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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Educational Triage:  
A Comparative Study of two High School Principals Serving Program Improvement  
Schools

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

by

Kyle Matthew Garrity

June 2013

Dissertation Committee:  
Dr. John Wills, Chairperson  
Dr. Robert Ream  
Dr. Douglas Mitchell

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2013

The Dissertation of Kyle Matthew Garrity is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## Acknowledgments

My foundational years took place in Helena, Montana. There were so many people from there that informed who I have become and guided me in my chosen profession. Father Jerry Lowney, a professor of sociology at the local Catholic college I attended, rises among the town elders as possibly the most influential. He reminded me on a regular basis to stop bullshitting and get at the heart of what is really going on with people. Ed Noonan, a gifted artist and friend, equally helped to calm my soul and find connection with people. I am indebted to them and I think about them often as I press forward in my studies and work in education.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Educational Triage:  
A Comparative Study of two High School Principals Serving Program Improvement  
Schools

by

Kyle Matthew Garrity

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Education  
University of California, Riverside, June 2013  
Dr. John Wills, Chairperson

The guiding question for this qualitative study centered on what it means to be a principal in a high school that has been put on notice as a failure and labeled *Program Improvement (PI)*. The evidence shed light on the unique challenges, role expectations, and varying social conditions faced by two female principals as they managed underprivileged schools. It also pointed to the detrimental consequences of the continued emphasis on standardized testing in math and English, the pressures to raise standardized test scores to untenable levels, the scope of comprehensive professional expectation, and the reality of limited resources. Ominously, a culture of *triage* educational practices existed in which school district resources were narrowly focused on those activities and students thought to raise test scores in math and English most significantly, and the poorest and lowest-achieving students could potentially be disregarded within the teaching and learning process. These two principals were inconsistent in their resistance to the broader effects of triage measures by often complying with labeling and tracking

systems while struggling to ethically manage interventions for the lowest performing students. Morale was persistent but low, and professional sustainability was tenuous given their inability to continually gain higher test scores each year, the long and taxing working conditions, the regular threat of job loss or transfer, and the difficulty in directly connecting their efforts with positive change.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

What does it mean to be a principal in a low-performing high school in America? What, specifically, are principals doing daily in those kinds of schools? What are the social conditions that affect their chosen actions as well as the understandings of their role? What do they do that can potentially affect the teaching and learning that takes place in their school? The evidence gathered in this study was compiled from a year-long qualitative study of two principals in underprivileged high schools. The goal was to answer these questions as they relate to perceived educational mismanagement, the relative sense of urgency to improve our failing schools, and the demand for accountability.

The present climate of educational crisis is not new, nor is the call for heroics in leadership to resolve the inadequate performance of many schools in the United States. Principals and the schools they lead are looked upon to be the great equalizers; that unique person and special place that impresses fair play, hard work, and the vital skills necessary for a vibrant life. The expectation that principals are to facilitate and create that ideal and thus have a primary role in mending our broad societal ills through managing the schooling process is an ongoing part of American history. Direction from a charismatic principal often seems like our only hope when communities crumble. Current political reforms and the continual desire for change and improvement has called for the recruitment of valiant leaders and the manipulating of school management practices with

a sense of urgency (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010; Mintrop, 2004; Elmore, 2004; Wirt & Kirst, 2005).

Given these educational expectancies, and that principals have been understood by policy-makers as chief assessment targets vital to school success, there is little known about what principals are specifically doing, or what they could do, when aggressive school improvement opportunities arise. In addition, academics are at fault because field-based research that offers systematic descriptions and analysis of how principals understand and manage their schools is slim. Instead, standardized tests in math and English are administered throughout the country and the results of these tests become the near exclusive tool for evaluating and understanding the competency of the modern principal (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). A more descriptive and scientifically analyzed picture of the life of principals has been absent from the conversation.

Popularly consumed representations of principals are those found in the media and appear as simplistic dramatizations, void of connection to the leading social scientists in the field of education (Spillane & Hunt, 2010). When referring to American pop culture, one can go beyond our own high school principal to remember the archetypal contrasts found in the bumbling Edward Rooney (played by Jeffrey Jones) in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* or the valiant Joe Clark (played by Morgan Freeman) in *Lean on Me*. Spillane and Hunt (2010) recognized the various popular societal images of the principal found in the literature such as the 'fire-fighter' and the 'lone ranger.' A more clever but still inadequate example of our culturally engrained understanding of principals was portrayed in the publicly acclaimed and award-winning documentary film by Davis

Guggenheim, *Waiting for Superman*. School leaders in some of the most challenging schools were briefly interviewed and identified as potential superheroes that could make or break a student's future based on their unique personality and their unconventional organizational maneuvers. The 2010 film begins with the director's comments that scholars have long held that low performing students are a product of our immediate social ills such as cyclical poverty and racism. Guggenheim eagerly dismisses this and offers that there are more important critiques to be heard, ones that directly blame failing students on the malfunction of school leadership and the resistance of stubbornly selfish teachers unions. Public schools in the most economically blighted areas of Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C. are presented in theatrical fashion (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010). Principals are highlighted as targets of policy concern.

It is here that the story of American education is presented to our broad public and charges the current policy debate. Guggenheim, Bill Gates, charter school advocates, and conservative economists such as Eric Hanushek, all of whom are highlighted in the documentary film as experts in the social dynamics of schooling, have effectively captured the conversation on public schooling and offered their personal understandings of students' failures and low achievement on standardized tests: a breakdown in leadership and obstinate unions. While Guggenheim has not hijacked the entire education policy debate, his film is certainly consistent with popular understandings of our educational system that finds a more understandable connection of failing schools with incompetent leaders and unmotivated teachers. Even more concerning are oversimplifications made by our key policy-makers. The current secretary of Education

under the Obama administration, Arne Duncan, has affirmed this and was quoted to have said, given there are about 95,000 schools in the U.S., "...if we had 95,000 good principals, we'd be done [worrying about K-12 education]" (Wallace Foundation, 2009).

Beyond the commandeering by those who unsystematically rise to define our educational problem and offer ad hoc reasons as to why it seems to exist, there is the added dysfunction that there is a knowledge gap as to what principals are actually doing to improve low-performing schools. There are many studies that purport to examine modern educational leadership practices in relation to improving student achievement, yet most are loosely descriptive rather than more precisely analytical (Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). Multiple quantitative studies, most recently found in the commended six-year Wallace Foundation study by Louis and Leithwood (2010) entitled *Learning from Leadership*, provide generalized lists of leadership actions that can raise student test scores. Possibly the most recognized study to date on principals, the \$3.5 million Wallace Foundation project argued for strong positive links between effective principal traits and gains in student standardized test scores. Led by a team of leading researchers in the field education administration which includes Karen Louis (University of Minnesota) and Keith Leithwood (University of Toronto), its main conclusions suggested that schools with high test scores included principals who pressed for continued professional development, who focused the staff on a mission of learning, and who rarely left (Good Leadership, 2010; Louis et. al., 2010). The data collection process for this study was broad in scope and provided helpful and generalizable conclusions.

While lists of intrinsic abilities and actions, such as a good principal is one who “focuses a staff on learning,” are commonly found in the literature and can be helpful generic guideposts, qualitative methodologists question their utility at times. They do so because quantified data can potentially ignore the specific social environments in which meaning and action is constructed (Erickson, 1986). For example, what could be considered an action by a principal of positively focusing a staff on learning at one site could be understood as harassment and disrespect of teachers at another. Meaning and meaning construction matter. Understanding the specific site, the actors at each site, and the broader social circumstances of the site is vital to offering a constructive analysis. There is scarce literature in the field of educational administration that offers *thick*<sup>1</sup> descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and imbedded social scientific analyses of this kind. Little is available regarding specific examples of how principals attempt to turn a failing school into a successful school, the particular contextual influences that affect a principal’s role during program improvement in schools, or how school leaders influence teachers by enforcing education policies related to raising standardized test scores (Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves, 1999; Firestone & Shipps, 2003; Coburn, 2005). This study was designed to do these things by systematically exploring the lived realities of secondary school principals who are attempting to improve failing schools.

Quantifiable formulas and statistically tabled summaries documenting school failure are enticing for those in the education politics game because the data is easier to

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<sup>1</sup> *Thick description* was first coined by Clifford Geertz in the *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). It has been adopted primarily by the field of anthropology, but extends to many of the social sciences in its usage. Responding to Skinner’s behavioral explanations of human action, Gertz argued that human behavior cannot be described alone in a stimulus-response model, but that it must include the meaning of the action, as well as the context of the action.

gather and read, and it provides superficially clear directives with apparent verifiable results. Unfortunately, principals are forced to navigate this “objective” and easily measured world posturing confidence while their maps are not clear and their world is messy. Some recognize this nebulous game, others don’t know or think there is a game and boldly march forward. Either way, the principalship is a potentially confused and disoriented climate when it comes to fixing test scores, let alone keeping a low-performing school safe and effective, or keeping their job. Shrewder principals realize they are the primary organizational symbol who inherits the calculated success of a school and plot appropriately along those lines. Principals are equally placed in a precarious position because they are not protected by professional associations or unions and are thus personally experiencing the brunt of character attacks and professional scrutiny when schools are failing. Thus, they must foster relationships with those that hold power and can protect them. A principal must then make choices between self-preservation and school improvement. Hopefully they are similar action points, but they can potentially be in conflict to the detriment of children. A helpful point that quantitative surveys among principals have produced regarding these contentious challenges are that many principals feel completely out of control when understanding their influence on standardized test scores, are often completely disconnected from vague roles numerous studies often purport, and can offer no real rationale or evidence for the rise or fall in tests scores of particular student subgroups or the aggregate scores of their school (Curtis & Plut-Pregelj, 2004). Principals can always breathe a bit easier should their schools test scores remain high or continually be on the rise.

School leaders have been under the gun to respond to research that imprecisely defines the roles of principals and then gives direction for school success focused exclusively on standardized test scores in math and English. Principals are to find creative solutions amidst broad parameters and demonstrate specific results in improved standardized test scores or face the consequences. Consequences for not succeeding can include a forced internal review action plan, extended parental rights in their ability to transfer students to another school, reduced funding both at the state and federal level, leadership and staff removal, mandated curricula, and the transfer of management authority to the state or a private company (Mintrop and Trujillo, 2005). The tension lies in making honest and provable connections between the vague prescriptions of studies like that produced by the Wallace Foundation and the results found in standardized tests. Exemplifying that confusion is the study itself that briefly states that a great principal spends time “focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement” (pg. 71). This is vague at best, offering no tangible propositions for producing school success, goals, or expectations. How is this new or helpful? And how does a principal do this and what does it specifically look like? What if the school is all poor suburban Latinos, or inner-city African Americans, or rural white Appalachians? What if the teachers are all veterans, or all new and young? What if there is no money, or lots of money? Various situational dynamics can potentially be overlooked when considering variable impact on school performance.

Concerns about schooling practices have been growing and there is some literature on the social processes by which education policy influences student



achievement, but most of the attention has been paid to the role of teachers in that process, not principals (Coburn, 2005). This is because teachers are primarily responsible for passing on the knowledge relevant to student achievement scores. As noted above, the empirical knowledge-based research on the activities of principals is small, and what does exist predates the current accountability movement created by modern reform (Spillane & Hunt, 2010). If policy-makers are to fairly understand principals as primarily rooted in the action of motivating and guiding others, the limits, specific actions, and intentions of good leaders in failing schools need to be an important point of modern research stretching beyond the focused effort of improving test scores. The Wallace study and many of its predecessors acknowledges that part. Those good leadership actions of directing and setting a school's mission and goal, encouraging a workplace of trust and collaboration, and actively supporting instruction with the hoped results of improved student achievement in math and English are firmly established as professional imperatives. And as Wallace-type studies ultimately ask, how could a defined set of goals, a cooperative work environment, and a deeper knowledge of appropriate pedagogical tools not improve student achievement? What this looks like in practice and on the ground through the lived daily lives for principals, however, remains vague and in need of development.

What is also vague is the acknowledgement about the explicit processes of how educational goals are set and the political nature regarding who is involved with the defining of what success is and what success is not. There are "blank" and "blind" spots in the literature regarding in-depth descriptions about how school leaders understand and

foster successful schools, and there has been a methodological bias toward limited quantitative effectiveness indicators (math and English test scores) and uncomplicated surveys that oversimplify what is deemed leadership success as justified in test scores (Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Bryman, 2004). Specific to this study, a key question that will be addressed is how does a principal understand and facilitate a successful school daily and explicitly? It is left to the qualitative researcher to thickly describe what the quantitative researcher has not, and cannot. It is one thing to know *what* leaders do (the macro functions/roles). And it appears from the lack of scholarship that we do not know *what* they are doing. We have too often only survey them with questionnaires. It is another to know *how* and *why* leaders do it (the micro tasks) (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). If we do not know what principals are doing and why, there is even less known about the process of how principals make a less effective school succeed (Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves, 1999), the specific contextual influences and prescribed accountability targets that affect principals and their role in schools (Firestone & Shipps, 2003), or if and how school leaders influence teachers in their interpretation and adaptation of education policy directives (Coburn, 2005). It is also unclear what school leaders experience as intrusive or constraining pressure from state and local authorities (Marks & Nance, 2007) and the specific role school leaders are to take amidst the policy shifts (Spillane et al., 2002).

To further complicate the matter, even if we could more easily understand the lives of high school principals and make clearer connections between their actions and school outcomes, there is still debate over which outcomes are the most important and

what principals primarily should do. It is equally important to examine the assessment process itself and call into question whether math and English scores should remain as the key standard. Should other factors such as high school graduation and college acceptance rates be a more important focal point? Could broader safety or character concerns be utilized, such as facilitating fewer bullying encounters, pregnancies, eating disorders, suicides, and sexual harassment incidents? Various socioemotional skills not measured by standardized tests, including so-called “non-cognitive” attributes such as improved *social skill* and *self-control*, are also often overlooked in the measure of what matters both in school and in life. In fact, socioemotional skills have a large and measurable impact, above and beyond test scores, on a child’s future success (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; 2006; Farrington et al., 2012; Heckman et al., 2006). Other factors such as enhanced club participation, the quality of community service projects, science awards, or music and art accolades could also be considered as success? It may even be possible to positively judge a principal by the mere fact that a school has not gotten significantly worse given the conditions of a particular site or community. My experience of two principals in low-performing schools speaks to a much broader understanding of school success.

Unfortunately the assessment criteria remain narrow and unforgiving. McDonnell (2009) recognized that the current era of standards-based accountability and its limited understanding of success, which the Obama administration and Congressional liberals have fallen prey to, has largely been a *top-down* policy, pressured by business elites from such companies as IBM and Prudential Financial, as well as conservative education

reform interest groups such as the Heritage Foundation. Benefitting from the conversation and fueling the pressure on the right have been educational consulting firms such as Student Achievement Partners, standardized testing corporations found in the efforts of College Board and Educational Testing Services (ETS), and curriculum interest groups and educational publishers such as Pearson-Prentice Hall. The Pioneer Institute, a Boston-based research organization, estimated that \$16 billion will be spent over the next seven years to transition to the newest *Race to the Top/Common Core* reform policies that continue to affirm the primacy of standardized tests in math and English (Rothman, 2013; Achieve.org, 2013). And because this expensive and more conservative business-oriented oversight model continues aggressive imposition on schools, many principals will be compelled with even more vigor to behave like CEOs showing objective and quantifiable results fixated on math and English test scores while pressing other important social matters to the side.

The curriculum and standardized testing chatter relevant to modern school reform management practices also continues to be framed in terms of global, state, and district comparisons. Over the last decade, the states have operated autonomously in their construction of standardized tests resulting in various levels of difficulty and breadth in content knowledge. The most recent reform efforts, as articulated in *Race to the Top* (President Obama's education policy agenda and addendum to *No Child Left Behind* of President Bush) and the development of a *Common Core* of national standards and tests, hope to overcome this discrepancy. The *National Assessment of Education Progress* (NAEP), the federal standardized test produced in association with the National Center

for Education Statistics that surfaced in the 1960s, has responded to this dilemma with more recent vigor and randomly assessed students throughout the United States gauging overall performance. Results of American test scores from the NAEP and similar international benchmark tests such as the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) continue to confirm poor performances, on average, in math and science when compared to the mean scores of international peers (Schmidt & Burroughs, 2013; Yu, DiGangi, Jannasch-Pennell, 2012). Mediocre results have persisted over the past 20 years despite concerted efforts by states to standardize curricula in every subject area at every grade level. The contemporary critique of American education within the Bush era of NCLB standards-based curriculum and its voluminous requirements has been that our schools have moved in a direction that offers knowledge that is "... a mile wide and an inch deep" (Schmidt, McKnight & Raizen, 1997). Schools have undergone exhaustive organizational change and been moved by educational leaders in a direction that has responded to the broad array of curriculum directives, all too often while paying little attention to the depth of knowledge-acquisition processes or the creative pedagogical methods that involve critical thinking.

Underneath the attention paid to this top-down agenda that presses extensive content memorization with lessened critical thinking skill development, the broad pedagogical scope that imposes daunting leadership and teaching expectations, and the enormous financial efforts to develop vague management tools monitoring it all, little room in the policy debate has been created to appreciate the complexities of the modern principalship and the communities they serve. Possibly the boldest critique of modern

accountability and assessment reform is Diane Ravitch, a Columbia professor and former Bush and Clinton education policy-maker from 1997 to 2004. Serving in a supervisory role during the development of the NAEP and originally a strong supporter of the testing and accountability movement found in NCLB, she now regrets the faith she once had in that cause. She admitted that the punitive measures dispensed on principals and low-performing schools were just bad policy, recognizing that the best predictor of low academic performance is poverty. Turning to market measures such as charter schools and merit pay to resolve core problems in education is “stupid.” Despite the experiences and insights from whistle-blowing policy-makers and academics, market measures continue to rule the day. In the modern paradigm of education reform, it does not necessarily matter how a principal facilitates a poor school in the raising of its test scores, or getting faculty to implement new directives focused on that effort, so long as any effort is confirmed in higher test score results in math and English. Consequently, we only look at profit-margins as expressed in test scores and ignore the poverty context, the complicated processes, the perverse incentives, and environmental fallout of standardized test-based accountability systems. Consultants can be hired to come in and offer strategies that do what principals cannot do, or refuse to do... but only if test score results are low.

