge base of the various students represented at Midland. Home visits, or off-site visits, involve the teacher going to the parent’s choice of location, most often the home, in order to create a meaningful relationship with the parent in order to better serve the student. Developing meaningful connections with the parent and the student outside of the school setting in order to raise student achievement is the objective for the visit. Teachers prepare questions ahead of time in order to be sure that the parent has the input on how their child learns most effectively. The teachers prepare home visit bags filled with various school-tools that the student can use for future homework and gives that to the student as a gift at the visit. It is the teachers’ role to be a listener and respect the parent as the child’s first teacher.

Monica shared some testimonials from parents and teachers about how the home visits have had an impact on building the relationship needed to foster academic growth between home and school. During parent meetings and at family nights, it has become evident that communication lines between parents and teachers have opened up since the beginning of the new school reforms. Monica recalled how:

"I’ve definitely seen a change this year as opposed to last year. I think they were afraid last year. I know they were afraid to do home visits. This is the east side, and there’s this stigma that you don’t want to go anywhere by yourself and you don’t want to go after dark; there’s certain streets you don’t go on. These are the
homes that our kids are going to, so why are you as an adult afraid to go to a home that a six year old is going to? If you’re afraid to go there, imagine what the family thinks. This year, I think it’s made a difference. And when teachers did those home visits, I never heard any negative feedback from one single parent or a teacher. It was always a positive experience.

Heather agreed that home visits have had a positive impact and added:

I think there’s a better understanding of where some of our kids are coming from. Again with that relationship piece. I think when you’re able to see how kids might be thinking or even just to bring yourself to where they are. Just being able to maybe step a moment in their shoes.

Both Monica and Heather have been impressed that staff has stepped up to make family nights at Midland a huge success. They have kept track of attendance at their monthly family nights and have watched attendance increase since the new reforms have been in place. Each month they have a new academic theme to focus on and the nights always include a meal served to the whole family, and often some type of performance from the students. This has also been Midland’s opportunity to involve various members and groups from the community as well as the local university students. They attribute the increase in parent involvement in the classroom to the connections that many of our staff is making with students at the monthly family nights.

Positive Behavior Intervention Systems

The implementation of the Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) has been a big focus of all staff at Midland. PBIS is a behavior management system that focuses on promoting positive student behaviors in and out of the classroom. PBIS teaches students explicitly how to behave in various situations and gives students opportunities to practice positive behaviors. The plan works to encourage student accountability through various trainings throughout the school year. When asked to share
her perceptions about this implementation, Monica seemed to exhibit some doubt as to
the impact of PBIS to this point in their reforms when sharing:

We’re implementing PBIS, but I don’t know if we have the full implementation as
it should be yet. Honestly, we don’t. We’re working on our major/minor matrix
right now. After every PD session, teachers are to fill out a 3-2-1 reflective sheet,
and they’re able to ask questions, and we answer those questions for them. My
reflection after looking at those sheets last night is that teachers have the
perception that once those majors and minors are developed, it takes the place of
their classroom management. For example, if it’s a minor for a student to break a
pencil on purpose, some teachers had that perception that I need to write that up
the first time a student breaks a pencil and something should be done. That is my
fear, especially with so many new teachers who don’t have that experience and
background to know and don’t have that classroom management. There are some
teachers in this building that having that major/minor matrix won’t change
anything about how they work. That may change the documentation for majors,
they may document more. But it doesn’t change anything else. It’s important that
I somehow relay that to the whole staff that this doesn’t take the place of what we
do every day. I hate to say this, but common sense doesn’t go out the window
because now we have a piece of paper that says breaking a pencil is a minor
offense. We’re working on PBIS. I think the focus has been so much on
academics not saying that is a bad thing. Last year was tough behaviorally; it
really was. This year is not so much. So I think we’ve been able to push
academics and focus on that so much more, that I think we’ve been able to let
PBIS go by the wayside more than we should have.

Heather shared similar sentiments when discussing PBIS and also added:

I think another place we can look to see as far as that relationship if you look at
the referrals that are written there are actually very few that actually come from
the classroom. Most of the referrals come from the lunch and recess and bus
unfortunately. Very few that comes to us from the classroom teachers. And that is
again is because of that relationship. I don’t know if we have ever pulled that data
formally, but I think that is a pretty good indicator of that relationship piece.

PBIS results are something that administrators will continue to track and keep data on
where and when any types of behaviors are happening within Midland in order to
determine best practices for interventions, and putting further support systems in place
for students and staff that may require further training or assistance. A PBIS team, made
up of both new and veteran teachers, was assembled and meets monthly with staff on various ways to support this implementation.

While both administrators saw strides made in working to close the existing achievement gaps through building a positive climate based on cultural competency training, strong relationships with students and parent involvement, they believed that the PBIS program continues to be a work in progress for both staff and students. While behavior referrals are down in the classrooms, the overall climate of the building which includes buses and all of the transition areas, still need to be worked on. Their plan is to continue documentation on parent involvement, referrals, participation and implementation of culturally relevant lessons and approaches and track those results based on how they are raising all student achievement and working towards closing the achievement gaps across various cultures represented at Midland.

Teachers' Views on Climate and Culture

Cultural Competency Training

Giving teachers more experiences with developing culturally relevant lesson plans and working on strategies to meet the needs of all learners represented in the school has been a major component of the reforms at Midland. The veteran teachers understand the various cultures of their students and have had experience in relating to students from all cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. When Midland developed book studies and cultural competency training for teachers in order to work towards closing the existing achievement gaps, the veterans were supportive of the new efforts. When asked about the approaches to gain cultural competence for all staff, Barb believed:
That’s another area where I think that was just good for us to give some time to make sure we were all on the same page and that we had considered some things that we might not have considered. It have us some common language and a common focus. That was another thing that we could add to the good things list. It just seemed like it made sense that your job at Midland is to know more about the backgrounds of families at the school. Ordinarily, they wouldn’t have taken the time to do that right away. Because we did that, it was very beneficial to do.

When asked about cultural competency training and the impact it may have on student achievement, Jade also saw the benefits of this type of training explaining:

I appreciate it from the standpoint because I need on-going support and training in cultural competency. Even after all the years I have worked in the district, I still don’t know what I don’t know until someone else helps me to realize it. That’s been an opportunity to find out what I’m still lacking. I guess that if anything, I feel that I am more aware of trying to understand why my parents do or do not do something instead of jumping to conclusions that I might have done before prior. Spending a little more time to get to know my kids. Whether it’s from the cultural competency training or just being around others I work with in the training. Bonding with each other. I believe it will be a factor because if we don’t force ourselves to recognize that sometimes we have different expectations for different kids and call ourselves out on it then it doesn’t matter, we might not do it. So yes, it will have an impact on student achievement.

Morgan also accounted the competency need that this training filled in a staff that is in transition and working towards raising students’ achievement. She explained:

I think we did need the cultural competency piece. We work in a very diverse building. I think it has been a very positive effect on all of the staff members. We get along very well; we respect each other very well. We’ve had some hard conversations and we’ve had some easy ones. Just getting us in here for the learning and buy the books for our book studies or whatever it may be has been very beneficial for all of us.

When asked if this type of training was necessary to raise student achievement and raise the awareness of staff members, Morgan added:

Definitely we needed the training. We have teachers from all over who haven’t worked in buildings like ours. Our building may be very different from the building they did their student teaching in. It probably was a shock for them. You don’t know what to expect. And then when you get there, you think, “Ok, how am
I going to deal?" I’m not saying they weren’t willing; I saw that they were willing to learn and become more competent so they could do what they needed to do, which was teach those students…and close that achievement gap.

Since each of the veteran teachers were present at Midland to see the transformation of the school first hand, they were also able to see the change in the climate of the building and they attribute the building of the climate, as well as addressing Midland’s culture as an important aspect of building a strong school community for teachers, administrators, parents, and students. Jade believed that the fireside chats set the tone for the new building reforms when she clarified:

I’m just gonna say it. When they are sitting across the table and they (the administrators) say they are not going to tolerate the negativity. We don’t have time for it. Sign on the dotted line kind of thing. It’s an expectation. You know that it helped to set the tone. The mental state of making a conscious effort to try and combat that. You have to try really hard because I think it naturally happens in workplaces sometimes. It’s bound to. You have to handle pressure and stress. We are together like a family. We will get on each others’ nerves sometimes but we will continue to rise above and recognize that we will work together on it.

Barb recognized that starting over, and working towards a stronger climate, has been a step in the right direction by stating:

It’s been an expectation. We’re going to have relationships with families. We’re going to collaborate with each other and we’re going to do the kinds of things that are good to do. That’s the way it is. So we just do it. If you get the chance to start over and build the team with members who are going to help play the game, it’s going to work. And I say it’s going to work and we have yet to see it, but we have signs that it’s working. It’s meant to move you forward. Even if we started strong with a good team, we are stronger now that we were a year and a half ago. We have all grown. We didn’t just come in to this strong and stay at that level. We’ve all been pushed to do more.

Morgan seemed to differ somewhat in what her perceptions of what the building was before and after the designation. When discussing the climate of the building she shared:
This is where it gets a little iffy. When you talk climate and culture, you’re talking building wide—staff members to students, students to parents, you’re talking everyone. Many people say our climate and culture was different before the PLAS label, before the big change. I don’t really see it that way. I’ve always felt like I worked in a building that I felt like it was a family. Now there was a time when we got new administration, and so there was a thing with staff and administration. But as far as staff and parents, staff and community, staff together, we’ve always had a real respectful climate and culture. Behavior has changed. With PBIS, we’re trying things differently. I know with PBIS I’ve had to jump on board and try some things. Some parts I agree with 100 percent; some parts I don’t agree with. I had to get on board and change my thinking to get on board with it because that’s what the district is mandating us to do. There was one time student behavior was treated a little different, I know we’re trying to keep kids in school, but we have to still remember this is real work for the students, and what we’re teaching them here, they take out into the real world. So we have to remember and be conscious; let’s be real world. If we allow certain things to happen, they’re going to expect them to happen out in the real world. So we have to be careful when we’re crossing those lines. I think we have a real nice climate and culture right now as well. I think we were lucky; we got a great group of beginning teachers and some additional support staff. They were a good fit for the building, and I believe our principal did a good job picking.

The new teachers also spoke of the benefits of having cultural competency training and how as first year teachers teaching in a diverse environment it was important; Sydney and Shelby expressed that having hands on experiences, such as the home visits and family nights, was an even more important way to gain cultural competence as a first year teacher. They also shared that it was important for staff to have those types of culturally relevant discussions through the training in order to learn from other teachers’ experiences and their involvement with families. Owen went on to say:

Without the PLAS plan I wouldn’t have been able to take a cultural competency class. So I was able to take that which was very interesting to me just because it was something I never experienced... It was very good to experience and you don’t know what you don’t know. So it’s good to know those things and it was also good to have some very tangible things that you could do to ensure that there is success there. Like having high expectations for everyone no matter what. I think that was the biggest thing I took away from this—don’t give anyone breaks
because of where they come from. You have high expectations and the kids seem to really rise up to meet them no matter what.

When asked if he believed there was a link between cultural competency and student achievement, Owen replied:

I think there definitely is and it’s not even just cultural differences. If just every kid learns differently and the more that you know about each child or each culture the better you are going to be able to reach that child individually.

Parent Involvement

The teachers discussed the opportunity that the PLAS label has given the school to fund home visits from teachers and monthly family nights. Morgan credits the parents for recognizing that Midland has always been a great place and she is now seeing attendance at family nights that she hasn’t seen for years. She believes that parents have an increased confidence in the staff and appreciates that there is such great support from Midland’s families. She added that “We do a really good job of connecting learning with our family nights as well.” Jade agreed adding that “I’m hearing positive remarks from parents. I would hope that helping parents getting in the door is having a positive impact and helping parents support their children academically and having a positive impact on student achievement.” Barb agreed saying:

That’s right. This is how we do it. We get to know parents and we go to their home and we have open communication and they’re involved with their students. Yeah, that just seems like a great thing to get in place at the start. I believe in parent involvement and support from parents. I’ve seen evidence of kids doing better when we’re all on the same team when you have parents helping us at home.

New teachers, like the veterans, also attribute the building of the climate, as well as addressing Midland’s culture, as an important aspect of building a strong school
community for teachers, administrators, parents, and students. Shelby was confident that relationships are the key to a strong climate. She admitted that she was nervous at first when asked to do home visits with her students and that attending monthly family nights was an expectation. She was worried that families might feel uncomfortable and might think she was judging them. After implementing the home visits she has been empowered to continue to reach out to those parents, who were welcoming to her, and is no longer questioning the parent-teacher-student bonding benefits. She expressed her success with home visits and family nights as a benefit to her as a new teacher when she discussed:

Having that relationship is key. Out of twenty-two students, I have such good relationships with the family that it makes it that what I say goes. If I say I have to call home or let's think about your mom they know I have that relationship with their mom. I call for everything, positive or negative. I do much more positive than negative calls. They know I will call and just hearing that reminder helps them get it back together for me. Knowing that I have parent support means that at any time can call them even during the day and they are at work they are not mad because they know if I’m calling I’m obviously concerned. They are there when I need them. Having those home visits, and that I’m just like them, and that I truly love their kids. Those family nights, being able to hang out with them, make jokes with them, and just letting them know I’m a human being and I’m not just a teacher. Don’t worry about me. Being able to eat with their families and play games is great. They worry about me for next year because they know that I’m just attached to their child.

Sydney shared similar successes in bonding with her students and their families and conveyed:

I work hard to build a relationship with students. I do home visits. I contact parents all the time for positives, as well as some negatives. I would say my culture and community climate in the classroom is the best that it can be. With that relationship also comes decreased bad behaviors and increased the amount of time on task. So that will reflect.

When asked if she has seen evidence of the positive effects of home visits and family night attendance she confidently stated:
Definitely. For a first year teacher, that home visit is crucial. I don’t know what it was like before, but I know our first parent nights there weren’t that many in attendance, and there are tons now. I think the atmosphere of the parent-teacher relationship is great. And they know open door policies so sometimes parents will just come in and sit behind their kid, and I love that. They just know it’s open door policy, and I even give out my personal cell phone. It’s that communication.

Owen, as well, supports the home visit process, and when reflecting on the varied benefits of increased parent involvement explained:

Yes, they want to be more involved. You can reinforce that at family nights and they are more a part of our school now recently. If parents are on board, it’s huge. When a child has seen you sit in their living room with their mom, you can reference that anytime you need to. The kid is more likely to listen.

When asked if the increase in parent involvement would likely have a positive effect on raising test scores and achievement, Owen continued:

I think it’s had a very good affect that we’re required to do home visits. I don’t know personally if I would have done a whole lot of home visits if it wasn’t required. So that’s been great it actually has been very beneficial for the students that I’ve done home visit for. Getting to know the parents and you can just say I’ve talked to your mom and you in your living room while you watched and it kind of gets them to be quiet every now and then. I think without the PLAS extra money, I don’t think we’d be able to do that. We’ve been able to throw some really good family nights where we had some high attendance. That is kind of attached to our plan and with that, I think that’s been great to build some community relations with a school that worked out in our favor on more than one occasion.

Positive Behavior Intervention Systems

When asked about the PBIS process, the teachers agreed that the behaviors at Midland are becoming increasingly better. Jade shared that having the positive behavior support systems in place is critical for Midland to continue to sustain their instructional time on task. She sees a huge difference in the building when it comes to time on task in the classroom, transitions in the hallway, and believed that teachers are really looking for
the positive behaviors and reinforcing those throughout the school day. She also believed that the staff has changed some of their behaviors as well as a result of not only PBIS, but the focus on school reform for Midland. When asked if she sees a change in climate from the beginning of the label, she shared:

Yes from a student to teacher perspective is that we are now looking for students who are doing their job. We are now looking for the positive and reinforcing that to students. From teacher to teacher yes, I feel like most everybody who is here is talking the talk and walking the walk. We are all human, we all make mistakes, especially under the stresses of this job but I think that it is generally how it feels.