The pressure on principals in low-performing schools is great, and the policies and goals for principals is continually being expanded and intensified with added scrutiny as newer policies emerge. The failure has been, however, in paying little attention to the specific contexts that principals engage during the process to raise scores. There is little

field-based research that offers systematic descriptions and analysis of how school principals administer and manage failing low-income schools and how they interpret their world. This qualitative study is an important piece in presenting some of the realities principals experience during their efforts to hold together and improve failing schools. Through descriptive analyses, the characteristics of two principals in two schools and their respective social environments will be vetted to help understand their lives and agendas. The comparison of two leaders offered a more validating iterative process which in turn helped to point direction to the research, as opposed to observing one principal that might withhold or not exemplify key behaviors. The politics, personality conflicts, competing programs, and structural barriers that inform a principal's day were therefore comparatively scrutinized. This study also shed light on the failure of the standards-based accountability movement and unintended consequences that program improvement labels have on low-performing schools and their leaders.

### *The Findings*

Most importantly, the main purpose of this study was to more precisely analyze the principalship as practiced today within low-performing high schools. A thorough description of the realities and lived daily encounters of principals has been missing and this research fills some of that gap. Typical mornings, voluminous meetings, vignettes of personnel management, daunting budgetary concerns, and varying strategies to address academic achievement for the disadvantaged, are more thickly described. In contention

with the call for captivating heroism by our education policy-makers, these two principals were more silent champions that dutifully pressed on despite few public accolades or monetary incentives. They were caring and thoughtful leaders who displayed no evidence or desire to cheat the system. They did not manage charter or magnet schools, or cherry-pick students and teachers in order to artificially raise test scores. They were not forcing the lowest-performing students to leave their school. They were not observed to press teachers to “teach to the test” or manipulate answers on testing days. They had little ability to recruit the best and the brightest within the teaching corps. There were few resources and limited training. The principals simply worked with what they had and did the best they could.

A second point of emphasis from this study is the continued criticism of the accountability systems associated within current policy. Modern education reform efforts that hope to focus school management practices on creating more positive outcomes on math and English standardized tests have some detrimental outcomes. Particularly unfair is the government oversight and imbalanced burdening placed on principals leading the most underprivileged schools. Resources are incomplete, training is inadequate, and the strategies for sustained and regular improvement are insufficient. Principals in underprivileged schools are additionally inundated with unique concerns reaching far beyond attention to math and English tests scores. These concerns include elevated instances of violence, health issues, special education matters, and language restrictions. Asking them to focus their efforts on the primary activity of test scores without additional resource investment is untenable. Resulting triage tactics currently guide principal



practice and define the principalship. Sophisticated tracking systems that categorize and segregate students further, the hiding and placing of incompetent teachers in non-tested subject areas as to avoid effect on test scores, labeling students and shaming schools for motivational improvements, and the potential dismissal of the lowest students that appear hopeless, all surface as examples of measures that could ensure professional existence and the survival of a school as a whole.

My concern for the disadvantaged and dismissed led me to tell the story of the two principals in this study. Both principals lead in one of the most underprivileged school districts in the United States. Principal Alena Swann<sup>2</sup>, serving Jefferson High School, and Principal Christi Jordan, serving Sage Valley High School, managed schools within Sierra School District in the American Southwest. Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools were approximately fifteen miles in distance from one another in an expanding poor suburban area approximately fifty miles from one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States. Because Sierra School District received significant Title I (poverty assistance grants) support, the administrative actions and the quantified student outcomes of their respective schools were under heightened scrutiny. Additionally, Sierra School District as a whole and the high schools described in this study have been identified as failures and labeled by the title *Program Improvement (PI)* because federal and state guidelines for progressive improvement in student achievement scores in math and English had not been met over multiple years. While many think this is a unique problem for low income areas with stagnant or declining test scores, it is not.

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<sup>2</sup> All names of people and schools are pseudonyms for the sake of confidentiality.

In 2010-11, over 50% of public schools (more than 56,000 schools) received some form of Title I funding (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). If the NCLB requirements that demand 100% of these students in Title I schools be proficient at math and English by 2014, then nearly all of them would be considered a failure by 2014 (Freedburg, 2010). Even the best of schools that have few poor students have not demonstrated 100% proficiency rates.

After spending the 2011-2012 school year in a participation-observation qualitative study with these two principals, some striking experiences came to light regarding the more personal experience of leading schools. Both principals were bright, well-intentioned, and thoughtful about their craft. Both were actively engaged in doctoral programs in educational administration to improve as leaders and potentially rise in the educational bureaucracy. They were supported by similarly committed district level personnel, an innovative and flexible Superintendent, and a caring staff. The circumstance of their existence was, however, complicated and daunting at times because there stood an often tacit combination of factors that created contradictory understandings about the purpose of their role and the focus of their goals. These factors included the unreasonable outcomes expected for all students, an oversimplified accounting system for assessing their success based mainly on math and English test scores, the vague and contradictory directives for achieving the potential outcomes required of them, and the overall realization by many of the players that the mission was tough and limited success was understandable.

Expectations by policy-makers outside the district were generally understood to be unreasonably too high by the principals and the leadership structures of Sierra School District. While cyclical waivers, such as the granting of *Safe Harbor* status, were being issued to allow school leaders more time with certain conditions, the detrimental consequences of Program Improvement (PI) were being felt and raising tensions. Most starkly, this was represented by the legal permission of the brightest (highest grades and test scores) and most mobile (highest income and ability to travel far distances) students to transfer to more successful schools due to PI status, further complicating efforts to raise aggregate test scores of these failing schools. Continued and growing frustration permeated as the systems and resource-negotiations became more complicated, all while the density of low-achieving students at the worst schools thickened and with no signs of improvement. Despite the plethora of programs, strategies, structural maneuvers, programmatic grant aid, and leadership planning, both Sage Valley and Jefferson High Schools experienced a drop in the tests scores in math and English following the 2011-2012 school years. The principals were contained in their surprise and struggled to find that silver bullet answer that could produce the coveted annual year progression of rising test scores. The cards seemed stacked against them and they were visibly exhausted. Correlative to the struggle, each principal had escape plans should the heat get too much... apply to other districts for leadership positions, leave the state for a better life, or move up to district office level positions where oversight and the consequences of PI went unscathed. A common question the principals would ask me was, “You still want to be a principal?”

These principals lacked the training, support, and clarity in action that I expected to see when it came to school improvement strategies that are so often celebrated and touted in the scientific literature and among policy-makers. A rich plan with proven success in its ability to address student achievement failure was visibly absent. The tone of the leadership and district meetings contained a level of sympathy and mutual frustration when considering this plight and the realization that there was no clear and simple answer despite the concerted effort by multiple players. The principals expressed frustration both in the lack of clarity in vision, lack of serious training to address the volume of issues that were presented to them, and the lack of reasonable support for their independent efforts. There appeared particular diligence, however, in district guidance and administrative attention to the triage-like strategies used in addressing specific populations that struggled at standardized tests in math and English. Outside professional consultants specializing in raising test scores, regular leadership strategies meetings, teacher collaborations, benchmark assessments, and motivational talks persisted. Yet despite a level of pride in the collective efforts of Sierra School District leadership, low test scores remained.

At the heart of concern was the sheer volume of tasks involved in the principalship. The attention drawn to the multitude of systematic duties was formidable, so much that it distracted them considerably from their charge of raising student achievement levels. The observed effort of the principals in Sierra School District to directly affect student achievement was therefore mired in the concentration of their total work. While it was clearly reasonable and associative, even a professional imperative

articulated in their job descriptions, the bulk of actions taking place by principals on most given days were only tangentially connected to the direct task of improvement in learning in math and English. These actions included: inspecting the overall health and safety of the physical plant, mediating the strong personalities found in teachers and secretaries, managing the security personnel that maintained order, motivating athletic coaches and their respective players, writing grants, supervising and evaluating every teacher, responding to parent concerns, attending to due process procedures during student discipline matters, directing of resources and budgets, and meeting with key actors... always meetings. And this was only a small fraction of their efforts. The volume of efforts was so great that it exhausted energies that could have been used to develop more trusting relationships with their staff and students or to confer some of their pedagogical expertise.

A common theme emerged from these observations and analysis that essentially defined the collective actions of the principals... *triage*. Triage is a term used to describe both the complexity of social circumstance that bore down on these two principals working within poor schools, and also the particularly measured policy strategies targeted at isolating their efforts when considering student achievement concerns. In other words, triage situations required triage tactics. The picture of triage in action is portrayed through what I observed during my year with the two principals. Similar to an army leader managing a mobile hospital at the front under continual stimulation, a principal must find the peace of mind and the organizational discipline to prioritize their concerns and their energies. At times this meant for the principals attending to those near death or

dismissal. When particularly overwhelmed, one simply had to patch up things so that they could survive another day. Some patients were overlooked for the sake of the greater good. Sometimes there was disorder and no particular method to solve a problem, and sometimes the entire effort was sabotaged because the war effort was seen as being based on a false premise. Resources were manipulated, begged for and borrowed, and distributed as judiciously as possible. There was not enough help, tools were limited, there was never enough resources, and there was little praise of the effort.

The scholarship from modern educational researchers such as Berliner (2014) and Ravitch (2010) which has recognized the deleterious consequences of modern policy on the principalship and schools was confirmed through the experiences of these two principals. The analysis which follows describes how recent reform efforts to standardize curricula, pressure school leaders to continually raise test scores with the threat of punitive action, and publicly shame and label low-performing schools, is essentially a failure. It has made the goal of admirable and successful leadership an impossible one, and it has further complicated the task of teaching and learning. School leaders have been asked to progressively demand more with less, and their plight has been misunderstood. The chapters which follow attempt to link the policies associated with the status of being a failed high school and the realities of being a principal at that kind of school.

The *second chapter* is a review of the literature and a description of the methods used to collect and analyze the data. Because qualitative researchers always consider the broader effect on the local circumstance, a historic evolution of modern education politics

and policies will be described. This begins with the spark of federal attention to schools during the Cold War and culminating in contemporary attention to curriculum standards and the accountability movement. I will then shift in historical attention to the specific development of educational administration as it has moved from traditional industrial models to more open models of the late 1990s. The scholarly literature on school leadership, the effect of principals on student achievement, as well as organizational theory, and role theory as it pertains to the principalship will then be described. The seminal qualitative studies on principals working in public schools will conclude the literature review section. The subsequent half of the second chapter will explain the progress of qualitative and anthropological work in schools and the importance of examining meaning-construction and gathering data at the local level. I will demonstrate how I chose the particular sites and principals, the process for gaining access to those sites and actors, and the reasons for those methodological choices which were based on my particular concern for disadvantaged children. I spend a moment describing the challenges of objectivity, reflexivity, and the important realization that we affect that which we study. I was quickly reminded of my position as an outsider when I was designated the *white shadow* by the security team at Jefferson High School. The methodology and data analysis techniques are further described, explaining the purpose of interpretive study, qualitative analysis, and their importance in the field of educational administration and policy.

The *third and fourth chapters* are paralleled descriptions and behavioral analyses of the principals involved with this study. Using pseudonyms and blurred geographic

settings, I use a three-part inquiry (biography, their respective school setting, and typical day) to describe the complicated personal lives and professional circumstances of Principals Alena Swann and Christi Jordan. Their early lives, families, dreams, immediate challenges are pronounced as to steep the data within two real people and the local culture in which they are imbedded. The demographic challenges of their specific school sites, physical schematics, histories, social and personal challenges, and typically stark occurrences are portrayed. The biographical and local site chapters are concluded with an analyzed narrative of a typical day for each principal. Particular vignettes serve to describe the volume of challenges, the complications of managing a high school in general, and the informal encounters that test the resolve of a principal hoping to increase test scores amidst destitution. Throughout the narrative, the innumerable possible engagements with students and teachers, as well as the various systematic pressures, display a triage-like paradigm.

The *fifth chapter* serves as an analysis of the tone generally ascribed to the overall participant-observation findings that ultimately culminates in the notion of *trriage*. The components of triage education are explained, the literature and practice of triage is appraised, and the potential consequences are described. Triage is further disaggregated to two types, bureaucratic triage at the macro level, and institutional triage at the local level. The broader pressures of triage type policies as explained in district level meetings are pressed against the lived daily practices of triage strategies within each school site. While the overall assessment of triage-like practices becomes a clear practical response to limited resources, the consequences and furthering of social class and ethnic disparity are



imminent. The results included the tracking and segregation of students, the displacement of marginal teachers from core classes that affected aggregate school test scores, the manipulating of resources targeted at math and English, and the focus of resources on the most promising of students.

The *sixth chapter* shifts in emphasis and considers the organizational and policy directives that additionally inform the behavior of the principals amidst the triage culture. Understood as a more *normative* analysis, the policies, goals, and idealized power structures are described. The social structures that set up the role of the principal, the formal role expectations, and the directed goals are outlined as they relate to the reality of action. The explicit and relative federal, state, and local policies that are most salient to student achievement concerns will be explained in connection with the response principals have to those directives. Most importantly, the policies related to Program Improvement (PI) will be connected to the overall school-wide plan of the principals and the pressures bore upon them. The normative chapter will conclude with attention paid to issues related to power, gender, and race, all of which surfaced as complicating and impeding variables for success. Program Improvement policies as a whole are represented as having detrimental consequences that ultimately make leading and teaching in poor schools even more difficult.

The *concluding chapter* is a summation of the current policy climate of educational reform and the deleterious effect it has had on two low-performing high schools in the American Southwest. I offer some potential policy recommendations that include a renegotiation of the premises embedded in current education politics, a plea for

further qualitative investigation of the effect of accountability measures on public schools, the removal of market pressures and public labels of schools, further development of the science of educational administration as a discipline, and targeted and increased resources for disadvantaged schools.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature and Methods of Collecting Data**

### Review of the Literature

For the purpose of understanding principals working in poor and low-performing high schools, a summary of the education policy landscape of the United States in the last fifty years needs description. The historical development of the theoretical understandings of schools as organizations will also be sketched. I will then turn to review corresponding research in the field of educational administration, and more specifically to qualitative research on principals in public schools and the methodology used to conduct such research.

Qualitative study incorporates a historic approach when first confronting issues. Within that approach, the evolving narrative must first be described in order to more soundly recognize the social context of the here and now. So when understanding the contemporary standards-based accountability movement in school reform as it applies to the modern principalship, it should be understood as part of the ongoing call for change and the developing result of both geopolitics and unshakable domestic economic challenges. The current state of education cannot be easily captured in a short documentary film, and no survey or interview by a journalist can convey the complicated life in which every principal is invested. All principals share a common national story, but each lives within a unique and intricate microcosm. So to better understand our nation's principals, a broader social and historic account of the modern principal is necessary to inform the more personal and local story of those leading schools today.

### *Modern Education Politics and Policy*

Originating within the rhetoric of the Cold War and the challenge the Soviets offered with *Sputnik*, President Eisenhower's *National Defense Education Act* (NDEA) of 1958 sparked the first large-scale federal investment in what was traditionally and near exclusively an unfettered state-by-state enterprise furthered by autonomy at the local district level. NDEA responded to the global communist dare by calling for more uniformity among American schools and offering funding to states in the areas of foreign language development, engineering programs, math and science, and supplemental college financial aid. It was also during the Eisenhower administration that the federal courts began to step in and assert themselves in education policy by addressing segregation concerns with the unanimous 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, ultimately pressing the President to send troops into Arkansas to enforce federal policy.

The modern genesis of serious national attention and focus on poverty, segregation, and the achievement gap in American schools was generated from Texans (Wirt and Kirst, 2005). It began with the 1960s *Great Society* and *War on Poverty* politics of Texas President Lyndon Johnson. President Johnson was particularly concerned with poor children and commissioned the Department of Education to research the state of schools in the United States. The concluding report entitled the *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, or more popularly known due to its key author, the *Coleman Report*, studied over 150,000 students. The conclusion of the Coleman report affirmed that while school-specific resources such as funding and teachers are vitally important,

individual socio-economic issues were the most important variables when understanding achievement outcomes for particular students (Equality of Educational Opportunity, 1966). The Coleman Report gave the green light for additional funding to poor schools and ushered in the expanding federal role in the policing and subsidizing of schools with Johnson's *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) of 1965. ESEA had with it the hope of curbing segregation and cyclical destitution through a program within it that has popularly become known as *Title I*. During the Johnson administration, the logical connection of failing schools to failing communities was clear. We fix failing schools by ending segregation and pouring money and resources toward poor schools which are disproportionately connected to minority populations. At this point, while a call for high standards in schooling curriculum was present, no serious federal accountability measures were in place beyond the rhetorical call for improvement (Kaestle and Smith, 1982; Wirt and Kirst, 2005).

While the connection of failing schools to economic challenges and entrenched racism still has many believers (Berliner, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2012; Ream, 2010), contemporary school reform has taken a considerable turn. Often termed *the effective schools movement* commencing with President Reagan, education politics was redefined by a newer and equally startling 1983 educational assessment report entitled *A Nation at Risk*. Following the tradition of federal education research committees and drawn from a combination of private sector, government, and education interests, Secretary of Education Terrell Bell created the *National Commission on Excellence in Education*. In contention with the efforts of the commission and consistent

with neo-conservative philosophy, Reagan's initial political agenda upon his election had been to limit federal involvement in schools and dissolve the Department of Education altogether, returning to the pre-Johnson era leaving the states to mend their own schools. The *Nation at Risk* report quickly squelched that hope, highlighting declining standardized test scores and accusing American schools of lacking rigor and discipline, particularly in light of rising economic competitors in Japan and Germany. The declared cause of our failure, as evidenced by a steep decline in SAT and international test comparisons, was not a result of the deep economic decline during the 1970s, but deemed by the Reagan administrations as a result of "... a rising tide of mediocrity" within our schools (Goldberg & Harvey, 1983). No major reform or school finance measures surfaced during the Reagan administration, yet the rhetoric of why schools were failing was being significantly redefined.