Barb addressed the implementation of PBIS by also comparing behavior to past years stating:

I agree we have evidence of better behavior this year. Can we attribute that to PBIS? I’m not sure. We made other changes, too, like looping teachers, so that’s tough to say. It certainly doesn’t seem like it did anything to hurt us. It seems beneficial to have it in place. Can we attribute that that’s the reason we have better behavior? Maybe. Maybe it’s also that we learned a lot the first year and we’re just figuring things out. I think we have figured out that collaborating and working together on both academic and behavior concerns has been worthwhile for us.

As the veterans discussed, the PBIS approach to improving climate at Midland was a point of discussion with the new teachers as well. The new teachers had mixed reviews of the PBIS program as it is still new to the school and may take time to see evidence of this implementation’s success. Owen shared his concern that, though it is working to a point, he would like to see it use more consistently as a building. His worry is that if a few teachers are not using it, that students will start to test those adults more often. When asked how he thought it could become a more relevant implementation, he expressed the need for more staff training. He has noticed some improvements from last
year. Shelby discussed the positive approach that the PBIS program encourages teachers to implement and questioned:

It's hard being a new teacher because what's a negative behavior? You should always be positive with them so I don't think we really have changed that. We are always positive in my room so to point out that positive so constantly they can see what they are good at and what others are good at.

Sydney's viewpoint differed somewhat from the other two new teachers when asked if the PBIS school-wide trainings of how to behave in various areas of the building have been beneficial. She confided:

No. Truthfully, not really. We can preach and preach and preach, but until a child takes ownership and wants to change, they won't. I guess that's what I work on in my class. I'm always talking about college and respecting authority. And I'm always relating it to my own experiences. They want to work hard for me. They want to please me most all the time. Because I've worked hard to become that type of role model for them and become someone that they want to please. I think most of the time they do. They want to be on our team and in our class and what I call our family.

The veteran teachers expressed their pride in Midland school and acknowledged that staying at Midland to work through the new implementations towards major school reform was the right decision for each of them. Barb found the new reforms to be an opportunity to grow professionally and shared her vision for being a part of transforming a school by stating:

I don't like seeing something new is happening and me not getting to be at the school that's getting to do it. So I need to be at the fun school and leading the way. If I hear another school is doing it and we're not than I want to be at that school. My vision is the work that we have done keeps going and we keep moving forward. Yes, it took a lot to make the change, but the things that we have learned that are working we keep doing and we keep moving forward.

Jade shared that vision and explained that choosing another school was never a consideration for her due to her strong allegiance to Midland and its students. She shared:
For me, I didn’t have any desire to go. If I would have already had that rumbling, maybe. For some they thought this was like a free ticket to go if I was ready for a change. For me, I felt like I wasn’t finished here. I still had work to do here. I was just like I cannot think of a reason to leave. I was really excited for a change. I really wanted to stick around to see if a change wouldn’t just really bring us to a better place. I’m not done working here yet. I already had the sense that I was already coming to work every day, bustin’ my butt, and working hard. I already know that what you’re presenting to me might be more hours but it already is for me. For some people it would have rocked their world to stay here. They would have had to change so much professionally and personally. For me it was like “Thank goodness.” I want to be surrounded by just everybody who has the same mentality as me. I want to be around people who want to work hard all day long. For me, it was awesome to bring in people who want to work hard all day long. For me, it was awesome to bring in people who want to work as hard as me. I couldn’t think of a reason to go. I don’t have that competitive streak like something to prove. I’m just not going anywhere as scary as it was and such a leap of faith.

Without hesitation, Morgan summarized her heartfelt feelings for Midland and confidently reported that her decision to stay was the only one for her when she expressed:

I wanna be where the action is. Put me up with a challenge. I’m going to make it happen. I love Midland. It’s my family. I’ve always said that. Much has changed. Much hasn’t. The students and the families haven’t. That meant a lot to me. Like I said I feel like someone challenged me to something. When the day came and they told us if you don’t want to work a lot, it won’t be like this anymore than you probably want to leave. I was like “Oh, let me show you.” That’s me inside. I thought it was important that students continued to have faces that they recognized, as well as families. I thought a lot about that because I’m also a parent here. They need someone to say you were here with us before. That’s why I stayed.

Though teachers agreed that there was excitement in working at a school that is now considered to be under the microscope and hoping to shine through to other low-achieving schools to follow should all of the PLAS goals come out as planned for raising test scores, there were mixed feelings on what their perceptions of outcomes for closing the achievement gap, as well as the implementation of the PBIS program. Though they
are seeing progress towards their goals, they were non-committal on predictions of
success based on those specific implementations. Where Barb shared excitement for
being on the cutting edge in new initiatives, Morgan reflected on positive things that were
already in place regarding climate and Jade felt that she needed more concrete evidence
to base predictions on standardized testing scores. There was a realization for these
veterans that there might need to be more evidence presented during data team meetings
to show progress of the various sub groups. There was agreement however that Midland
was a very positive working environment for staff, students, and families.

Throughout the interviews, Sydney, Shelby, and Owen talked often of the strong
staff bonding that has happened since the beginning of their PLAS journey. They were
aware of the reputation that their school had previously for not having strong staff
relationships and they were determined to set high standards for themselves and for their
students and set out to prove any naysayers wrong. They each extended invitations to
teachers from across their district to come and see all of the positive changes and focused
direction that Midland was heading. They are convinced the test scores that Midland
students have previously received do not represent their students’ ability and they are
ready to assist students to rise to their potential. Shelby expressed that they are working
as hard, and as smart, as they can and wanted that to be recognized when stating:

I think a lot of teachers know that. I’ve had a lot of teachers that come in and say
that what we are doing here, like I have that one teacher from another school that
comes in and she just is like “A lot of schools have lowered their standards so
much and you guys haven’t lowered that. You still have the high expectations
where a lot of people just throw it to the side.” I know that we’re not the only
team doing it. The school as a whole has these expectations for them that a lot of
schools have had to put on the back burner. And most of those schools are the
ones that keep passing. They are not going through the editing and revising
stages. They’re not doing all of the random things that we’re doing. She just constantly talks about how we aren’t lowering our standards to just focus on the test. WE have the test taking strategies as well as the other things. Like even though we know writing won’t be on the test, we focus on it a lot because we know they are going to need it in life.

In agreement, Sydney added:

No one here is satisfied doing the bare minimum. And I think we’re all defensive against the outside in so we are all teamed in together. This is our family so we can talk about each other but nobody’s going to say anything about what’s going on here. We have to prove them wrong and see how hard we are working. We never sit down.

Unlike the other new teachers, Owen did learn about Midland through a long-term substitute position he had filled for a semester before the PLAS initiatives were put into place. This gave him a chance to understand what type of a school he was joining and a unique perspective of how the staff and administration team was prior to the designation and once the PLAS implementations began. When asked if he has noticed a big shift in the climate, he replied:

Absolutely. It was really rough here for that half year. I don’t want to blame a lot of people because it was really up in the air if they were going to have a job next year. It was just very, very tense. Our principal wasn’t really around and wasn’t a presence at all. Every teacher seemed like we were on an island by ourselves. Everyone was wrapped up in their own problems and their own stress and you couldn’t go anywhere for help. The kids knew it and the kids were just—it was just very rough. You could tell the kids felt the level of stress and it was affecting them.

Owen credits the time to collaborate with his team for creating a positive climate at Midland. When asked specifically if collaboration opportunities have helped with the climate of the building, he stated:

Absolutely. It’s been really great and we’ve been able to then use each other during the day too if a student just needs a break we can send them over to another classroom where they are getting the same instruction that all three are
doing. So they don’t have to miss out on anything cuz their misbehaving or need a break. We mesh together really well, so that goes really well in our planning. We have good ideas and respect each others’ ideas so we can come up the best possible ways to do what we do.

When asked about their vision for Midland’s future and what advice that might give to other teachers who may be facing a similar PLAS label, the new teachers’ answers clarified their newfound knowledge of how to work towards major school reform in the face of adversity. Shelby summarized her thoughts by reflecting:

They always tell you how hard it is, how flexible you have to be and always be on your feet. It’s definitely forty times harder than they said it was going to be. You have to make sure this is something you are passionate about or you are going to burn out quickly. I think we’ve all gotten a little better. Last year, cars were here until at least seven or eight every night. I know I was always slower but it feels like cars are leaving much earlier. They are still doing as much work but we’ve kind of figured out our groove. No one is leaving without their work done. We are working smarter now, not harder.

Sydney’s experience was similar when comparing this school year to last year and she shared:

This year I’ve gotten to the point that I work hard all during the week so I can have my weekend. Last year, I worked all weekend. I would go through times last year where I couldn’t sleep at all. I’ve learned this year now to put it in a drawer. No matter how tough the day was or whatever is on my mind to put it in a drawer and just leave it.

Owen also looked at his change in perspective from last year to this year and advised others facing a similar situation to:

Be prepared to put in a lot of time. I think some teachers have set priorities now like this is very important to me now but my family is also very important now. I need to have a break. I think that was a very hard lesson for me to learn. I can work hard and take things home until midnight or one o’clock and stay up late but then I’m not very good the next day. My kids don’t learn as much the next day because I’m tired and I’m cranky.
Teachers’ perspectives on climate and culture shared in regards to the need for cultural competency, parental involvement strategies, and classroom management appear to move in the direction needed for meeting the needs of Midland students. There was evidence in their interviews of their confidence to be the type of culturally competent, relationship-building, classroom manager and competent professional that a PLAS school needs in order to raise student achievement.

The individual interviews with administrators, veteran teachers, and new teachers, followed by their focus group interviews, was a tool to assist in answering the three research questions regarding teachers and administrators, curriculum and academic achievement, and climate and culture. It was an opportunity to probe individual feelings about these three areas and follow it up with deeper questions in the focus groups. Appendix A is the individual questions for the administrators. Appendix B is the individual questions for the teachers. Appendix C is the focus group questions for administrators and Appendix D is the questions for veteran teacher focus groups. Appendix E contains the new teacher focus group questions.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and administrators in an elementary school labeled as a Persistently Low-Achieving School in 2009. Midland was one of the first two elementary schools in their state to be given the PLAS label due to low student achievement on state standardized test scores. The PLAS designation mandates that schools with this label develop a specific three year plan, complete with measurable goals and specific plans for increasing test scores. Midland’s leadership team and staff responded by implementing various educational strategies in order to increase their students’ achievement in an accelerated time frame. Putting a strong focus on research-based strategies and building the instructional capacity of the staff, Midland put their three year plan into action beginning in 2010. The specific focus of this study was to investigate the response of this school in the following areas:

1. Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators: What impact did the PLAS label have on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building?

2. Curriculum and Academic Achievement: What impact did the PLAS label have on curriculum development in this school and plans for assessment of academic achievement?
3. Climate and Culture: What impact did the PLAS label have on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence?

**Summary of the Study**

This study was a qualitative case study. The method used for this research was researcher inquiry of the qualifying grant plan, as well as interviews with building leadership and staff. The researcher triangulated data through the schools’ state grant application, official plans for changes, and interviews with principals and teachers.

This study’s information is significant because Midland was the first of two elementary schools in its state to be given the PLAS designation. Schools to be labeled in the future will be searching for models of plans and ideas for implementation that will allow them to make changes in staff, raising students’ academic achievement, and improving climate in order to work towards accelerating the academic performance of all students.

Through the interview portion of this study, transcripts yielded the administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of their own professional practices, the perceptions of how student achievement has been impacted as a result of the PLAS designation, and how the climate and the culture of the building has been changed due to receiving a PLAS label. Analysis of these transcripts also yielded ten themes within these areas. The themes under Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators included Staff Changes, Professional Pressures, Dynamics of Staff, and Professional Development. The themes under Curriculum and Academic Achievement included Raising Student Achievement, Walk-Throughs, and Professional Learning Communities. Finally, the themes under
Climate and Culture were Cultural Competency Training, Parent Involvement, and Positive Behavior Intervention Systems.

Administrators, veteran teachers, and new teachers were all initially interviewed individually. The interview questions that were used for administrators are found in Appendix A. The interview questions used for all teachers are found in Appendix B. After all individual interviews were completed; the researcher recognized the need to administer focus group interviews. Appendix C represents the questions that were developed after the administrators' individual interview; those were used for the administrator focus group interview. Appendix D represents the questions that were asked of the veteran teacher focus group. Appendix E questions were used for the new teacher focus group.

The interviews provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the effects that the PLAS designation and the various implementations had on both leadership and teachers. Administrators and teachers had the opportunity to reflect on how the PLAS designation affected each of them on various levels. The information gathered from the participants was used to investigate the three research questions.

**Conclusions: Research Questions**

**Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators: What impact did the PLAS label have on the professional practices of teachers and administrators in this building?**

**Staff changes.** A common characteristic found in the interviews of the Midland staff was participants expressing the view that the dramatic change in leadership and staff was critical to major school reform. Participants unanimously reported that this overhaul of leadership and staff, along with the support of coaches, was an important step toward
raising student achievement. Orr et al. (2008) examined persistently low-achieving schools. Their data suggested that how schools initially respond to change determines the schools' turnaround capacity. When discussing instructional leadership integrity, the authors stated: "A consistent theme throughout the school improvement research is the centrality of leadership, particularly instructionally focused leadership" (p. 683). The authors claimed that, in the low-achieving schools they studied, the job of school reform required a shared leadership role in the form of an assistant principal. The administrators from Midland both spoke in detail of their focus as instructional leaders, rather than a principal's traditional role of building manager. These administrators found that initiating school-wide reform, fostering the development of veteran and new teachers, and building the climate and culture of the building could not be done without the shared administration model, and the shared vision and commitment among the staff. Through analysis of the research and the teacher and administrator interviews, it is evident that making major staff and leadership changes was an important component in school-wide reform at Midland.

Professional pressures. Under that shared vision, teachers and administrators discussed the pressure, and added stress as a result of the PLAS label and, regarding expectations, both for their performance and for dramatic growth in student achievement over an accelerated time frame. As a group, all of the participants shared an excitement to take on this challenge. O'Donnell et al. (2008) explored stress among teachers who worked at schools with low poverty, low student achievement, and a high minority percentage. These authors found that when teachers are provided with the sufficient
resources needed to meet the needs of their students from different cultural backgrounds and Title 1 needs, their levels of stress decreased. The authors explained “It is important that effective coping mechanisms are identified at the teacher level, but at the same time, administrators must be on board with monitoring the environmental conditions that could be contributing to teacher stress and burnout” (p. 158). Midland staff believed that they have received the staff, the resources, and the material items they need.

Participants did express the need for more time and more district flexibility to fine tune their curriculum, as well as professional development to meet their specific building needs. Part of the leadership stress was the need for the district to become more knowledgeable, play a more active role, and be more supportive of Midland’s unique reform efforts and specific PLAS goals in when making blanket district decisions. The administrators shared feeling stress due to the unknown once the PLAS funding was complete. Both administrators chose to come to Midland strongly believing that they could be the turnaround specialists that a low-achieving school needs; while recognizing that their jobs were on the line if progress were not made on all levels of the PLAS plan goals.

Part of the teacher stress was the need for administrators to focus more on their individual strengths, while recognizing that the extra work load that accompanies school reform, both for veteran teachers and new teachers. Providing time to let teachers organize their environment would alleviate some of those stresses. The PLAS plan did not provide any extra funding for teachers’ individual planning, only for time to collaborate on data and group professional development. Despite the stress, each
participant showed a great pride in the continued hard work and fulfillment from on-going academic and behavioral growth of their students. Their pride in the commitment of their colleagues, their students, and their school environment was evident through each participant interview. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the added pressures of a PLAS label led to the continued bonding of all staff, from leadership to teachers, and that pressure created a culture of dedicated, determined staff members.