The second Texan, President George W. Bush, was the first since Johnson to press forward a major national education policy to address perceived failures in American schools, but he did so with the newly defined premise. Bush put the conservative philosophy to the test with his addendum to the ESEA of 1965 and entitled his hopeful plan *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). NCLB appeared to have been a complicated response to achievement disparity among domestic ethnic groups as well as global competition challenges between the U.S. and our international competitors (Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves, 1999; Wirt and Kirst, 2004; Hallinger, 2005; Marks & Nance, 2007). It is here that content area standards and rigorous high-stakes tests were uniformly developed by all states to secure desperately needed supplemental federal funding. While standards-

based testing and assessments began to appear in the mid-1990s, it was not until NCLB that real authority in connecting test scores with school success took root in the sanctions and conditional funding sources that the federal government provided. *Adequate yearly progress* (AYP) as understood by consistent and clear improvements of all students needed to be demonstrated in objective ways or the states and local school districts would face punishments and funding stream constraints, not to mention the very public shame that came with overly publicized test scores. Within NCLB, states were forced to standardize curricula in math and English so that clear goals were set and each student could be tested as to their proficiency in those core areas. The results of those tests could be quantified and publicized. Students, schools, subgroups (gender, ethnicity, income level), cities, and states could now be given a number to then be judged as to whether success or failure had occurred. But most important and salient to this study, under the Bush administration these quantified scores and any failure of them would now be blamed more on teachers and school leadership, not poverty or social circumstance (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003). Under the provisions and pressures of NCLB, the principalship began to evolve into a manager exceedingly sensitive to test scores in math and English.

The modern education reform era of resolving dismal test performance by focusing on low expectations, unmotivated teaching, and misdirected leadership in public schools was now being policed by a system known as “accountability by standardized testing.” It was ultimately being reinforced by dangling additional federal dollars to needy states (McNeil, 2000). The response has been overwhelming and has resulted in

every state Department of Education creating standards in core subject areas and testing their students every spring. Every student in grades two through eleven participates in standardized tests covering mandated content that, in theory, has been diligently covered by teachers throughout the school year. Arizona has entitled their testing system *AIMS* (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards) and Nevada calls theirs the NPEP (Nevada Proficiency Examination Program). In California, the state has introduced the *STAR* (Standardized Testing and Reporting) system. A testing bureaucracy has now blossomed, creating a conscious structural response forcing key leaders and teachers to now be data analysts who strain to engineer systems more respective of standardized tests in math and English (Arizona Department of Education, 2012; Nevada Department of Education, 2012; California Department of Education, 2012).

Tremendous pressures now exist on principals and their schools because the results of the tests are given to each student and family, and the aggregate scores of each school and their districts are circulated to the media. This ultimately allows communities to more clearly see which schools are in failure and which schools are succeeding. California describes their reporting system through an annual *Academic Performance Index* (API) in which aggregate scores can be judged (600 for a school is bad, 800 is good). (Arizona Department of Education , 2012; Nevada Department of Education, 2012; California Department of Education, 2012). The resulting scores from these types of standardized tests has dominated the conversation of appraisal for American schooling and guides real estate consumption patterns that has further segregated our communities (Allen, Burgess, Key, 2013; Ngyen-Hoang & Yinger, 2011).



Despite the consequences of expanding ethnic and class segregation and stagnant international test scores, the Obama administration has concurred and continued the theme of standardization and high-stakes testing. The torch has been passed and accepted, and the driving policy agenda of pressuring failing students and schools to improve through the lens of standardized tests has remained firmly entrenched. The basic premise of standardizing curricula in core subjects (math and English) to be evaluated with objective high-stakes testing (API/AYP) has been similarly accepted by a majority of Democrats and Republicans (Mintrop, 2004). President Obama administration has further protracted the standardization movement by taking away independent state development of their own standards requiring a *Common Core* of national standards that are to be fully adopted by 2014. Based on these national standards, a national standards-based test will be administered for the first time in 2014. Tests such as the AIMS, NPEP, and STAR will become obsolete, as will the standards and tests developed by all fifty states. The academic performance indexes of each state will give way to an index yet to be named.

The development of the Common Core brings with it a hope in more rigor and depth of pedagogical practice, but cynicism remains. It is important to note that the primary player involved with the development and lobbying for the new Common Core standards and subsequent tests is a non-profit consortium of business leaders known as *Achieve Incorporated*. Corporate heads from IBM, Intel, Prudential Financial, and the owners of ACT and the College Board, all of whom had a deep hand in previous state test development, serve on its board. The recognized guru of the common core standards is

David Coleman, current president of the College Board and former millionaire developer of a private educational data and assessment company. (Achieve Inc., 2012; Rotherman, 2011).

In addition to the Common Core standards and subsequently altered testing formats that are now on its way, the Obama education agenda has targeted school leadership as a primary solution to improving student achievement on standardized tests. Announced by the United States Department of Education in July of 2009, a \$4.35 billion dollar incentive program entitled *Race to the Top* (a policy extension of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* and subsequent addendum to *NCLB*) hopes to spawn creative and progressive reform in school leadership (Branigan, 2009). Additionally, conservative market-based incentives (charter schools, merit-pay, and competition) and strategies for management novelty (professional learning communities, small learning communities, distributive leadership) have been at the top of the education agenda.

Over the past two decades, it is arguable that principals have been the important enforcement piece to federal, state, and local initiatives aimed at improving student achievement (Spillane and Hunt, 2010). How principals are able to raise the test scores of their students, improve teaching and learning, and transform the culture of education at their schools to improve these test scores are therefore a centerpiece of the modern education reform discussion. Current reforms are looking specifically at school leadership and new research is paying considerable attention to establishing guidelines for what it takes for leaders to secure school success under the new testing benchmarks

(Harris, 2004; May & Supovitz, 2011). With the movement toward the Common Core, principals will move beyond district or state-wide assessments and will now face nation-wide comparisons.

### *Historical Themes in Administration Theory*

The management of schools and the organizational structures of education have not emerged due to independent strategies of gifted principals and the foresight of education scholars. How we direct our schools parallels the evolution of our country as a whole mimicking other familiar institutions such as business, the military, and the church. It has been argued by education scholars, however, that modern school administrative practices have primarily emerged due to its connection with industrial-economic models and the Weberian ideal of the efficient bureaucracy. In other words, we have tended to run our schools like we run our factories.

Three general industrial models have dominated the conversation when considering the evolution of school management archetypes. The first, referred as the *classical, scientific management, rational systems, or structural-functionalist model*, was the earliest and arguably a product of the thriving industrial centers of America at the turn of the last century. Frederick Taylor (1911) notably articulated the scientific management supervisory style from his experience in the steel industry of the early 1900s, citing the robotic rationality of work and the desire for ideal productivity and obsessing with time and motion studies of efficiency. This model, when applied to school administrators, viewed teachers as extensions of management and thus staff were

employed to carry out the standardized and prescribed duties as assigned by management. Control, accountability, and efficiency were managed from a superordinate position. Teachers implemented a highly refined and standardized curriculum and carefully followed strict guidelines and protocols with little freedom to innovate. If this system was not followed, teachers were released by an autocratic leader. School leaders and teachers were viewed, similarly to today, as technical professionals who were responsible for working hard and for carrying out orders. They were not necessarily responsible for applying independent judgment, or for establishing priorities and setting educational goals based on sound judgment.

During the 1930s, under the direction of key thinkers such as social philosopher Elton Mayo, institutional theorists challenged the classical organizational model and demonstrated that workers needed both psychological and technical satisfaction in order for organizations to secure efficient production (Mitchell, 1996). Mayo observed the cold and tacit inefficiencies that the strict scientific management style produced in his observations of the Hawthorne Works electrical manufacturing plant in Chicago. Mayo developed the notion of *human relations supervision*, prescribing that production can be increased by creating a more humane and emotionally sensitive work environment. This included considering the importance of the social needs of the workers, the impact of environmental factors such as the effect of seasonal temperatures and workspace safety, and treating workers with respect by including them in the decision process. When introduced to school organizations in the 1960s, teachers were encouraged to participate in the school mission and design, thus inviting the perception that teachers were dynamic

and creative professionals capable of various levels of leadership. Post War sentiments additionally encouraged a more open, participative, and democratic attitude toward the conducting of educational administration (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993; Willower & Forsyth, 1999).

The contemporary *effective schools movement*, a common description assigned by scholars capturing the current pressures of accountability on schools, has witnessed heightened expectations for efficient improvements in student achievement outcomes, and a boom in start-up “leadership academies” and empowerment seminars (Hallinger, 2005). Site-based management practices dominated the era continuing the call for more conversation and local control, but now joined with more stringent and streamlined business practices (Marks & Nance, 2007). Pop-culture theorists also entered the leadership conversation at the end of the 1980s and greatly influenced school leadership practices. Warren Bennis’s, *On Becoming a Leader*, and Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* for example, permeated the reading lists of all genres of institutional leaders (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2003). America seemed to have an infatuation with high performance standards and the heroic leader getting us to those standards. In schools, that person would be the principal (Hallinger, 2005).

Despite the proliferation of preparation and leadership development programs and public pressure for more efficiency, by the 1990s, no major leadership theorist or school reform effort produced the significant student achievement improvements that politicians and the public had been clamoring for nearly half a century. Disparity persisted between and within states. Accountability, however, continued to drive policy efforts, and

systematic reform focused on curriculum and performance standards, professional development, and eliminating performance gaps. The 1990s saw a new impulse to rank, classify, and sanction schools for their performance. Principals were placed in the precarious position of interpreting and implementing cyclical policy shifts and conflicting federal and state initiatives. Should their efforts fail, they faced punitive sanctions such as dismissal or relocation (Marks & Nance, 2007). Ironically during this period, school leaders' specific role in implementing accountability policy measures went largely ignored by policy makers despite the fact that, in practice, they shouldered most of the pressure and responsibility (Spillane et al., 2002).

Since the 1990s, the effective school movement has recognized the limits of training principals to be charismatic business managers that can miraculously raise test scores. The limited role of *principals-as-managers-who-lead* proved ineffective. The latest trend has been to conceive of and train principals as *instructional leaders*. Instructional leadership has been the most frequently studied model of school leadership over the past twenty-five years (Hallinger, 2005). Now school leaders are pressed to foster a more academic culture with higher academic expectations, to direct the goals of the school that are more attentive to curriculum standards, to more readily supervise and control curriculum and instruction, and to activate a more hands-on approach focused on learning. Data supporting positive effects of instructional leadership models on student achievement have been mixed, and studies have shown that the concept of instructional leadership remains vague and undeveloped. Depending on how one defines “instructional leadership” (shared authority, directly modeling instruction, punitive or

awarding measures) can potentially correlate with infinite “outcome” variables (professional interaction, streamlined systems, teacher efficacy, test scores, etc.). When specifically considering predictors of student achievement, family socioeconomic status remained a much stronger predictor than models of instructional leadership (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012; Francera & Bliss, 2011).

### *Literature on School Leadership*

The science involved with education has made strides with the growing emergence of university departments and scholars specific to its field. Within education, the more focused scholarship on leadership, termed *Educational Administration*, has arisen in the last fifty years. The field of educational administration is a newborn and often accused of ambiguity given the fluidity of educational models and the changing organizational understandings and purposes of public education (Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Heck & Hallinger, 2005). Because it shares with other social science disciplines that study human behavior, there is the added tension and passionate political disagreement over the appropriate direction of educational administration as a scholarly discipline. Scholars continually argue over the field’s central questions and methodology, as well as its disciplinary breadth and the role educational administration has in achieving social justice and advancing student achievement (Page, 2001; Heck & Hallinger, 2005).

The status and nature of research and theory in educational administration has similarly been accused of being immature due to the lack of consensus in the field over

theoretical issues, the infancy of its place as a recognized discipline, and the political nature of the field (Bates, 1980). There are those, in contrast, who are disheartened at quantitative positivists and the pressure on education scholars to create a highly rationalized and systematized order to the field of educational administration, claiming that a more uniform and homogenous theory could imprison creativity and ignorantly dismiss the uniqueness of each circumstance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Those in the field of educational administration who have chosen the qualitative methodological path are also forced to confront deep and complicated epistemological issues. Despite all of this, it is important to understand where school leadership and its theorists have been in order to perceive of how they understand and enact their trade today.

The more specific study of contemporary school leadership as opposed to business leadership has, of late, been parsed, and the field of Educational Administration has begun to separate itself as a distinctive discipline. In recent decades, educational researchers found their own stride and shifted their attention to leadership models connected with relevant school reform issues (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990; Marks & Printy, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Firestone & Martinez, 2007). The business school model of leadership has continued to creep its way into schools. And where businesses aim to improve profit margins, pressures bear on principals to equally aim at improving standardized test scores. These quantified outcome-based driving points and aggressive industrial efficiency models imposed on the conduct of schooling leadership continue to keep the two worlds entangled. Thus, while still negotiating its independence from the dominance of the business world and the



classical structural-functionalist model, contemporary educational scholarship on the effects of school leadership has also notably been open to and pressured into seeking market-based ideas when trying to improve student achievement (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Hanushek, 1986).

Within the current political climate of outcome-based assessment of schools and the focus on instructional leadership, multiple empirical studies have recently reviewed the direct and indirect studies on the leadership practices that affect student outcomes (Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010; Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). The majority conclusion found among the research, particularly among quantitative researchers, was that school leaders have a measurable, but small and indirect effect on student outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Witziers, Bosker, Kruger, 2003; Heck, Larson, & Marcoulides, 1990). The actions and strategies that school administrators hope to have on school success have been determined to be essentially mediated by teachers. Scholars have effectively termed the more appropriate means of understanding successful leadership in schools as a *mediated-effects* model (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Pitner, 1988). School leadership and subsequent success should therefore primarily be understood as a *distributive* practice that is “...stretched over the school’s social and situational contexts” (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, 2001). A truer picture of successful principal leadership has been articulated

not as the sole leader of a school, but the “leader of instructional leaders” (Glickman, 1989).

In a structural equation modeling study that tests the causal relationship between instructional leadership behaviors and correlative outcomes of student achievement, Heck, Larson, & Marcoulides (1990) were able to link two mediating variables as important to improving student achievement. The first, the ability for principals to establish a strong academic climate, and the second, the ability to manage an organization that is focused on instruction, were both shown to be strong predictors of student achievement. The policy implications of this study indicate that training principals to be instructional leaders may be futile. Better time may be spent training principals to lead instructional leaders. Yet again, while these variables are a clear professional imperative for school leaders, the details on how to create a focused academic environment is still vague and in need of further investigation. The limits of quantitative studies like these remain in their inability to isolate what it means to be a “strong academic climate” and a school that is “focused on instruction.”

The qualitative literature on the more specific social processes by which education personnel influence student achievement is growing, but most of the attention has been paid to the role of teachers, not school leaders (Coburn, 2005). The quantitative literature has been prolific in recognizing the indirect but detectible role in which leaders improve student achievement, and it has also been creative in offering lists of actions in which leaders can improve school achievement. As noted, these lists are abbreviated and undocumented as to the detail of how these activities are to specifically take place. So

despite the call for studies that examine modern educational leadership practices in detail, most are still imprecisely descriptive rather than descriptively analytical (Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) for example, provided twenty-one leadership actions that were statistically related to student achievement. This list included activities such as maintaining discipline and order, securing resources, monitoring the effectiveness of school practices, and fostering a mission and shared belief system. Meta-analysis found within quantitative literature consistently found three key factors that were commonly referenced as to the “best practices” for principals: focusing the mission and goals of the organization, encouraging an environment of collaboration and trust, and actively supporting instructional improvement (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010; Spillane, Halvorson, & Diamond, 2001; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins (1992) identified the qualities of a true transformative or expert leader versus a typical or inadequate leader. The expert was one that set organizational direction, was a good problem solver, had goals, principles, and values, and displayed a clear solution process that empowered others. Explicit examples or correlating narratives for those outcome variables was absent.

### *Organization Theory Applied to Schools*

Organizational theory will primarily be used to explain the social structures that constitute schools as formal organizations relevant to the experience of principals. It will be demonstrated how organizational theory can provide a methodological framework for

examining and explaining the role school principals have within their school structures. Organization theory offers an important frame of reference when constructing an examination of the principalship and its effect on student achievement. It does so by recognizing the tangible and generalizable systems and social constructs common amidst social human operating within institutions. The life of two principals is examined within these helpful organizational frames. How a principal fits into the organizational structure, what they see their role to be, how others fit into their vision of leadership, and how the culture is negotiated by their position will be documented and analyzed.

Charles Bidwell (1965) has been considered one of the first theorists to rationally apply organizational theory to the structures found in schools, and his work was a broad attempt to locate and synthesize the major sociological and psychological literature on how schools are organized. Bidwell described schools as having identifiable bureaucratic elements. First, the school is a *client-serving organization*, preparing its clients (children) for adult status through training and indoctrination. Second, schools have a clear *role structure*—students are recruited somewhat against their will to be taught, and the professionalized staff is to fulfill their achievement role in voluntarily advancing young students. Third, schools have a *functional division of labor* between principals, teachers, and staff, with age-appropriate grades and subsequent teachers. Fourth, there is a *hierarchic ordering of offices*, defined by state law, and a *public set of rules and procedures* that all are obligated to follow in order to create a *uniform product of a certain quality*. For Bidwell, the school project is a massive and complex project requiring standards and order.

Richard Scott (1998), a modern education sociologist building on the organizational theories of Bidwell, described five key elements of an organization salient to the institution of schools. These properties were adapted from the language used in Leavitt's (1965) four "internal" elements of an organization which included the *social structure, goals, technology, and participants*. Scott's modern examinations recognized an important and neglected sociological construct, adding a fifth element in that of the effects of external *environmental* factors. When considering all these elements, social structure involves the roles and patterns of an organization, goals imply the ends that participants hope to achieve, technology comprises the tools (machines and equipment, technical skills and knowledge) necessary to reach an organizational goal, and participants are the actors involved in the organization. Scott's environmental factors were those which are external to the immediate actions of the organization but which drive and effect the organization at its core. Beyond Scott, a sixth element is commonly found in the literature and which further complicates an organization; it is the relationship of *power* and *authority* to the role each actor has in the organization.