**Dynamics of staff.** The administrators shared a clear vision, a strong passion for staff and students, and a determined commitment to raise student achievement within the required time frame. This shared vision was extended to potential staff during the "fireside chats," which were conducted to determine which potential staff would share in their passion and commitment to raise student achievement and create a strong building climate. The interviews revealed, overwhelmingly, that the Midland staff collectively believed that it is the staff's responsibility to diligently work towards meeting the students' academic and behavior needs. This could only be accomplished through individual commitment among staff, willingness to participate in professional learning communities that analyze curriculum and instructional strategies, and an on-going commitment to maintaining a climate where the needs of all students are met in an environment that is safe and structured. The overwhelming theme of the administrators' and teachers' interviews was that they each recognized the need for building strong relationships with students and each other, and the continued need to have high expectations for all staff and learners at Midland.
Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the administration and staff at Midland benefitted from the multiple opportunities to collaborate with each other through various leadership team meetings, grade level meetings, data team meetings, collaborative lesson planning, large group reading and math professional development, as well as cultural competency and PBIS trainings. Through collaboration opportunities, the Midland administration and leadership team consciously built the capacity of their teachers so Midland would continue to flourish once the extra PLAS funding was no longer available. Patterson and Patterson (2004) described the vital role that teachers can play in creating a resilient school culture. They studied research on schools facing adversity and found that when teachers work with their colleagues to solve problems, share expertise, and shape school culture together, and then they were able to make contributions that led to shaping school culture and building school resilience. Midland’s staff was working toward these same goals as a strong, focused, goal-oriented team. Patterson and Patterson (2004) explained:

Teacher leadership is not about individual “teacher power” but about mobilizing the capacity of teachers to strengthen student performance and develop real collaboration within the school. In our research on resilience in schools, we repeatedly find that in tough times, teachers turn to teacher leaders for help—and teacher leaders rise to the occasion. (p. 77)

The dynamics of the staff at Midland showed that sharing a common vision, strong work ethic, and desire to improve one’s own development as a professional is an important component to raising student achievement.

Professional development. It was evident throughout the interviews that professional development was another key component for building the staff capacity
needed to make school-wide reform successful in a persistently low-achieving school. Each of the participants positively supported the need for continued professional development for their own individual growth, as well as to support a shared staff vision.

Opfer and Pedder (2011) researched the professional development of teachers and concluded that “...teachers need time to develop, absorb, discuss, and practice new knowledge” (p. 385). They also found that the traditional professional development models of the onetime workshops are no longer relevant in today’s reform movements. They suggested that teachers should have significant numbers of on-going contact hours, which has been shown to be more effective if done with teachers from the same school, grade level, or department. Midland participants shared their appreciation for the extended hours of professional development provided as a result of their PLAS funding and some of the reforms toward which their district was working. Administrator and staff consensus indicated that much of what Midland was doing is the result of the continued professional development based on their current needs and the needs of their students.

When reviewing the research of others in the field of professional development, Opfer and Pedder (2011) concluded: “In these reviews, they concluded that collaborative professional development produced changes in teacher practice, attitudes, belief, and student achievement” (p. 376).

Though time consuming, and often times given in rapid succession, both teachers and administrators collectively agreed that their professional development sessions at Midland have been relevant to their needs and beneficial to their professional growth. Teachers and administrators also agreed that the research-based strategies they
implemented should ultimately lead to the academic achievement of the students at Midland.

Curriculum and Academic Achievement: What impact did the PLAS label have on curriculum development in this school and plans for assessment of academic achievement?

Raising student achievement. Administration and staff at Midland recognized that the initiatives that were in place at Midland could be potentially ground-breaking in reforming a low-achieving urban school district. Each participant recognized that their individual role was vital for Midland students to succeed. The administration shared confidence that the district had picked wisely when putting them at the forefront of these needed reforms. The veteran teachers shared their excitement to show the district that Midland students were capable. The new teachers shared their willingness to do whatever it takes to be a member of this team that is working towards raising student achievement in a strong and safe school community.

Rinaldi et al. (2010) studied an urban school that was also working toward implementing effective reform in a three year time period. “While the educators initially viewed the model as an administrative directive, they began to assume responsibility for the model’s implementation during the second year as they considered themselves change agents and problem solvers for their school” (p. 44). The Midland interviews were done during the second year of implementation and teachers and administration did share their reflections on how they have made some personal and professional changes as needed throughout this reform. It was evident throughout the interviews that each participant viewed themselves as a change agent capable of meeting the requirements of the PLAS
plan, as well as providing the support and guidance that the Midland students needed in aspects outside the PLAS plan's goals.

The lack of positive results in the first year of state testing led participants in this study to experience a strong, yet brief period of disappointment in their reform efforts. Marsh and Willis (2007) pointed out the traumatic effects that this type of disappointment can have on individual schools. They discussed:

No matter how well a school might be functioning, it must still demonstrate progress as measure solely by the state-chosen standardized testing, and many communities have learned how fine the line can be between success and failure on such tests. In effect, NCLB has placed so much weight on the results of testing that teachers have had little choice but to reduce instruction in other subjects in order to teach to the test, sometimes to the detriment of their own mental health, sometimes even to the detriment of the mental health of their students. (p. 63)

The other disappointments that participants shared regarding raising student achievement was the laser-like focus on math and reading only, and how other subject areas, though important, may be neglected in the state tests. Marsh and Willis (2007) discussed that NCLB mandates have promoted curriculum alignment. Although teachers were encouraged to participate in curriculum building activities, the mandates came from people outside their specific buildings. The authors stated “Indeed, one of the least desirable outcomes of NCLB has been the de-skilling of teachers through diminishing opportunity for teachers actually to make decisions about curriculum and instruction” (p. 64).

Participants in this study were able to rise above their initial disappointments regarding the academic achievement. They took a short time to grieve the first year results together. Their next step was to quickly re-evaluate each of their initiatives, look
at what was truly done with fidelity and what components of the initiatives were not effective. They then reflected upon why those initiatives did not have the intended effects on academic achievement. They held professional development sessions on how to implement and sustain change initiatives effectively in order to show evidence of their school-wide reform. The willingness to work hard was still a focus of their team and they quickly recognized the need to work smarter, and not harder, to meet the needs of students at Midland.

The participants agreed that raising student achievement takes time and is sometimes coupled with initial disappointments and implementation dips. However, there was a shared confidence among these participants that they would meet their PLAS goals in their three year allotment through hard work and refining their instructional strategies and delivery.

Walk-throughs. Midland responded quickly to their district's new implementation of walk-throughs conducted by the leadership team. Midland's leadership team appreciated the opportunity to conduct walk-throughs as a way to monitor, observe, and provide reflective feedback specifically on the initiatives being implemented at Midland. Participants shared that they perceived these walk-throughs to be an effective tool of communication between leadership and staff, and that the staff at Midland welcomed walk-throughs as a necessary initiative to continue to monitor the effectiveness of various instructional strategies. Administrators viewed walk-throughs, using Marzano's I-Observation format, as having been a valuable tool for administrators and coaches to use in order to provide constructive feedback to teachers. Veteran teachers viewed the walk-
throughs as one of the implementations that showed signs of progress in providing relevant feedback to teachers, causing them to reflect on their delivery of instruction and its effectiveness in raising student achievement. They also appreciated the accountability factor that it provided for all staff.

As discussed in Chapter 4, all three new teachers found that the additional walk-throughs, observations, and reflective questioning surrounding instructional strategies were of benefit to them as they continue to develop, grow, and change as professionals. The walk-throughs provided means to meet the specific needs of staff and students at Midland.

Walk-throughs have been a successful component of the implementations at Midland and became a daily component for the leadership team and teachers. Midland fully implemented this new district initiative due to the accelerated time frame of their PLAS goals and expectations. Other schools in the district looked to Midland when questions arose about the walk-through process, as well as how Midland had so quickly refined their professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities. Based on their formative data, observational data, end of unit assessments, developmental reading scores, monthly state skills test results, and a steady decline of classroom referrals, participants each made predictions for success on state standardized test scores at the end of this three year process. Interestingly enough, there was a consensus among participants that whatever those results showed, they knew that their students had made great strides in their academic achievement to date. The participants knew that they had implemented, with fidelity, each of the district
driven curriculum changes. They strongly believed that their students were motivated and were focused on their academic achievement. They spoke at length of the positive climate that Midland had developed, and how it met the specific needs of all of their students from all cultural backgrounds. For all participants in this study, there was the worry that the state tests were not designed to show the true picture of Midland’s students due to possible gaps in the curriculum. After standardized testing results were not positive in their first year of implementation, the state and the district worked to align the curriculum and standards by the third year. There was consensus among the participants that the expert from the Leadership and Learning Center has been a strong component of their professional development. Having an outside influence with proven success review their implementations and guide Midland on its journey has been an innovative step in the right direction for both administrators and teachers.

Though Midland was considered to be the lowest performing school in its district, the approaches to creating strong, quality professional learning communities led many administrators, coaches, and teachers throughout the district to visit the building and observe their professional learning community process. Midland’s professional learning community meetings were sometimes recorded and shared with the other schools in the district. District administrators looked to Midland for leadership and guidance in the area of creating professional learning communities that work together in order to raise student achievement by meeting the needs of all students represented across the building.
Climate and Culture: What impact did the PLAS label have on approaches to student behavior, parent involvement, and cultural competence?

Cultural competency training. Establishing social justice for all students was a major focus of reform for the Midland staff. The participants spent many hours attending cultural competency training in order to better meet the needs of all students at Midland, to raise student achievement, and to close the existing achievement gaps at their school. Each participant, though at different phases of their professional lives, expressed the benefits of this training. Administration viewed the training as a need for the entire staff. Both administrators believed that the issues of cultural competency must be put on the table in a non-threatening environment, thus encouraging honest and open staff discussion about what they currently know and what they still need to learn.

Veteran and new teachers believed that providing this professional development time gave them new tools to create more culturally relevant lesson plans that also aligned with the core curriculum and met district standards. However, more than just supplying needed tools, the teachers believed that it helped them bond as a staff through open conversations. It gave them the opportunity and the setting to jointly recognize various issues.

Howard (2007) also believed that schools should transform their instructional practices to yield deep changes in student achievement and stated:

In this phase, schools assess and, where necessary, transform the way they carry out instruction to become more responsive to diversity. For teachers, this means examining pedagogy and curriculum, as well as expectations and interaction patterns with students. It means looking honestly at outcome data and creating new strategies designed to serve the students whom current instruction is not reaching. For school leader, this often means facing the limits of their own
knowledge and skills and becoming co learners with teachers to find ways to transform classroom practices. (p. 4)

It was the consensus of the administrators and teachers interviewed in this study that the cultural competency training was beneficial as a whole, though some felt that they may have needed it more than others or felt that their experiences led them to have various views on this initiative. The process of going through these interviews led participants to be more aware of their formative data analyses to see if they were meeting the needs of students. This process appeared to shine a light on the need to further collect data across the subgroups that are represented in the standardized testing process.

**Parent involvement.** All participants interviewed strongly supported home visits and family nights as a way to build relationships with students and families at Midlands; Administrators and staff all had hopes of raising academic achievement through increased parent involvement. While hesitant at first with the home visit process, both veteran and new teachers spoke of the benefits of this strategy. Many testimonials were given on how the lines of communication opened between teachers and parents as a result of making that home to school connection. Administration also shared testimonials from parents about the home visits during parent meetings, and how they the visits were widely viewed as positive and welcomed by all involved. LaRocque and Darling (2011) believed that parental involvement was the missing link in school achievement. The authors contended “Schools, even well-intentioned ones, cannot educate every child on their own. They need the active support of community and family” (p. 115).

Training prior to conducting the home visits and implementing the family nights was a focus at Midland right at the start of the reform movement. The leadership team
recognized that all staff needed to have a shared vision of exactly what productive parent involvement would and should look like, and how it should be done very professionally, so that parents felt a part of this process. Staff discussed the objectives of home visits, what topics were appropriate to discuss, what materials to take, and ways to empower parents to become part of the process of reform at Midland. Staff also met each month to determine what academic focus would need to be addressed at family nights. Participants shared that they liked being a part of this decision making instead of just being told what to do and when.

Participants were proud of how their attendance had increased with each monthly family night since the beginning of their three year journey. They spoke of not only the professional relationships that they have built with Midland families, but also of the friendships that have developed as a result of their shared vision for success. They often referred to each other as their "school family."

Throughout this study, it became evident that building relationships was a common thread and conscious focus among all of the participants. Relationships between administration and teachers, relationships among all staff, relationships between staff and students, relationships between staff and parents, and the relationships among the entire Midland community was a recurring theme through the interview responses. There was no doubt that these participants found building relationships through adversity a challenge that they were ready and willing to address successfully. The participants recognized that safe climates foster raising student achievement and that meant establishing a trust system among staff, students, and families where all members of this
school community felt they had a voice; they were valued, and they were accepted for who they are.

Shields (2004) supported building relationships as a key factor in raising student achievement. Participants in this study believed and showed evidence of building strong relationships. They viewed their school as a family that would help them to reach their PLAS goals. Shields also found “Staying focused on relationships, understanding, and dialogue can help leaders deliver academic excellence and social justice to all students” (p. 38).

Increasing parent involvement, and parent involvement activities, will continue to be a goal at Midland based on the success that they have experienced. Each of the participants shared the value of including parents for themselves and for their students in order to build relationships that will ultimately raise the student achievement at Midland.

Positive Behavior Intervention Systems. When discussing the PBIS process administrators agreed that they are implementing the components of PBIS but they are not sure that there is complete implementation of the entire PBIS philosophy in place at Midland yet. This reform has shown the leadership team some evidence of being positive and effective, in that their referrals have gone down, but administration hopes to see all staff and students exhibit the expectations on which Midland is focusing. There is still a need for working through positive interactions towards building more positive classroom management strategies and to focus less on the need to see punitive consequences when negative behaviors occur. Administrators plan to continue staff professional development to work through these issues as a staff team.
Veterans and new teacher participants shared that positive behaviors at Midland are becoming increasingly evident. Not all participants agreed that we can attribute these improvements in behavior to just the PBIS program. There is not conclusive evidence that other building climate factors have been the reason for this, such as the newfound pride in their school as a whole. They have all seen evidence of more time on task, smoother student transitions, and an intrinsic motivation of students to do their job. Participants also discussed how staff has focused on positive interactions also and how they work to find the good in each other as well.

Implications of Change

Orr et al. (2008) question whether schools that are considered persistently low-performing can be effective unless the principals who are making the implementations are willing to work strategically beyond the required reform strategies and foster their own innovative solutions to meet their school’s needs. They continue that organizations that are in decline need to restructure the organization by removing a large portion of the existing staff, redirecting energies, and developing a positive school culture. The authors discussed how often schools that are working towards reform will be undermined by factors outside their realm of control. Administration and teachers at Midland soon realized after implementing their changes that although they did restructure the staff, redirect energies, and develop a positive school culture, some factors were still out of their control. This also benefitted them in terms of recognition that the responsibility for their school’s success lay on the shoulders of those within the school, and that helped them to continue to focus on developing a positive staff ownership of all of the staff and
student outcomes. Staff bonded as a result of this ownership of the process and worked even harder to create change that would lead to Midland’s success and ultimately raise student achievement at their school. Midland became innovative at meeting this challenge quickly in the process that was discussed as a need by Orr et al. (2008).