To understand the phenomenon of *leadership* and *authority* more specifically in an organization, Ogawa & Bossert (1995) recognized four basic constructs commonly found in sociological theory. This includes the notions of *function, role, the individual, and culture*. *Function* is the ability to influence organizational performance, to affect the mind and behavior of participants, and to strive to reach goals. *Role* is a competency and authority within a position or province and within a chain of command. *Individual* is certain attributes which describe how one acts in certain ways, the traits that set them

apart, and how they can lead, set goals, develop formal structures, and have initiative.

*Culture* is how a person wields power shaping or setting the tone of meaning-making for the group. The authors assert that leadership lies within the system of roles that are embedded in relationships, and compliance is gained when members are sharing resources within their network of roles. All individuals can lead because all possess resources that can help an organization. It is the interactions of collective resources that constitute leadership. As for culture, leadership involves shaping and influencing the meaning systems of the organization, but in solidarity with the collective. This could explain why trusting and respectful relationships matters so much in schools.

Educational leadership scholars Leithwood & Duke (1999) recognized that across the literature, most definitions of leadership roles share the common understanding that it involves influencing. The who, the how, purpose, and outcomes, however, are all up for grabs and extremely flexible and vague. In their meta-analysis of the major peer-reviewed educational administration journals (*Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Journal of School Leadership*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, and *Educational Management and Administration*) over the past twenty years, six distinct leadership models were recognized:

- *Instructional Leadership*: focusing on the behaviors of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting pedagogy and the growth of student achievement.

- *Transformational Leadership*: focusing on those charismatic empowering traits that call for the commitment and capacities of organizational members.
- *Moral Leadership*: focusing on ethics and values formation.
- *Participative Leadership*: focusing on the decision-making process and involvement of the group.
- *Managerial Leadership*: focusing on functions, tasks, and systems that make an ideally rational system operate.
- *Contingent Leadership*: recognizes the various unique organizational events and that each potential circumstance may require different leadership styles.

These leadership models are helpful in recognizing the thematic styles that principals employ in their general mode of operation, and can serve as further evidence that leadership is a complicated and chameleon-like enterprise.

Based on questionnaires to nearly 1000 teachers across the United States, Blasé & Blasé (2004) asked teachers to describe the three primary characteristics of successful leadership. Teachers described a good leader as one who talked open and honestly about teaching and learning, who readily provided for staff development with appropriate time for peer connections and continuing education, and who encouraged teacher reflection and the empowering of teachers to engage in critical dialogue that more harmoniously allowed for the embracing of challenge and change. The study found a clear need among teachers for principals to lead, but in that leadership, for them to recognize teachers as intellectuals versus industrialized technicians. Teachers want leaders who can negotiate their delicate world and be neither heavy-handed nor afraid to push. This realization

competes with the modern reform effort to standardize teaching practices and punish those that do not conform.

As part of the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) task force on educational leadership, a comprehensive portrait and literature review of leadership behaviors and roles was gathered (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This most recognized research associated within education scholarship hoped to produce a rational and functional orientation model examining the roles of principals. The task force was established by AERA in 2000 because of the deficit of literature on school principals and the charge to promote and encourage high-quality research in educational leadership amidst the heightened accountability and student achievement concerns. The task force research came to five key conclusions about school leadership:

1. Leaders are second only to teachers and their curriculum in affecting student learning
2. Administrators and teachers provide most of the leadership in schools
3. Three core qualities of successful leadership involves setting direction, developing people, and developing the organization
4. Leaders are positive and productive in the face of accountability challenges by empowering others, providing helpful guidance, and by planning strategically
5. Leaders are positive and productive in the face of challenges in educational diversity by encouraging innovative instructional methods, strengthening community bonds, and expanding student social capital



Others such as Robinson, Lloye, & Rowe (2008) have examined the various types of leadership roles, particularly the comparison of instructional versus transformative leadership roles, in their meta-analysis of twenty-seven published studies on the relationship between leadership and student outcomes. They found that the average effect of *instructional* leadership on student outcomes was three to four times that of a *transformative* leadership style. *Instructional leadership* was defined as a leadership orientation directly related to teaching and learning. This involves aggressive leadership and the creation of an amicable work environment, a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, high teacher expectations, a shared leadership focused on learning, and a clarity of mission, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. While generally viewed as impossible without a shared sense of leadership, the potential critique of the instructional leadership style is that it can be conventional or traditional in nature, overly paternalistic, archaic, and less democratic despite its hopeful title (Sheppard, 1996; Marks & Printy, 2003). The definition of *transformative leadership* involves the collective understanding and the inspiring of teachers to new levels of energy, commitment, and moral purpose. The ideal hope of this style is to drive a school with passion to a common vision and larger good. Transformative leadership affirms the primacy of the principal's reform role and their charismatic ascendancy, specifically when introducing innovation and organizational culture. The criticism has been that this style lacks the explicit focus on curriculum and instruction (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998).

Currently in vogue is the discussion of leadership roles in terms of *distributive leadership*. Harris (2004) speaks of its positive affects on school improvement, but stated that there is little agreement as to the meaning of the term itself. Similar to the AERA task force understanding of contingency leadership, distributive leadership is generally not understood as a technique, practice, or role type, but a way of thinking about leadership. When operationalizing distributive leadership, one is concentrating on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organization rather than seeking it only through formal positions or roles. The job for those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of an organization together in a productive relationship, orchestrating and nurturing the space. In theory, distributive leadership styles recognize that schools operate differently in different places, whether they are new, old, growing and building, sustaining the status quo, or in crisis. Each circumstance requires a different knowledge basis and commitment to a necessary leadership style. A chosen leadership model understands the complexity of relationships and circumstances while also recognizing the importance of the shared process.

#### *Qualitative Research on Principals in Schools*

The qualitative literature on principals is slim, and specific studies on high school principals that go beyond truncated surveys are even slimmer. Most educational research has been performed with teachers and prior to the modern era of accountability and standardized testing (Spillane & Hunt, 2010). Hallinger and Heck (1999) argued that one of the most notable blank spots within education scholarship has been regarding the in-

depth descriptions of what is actually going on in the management of schools and how leaders improve failing ones. There are, however, some notable qualitative studies on schools that shed some light on the life of principals.

Possibly the most cited qualitative scholarship on principals is the seminal work of Harry Wolcott and his ethnography, *The Man in the Principal's Office* (2003). Originally published in 1973, Wolcott spent a year as a participant-observer of an elementary school principal amidst a sentimental time long gone. Similar to the purpose of this study, Wolcott sought to understand what it is that principals do, and what are the social factors that influence their lives. Edward Bell, the subject of his principal study, allowed Wolcott to enter his life, learn about his childhood, spend time eating with his family, attend his daughter's wedding, gain his wife's perspective, and observe his daily activities as a school leader. In the end, Wolcott was able to describe that a principal in a school is anything but a rational bureaucratic leader. The personality of Edward Bell, the complexities of William Howard Taft Elementary School, the diversity of occurrences in the school amidst its staff, students, and community... all contributed to an intricate picture that no survey or short interview could capture. The purpose of the study was not to judge or categorize the proper functions of a good principal, but to describe what it is a principal actually does, and offer some insight into why they do certain things. What Wolcott found was that an elementary school principal, at least in the early 1970s, could be found doing three types of tasks—receiving requests and handling problems, orienting and greeting, and taking care of the building and system. Why Edward dutifully attended to his job description and his attendance to policy directives or not, and how he did it was

mired in the complications of his past, present, and all those variables around him such as his problematic son, his religious devotion, his gender identity, sensitivities to the politics of his district, and his rural upbringing.

Mary Metz (1986), a leading interpretive scholar in education, spent the school year of 1979-1980 in a Midwestern school district focusing her qualitative research on three junior high schools. Metz described the conflict between the expectations of a rational bureaucracy in schools with the practical and real functioning of schools. As she argued, while there can be a claim to have clear and unified goals in a school, the reality is that "...when one asks the meaning of the term 'educate,' it becomes clear that school goals are multiple and ambiguous" (46). Because of this, a system of *loose coupling* occurs in which a principal can be given relative autonomy to do as they will at their school site so long as they do not attract visible problems or complaints.

Metz's work in schools has found that there are many similarities and structures found in all schools, such as buildings, teachers, and students. But she also found that the actors in these settings took great liberties in their actions of interpreting how and why things occurred at their respective school. The nature of schools was recognized as being socially constructed and continually reconstructed based on the changing of actors within the school, the socio-economic conditions, and the competing cultural variables that influence a community. An example of this was in the character of Principal Jake Taylor at Pinehill High School, the subject of a two and a half week study by Metz and a team working for the *National Center on Effective Secondary Schools*. Pinehill was a high school located in an industrial working-class city, and Jake Taylor was a product of it.

Jake appeared to reflect the values and traditions of the poor town, and was often at odds with outsider teachers that were unsympathetic to the challenges of the students. Because of this, a more commonly observed behavior was that he was uniquely intense about his conversations with teachers that appeared to fail too many students (Metz, 1990).

Insight gathered from observing the daily experiences of principals is the task of the interpretive scholar. Characters such as Jake Taylor, while seemingly inconsequential to the policy-makers hungry for quick and easy quantitative data that can guide potential reform, are important to study. The actions and decision-making processes in which principal Taylor engaged tells us some of the strengths and weaknesses of hiring a local boy to lead a local school, the potential challenges of migrating teachers to an unfamiliar site with complicated cultural differences, and the direct effect and influences leadership has on the morale of a school. These are just some essential considerations that policy-makers must consider when understanding school success.

## Methods of Collecting Data

The qualitative practice of inquiry for this study was interpretive in nature and most commonly associated with the methodological practices of anthropology. Looking interpretively involves directing scientific attention to the micro tasks and actions of daily life for particular people. It also requires attention paid simultaneously to the wider social and historical contexts that influence today. Interpretivists immerse themselves on the inside, become part of the inside, and respectfully search for understanding that insider perspective. The tradition of anthropology and looking interpretively at schools began in the United States in the 1940s and '50s. It first began while considering issues related to Native American educational programs pressing Americanization strategies and federal policies associated with racial segregation during the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Eddy, 1985).

Anthropological explanations for low achieving minority and working class students has evolved from historically held *genetic deficit* arguments (the belief in the inherent intellectual and moral deficiency of certain peoples), to *cultural deficit* arguments (the belief that certain people resided in environments void of appropriate levels of cognitive stimulation), to *sociolinguistic differences* in communication styles between teachers and students, to John Ogbu and placing blame on social injustices such as entrenched caste systems and discrimination in employment. Anthropological and interpretivist inquiry has most recently involved less universalistic scientific theories to explain why poor and minority youth fail (Erickson, 1986; Foley, Levinson, Hurtig, 2000). Instead, they are looking into the locally produced and subjective meaning-

systems that develop in human interaction. It is the dynamics of the face-to-face in conversation with broader socio-cultural contexts that enables an analytic explanation for how behaviors are produced.

The particular concern of meaning construction and subjective sense-making is important for many reasons, especially in the study of schools. It is important for the mere fact that the lives of children are at stake. School systems and its players have been studied from various perspectives, most notably from quantitative methodologists, educational psychologists, and positivist sociologists (Erickson, 1986). These more traditional perspectives offer linear causal models in which behavior is observed or surveyed, variables are derived, and patterns and associations are discovered with statistical analysis. While this method offers valuable and sometimes generalizable insights, it is limited in its ability to capture the specific and local understandings that are often lost in broad statistically painted strokes. It is inevitable that actors involved with managing schools are more complicated than they first appear, that they make inferences and presumptions that are unpredictable, they change their minds, they lie or mask their true feelings, and they often only present their best face. Human abilities to support or sabotage policy, interpret and redefine goals, make sense or sublimate the dysfunctions of their world, claim undo credit and dismiss failure intermittently, were and continue to be profound. For interpretivists, there is a critical analytical distinction between the behavior, or the mere physical act, and the action, the physical act with the additional element of meaning interpretation of the actor involved. Interpretivist need to spend

large amounts of time in the field getting to know their subjects. There is no quick and easy way to comprehend the depths of human understanding (Erickson, 1986).

### *Gaining Access to Principals at PI Schools*

For practical motives, I chose to investigate two high schools located within a fifty mile radius of each other and within reasonable distance of a large urban center. It was also important to find schools that were formally designated as *Program Improvement (PI)* given my specific concern with low-performing schools with high populations in poverty. Under the ESEA of 1965 and the subsequent sanctions ushered in through NCLB, all Title I schools that receive federal dollars that do not demonstrate Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) are labeled *PI*. Each public school, particularly schools with significant populations of low-income students, must demonstrate recognizable accountability systems and show clear data that indicates an upward trend in math and English standardized test scores for all students. Failure for a school or district to demonstrate a positive trend over two consecutive years, as it is applied to each school or any subgroup such as English Learners, disabled children, or African-Americans, initiates *PI* status and ushers in government oversight. Additionally under NCLB and by 2014, all schools are expected to have 100% of its students at a proficiency level in both math and English. Given the requirement that schools are to have both sustainable increases in proficiency levels and 100% proficiency in the core subject areas, in 2010, over 50% of schools that received Title I funding were considered failures. Finding schools that fit such a designation was an easy task given the multiple low-income communities in the



American Southwest and the rising political pressure of continual and sustained improvement.

I initiated email contact with over a dozen schools that fit my study description and received overwhelmingly positive responses. I chose the two principals for this study because two additional variables could also be investigated: gender and race. The high schools within Sierra School District were also amongst the lowest-performing and poorest in the state. The two female principals that drew my attention were also eager and supportive of my work when a follow up interview was scheduled, and it appeared that they had the full understanding and openness that was necessary for a more thorough study. The focus of my work targeted Principal Alena Swann at Jefferson High School and Christi Jordan at Sage Valley High School.

After site access and full university approval were formally granted, I pressed forward with my work that would last the entire year. I would arrive at each high school two to three times a week at various times, but mostly from lunch-time until the end of school due to my own professional and educational commitments. I was granted leave during my non-teaching time by my own administrative team in support of this research. Additionally I requested a leave of absence one day a month to observe full days. Because I lived and worked in a different district than the principals I was studying, dissimilar calendars and budget-reduction days in my district also allowed me to frequently visit the schools. I spent the breaks and holidays catching up on interviews and analyzing the data I did collect.

I targeted two high schools that were predominately poor, minority, and lead by women. At first, I was suspect at my ability to gain access to the conversations and behind the scenes conversations that only the leadership team was privy, but after my regular attendance at each site and the developing relationships I had with each principal and their staff, I was able to access more than I could have ever imagined. Both principals were generous with their time, vulnerable with their thoughts and feelings, and encouraging of my research. Because of this, I entered each site with a welcome from any staff and security personnel, and even developed a nickname... the *White Shadow*.

#### *Reflexivity and the White Shadow*

Malcolm, a 6'5", 250-pound, sixty year-old former professional basketball player was head of security at Jefferson High. Upon entering Jefferson High School each day, I crossed the threshold of the school through the front administrative doors and would approach a mud-room like holding area that would regulate the coming and going of any outside community members. Malcolm led the security team which rotated in its patrol of the front desk, but he was the figure that commonly received guests in the afternoon. It was he who usually announced to the front office upon my entrance that whiteness had arrived. My nickname was symbolic in so many ways, and a metaphor of what was to come. When I walked in Malcolm would look at me in disbelief with his deep white eyes, subtly and slowly reach for his walkie-talkie like he was grabbing a handgun, then solicit the principals attention by an all-call announcement... "The *White Shadow* is here." I could faintly hear the principal remark the first couple times on the other end,

“What?...who is here?” Malcolm was not going to let this go. He needed to play this out, even teased the principal a bit for her elevated sense of needing to be studied, plus he was too old in his years to not enjoy his work and have a little fun with me. “The white guy... doing the study... you know!” The principal would laugh the first couple times, then simply say, “Ok... let him through.” After the first couple weeks, Malcolm simply smiled, shook my hand with potency, and nodded his head like I was a regular. It was obvious I was a white outsider, and it was obvious I was a mere inconsequential shadow of the efforts performed at this school.

I was curious about my new found title one day and proudly *googled* just to check if my radar was off. I turned to that controversial Wikipedia and easily found *white shadow*. Interestingly, there was a prime time television show in the late 1970s entitled *The White Shadow*. My parents had denied me access to regular television through my elementary years, partially due to their somewhat Bohemian sensibilities, but also due to their economic circumstance. The show was noted to be the third-longest running dramatic television show with a predominantly African-American cast in the history of American television. It had additionally received wide acclaim in Europe, particularly Turkey, and served as inspiration for the development of basketball there. The main character, Ken Reeves, performed by actor Ken Howard, was a former NBA player who had injured his knee and was looking for a new path. Upon the request of an old college friend and current high school principal, Ken decided to take a high school coaching position for an inner-city school with a predominantly Latino and African-American student population. Coach Reeves served as that archetypal inspiring and selfless white

leader of poorer minorities, a jock-like version of *Welcome Back Kotter*, promising his players loyalty and support, always being right behind them, "...like a white shadow." Apparently one of the greatest NBA players, Bill Russell, parodied the television show on *Saturday Night Live*, of course calling himself the *black shadow* (Thamel, 2010; Wikipedia). So while I found some affirmation in Malcolm's coronation of me as a possible white do-gooder, I heard that sarcasm that only years of friendship and the comradery of being a fellow African-American player could ascribe. My guess was that Marvin thought that most white people only saw in the television show the benevolence of a white coach helping black kids. For African-Americans, it was just another narrative they had to tolerate while holding their tongue. The *White Shadow* symbolized how the black community needed heroic white people to move them to a better existence. Never mind that white people created their shady existence in the first place. I wish I had the time to study Malcolm and learn from him and the perspective he had... maybe my next study. This limited relationship highlighted the complexity and the double-talk that existed within this troubled school and education policy within the country when poor minorities were at stake.