Hall and Hord (2011) outlined the patterns, principles and potholes that go along with implementing school change. Midland staff received professional development on Hall and Ford’s principles of change and discussed how to recognize and work through these principles in order to develop sustainable change in their school. The authors outlined the twelve needed principles of change and they are as follows:

1. Change Is a Process, Not an Event: Our research and that of others documents that most educational change takes three to five years to be implemented at high levels. (p. 5)
2. There Are Significant Differences in What is Entailed in Development and Implementation of an Innovation: Development entails all of the activity related to creating an innovation, while implementation addresses establishing the use of the innovation in adopting sites. (p.6)
3. An Organization Does Not Change until the Individuals within It Change: Even when the change is introduced to every member of the organization at the same time, the rate of making the change and of developing skill and competence in using it will vary individually. (p. 7)
4. Innovations Come in Different Sizes: Depending on the type of innovation and its characteristics, the change process can require more time and be more resource consuming or relatively quick and simple to implement. (p. 8)
5. Interventions Are the Actions and Events That Are Key to the Success of the Change Process: When change is successful it is the quantity of the little things that make the difference. (p. 10)
6. Although Both Top-Down and Bottom-Up Change Can Work, a Horizontal Perspective Is Best: For change to succeed, a major shift in thinking by all the participants is needed. (p. 11)
7. Administrator Leadership Is Essential to Long-Term Success: A central theme of advocates for bottom-up change is that those nearest the action have the best ideas of how to accomplish change. (p. 13)
8. Mandates Can Work: When a mandate is accompanied by continuing communication, ongoing training, on-site coaching and time for implementation, it can operate quite well. (p. 14)
9. The School Is the Primary Unit for Change: The school must and can do a lot for itself, but it also needs to move in concert with and be supported by the other components of the system. (p. 14)

10. Facilitating Change Is a Team Effort: Embedded in all of this and in many of the principles presented above is the core belief that change is a team effort. (p. 15)

11. Appropriate Interventions Reduce the Challenges of Change: If the process is facilitated well, change can be fun, and it certainly does not have to hurt or even be dreaded. (p. 15)

12. The Context of the School Influences the Process of Change: In schools that have created such organizational conditions, the staff collectively reflects on its work with students and assesses its influence on student results. (p. 16)

The implications for studying the work of Hall and Hord’s principles, briefly outlined above, are to recognize in advance what those principles of change are going to be, and how the change process can be successfully facilitated when schools take into account all of those patterns and possible potholes along the way. Studying those principles as a staff helped Midland to recognize how change works and, as Hall and Ford discussed, just how to influence and facilitate those changes successfully as a team.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study examined teacher and administrator perspectives on how to effectively implement school reform for persistently low-achieving schools. Another factor that would be interesting to examine would be the perspectives of those at the state or district level. They would have a different perspective based on the perspectives that they have of other low-achieving schools and they would also be able to compare Midland to the other schools about which they have extensive knowledge. It might be notable to research schools with the PLAS funding compared to low-achieving schools that chose not to be funded and follow the PLAS mandates.
This study did not include the perspectives of those most affected by school reform. To include the perspectives of students and parents could also be a fascinating study using the framework of this study. Students and parents would give the researcher an interesting challenge to include all of the school's stakeholders in this PLAS process.

This study examined a persistently low-achieving elementary school. A replication of this study could look at middle and high schools that have received the PLAS label and investigate how they responded to the various research questions presented in this study. Another future exploration could be to study low-achieving schools in various states to see how their core curriculum, standards, and grant plans compare and contrast to other states and if there is anything that is not equitable across state mandates.

Since the beginning of this study's process, states have been able to apply for NCLB waivers which mean that states that receive the waiver will not have to meet the 100% proficiency requirements by 2014. Those states that are approved will not be required to implement the NCLB sanctions, such as supplemental education services, tutoring, or school choice according to Midland's state's director of school boards newsletters. In exchange for not being held to those sanctions, states that receive the waiver will have other requirements that will have a greater degree of flexibility and focus more on long range outcomes. At the completion of this study, ten states had already received the waivers, not including Midland's state. A future informative study would be to follow the low-achieving schools in those states to find out how they would
implement school wide reform in order to raise student achievement or compare the achievement outcomes of the PLAS process versus the waiver process.

Other possible questions, such as the following, could be addressed by experienced scholars and educators about the long-term effectiveness of the NCLB Act (NCLB, 2002). Is it doing what it originally claimed to do? Who are the advocates? Who are the opponents? Whose students are being challenged? Are the gifted students being left behind in the process? Is this act driving the lowest level of learning possible? Do we want children who are strictly good at recitation? If we want critical thinkers, lifelong learners, and engaged participants, then is this the pedagogical avenue to take? What are we (as educators) to make of this law? Is the funding that this Act promises being dispersed appropriately to school systems in need of improvement? And, of most importance for the purposes of this paper, is it making effective strides toward closing the achievement gap and raising student achievement for all students represented in our schools?
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators

1. **Staff Changes**: Recognizing that you replaced more than half of your teaching staff, with many of those being first year teachers; do you feel that you are currently on target in terms of those changes you made with staff?

2. **Staff Changes**: Tell me more about your leadership changes and changes in leadership structures. Were these changes wise and effective and what do you think still needs to be changed if anything?

3. **Professional Pressures**: What role does extra support staff play as far as student support, extra duties, expectations, and supplemental services?

4. **Dynamics of Staff**: Staff has been offered incentives such as a week’s pay for raising student achievement to a certain level as well as incentives for extra pay opportunities throughout the year. What has the impact of these incentives been and have incentives been effective or do they need to be changed?

5. **Professional Development**: What changes will be made for next year? (Ex: Staff, Goals, Test Preparation, Professional Development…)

6. **Professional Development**: Tell me more about the impact the PLAS designation has had on your building staff. Was this what you expected and what advice would you give to other schools who are currently looking into making similar changes in administration, staff, or professional development?

Curriculum and Academic Achievement
7. **Raising Student Achievement:** How are you utilizing your PLAS Funds to raise student achievement?

8. **Raising Student Achievement:** You have had a guest expert come from the Leadership and Learning Center on several occasions. What were the objectives or focus of that expert and how successful or impactful was that initiative for staff?

9. **Raising Student Achievement:** You have implemented new initiatives in Math, Reading, and Writing to include a more inquiry-based approach to your curriculum. How are these approaches meeting the students' needs and how are you working to accelerate progress in each of these areas?

10. **Raising Student Achievement:** Do you feel satisfied that your approaches to staff changes, curriculum, and climate will increase the student academic achievement in your building?

11. **Walk-Throughs:** You have created walk-through procedures to monitor staff's instructional delivery. Are those working the way that you initially had hoped?

12. **Professional Learning Communities:** What type of instructional decision making process do you have and what effects has it had so far on changing curriculum and raising student achievement? Has this process had the effects you expected when you began this new initiative?

13. **Professional Learning Communities:** What are the district differences in expectations for your school compared to other schools in your district in regards to professional learning communities? Have the initiatives that you have put in place had any effect on what the district is beginning to do at other buildings?
Climate and Culture

14. **Cultural Competency Training**: You have implemented cultural competency training on mandatory Saturdays and through optional book studies at your school. What impact have these initiatives had on your students, staff, and families?

15. **Cultural Competency Training**: What impact has cultural competency training had on your students and what is your vision in regards to their future based on the PLAS implementations you have made?

16. **Cultural Competency Training**: What impact has the cultural competency training had on you personally and what is your vision for your future in regards to the PLAS designation?

17. **Parent Involvement**: What types of Parent Involvement do you have in place? Is there any evidence of increased student achievement based on increased parental involvement?

18. **Positive Behavior Intervention Systems**: You have implemented Positive Behavior Interventions Supports (PBIS). What are your perceptions of how this approach is affecting the climate and culture in your building?
APPENDIX B

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators

1. Professional Development: What impact did the PLAS label have on your approach to creating instructional strategies knowing that there is a higher expectation for you personally to accelerate the academic growth of your students?

2. Professional Development: What impact did the PLAS label have on your development as a professional knowing that you would be expected to participate in several hours of professional development and increased observations and monitoring of your progress in the classroom?

Curriculum and Academic Achievement

3. Raising Student Achievement: How did the PLAS label impact your implementation of the district curriculum knowing that there was a need to accelerate growth in academic achievement for your students? Did it cause your building to put a greater focus on any certain area of curriculum more than other buildings?

4. Raising Student Achievement: What is your impression or feeling of the PLAS label in regards to raising students’ scores on standardized tests? Do you see evidence that the initiatives that have resulted from this label are having the intended effect on student achievement?

Climate and Culture

5. Cultural Competency Training: Your school has received extra funding to implement cultural competency training as well as book studies to gain greater cultural awareness
for all students represented in your building. What impact did the PLAS label have on
your approach to gaining cultural competence and what do you perceive the affect to
be for students and families?