Interpretivists recognize that they enter and affect and are affected by the world in which they observe. They also understand that they are necessarily bound and connected to that which they study. Malcolm coronation of my newfound title was a quick realization of that fact. When conducting research, interpretivists must continually be reflective on the influence and subjective effect they have on that which is studied. This sociological concept, known as *reflexivity*, recognizes that there is inherence in studying

that which we also make (McDermott & Varenne, 2006). Clifford Geertz (1973) refers to this inescapable dilemma that is the reality of our world, or cultural construction, as a *web* that we all weave. My intention of this study was to not focus or give much time to other actors in schools, yet this was an impossibility given people such as Malcolm. He brought to my attention and reminded me of this concept.

Interpretivist inquiry often involves a critical lens. When one looks at meaning, social context, and structures of authority, it is impossible not to examine the hegemonic traditions which maintain power and authority, or be sensitive to issues of economic and social justice. There is an element of justice simply in the fact that ordinary human deeds are being recorded, particularly within the realm of schools and institutions that intimately affect children. This project, however, was not a psychological pursuit, but a sociological one in which an interpretation of the contexts, actions, and behaviors of actors in association with one another. Personally, this is a lens I have adopted due to my previous work with the church, organized labor, and my career as a teacher. It is also the influence of scholars and professors in qualitative methodology and education policy that bring with them a sense of curiosity, skepticism, and care for understanding the unheard voices in our society.

### *Methodology and Data Analysis*

As Geertz (1973) described, "...what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to." (9). Analysis of that data is therefore systematic and scientific. It involves the

deliberate sorting out of the structures of signification. The interpretivist sifts through the gathered data and is selective of its importance. Erickson (1986) described key elements of data analysis that interpretivists historically engage. They offer empirical assertions, engage in a construction of analytical narrative vignettes, cite quotations, propose synoptic data reports, interpret commentary, incorporate theoretical discussion, and transcribe all that is heard and observed. This work engaged all these principles.

The interpretivist seeks to describe and analyze human meaning construction and the causal chain of how action has occurred. This requires getting at the purpose behind action and the explicit and tacit system of symbols that mediates causation. To accomplish this, the social scientist needs to place him or herself within the system in which social and cultural structures are displayed and constructed, and specifically, where cause and effect is taking place, all of which can include sustained participant-observation, formal and informal interviews, and document collection.

In effect, an interpretivist engages in what is known as *cultural analysis*, and includes studying broad notions of culture, both a local culture, and a personal culture (McDermott & Varenne, 2006). In this case of studying principals, I am looking at two individuals in the context of other individuals and trying to interpret their world on their own terms. I am not trying to predict their behavior or assign labels. Instead I am seeking to know more about how principals understand the failure of some students and why principals make the management decisions they do. Interpretive research, however, has to particularly focus on *local* meaning as it is currently in practice. The goal is to *thickly* describe specific action and make the invisible visible (Erickson, 1986).

The deliberate data collection process employed by interpretivists is commonly described as *funneling* (Jacob, 1987). This involves identifying the formal and informal social systems and broad sense-making perspectives that influence a local site, collecting instances of events over multiple circumstances and settings relevant to the research, and examining and comparing that data to the substantive theory in anthropology and sociology as well as the key environmental influences that affect those involved. This process also involves the evolution of the more comprehensive participant observation of a research site to the more focused analysis of social interaction among actors.

Because of this, I spent between two to five hours a week over the course of the school year from August 2011 through June 2012 collecting data. I walked through each campus getting to know the physical layout. Three full days were spent attending the leadership retreat at the district office in which all principals and assistant principals were briefed on the goals for the coming school year, placed into brainstorming activities for addressing pressing concerns, and educated on the resources that were available to them during the upcoming year. On a regular basis, I observed both principals engaged in interaction with their secretaries and front office staff, engrossed in teacher evaluations, and facilitating positive student interactions. I also attended formal staff meetings, leadership meetings, and spontaneous meetings with parents and staff.

I also tried to locate myself where I could catch the background noise from conversations that could appear more candid. I was able to capture principals reprimanding other leaders, teachers, students, and parents. I was able to hear the more personal pep talks with colleagues who were struggling with their personal lives, and I

was able to observe the principals interact with their family and loved ones both during visits and personal phone calls.

When schedules permitted, both principals were generous in explaining what was observed. I had anticipated a more structured approach to scheduling formal interviews, but found that the principals were eager to stop and engage me in a question and answer dialogue shortly after an interaction, or during the following visit after I had analyzed the occurrence and had more questions. The targets of my study were two principals, but I was quickly able to gain access to key informants that were assistant principals. I also engaged in both formal and informal interviews with them to confirm observations and dialogue I had with the principals. Formal interviews were scheduled, and fifteen to thirty-minute question-and-answer dialogues that were hand-written recorded and later analyzed. Because the perspective of teachers was not the focus of my dissertation, I did not invest large amounts of time formally interviewing teachers, but was able to pick up on some of the chatter that occurred during staff meetings and one-on-one interactions. Lead teachers at Jefferson High School and Sage Valley High School in the areas of math and English were particularly sought out for their understandings given their more immediate relevance to standardized test scores.

Key data from documents also helped to provide insight into the daily lives of the principals. The school district was generous and forthcoming about the policies and prerogatives leaders were given through meetings and electronic correspondence. This included an administrator's yearly handbook that described goals on everything from English Learners (EL) to Special Education to the implementation of the Common Core.



I also had access to each principal's strategic plan for its specific site and the details of their calendar.

Upon the completion of each day's work in the field and usually within one to two hours of an observation or interview, I transcribed and analyzed the data. This involved computer transcription of the hand-written fieldnotes that had been gathered from the day. Key events and commentary I was unable to amend while furiously writing down the details of the day was also a task. During these chores, I was able to thematically recognize the importance of each event, such as an inspirational talk to the football players or a personnel dispute. I was also able to associate key theoretical topics and apply them to events or perspectives of the principal, as exemplified in the conclusions related to *triage*.

### *Qualitative Study of Two Principals*

It could be deduced from the current scientific literature, and public policies that offer simplistic prescriptions, that principals are predictable variables within a school system. It can also be said that given the growing standardization of education, all schools and their contexts could be equally consistent. Quantitative sociologists offer us road maps that if eagerly followed, would produce an objectively successful school system. Politicians incentivize principal behavior with carrots and sticks, giving their respective schools more money and praise if they raise achievement scores, and offer threats of being fired or shamed if they don't. The rational model of the principalship has served as a guidepost for understanding and addressing student failure.

Public understanding of the principalship, however, is colored by our own limited contact with the principals we suffered or prospered under, the possible contact we made with principals due to our own children or family members, and the popular myths that are circulated by movies and stories. My own children are captured by the images of their elementary school principal and the characterizations of school life and the principals the Disney channel proposes. Two contrasting archetypes of principals in American culture during my generation were Ed Rooney (played by Jeffrey Jones), the bumbling idiot and nemesis to Ferris Bueller, and Joe Clark (played by Morgan Freeman), the tough take-no-prisoners hero in the inspiring film about an inner-city school, *Lean on Me*. Both characters represent the extremes Americans have in their historic memories of the best and worst of what principals can be. I mention these characters not only to illustrate the uniqueness of the personalities found in two principals, but the uniqueness in circumstance that each film character held in context. Ed Rooney managed a high-performing wealthy white Chicago suburban school where control and resources were a minimal concern. Principal Rooney spent his day looking for things to do, and overreacted when something did happen. Joe Clark was thrown into a New Jersey urban school comprised mostly of poor Latino and African American students centered in economic crisis and gang violence. Principal Clark had to be aggressive in maintaining the safety of the both the physical plant of the school, and worked tirelessly to gain access to the personal stories of the suffering students encountered at his site. How can we generalize our schools if both these archetypes are true? How can we offer similar prescriptions to principals in such contrasting

circumstances? I spent a school year with two principals within the same district and discovered profound differences in their personalities and tones when addressing similar school circumstance.

To come to the conclusion that all principals and schools are unique and should require policies be sensitive to that, I spent a year doing extensive research on two principals of schools located near major urban centers in the United States. As a participant-observer during the 2011-2012 school year, I traveled to two high schools and spent over 100 hours shadowing and interviewing their leaders. Specifically, I focused my efforts on the activities and concerns of the principals at each site, attending formal and informal meetings, classroom observations, district level meetings, parent meetings, and any conversations that could potentially offer me insight into the daily activities of a principal and the context of their site. I was able to gain insight into their personal lives, their motivations, their daily and yearly calendar, their approaches to leadership and professional life, and the goals they had to improve their schools.

When conducting this research, the goal of studying these particular sites was not to generate representations of high schools that could be exemplified as the norm, but to see the uniqueness of contexts and meaning-making that occurs for particular actors that are high school principals. Meanings and actions were generated with a sensitivity to the broader world, but it was essentially created locally, where interaction, local understandings, and sometimes exclusive customs took place. While the principals I investigated were unique, there were patterns and similarities that can help create some

generalizable realizations about the challenges principals face, and these similarities or differences can enlighten social science with tools for further investigations.

### **Chapter 3: Principal Alena Swann and Jefferson High School**

This chapter serves as a descriptive analysis of the life and professional circumstance of Principal Alena Swann. The first part narrates the more personal story, including her development as a leader and vignettes demonstrating key traits of her personality. The external support systems and subjective challenges are revealed. The second part examines the school site in which Principal Swann leads, Jefferson High School. The social realities for low-income and minority students, the problematic characters that influence the tone of the school, and the particular trials and systematic failures that underprivileged schools face are painted. The third part unites the principal with her site and displays encounters found in a typical day. The comprehensive and complicated issues that principals address, such as regulating compassion verses punishment for both students and teachers, portray the daunting task of leading schools that suffer from limited resources and persistently low test scores.

#### *Principal Swann*

Principal Alena Swann was in charge of Jefferson High School. Alena was hard to miss in a crowd for many reasons. She was a striking and brassy early fifty-something African-American woman with long elegant hair and bold choices in her dresses. If one could not immediately see her upon entrance onto campus, one could soon hear her, and from great distances. It became almost habitual when searching for Alena upon my arrival on her site to perk my ears and listen to her aggressive and raspy voice in the

hallways as she addressed her students and staff. “Just where are you going young man?” or “Hi baby! How are you?” Alena also regularly issued a bold mantra to her staff in the corridors that responded to each challenging event by saying, “...we are gonna work it out... get it done...don’t worry... stop trippin!”

Alena had a gregarious personality that could easily be interpreted as fake and impersonal given its seemingly endless energy, the constant distractions she appeared to welcome, her inability to relax and stay still, and her firmness and often stoic demeanor in more formal and professional settings. While most in her professional world could only access the more prepared side to Alena, she could easily *code switch* (Gumperz, 1977) during the informal encounters with close confidants, exhibiting a more vulnerable empathetic tone. During faculty meetings, I would try inconspicuously to record her actions and gage the sentiment of the teachers receiving her directives. The female English teachers seemed particularly annoyed by Alena’s measured tone at meetings and were overheard to have said, “Can’t you see, she is like a robot talking!” This perception among teachers would sometimes hurt her ability to move teachers on policies. Alena relayed to me that she seemed to find more success in motivating teachers in their craft when she had respective peers lead curriculum and professional development meetings instead of herself or other administrators. Despite this challenge, her closest administrative team members defended Alena as being deeply aware and involved and that the resistance of teachers was due to their personal issues of incompetency and arrogance. Alena admitted an awareness of her strong and direct personality and that it had its limitations with less malleable and sensitive teacher personalities.

Her passion for kids and resiliency amidst chaos ran deep, and she saw herself not just the principal of a challenging high school, but a “mentor of future leaders.” Alena was very purposeful, direct, and confrontational, with a tone in her voice and a glint in her eye that expected the same drive and frankness from others. If she sensed manipulation or misdirection from either student or staff, she reeled people in with a condescending moan, or a quick jab stating, “... listen to my question!” She prided herself on being a good judge of character, but expressed humility and sincerity in her solicitations of multiple administrative voices to testify on any issues to confirm her instincts. I often heard her proclaim, “...let’s think out loud” in leadership meetings. Her strong personality coupled with her regular pleading for input from others received mixed responses from the non-administrative staff and was often dependent on her more jovial mood or her more heated and engrossed moments. She swore like a sailor amidst trusted advisors reciting “... fuck that bullshit... shit, who does *he* think I am.” She also laughed boldly and easily at herself and others. Alena often referenced a disconnection with her calmer and less ambitious mother when reflecting on her own more compulsive emotions and decision-making processes. She described her mom as cool and “even-keeled.” Instead, “I scream and cry, let it out, be myself.” I think Alena had both sides within her.

Alena came from the inner city, her mother a schoolteacher and her father a salesman. Alena described her upbringing as “middle class.” She was the youngest of three girls. She watched her oldest sister “go crazy” and leave home while she, the good girl and “spoiled brat,” stayed and did things the right way. She excelled in school, particularly in math and science, because of that pressure from an archetypal attentive

mother who is also a professional teacher. Alena was the product of the dance and cheerleading route, even going on to perform at one of the top private universities in the country. She was a sorority girl too, an Alpha, following a long tradition of strong women in her family. “I would have been a Delta back in the day.” She readily conveyed to me that in the black community Alphas were the lighter skinned and Deltas were darker according to socially enforced traditions now appearing to be less strictly imposed.

After college, Alena started her professional career as a textbook sales representative, then a nutritional specialist, and eventually fell into teaching when searching for that more solid and honorable commitment in her mid-twenties. She taught science and math classes at middle and high schools for nearly ten years before becoming an administrator. Alena rose through the professional ranks by aggressively engaging the social life of schools and serving as the cheer coach, grade level dean, and advisor for various clubs. This all gained the attention of district level leaders who encouraged her to apply for assistant principal positions, particularly given that she was a black woman with lots of potential. Becoming an administrator appeared to be a natural path for Alena, but she did admit there have been personal and financial challenges to engaging this line of work. “When I became an AP, I took a \$30,000 pay cut because I was the dean, coach, advisor, and summer school teacher... teachers don’t get it, we get a pittance!”

Alena married a sales representative and had two daughters that are currently in college. Her daughters called daily to relay to their mother a funny event or the need of some resources. She was proud of them. There was a little disappointment in her voice,



however, when she spoke of family and their connection to her professional life. She sometimes spoke with reluctance and ambivalence stating one day that they brought her joy and that her husband was “my soundboard.” Another day she said, “My husband... as crazy as he is... is oblivious [of my professional life]... he gets too fired up, so it is pointless to rely on him [for emotional support].” Another ongoing challenge in her personal life was the failing mental health of her mother. Alena and her sister rotated in their care for their mother who suffered from Alzheimer’s. It was fairly clear that Alena’s approach to her family life somewhat mirrored her professional life... she was a leader juggling many balls with questionable support. Surprisingly, and despite key symbols I noticed around her office and the frequent rant to Jesus, her faith was not of serious importance. I witnessed Alena privately hand out jewelry to her fellow administrators with visibly Christian overtones, one described as a “mustard seed necklace.” In a follow-up conversation, she downplayed their symbolic importance, but acknowledged her connection to the biblical story and her desire to be like a mustard seed that grows and created positive change. She prayed every night, but did not go to church.

It was hard to find noteworthy foundations of support in Alena’s life. She struggled to find words when I asked her on whom she relies for both professional and personal encouragement. Alena spoke positively when referring to her supervisors at the district level, but at the same time did not feel a sense of loyalty to the district or share any non-professional time with district officials. She spent much of her leisure time with her assistant principal, Dominique. Dominique was her closest friend, also a doctor in her field, and an African-American in her late thirties cut from the same cloth in the

inner-city. Dominique was present during many of my observations and interviews of Alena, which I appreciated. The saucy banter and depth of their knowledge of one another pressed Alena to be more forthcoming than when we were alone. While Dominique was a clear source of joy and a safe outlet for Alena, Alena still took a very motherly tone with her and had concerns about Dominique's anger and ability to compose herself for the long haul that is the principalship. Dominique admitted that she did not have the "poker face" that was required for principals and privately expressed that she never would and that it was a problem for her at times. Alena understood that her job was filled with financial challenges, regular heartbreak, injustice, moments of joy, and elements of loneliness. Colleagues, children, schools, all would come and go, so she had paced her soul for that lifestyle. Dominique was not as prepared, and she had recently been diagnosed with throat cancer. Chemotherapy had started the prior summer and there were days that Dominique was struggling just to make it to work. If that was not enough, she was a single mother and recently entered a new romance that occupied some of her energy and the conversations she had with Alena. Usually the discussions were humorous and jabbing when romantic connections about men occurred. But when moments of seriousness, health concerns, and the realities of life crept in, Alena often sparked up at Dominique and declared, "Tell home boy to take care of you!"

### *Jefferson High School*

When I first entered the grounds of Alena's school at Jefferson High School, I was quickly reminded of the differences that exist between schools in the United States

and their relative environment. I teach at a school that is new and strategically placed near low-lying mountains with steady breezes, away from the stream of heavy traffic and business actions. Multiple gated communities feed into my school and great efforts have been made to beautify our million dollar turf football field and the surrounding performing arts and aquatic center. It is one of the highest performing schools in the state with small English Learner and low Socio-Economic (SES) populations. The school staff prides itself on cultural diversity and the positive climate it has created. About eighty percent of my faculty, staff, and administration are white with most living within the school district boundaries and each possessing an eagerness to bring their children to the school in which they work. My school has a student population that is just over half Latino, about 10% African American, 40% white, with most ethnic groups experiencing middle class life in a booming suburban town boasting five golf courses, two new public libraries, rapidly expanding malls, and every-present parks and playing fields.

Jefferson High School is a different story. Built in the 1960s, it sits on a busy main street amidst one of the most destitute cities of the Southwest. Recently blessed with a hopeful economic streak in the late 1990s that doubled its population, it was quickly ruined by the recent home foreclosure crisis and the termination of military bases nearby. The ethnic makeup of the school and area is almost entirely Latino (predominantly immigrants from Mexico), with a small African American population and a nearly insignificant white population. In contrast, the staff at Jefferson High is mostly white, all of whom make long commutes from the surrounding wealthier areas. Only

Jefferson High  
Basic Schematic Diagram

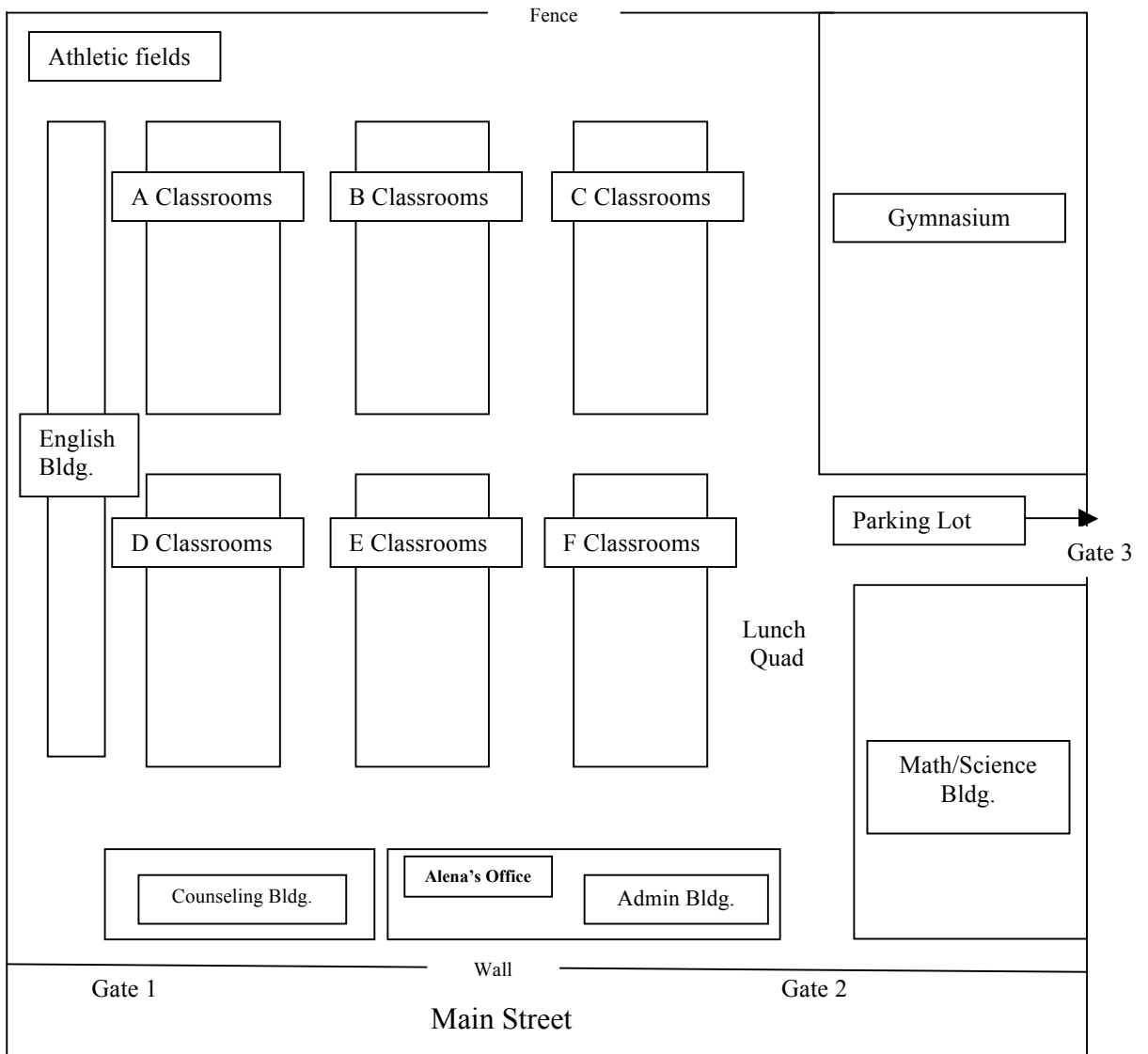


Fig.1

about 20% of the teachers are Latino, and they commute too. Principal Swann commutes over twenty minutes a day each way. Nearly all the of 2500 students at Jefferson High receive free and reduced lunch supplements from the federal government and the median income of families in the area hovers at the poverty level.

A noticeable climate of pollution, poverty, and violence was also present. During the 2010-2011 school years, there were over 2800 violent and property-related crimes reported within the school community boundaries. Four shootings took place in 2011 within 100 feet of the school perimeter and each involved students or former students of Jefferson High. Of the incoming freshman, one in five had been in a fight within the last twelve months and one in four had been seriously bullied and contemplated suicide. Over 20% had used alcohol or marijuana in the previous thirty days. Additionally peppering the school was the ubiquitous combination of stench from neighboring fast food restaurants, agricultural aromas from nearby animal and crop production, and fallout from the tri-county area emission pollutants due to the trapped air from inversion layer effects. Three medicinal marijuana shops and multiple bail bond businesses are within a quick walk of the school, and most store fronts appear to be struggling due to the unattended facades and empty parking lots. Police cars and private security vehicles are noticeably more common, unattended children and obese elderly in electric wheelchairs dot the landscape, and metal bars cover the windows in homes near the high school.

While I felt the positive energy that uniquely emitted from Jefferson High, its spirited slogans shining from lighted signs and the common laughter that existed amongst students, it looked and felt prison-like. Posters dotted the hallways with inspirational

quotes that called for “Perseverance” and the marquee impressed upon students “To Never Give Up!” Intermixed was the reality of a policed enclosure, lots of chain link, and the *tagging* on some of the walls and bathroom stalls that often stated “fuck you *pendejo*” (Chicano slang for someone stupid) and “suck it Kemosabe” (nickname of Tonto, Lone Ranger’s Native American sidekick). The major ray of hope symbolically emitted from those who seemed counter-cultural or who proudly wore their JROTC uniforms. Alena liked the JROTC unit, and as she emphatically cried in response, “We are fighting the *ghetto*-image of incompetence,” trying to create a positive image and give students a sense of hope. Beyond the stark imagery of Jefferson high was the stigma of being a Program Improvement (PI) high school. Being a PI schools meant a disproportionate number of poor, minority, at-risk, violent, hungry, learning deficient, and mentor-needy students. The unique challenge that Alena faced was juggling the time and energy to address entrenched stigmas, a diminished sense of communal self-worth, a healthy sense of order, and real strides in alleviating inequality through the learning process. During my first initial contact, Alena made it clear that her circumstance was “different” and that even comrades in her district did not appreciate the gravity of it.

Struggling to employ good people was a clear example of being different. It has been hard for Jefferson High to recruit and retain high quality leaders and teachers because of the perpetual environmental realities that existed there. A science position opened up a month into the school year, “...and we have one candidate” after an extensive search, and he “was awful.” Because most of the faculty and staff saw their job as a job and less an extension of their community and their immediate lives, regular

turnover amid less personal investment had taken place. Principal Swann struggled to fill key positions that guided and maintained school culture. For example, three football coaches had been hired in less than three years. In addition, a regular revolving door of administrative staff has meant an entirely new assistant principal corps, a new activities director, and a new athletic director... all in the last year. One senior faculty member shook his head in frustration when offering a brief history of his twenty-one year tenure at Jefferson High and described how he had seen “seven principals and one clown of an interim.” Obstacles also include an inability to find teachers that met minimal credential requirements in math and science and a difficulty in maintaining a seasoned and competent security and secretarial staff. Principal Swann often complained that many teachers were “...not connecting, won’t open their ears... can’t *see* the kids, but have great content knowledge.”

An example of the internal morale and cultural struggle at Jefferson High was the ongoing battle to secure that coveted position of head football coach. The high school in which I currently teach claims over twenty football coaches, with most of them being on-campus teachers and garnering that hope of someday taking on the glory and title of varsity head. Jefferson High has yet to see the dedication from staff that comes with a stable and successful program and an iconic coach. The Jefferson High football program has had a losing record going back for more than ten years and a revolving door of varsity head coaches that mimics the revolving door of principals. This turnover contributed to the vacillating attitudes about winning versus character building. The new head coach this year is Jerry Tuss and his troubles began with the hiring process. Coach

Tuss is an African-American transplant from a Southern state and an unknown face to the school. He beat out the traditional next-in-line assistant coach and Jefferson High teacher and was awarded the post and a rare full-time physical education teacher position despite concerns expressed by tenured coaches and teachers. It was rumored that the new head coach was an acquaintance of the superintendent. Coach Tuss was a regular in Principal Swann's office and he had her support because he was "... raising good men," but was already and too frequently coming to her office for distressed reasons. On one occasion, Alena heard rumors from one of her assistant principals that Coach Tuss had fired the entire coaching staff out of frustration of their disloyalty and failure to buy into his coaching ways. Alena relayed,

...Jerry is not the most organized guy and I am hearing about that way too much. The Athletic Director wants to get rid of him, the Superintendent wants to keep him, no staff is helping him... and I heard he fired the assistant coaches, doing this all without the AD. The AD is getting sucked into all this negative talk... I need to take care of this!

Many of the teachers that had previously been part of the coaching staff from the prior head football coach were leaving Jefferson High at the closing bell and heading over to their rival high school, Desert Hills High School, to coach there instead. They had also symbolically fled during the school day, going so far as to wear Desert Hills football coaching apparel during school hours out of protest over the outside appointment as well as to dispel their association with the losing program. The wearing of rival high school apparel by five white male teachers at Jefferson High served as a daily reminder



of the battle Alena was up against to advance the morale of the teachers, let alone the students that observed this protest. Those who remained loyal to the program were not much better, regularly trying to sabotage the newly hired coach by randomly missing practices, leaving young men unsupervised during critical moments, and contesting the head coach in open forums. Alena called Coach Tuss in for a quick moment one day and the following dialogue and actions ensued:

*Coach Tuss enters the office after a phone call from Alena earlier that afternoon requesting him to meet her around 1:00 p.m. for a discussion. He enters the office at 1:00 p.m. and is clearly uncomfortable and under stress. He regularly glances at me in the corner seemingly seeking my approval and sympathy for his circumstance.*

**Alena:** “I got hit with rumors that you fired all the coaches... the football coaches are not happy, I told them to work it out with you... I appreciate all that you do, building good men and a program...tell me what is valid, who is fired and why?”

*Coach Tuss discussed his drama for twenty minutes straight, a monologue, disjointed in his arguments, but appears sincere despite being under the gun. His primary argument is that he has character, follows through with concerns about his team and assistants, and is not getting consistency or proper mentoring from the other coaches, affirming that they had been warned.*

**Alena:** *listens intently, multiple “uhhs.” She was writing things down on a pad of legal paper, but is clearly annoyed that her question was not*

*directly answered and restates her original question after his frazzled response. “There is heresay that all of the coaches are fired... how is that possible?”*

**Coach Tuss:** Two coaches were released.

**Alena:** *gestures in support* ...I agree with you coach. The superintendent demands loyalty and character, particularly from the football program. It sounds like these guys are unprofessional.”

*Coach Tuss rises to leave because football practice begins in a few minutes. Immediately following the brief meeting, one of the Assistant Principals, Dominique, walks in and immediately comments to Coach Tuss on the situation, referring to the Jefferson High Coaches that fled to coach at Desert Hills.*

**Dominique:** It’s sad that adults act this way.

*The door closes as Coach Tuss exits in frustration.*

**Alena:** *Stares at Dominique with a defeated tone.* I am not hiring a new football coach right now.... Am I talking with rosie-colored glasses? Tell me? Are we progressing? I see young men, not thugs walking around... I know the caliber of those coaches [coaches who remained at Jefferson High], you can’t do old school here, street mentality, can’t do that anymore, slammin’ kids.

Alena also explained that an additional personal and professional problem had arisen from the instability of the head football coaching position. Because schools were essentially competing not just on the football field, but both academically and in the

public eye, the rival principal allowed and encouraged the mutiny of coaches from Alena's school to his own. Instead of recognizing the tension created by allowing Alena's teachers to come to his school to coach, he embraced them and fostered a poisonous climate because of its positive influence on his football team and the public acclaim that came with it. Alena said she personally confronted the Desert Hills principal about his acceptance of her teachers and coaches, but received little empathy.

**Alena:** I said to [Desert Hills principal], 'How dare you, stealing our PE guys as coaches' ...he is clueless! Football is the generator of school spirit, it's a big to do. Neighboring schools have stellar programs, magnifying my bad program. The PE teachers that fled are shit! They are dragging down Jefferson High, they are here for the check.

An ironic twist culminated at the end of the football season for Desert Hills High School. The season was essentially declared a bust for them and all games were forfeited due to the recruitment of an ineligible player from another school district. Upon the news, Alena met with Coach Tuss in her office and smirked, "Sucks...If you do sketchy things?... and they have no sympathy for us...keep the boys encouraged."

A recent survey conducted by the school administrators because of an application for a *Safe Schools Grant* revealed that there were major morale concerns by both the students and staff at Jefferson High. Teachers felt that only about 20% of their students were motivated to learn and over half the faculty and staff felt that violence, alcohol, and harassment were debilitating affects countering the learning goals of the school. Less than half the students felt safe at school and only one-third felt connected to the inner

workings of the school culture. The Academic Performance Index (API) Score for Jefferson High has persisted below 700, making it one of the lowest performing schools in the country. The winter of 2011 was particularly stressful for the administration and faculty at Jefferson High because Federal Program Monitors (FPMs) were observing and collecting data about the teaching and learning taking place there. During a week-long period, a series of “Five-minute walkthroughs” were conducted by government officials and consultants to determine if certain organizational school improvement models and interventions were in place. These appeared to the principals of the Sierra district more as “scare tactics” than any possible avenue for understanding their multi-year improvement plans. Despite great pains with the best of intentions and visible signs of student achievement efforts, Principal Swann regrettably was informed that her 2011-2012 API scores dropped even further. Nearly two-thirds of her entire student population did not meet basic proficiency standards in middle school level algebra and English. When considering schools of a similar population, Jefferson High sits just above average.

#### *A Typical Day for Principal Swann at Jefferson High*

Alena was “slow-moving” in the morning. She usually rose at 5:15 a.m. Her husband stayed asleep a bit longer and her children were all gone now, so she was on her own as she made a fruit-smoothy shake to kick start the day. Even though this was not a nutrition study, it was apparent that both principals I observed during my study struggled to find normalcy and balance in their commitment to staying and eating healthy,

particularly in the morning. Observations of meal choices were limited to the consumption of local fast food that was often chaotically collected by random people at irregular times. I also noticed the frequent scavenging through candy and peanut jars strewn through the front administrative office. Alena never displayed or admitted to a regular exercise routine. The time commitment and urgency of the job as principal had the added pressure of early and constant attendance to their site with little consideration of her need to eat or get appropriate rest. The official school day began at 7:30 a.m. and ended 3pm with no official snack or lunch break in-between for administrators.

Alena's commute to school was about twenty to thirty minutes from the time she left her house until she enters her office at 7:00 a.m. She was usually one of the first to be on campus and tried to use that quiet time to settle in, make a list of daily obligations, check her calendar for the day, and respond to a few important emails. That quiet time was always short-lived. For the next hour, a regular stream of people would stop by to say "good morning," remind her of key events, sign-off on paperwork, or just contemplate how to handle discipline issues from the day before. On one particular day, a plan of attack needed to be brainstormed to address the previous day of events that included a girl-fight at lunch, a pot-smoking incident during PE class, and an angry parent waiting in the lobby regarding a student's grade. In the morning, the administrative team had a *tag...your it policy*, which meant that in the morning if you are in the vicinity of the immediate issue, you get to deal with it. This policy had mixed results that often punished eager administrators with less complicated morning lives. Alena was the only administrator without young children, so she often bore the brunt of

morning issues. She seemed very sensitive and obliging to the fellow female administrators with who she worked that were bound to the complications of young children.

The bell ringing in the morning was a welcomed sound for administrators to get everyone on campus more quiet and focused on the mission of teaching and learning. The first bell at 7:25 a.m. was a warning bell and created with it a noticeable sense of anxiety for the staff and students while the opposite emotions existed for the administrative team. From Alena's perspective in her office that morning, she could hear the final greetings and posturing of students rushing to make it to class or face the consequences of detentions for tardiness. A sly male student made it a habit of walking between Alena's office and the E Classrooms (see Fig. 1) and antagonizing her every 7:27 a.m. by barking like a pit-bull. It drove Alena nuts and she would scream back through her office wall... "Knock it off... get to class!" It was hard to consistently hand out detentions to students for making animal noises during passing periods, particularly when she was at a loss for who was actually making the sounds given the hundreds that passed by.

Near 8:00 a.m. every morning, Alena would deliberately regroup to prepare her *Words of Wisdom* that she added to the 8:30 a.m. student announcements over the intercom. It usually involved an inspirational quote, a reminder of important holidays, key school events, and then ended always with "...make it a great day... or not!" Her voice was commanding and inspiring and she seemed to enjoy those moments, believing her words made a difference. Following those early morning announcements, activities

involved walking around campus to make sure the site was basically sound and secure, and “checking in with the major players” on campus such as head of security, the administrative team, athletic director, and head football coach. There was never a truly normal morning despite the goal of following a basic plan, “because of drama” and the inconsistency of nearly 100 faculty and staff and 2500 kids, and the fact that “shit just happens.” Before one could blink, the end of the first period bell rang at 9:00 a.m. and supervisory break duty began. Alena and the security and administrative team would briskly walk out to observe students in the most common areas for about fifteen minutes. These break periods occurred four to five times a day every hour and a half and were required supervisory duty for the administrative team. Breaks between class introduced a welcome break or an annoying interruption to the rhythm of other demands, depending on the mood of the day.