6. **Parent Involvement:** Your school has received increased funding to implement home
visits and family nights. What impact did the PLAS label have on your approach to
parent involvement and how do you think increased parental involvement will affect
your students’ achievement?

7. **Positive Behavior Intervention Systems:** Your school implemented PBIS in order to
increase positive behaviors from students. To what degree do you think the PBIS
approach will impact meeting PLAS achievement expectations?
APPENDIX C
ADMINISTRATOR FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators

1. Staff Changes: In regards to the change in leadership at this building, you both discussed how important leadership collaboration and having similar goals were in making this journey a success. Could you tell me more about what has been successful in the dynamic between the two of you?

2. Professional Pressures: It’s my understanding from both of your interviews that replacing the past principal and adding an assistant principal has had an impact on staff, students, and families. Could you both discuss that further and what your perceptions are on this dramatic change?

3. Dynamics of Staff: Your leadership team consists of yourselves, a lead teacher, an instructional coach, a math coach, and a shared reading coach position. Both of you spoke to each of their key roles in your school. To what degree are leaders and coaches a needed component in implementing school-wide reforms?

4. Dynamics of Staff: What role has the addition of so many first year teachers had on your school goals? With that, how has the teachers who remained roles changed since the PLAS designation?

5. Professional Development: Looking back to the beginning of your designation, what would you have done differently from the beginning regarding your implementations for teachers and yourselves?

Curriculum and Academic Achievement
6. **Raising Student Achievement**: Your visions for student achievement, and how you raise it, were very similar. One of the implementations that both of you discussed as crucial was your intensive after school instruction for those who are below grade level expectations. Could you explain the intensive program further and at this point, what are your perceptions of success regarding this implementation and is it something that you feel is meeting student needs?

7. **Raising Student Achievement**: What implementations do the two of you think will have the most dramatic impact on raising student achievement and which of those do you see yourselves continuing after this three year reform process is finished?

8. **Walk-Throughs**: Each of you has seen walk-throughs and consistent monitoring of instruction as a needed component as well. Could you further explain the process of your walk-throughs and the impact those have had on your teachers’ instructional delivery and accountability?

9. **Professional Learning Communities**: I heard you both mention how aligning your curriculum to match the core state standards seemed to be a missing component in the past. Could you explain this process of alignment and discuss the impact this new awareness has had on teachers and the delivery of instruction now?

**Climate and Culture**

10. **Cultural Competency Training**: A reoccurring theme was your recognition of a need for cultural competency training along with your other reforms. Some may be surprised to see the time that you have committed to staff training in this area. How would you defend the time that has been designated for that?
11. **Cultural Competency Training**: Each of you discussed the need to close the achievement gap in your building. Is enough being done in regards to the culture of students represented in your building and what is still needed?

12. **Parent Involvement**: Building relationships, whether you mentioned students, staffs, or families was another reoccurring theme in both of your individual interviews. How does leadership encourage and monitor such a subjective implementation and to what degree have you seen a measurable change across your school?

14. **Positive Behavior Intervention Systems**: What advice would you give to other leadership teams facing a PLAS designation in regards to staff, academics, and climate? Would you choose to have PBIS as a component of your reforms if given the chance to implement a program again?
APPENDIX D

VETERAN TEACHER FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators

1. **Staff Changes:** In terms of creating school-wide reform when schools have the designation of “Persistently Low-Achieving”, how important do you see changing the staff of the building? Was their another approach that could have worked? In your opinions, could this type of reform have happened here with keeping the prior staff?

2. **Dynamics of Staff:** Can you discuss the change of leadership style from before the PLAS label to now? Each of you discussed how the leadership makes a big difference when making reforms. What is it about the leadership team now that may lead to improving academic achievement at your school?

3. **Professional Development:** Can you tell me more about your current approach to creating instructional strategies? Each of you discussed using current research-based strategies and having a heightened awareness of the effect of your delivery of instruction. One of you called it filling your toolbox with strategic tools. To what degree has the PLAS label caused you to become a better educator and what effect has that had for your students at this point? Increased professional development a factor?

Curriculum and Academic Achievement

1. **Raising Student Achievement:** What are your perceptions, hopes, fears, or predictions on the standardized test scores in 2013?

2. **Walk-Throughs:** There is constant monitoring, such as walk-throughs and evaluative observations, from your leadership team on each of you individually while you are
delivering instruction. What impact has that implementation had on you individually as well as on your grade level team and your students? As a veteran teacher, is this something that was hard to get used to as compared to new teachers?

3. Professional Learning Communities: Each of you discussed how often you collaborate with your grade level team for lesson planning, analyzing data, and moral support. Can you discuss further the impact of collaboration for new teachers and for veteran teachers placed into a PLAS building?

Climate and Culture

1. Cultural Competency Training: To what degree does each of you feel that building a strong climate among staff, students, and families has on raising student achievement in a building? Can you talk to what the dynamic is here now compared to the past and any differences you are seeing in regards to climate? Why is cultural competency training an important component in school reform?

2. Parent Involvement: What advice do you have as a group of seasoned educators for other teachers or leadership teams that are about to set out on this journey and are looking for parent involvement ideas? What would you keep the same here and what would you have done differently?

3. Positive Behavior Intervention Systems: If you were given the choice to choose another behavior management system, would you make the same choice knowing now what you didn’t know then? Do you have any testimonial statements as to why staying here was a good choice or not?
APPENDIX E
NEW TEACHER FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Professional Practices of Teachers and Administrators

1. **Staff Changes:** In your individual interviews each of you discussed the staff that was chosen to stay as well as the new teachers that were chosen to implement the PLAS plan. Can you further explain what the dynamic of so many new teachers has had on your building?

2. **Professional Pressures:** We previously discussed the combination of the stress of being a new teacher added with the stress of being expected to do more than veteran teachers have been able to do with your current student population. Tell me more about your perceptions of leadership adding new teachers to a school with new reforms. In your opinions, was this a good decision? Why or why not?

3. **Dynamics of Staff:** Fireside chats were done with the leadership team during your interviews. Could you discuss the impact that those chats on your decision to come here and what expectations discussed then have changed since your job began here or weren’t discussed prior to your start date?

4. **Professional Development:** Please discuss the dynamic of the leadership team, the veteran teachers, and the new teachers such as yourselves and what impact you think this combination has had for implementing your PLAS plan effectively.

Curriculum and Academic Achievement
5. **Raising Student Achievement**: To what degree do you believe the data team process has not only had on you as a teacher but what do you perceive this implementation will have in raising student achievement?

6. **Raising Student Achievement**: There wasn’t a consensus as far as your perceptions for your success of the three year reform process. What are your perceptions, hopes, fears, or predictions on the standardized test scores in 2013?

7. **Walk-Throughs**: There is constant monitoring, such as walk-throughs and evaluative observations, from your leadership team on each of you individually while you are delivering instruction. What impact has that implementation had on you individually as well as on your grade level team and your students?

8. **Professional Learning Communities**: Each of you discussed how often you collaborate with your grade level team for lesson planning, analyzing data, and moral support. Can you discuss further the impact of collaboration for new teachers and for any teacher placed into a PLAS building?

9. **Professional Learning Communities**: In regards to raising state standardized test scores, you have each mentioned an increased focus on math and reading. Is this the correct approach considering your current status? Is anything else suffering as a result of this narrowed approach to education?

**Climate and Culture**

10. **Cultural Competency Training**: Each of you talked about the bonding that has happened among the staff here at Midland. Could you discuss what impact that bonding through adversity has had on you, your team, and your students?
11. **Parent Involvement**: Home visits seemed to be a positive experience for each of you. One of you discussed the need to build a parent-friendly building in order for students to be successful. Can you speak more to the importance of that as a group?

12. **Parent Involvement**: Your family nights were an aspect that you each thought was a positive addition to keep communication lines open with parents. What real impact do you think those opportunities to further communicate with parents have on raising student achievement?

13. **Positive Behavior Intervention Systems**: One of you brought up the issue of not being sure of the impact of PBIS. After your first year, your scores did not increase. What effect did that program have on staff and student behaviors and how did that affect the climate of your building?