Between the morning activities and the end of the school day, Alena was pummeled with meetings. She described that about “30%” of those meeting were planned, while the overwhelming majority were a result of spontaneous issues that unsystematically emerged. I informally mentioned to her one morning a recent London School of Economics and Harvard University study that had received some media hype on the amount of time CEOs and leaders in the business world spend on meetings (Bandiera et al, 2011). The academics behind the study spent a pre-specified week with nearly 100 of the world’s top company leaders and concluded that only about 15% of their time involves working alone while the rest of the time is spent on meetings. The study tried to correlate the quality of those meeting times as with either *insiders* (those

working in the company) and *outsiders* (those more personally and socially beneficial). Those leaders that spent more time with insiders tended to get more benefit (company performance) from meetings. Alena was unaware of the study and merely related that “it made sense” and “was somewhat relatable.” Beyond the few times in which Alena’s daughters stopped by for a visit or a spontaneous lunch, or the occasional vendor soliciting an educational software sale, I rarely witnessed Alena engaging in *outsider* meetings during the purview of the work day (less than 5%). The Harvard study concluded that on average CEOs spend nearly 50% of their time on *outsider* meetings.

A meeting dealing with complaints from unpaid referees was on her plate this morning. Following the morning break and to further complicate the drama related to the Head Football Coach, Alena requested that the Athletic Director meet with her to discuss why referees at the previous weekend’s football game had gone unpaid and had called Alena personally to complain. John, the Athletic Director, was in the midst of his first months as an administrator and was responsible. He often displayed a meek and appeasing tone with the referees and veteran coaches, yet conversely displayed a stubborn dismissiveness with Alena. Alena attributed this to the fact that he was a privileged white man who “came from money” and that he does not have respect for others, particularly black women in authority. She felt John waited to the last minute to plan things that were vitally important, such as the organizing and planning of paying low-level referees or pressing coaches to have budgets and fundraise to supplement their programs. Alena described John as someone who hoped that the world would just respond to his untimely requests and that people would make adjustments to his needs



and own personal sense of justice. She regretted ever hiring John and was equally frustrated with the alternatives. “I picked him [amongst other potential candidates]... and I got to make up for that... I chose him...shit!” John was also recognized by Alena and many district leaders as a “...disappearance artist, a joke, and a victim.” Alena additionally describes John as someone who won’t follow protocols because it is too much work and he won’t get administrative approval before making purchases. Alena requested John’s presence in her office that morning to discuss the formal complaint of the referees.

*John entered the office and sat across from her desk. This event served as the only time I was asked to step outside the office and sit across from the principal’s secretary, but was privy to the conversation because I was still within earshot of the interaction. The conversation lasted for about five minutes shortly after 9:00 a.m.*

**Alena:** “I see you drive in a couple of times after the bell!... Lot of things going on... talked to Mr. Richards [head referee]...need you to take responsibility...need you to explain and be clearer. I need you to communicate, with clarity, and honesty. This is the unpleasant part of your job.”

*John could barely get a word in... lots of “but...but...but.” Alena was aggressive, stern, condescending, and loud, clearly at her wits end with him. The referees were “pissed,” not paid, and calling her and the district office for answers. John tried to explain that budgets are tight and that there is no money, but can’t get his argument in.*

**Alena:** “If we don’t have the money, we don’t pay. We need documentation... if you don’t document, the ref does not get paid... we cannot transfer money... athletics needs to deal with it...need to be honest ahead of time... you need to be up front with the refs! You can eliminate stress by being organized, communicating, and being honest. We can’t always be in an emergency situation. You need to get teams to do more fundraising. You have to make that happen. We have to think outside the box and not be defeated... Don’t fight me on this! You object to everything I say... I don’t want you to be in a place where you always say you are sorry... I don’t want to feel like I’m getting angry every time I talk to you... you need to step up and be an administrator!”

*The secretary shook her head a bit. I asked her if this kind of banter has ever occurred. This was the third in recent months with John that she knows of and said it was getting nowhere. It was a common and intense tactic used by Alena given her frustrations with many staff on campus. Alena continued, but now the tone shifted to John’s overall performance as an administrator.*

**Alena:** “There was a fight on campus... you walk away. You need to stop and be in charge. Furious parents observed this! Right now you are not on the administrative team, you are on the teacher team! That’s scary. On the administrative team we have information that they [teachers] are not privy to... if you have one foot on my island and one foot on theirs, we can’t work. Of course I support the teachers, but I need to feel comfortable with you and trust you. We come together as one. We must always march out there with the same attitude and repouire. I need you to step up off the coaching and teaching island and be an administrator...so

think about it over the weekend, then come see me on Monday... what it means to be on a team... not learning on fire...alright!”

*John had shut down about two minutes into the meeting and quietly listened to the rant. Confrontations like these were regular occurrences for Alena and were accompanied with questionable results. That morning John departed the office after being essentially scolded and given an ultimatum by his supervisor with an unemotional look on his face like the event never occurred.*

Immediately following John’s exodus, Dominique entered with two young African-American girls engaged in an argument who also were late to school. Alena gestured to me, “I have adopted these two girls.” One of the girls replied, “You aren’t my momma!” Alena laughed and declared, “Be glad that you aren’t!” The two girls had been in a regular feud during the course of high school and both were on state mandated *IEPs* (Individual Educational Plan) with the goal of academic and social improvement considering their learning challenges. Each day every administrator was observed to commit an average of one hour to IEPs and the bureaucratic actions required from them. Federal law required their attention and attendance to any meeting that specifically addressed the learning and behavior needs for special education students. Resulting conclusions from IEP meetings had to correlate with pedagogical and social protocols as signed off by administrators. The behavioral issues for these two girls include fighting, disruption, truancy, and general disrespect of their fellow students and teachers. All these issues were previously addressed in the multiple IEP meetings with parents and advocates, ultimately granting levity and a softening of punishments due to their

disabilities. Alena and school officials were continually placed in a precarious position because no formal meeting with teachers and administrators had occurred up to this point during this particular year, which was a legal requirement. Because the protocols had not been officially followed and plans not updated due to the lack of priority and their overwhelming schedules, responding to disciplinary events like this with rigid enforcement was problematic. Alena related that many parents were aware of this legal and practical dilemma.

To be more specific, the administrative team at Jefferson High was overwhelmed with hundreds of IEPs (near 20% of the students) that required regular attention. This attention included the subsequent meetings that were to legally occur with an administrator for each student each year and the protocols that must be documented and followed. Alena and the assistant principals often resorted to the bully pulpit, informal scoldings, and spontaneous one-on-one meetings to hold things together. Alena targeted the girls by saying, “You guys are late again! Why? You guys are taking me to another place! Control yourself... an ugliness is coming out.” The first girl, Marchelle, rebutted and said that she was “having my period.” Alena looked doubtful, but sent her off to class. Chastity was given a bit more. She was fifteen and had a strikingly worn toughness about her sporting a stereotypical gang look of baggy shirt and jeans, off-centered baseball cap, and angered face. She had previously been suspended twenty times.

**Alena:** My school is in an uproar... partly because of you. You say you are untouchable. We are gonna suspend you every time you cause trouble.

You are never in class... Need you to tell me what is going on? Do you want to go? Do you want to go *bye*? What do you want to do? I am done! Too much every day... Be in school, go to class, do your work... stay out of drama... pick new friends!

Chastity sat in quiet defiance and was then sent off to class. Alena relayed that both girls' IEPs "... are way out of compliance. I am being nice at this point, their Mom is furious and teachers failed to do the IEP, so I am trying to hold things together."

Following the girl-fight drama and nearing 9:30 a.m., Catalina, the second Assistant Principal, informally dropped into Alena's office. Informal drop-ins by fellow administrators was observed to occur dozens of times during each day. Catalina was a young Latina who had a quick wit and a fun, distracting energy about her. She had just arrived at Jefferson High this year because she had been forced to move from one of the other high schools in the district due to a "superintendent's philosophy of rotating leadership throughout the schools to give them experience." Alena did not know Catalina well and it was a difficult road of trust-building given that Catalina was young and inexperienced and missing many professional days due to her recent pregnancy. Her informal visits were usually social, either to tell a funny story or to solicit direction about an institutional concern in her responses to the needs or problems of the staff. Regular two to three minute encounters occurred at least five times a day between Catalina and Alena. One of the tasks Catalina was responsible for was the supervising and directing of a *dual-enrollment* program that allowed staff to teach classes that additionally gave students junior college credit. This particular day, Catalina had a challenge because one

of her dual-enrollment teachers took the onus to personally reduce his student class load by using the partnering junior college protocols to exit students. He was manipulatively communicating with the loosely affiliated junior college admissions staff before discussing any concerns with administrative staff at Jefferson High and officiating the removal of his students. Catalina entered the principal's office this morning particularly peeved at this problematic teacher and the confusion he was creating.

A steady stream of encounters like this occurred each day with the multiplicity of people on her staff. To demonstrate the pace and tone of events, the following example of dealings took place over a ten-minute period and were typical of the fast-paced happenings that interwove the planned and unplanned.

*9:35—Catalina entered the room and checks in for about thirty seconds.*

**Alena:** *looked up from her desk to speak with Catalina as she is responding to an email regarding the two girls she had just spoken with. What's up with your boy, Jake? About the college? About trying to get kids out! Jake only wants to teach accelerated kids and sends an email to the junior college to get lower kids out?*

**Catalina:** I need prayers today! No use trying to understand because this is crazy!

*Alena laughed and raised her arms as if at a church revival. Catalina scurried out with no real direction from Alena. The encounter served more as a confirmation of the drama than a seeking of direction. As she leaves, a young Latino boy casually walked in (Alena has an "open door*

*policy” for all students and staff... “but I need to close it more.”) and asked Alena if she wanted to buy some cookies to support a student club.*

**Alena:** No thank you, baby! *Student walked out and Alena glanced over at me as she returns to her typing and email responses. Got an email from a teacher about a broken chair... Jesus!*

Alena regularly complained, even talked out loud to herself about the lack of common sense that teachers had about the simplest of problems (a broken chair, late homework, low students they want out) and their inability deal with them or to discern who the appropriate staff was to truly help them. On a daily basis, teachers and staff would directly send her emails on what Alena regarded as menial issues, or conversely wait until the last minute to discuss important matters that had now blown up.

Alena briskly rose from her desk and walked down the hallway to address another matter with Maria, the accounting manager for the school. Her office was about twenty steps down the administrative hall among the other assistant principals and the discipline office. Traveling from Alena’s office, one headed down a narrow administrative hallway which would open up into a quad of four administrative offices. About a dozen chairs outside the respective doors were filled with students anticipating the distribution of their punishments. Jean, the secretary to the assistant principals, sat at a desk in the middle of the quad area and organized the flow of traffic. Maria’s office sat at the extreme southern end of the quad, distant enough to stay away from the business of the discipline action, but close enough to always be aware of the noises that were a part of its existence.

The issue with Maria was about the resources and purchasing order Alena needed for an African-American community dinner that was to take place on campus at the end of the month. Alena needed legal and financial guidance from Maria and jumped right into the large chair facing Maria's desk.

**Alena:** So, how much do we have? *Alena and Maria appeared to have an unspoken sixth sense with each other given that no theme was mentioned as they only used pronouns to ask each other questions. I finally deciphered the conversation hours later to discover the issue was regarding the purchasing order for the community dinner.*

*Alena's cell phone rang and she must answer it. It is the Athletic Director wanting to know how to respond to a situation in which a football player and local pastor are handing out gift cards to other athletes... she says she will call him back. She reconnected with Maria and inquires about where the resources could come from and what specific budget item could be charged.*

**Alena:** Where to charge things...to Title I, to what account? *Maria nods. Am I doing good? Maria nods again. We ok, did we do ok last year? A third nod, Maria was a woman of few words.*

9:40 a.m.—*Alena stood up without transition and scampers quickly back to her office for another meeting that was scheduled to take place with her Assistant Principals Catalina and Dominique. The agenda item was the writing of a Safe Schools Grant potentially worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in aid to the school. The ladies were waiting as Alena re-enters*



*her office. Before they begin, Dominique inquired about an African-American community dinner and the speech Alena was scheduled to give.*

**Alena:** I am nervous, I was asked to introduce a big dog speaker in the African-American organization.

**Dominique:** You want to be a big shot, roll up your sleeves and do it!

The elbowing banter was interrupted by Coach Tuss who abruptly and unexpectedly sticks his head into the office. The coach began to complain about one of the teachers who had mutinied to the rival high school and was again “wearing a shirt” of the rival high school. Another teacher apparently had called him out publicly during a PE class and Coach Tuss wanted her to be aware of the mounting tension that students had observed. He also felt a buzz was generated around campus and suggested administrators be on the look out. She acknowledged the comments with a head nod like it was not the first time and the ladies began working on the grant for the next thirty minutes. It was still morning.

Any sort of visible break or lunch took place between 11:00 until possibly after school, sometimes never at all. Mondays were a bit more reliable, given that these afternoons were set aside as formal administrative meetings. From 1:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m. every Monday, the principal, three assistant principals, athletic director, student activities director, and lead administrative secretary all gathered to discuss the calendar for the week and major issues. They met in Alena’s office, which was long and narrow enough to place her personal desk at one end, and a long conference table at another (see

Fig. 2). Possibly the most noticeable gesture was how each administrator immediately emptied their pockets and sidebelts of their numerous communications devices onto the conference table. Each had at minimum of two cell phones (one personal and one district allocated) and a medium sized walkie-talkie that continually buzzed. They would turn the volume down, but out of safety and necessity, always kept it alive due to the continual stream of physical plant or disciplinary concerns with the security team. Each player usually carried with them an iPad or an appointment book to keep their duties in order, so the huge table that seemed overdone was dwarfed by the folders, paperwork, calendars, and technology.

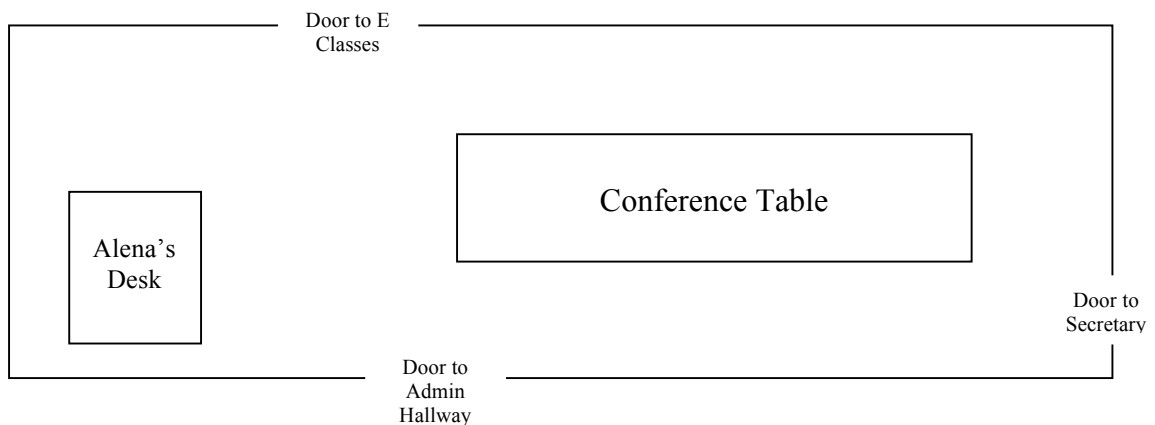


Fig. 2

Alena prepared an agenda which she regularly emailed the administrative team ahead of time. It was always colorful and included an inspirational quote at the top (see Fig. 3) and a ten-point order of business. On this Monday, the items to be discussed

included the calendar for the week, upcoming 9th grade parent meetings, gleaning the data from recent student and parent surveys, a planned academic boot-camp, and each administrators' department reports. Two of the assistant principals were not in attendance, which was not unusual. Catalina was absent due to her managing the distribution of standardized tests to students who had been absent during the scheduled time of the previous week. Theresa was caught up in a drug-related pat-down and consumed with the due process required for issuing a suspension. Because of ethical and procedural mandates from education code and due process laws, suspensions included hours of interviewing witnesses, gathering and processing legal documentation, and correspondence with the on-site police officer and relevant parents or guardians. During the course of the 2010-2011 school-year, Jefferson High encountered more than 600 suspensions. The state average was about half that.

Alena's secretary, Elizabeth, sat at the principal's desk taking dictation of the meeting and simultaneously manipulated the school's calendar and its website when the first line of business began. To gain access to the school calendar and reserve a building space or required resources, each staff member needed to submit a yellow form known as an *Application for Activity* that formally required the leadership team to acknowledge, amend, and approve. Today's items included but were not limited to a request by the design teacher for a prom fashion show, the activities director for a lunch-time comedy show, the dance teachers for cheer tryouts, and the PE departments for a fitness challenge and fun-run day in April. Alena poured over the twenty to thirty yellow forms with everyone as she concurrently struggled to down apples and peanut butter and rummage

through the large glass candy jar in the center of the table. Questions and comments such as “does this conflict with CST testing (state standardized tests)” or “what about a pre-parent meeting?” or “I think the basketball team has already requested the gym for that date” and “we need details if security is needed” filled the room and held up approvals.

Unanticipated concerns surfaced at an almost humorous pace for what many would naively consider tedious events and issues. For example, to cover some of the costs for any major event, it was suggested that students could be used as volunteer translators for the Spanish-speaking parents in attendance. On the surface, it appeared a great solution to cost-saving measures that could have required the expensive hiring of professionals. Potential problems immediately sprouted such as the fact that students needed to be vetted, trained, and coordinated. Alena was particularly concerned that when she spoke at such events, her words were represented appropriately, and not by students. For the upcoming 9<sup>th</sup> grade parent night, an interaction occurred over Alena’s desire to have Catalina translate the speech and not a student. Because Catalina was to be in attendance for the night, Catalina seemed an easy nod to do the simultaneous translation of Spanish for the crowd. This was a potentially dangerous commitment for Catalina. I had heard a comment from Dominique in an earlier interaction describing how she had concerns that Catalina had misrepresented herself as a fluent Spanish-speaker when hired by the district. “I am having heart palpitations thinking of it,” replied



## Admin. Meeting

Character cannot be developed. Only through the experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

- Helen Keller

1. Calendar
2. Incoming 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Parent Meeting
3. Student and Parent Survey
4. Auto Dialer for Survey
5. Standardized Test Teacher-Student Meetings
6. Test Bootcamp
7. Career Fair
8. Attendance
9. Discipline
10. Counseling

Fig 3

Catalina to Alena's request. I clandestinely withheld this information and watched Catalina awkwardly dance and proceed to describe her other overwhelming commitments for the night. Alena was forced to search elsewhere based on Catalina's jumpy and emotional response. This agenda item alone took over an hour.

A good part of the meeting thereafter was consumed with needed administrative guidance on various school matters. Which teacher would be sent to a cultural sensitivity training, who would organize the *Healthy Kids Survey*, where would the AV-screen for the upcoming student assembly be taken from, should failing students be able to attend an upcoming assembly? This twenty minute focus was broken up for about ten minutes as Alena gagged and choked nearly in need of resuscitation due to inhaling a peanut she had quickly thrown down her throat during a brief lull in the chatter. I was faced with one of those moments that Ruth Behar described in her more personal anthropological work, *The Vulnerable Observer*. In it Behar described how we as social scientists are embedded in a dialectic of connectedness and otherness, sometimes forcing us to choose between the standoffish witnessing and recording that is part of science, or choosing to fully engage in order to get closer to that which we study (Behar, 1996). I chose to help and get Alena some water as the others stood by in confusion. It is not as heroic as the characters that Behar recounts, such as photographing and recording the events of a dying child drowning in a mudslide as nations idly stand by in order to tell the world of third world horrors. I oddly thought of Behar in that moment and will never look at principals eating peanuts the same. I also later thought that the peanut-choking event was a great metaphor for how principals in low-performing schools look and feel... choking but not dying, and people on the outside looking in with worry but not fully understanding the scope of the problem or what to do.

When Alena eventually recovered, the group attended to the crucial upcoming standardized tests. Standardized tests were administered in the spring by every state in

the nation and represent the bulk of data that is used by both state and federal governments to assess whether students and schools were succeeding. The majority of the tests which begin at second grade and continue through high school are primarily concerned with math and English skills. Alena wanted to the bulk of leadership meetings to address this topic even though it did not get its due diligence. She pressed her agenda of practicing the test in each class and offering supplemental teaching beyond the normal school time.

**Alena:** Each teacher needs to spend five minutes with each student... to talk about the test... bell to bell instruction. Plant a seed, not give a heart attack. [Last year] I had a testing bootcamp last spring... two hour session...for below basic [students] and far below basic [students]... it raised us up twenty-nine point.

*All of the Assistant Principals frown. These positive results from last year offer a mixed blessing. This meant they would do it again and give up their spring break vacations to make sure this boot-camp for the lowest performing students went well.*

**Alena:** English, language arts, math...powerpoints, test practice, email the teachers the powerpoint to prepare. We need to gather the data to figure out who to invite, need to figure out if we can do it, snacks, which teachers can do 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.?

*The remaining hour would be spent answering those questions... who would be the data point person, who would gather the teachers, who*

*would be the best teachers, how to select the students, where to get the funding, etc.*

To help understand some of the minutia that fills the gaps in each day, the following chain of events were observed in the afternoon. This all took place over the span of approximately fifteen minutes and was typical of the various matters that regularly kept the principal on the move. It was certainly contained in what I have acknowledged as a “typical day” and not necessarily specifically addressed in the job description for the principal.

- Athletic Director called on the phone to discuss a matter related to a misbehaving student because he is at a loss for understanding the appropriate course of action.
- Math department chair casually walked into the principal’s office to ask a question related to the authority and usage of keys for certain buildings and who can use them.
- The technical support staffer entered to replace a keyboard in which the “h” key does not work.
- Security solicited the principal over the walkie-talkie for directions on an electrical shortage in a classroom.
- An Assistant Principal was livid about an email sent by another staff member and wanted emotional support and advice on how to respond to the staff.
- A teacher entered the room to ask direction on how to handle a letter of recommendation for a student that is questionable .
- As Assistant Principal checked in about approval of a flyer for a club.



By 3:00 p.m. and the departing of the last students from campus, the day finally slowed and it was “time now to get work done.” It is in the afternoon that the greater part of planning, emailing, and signing off of legal documents took place. Alena declared during this time, “I hate my signature now.” At 3:30 p.m. was the first noticeable change in Alena’s intensity. Her body relaxed, she sat comfortably in her chair as she drank a diet coke like it was a martini, slowly sipping it and savoring its medicinal value. She looked at the 200-plus emails awaiting her attention. “I never get to this.” She has her yellow legal pad placed in the middle of her desk and she goes through each point with the tip of her pen as she slouches over. At the top of the list was the need to call the director of her doctoral program to confirm an upcoming meeting. Next, she began to scan through a stack of computer paper with data on student failure rates that had been generated by the lead counselor. Over 25% of all grades issued at Jefferson were F’s. One teacher issued an F to nearly 50% of his students. Another teacher’s grades were almost 70% D’s or F’s, “...and he taught an elective class... How do you fail at a class that is chosen?... insanity!” Alena began to think about a plan and she was frustrated. She began to solicit my ideas and our discussion turned for a few moments to the hiring process.

The bulk of failing grades and students appeared to be generated from a peculiar group of ten teachers, representing about 20% of the faculty which she felt were worthless. Alena was generally down on all her faculty claiming that she had no “superstar teachers” on her campus and that she was plagued by a crew of mediocrity. She hoped her ability to hire new faculty in the spring would give energy to the flatness.

The option of firing mediocre teachers appeared pointless given the time and energy it would take to fully process it, the legal expense placed upon the district (nearly \$200,000 per disputed case), and the reality that there are not good qualified people eager and available to her even if she did have open space. Alena seemed paralyzed around the issue of improving teaching at her school. To further inflate the matter, this year the teachers' union and school district had reached an impasse during contract negotiations. Teacher salaries had been cut for the previous two year and regular protests and demonstrations along the sidewalks surrounding her campus reminded her that tough economic times and further pay cuts would not make things any easier.

Alena and the administrative team would informally gather at some point around 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. just after the final bulk of teachers left campus. Athletic activities such as football practice or JROTC drills provided a busy energy until 6:00 p.m. The exit of athletes and coaches gave permission for Alena to consider going home herself, which on average was around 7:00 p.m. "During my first two years as principal, I was also here later, and every Saturday and Sunday. Now usually once a month [here on Saturday or Sunday]."

When I asked Alena what made someone a great principal in a school of disadvantaged youth, she replied, "Swag... It is something about presence, a confidence level. It does not come with title... They [those with swag] *get it*." The term *swag* emerged during a discussion about race and cultural sensitivity. Alena was keen on finding teachers that could be potential leaders within her school, and regularly searched for those that *got it*. *Getting it* for Alena meant cultural sensitivity, connection to the

place of poverty and oppression, and a palpable spirit of fearless conviction.

Interestingly, her doctoral thesis topic was on “courageous leadership.” When I asked her if any white teachers on her campus had swag, she said “one guy, John... But he is married to a black woman.” The other administrators in the room laughed at Alena when she answered the question.

Alena uniquely invested herself in the political networks that considered the plight of African-Americans, women, and the poor. Exemplifying this was her attendance at a fall conference for *African-American Administrators and Superintendents* at the state capital during the winter break. With the goal of ensuring greater equity and funding for poor and minority schools, the African-American leaders hoped their presence and lobbying of government officials would create a sense of urgency and attention. Stark data from the meetings confirmed her understanding that racism was alive and well in America. “African-Americans make up 6.8% of the school population, 29% of prisons are black, 1-2% of school principals are black!” She seemed guardedly optimistic about her involvement in the group and it fed her need to be a part of the bigger picture outside the microcosm of her immediate school site.

Attending the conference also was Dominique, Principal Swann’s most trusted friend and assistant principal at Jefferson High. Her recollection of the conference and the state of affairs for minority students was less enthusiastic.

I was totally frustrated with some of the Democrats... they are totally out of touch with reality. It’s all bullshit!... we are like running in place... lots of talk and no action plan! Lynchings may not be taking place today,

but we are still getting bamboozled. [Government, leadership, citizenry] are doing a minimal effort... and there is no safe space to allow us to be honest... for all ethnic groups.

Alena never expounded such prose and even had concerns about Dominique's rage. She tempered her emotions, although Alena admitted, "I do have high blood-pressure," and tended to have more hopeful understandings of the power structures. She paced herself for the principalship and the social realities she had to deal with. Dominique agreed that anger was her issue, but also assumed Alena was either naïve or not being fully truthful about her own resentments about the system.

During a more personal discussion about her family and issues of race, Alena admitted she may be a little naïve about issues of race given her success in a white man's world. Her youngest daughter brought that to light recently during an intimate conversation with her about college and the future. Living in the suburban southwest offered her daughter limited contact with populations that were primarily African-American, and during a recent visit to a "Black College Expo," her daughter was immersed in black culture and had an epiphany about her ethnicity. She discovered some residual shame about "...being black... I learned its ok to be black!" Alena was a taken a bit back by this admission, and yet at the same time proud that her daughter rose out of the struggle with a new sense of strength.

Coinciding with her daughter's, Alena also relayed her own sense of shame as it related to race. Concerns about being African-American had not been a significant issue until she became a principal. It was normal to be a black teacher, normal to be a black

assistant principal... but it was not normal to be a black principal. She had never received a negative email from any colleagues until her announcement as a principal. “Step down from your mount!” was exclaimed by a fellow African-American teacher upon her inauguration. Black parents had always been supportive of her career ascensions until the principalship. Now, apparently, “I am too bourgeoisie!” African-American families treated her differently now that she was in charge, uttering class slurs under their breath at meetings in battles they were losing... “bougie.”

Principal Alena Swann demonstrated actions that responded to her deep moral sensibilities, bold personality, and developed coping mechanisms, all while being thrown into a world filled with infinite trials. Her leadership team and the faculty were adequate, yet contained within them their own set of very human challenges that defied common sense or basic manners at times. Mediating conflicting dispositions, negotiating unpredictable revenue sources, motivating the stubborn, and appropriately responding to legal directives for the mentally challenged was daunting enough. Now to get them all focused on test scores. This was the foreboding challenge given limited resources, entrenched poverty, oppositional colleagues, limiting policy guidelines, and locally charged circumstances.

## **Chapter 4: Principal Christi Jordan and Sage Valley High School**

This fourth chapter on Principal Christi Jordan offers a similar descriptive analysis that includes a brief biography, an overview of Sage Valley High School, and a narrative of a typical day. Principal Jordan, as compared to Principal Swann, represented a more introverted style of leadership at a less problematically charged site. That being said, contests of will were plentiful, and students presented intense daily distractions from the course of raising test scores. The comparison of the two principals provided helpful and important confirming data, displaying how two leaders within the same school district receiving identical directives responded to those directives while managing their populations and cultural settings. The varying personality types and systematic prioritizations also served to exhibit both the positive and negative effect within the subjectivization of leadership as a construct.

### *Principal Christi Jordan*

Principal Christi Jordan had been leading Sage Valley High School for 4 years. Christi was a forty-something blond and blue-eyed divorcee who was a bit less conspicuous than Principal Alena Swann. She cared about her craft and was also ambitiously engaged in a doctoral program in educational administration, but was juggling a bit more than Alena and struggled to find the time to finish that final lap. When I first saw Christi from a distance, I thought she was a student because of her baby-

face and choice in less formal attire. She often wore jeans and a t-shirt to work, kept her hair in a pony-tail, and discreetly flashed a dolphin tattoo on her ankle. I told her my initial reaction after a few months of contact thinking I was offering a compliment about her youthfulness. I soon realized by her reddened face and return volley that she thought I was critiquing her professional attire. “Ya, I thought I was too casual.” I backtracked and explained, but it was too late and I had added to an influence. She confessed that district officials recently made some comments to her regarding their desire to see principals dress up in business attire. “The superintendent wants men in ties, except on Fridays... no more sweatshirts and t-shirts.” Christi’s wardrobe adjusted accordingly as the year progressed and she even dyed her hair brown the second semester with the goal of “changing things up.”

Where Alena was a spirited extrovert seizing center stage, Christi was an introvert who appeared to more gently pressed from behind the curtain. This dispositional type was confirmed when she admitted to taking the Briggs-Meyer personality test administered by the district office this past year. “I am an INSJ, introverted feeling and sensing type... a detail-oriented person and a bit of a perfectionist.” Teachers and staff sarcastically referred to her as “boss” during small group adult interactions. Christi was in on the joke and still often elected to stay relatively quiet during robust meetings, yet it was clear from the ironic banter that she was ultimately in charge. During teacher trainings and leadership meetings, teachers were witnessed to regularly glance at Christi for the subtle gestures she would offer to affirm the direction of a deliberative process. She would raise her eyebrows if something wasn’t going right, and smile and nod if the

course was sound. Christi admitted “I have control issues” and if one paid enough attention to her eyebrows or followed her around enough, she was perceptive and had some sort of hand in everything. One afternoon she spent a couple hours sitting with the district technology person perfecting the school message that would greet parents when they call. She re-recorded the message over a dozen times until it was clear and flawless, an expectation, she explained, that no other principal would seem to care about. She expected the same from the Spanish interpreter she recruited to translate her words and mimic her tone.

Christi had a second title—the *Paper Nazi*. Many in the English department referred to this title when not in her company, but it seemed a sore point to many of the faculty. Christi had a personal commitment to keeping copy and paper budgets low, which fit her philosophical and pedagogical position that worksheets were not the best source of learning. Teachers were therefore held hostage by her paper resource limits and were forced to pay out-of-pocket should they require paper beyond the one-box-per-semester allocation. “Each teacher gets a large box of paper... that’s it! It’s my policy to keep them [teachers and students] away from its usage.” From the outside looking in, and from my position as a teacher, it appeared a bit passive aggressive and was a policy somewhat insensitive to the fact that most students could not afford and be organized enough to have paper on them at all times. Christi held firm to her point and allowed little deliberation on this particular matter when approached.



Despite the quiet and stealthier tone of Christi, I had an easier time hunting her down because she tended to spend more time in her office space. For Christi, her tidy office (Fig. 4) seemed to represent more of a personal sanctuary, allowing her to meet privately with key players, plan out strategies, and respond to parents and emails. This was in direct contrast to Alena’s style in which she constantly had multiple staff and students coming and going through her office which doubled as a meeting and lunch room for the leadership team. There was no question that both Christi and Alena cared deeply for kids and functioned well with their respective administrative staff, but Christi seemed to keep a safer emotional and physical distance from the plethora of drama to be found and appeared symbolized by her office arrangement. An un-windowed wall stood between her and the proverbial water cooler of potential social gatherings. The curtains were always drawn over the windows separating Christi from her secretary.

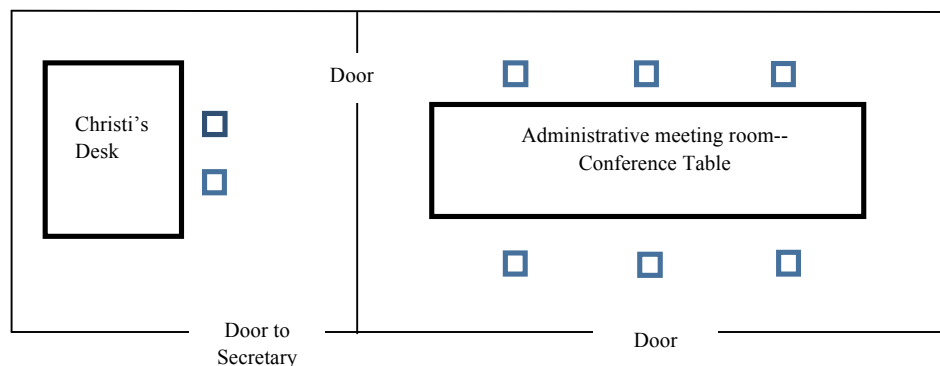


Fig. 4

When witnessing Christi in more intimate and extended situations with students, which were more commonly seen than with Alena, she generally exhibited a softer tone that eagerly solicited conversation. I never witnessed her raise her voice or yell in frustration. Where Alena was quick to deliver that inspirational or correcting speech and seemed to soar with the opportunity to holler and press for immediate change, Christi was more cautious, asked more questions, and separated people to a more neutral space to get at the matter. Even during her regular rotation in the discipline office, she greeted each student with a "...hello kiddo," giving them the benefit of the doubt before sending them off to detention or calling their parents in front of them. An example of her steadiness occurred during a heated exchange that blew up in her office between students over the distribution of internet gossip. It was a Wednesday when the two young girls, both products of the foster-care system, boldly entered the administrative offices brawling over slanderous Facebook postings. When the first entered, Christi announced, "Hey honey, come on in... I am proud of you for coming in here." The young girl quickly relayed before she hit her seat, "Shannon is saying I have herpes." Shannon entered shortly behind as this was announced and tensions rose with a heated bickering back and forth. Christi allowed them to quarrel for about five minutes, and when the drama was fully revealed, she jumped in as a peace-maker. "This is done... there will be no fighting or jumping! You guys were friends at one time... no texting or contact for a while." She then described what appropriate behavior should be and warned them of potential consequences should things escalate even further. Christi enjoyed moments such as these where she directly handled discipline and had a chance to engage student life, particularly

with young girls who faced the challenges of disrupted homes. She could easily temper her emotions and make a joke, even when kids turned it to personal attacks. “Today was fun aside from that one kid saying *fuck you!*”

Christi described herself as an only child, a “... daddy’s girl... [My Father] raised me as a boy.” She grew up in a middle-class white suburb and was less candid when pressed to describe that life and her mother. Childhood seemed to center around her father who spent enough time playing basketball with her that she was awarded a scholarship to play at the collegiate level. Despite Christi’s relative ease with the coaching staff and partial tom-boy energy about her, her athletic accomplishments were unnoticed and unmentioned by staff during my experience with her. Christi didn’t feel the need to advertise her unique status as a college athlete beyond a small picture on her wall that displayed her loyalty to the Portland Trailblazers. She said that even though she no longer coached and did not play that card to build social capital, it was an important advantage to have been a college athlete when considering and preparing for the principalship. Christi added that coaching and playing sports may have been the most important skills when preparing for the demands of her job. She did not connect her college basketball experience with development as a leader, but it prepared her to work with and anticipate the jock personalities of men that tend to dominate the administrative ranks of public high schools. The sport experience also helped to toughen her up to the emotional demands and the chaos that often mimics a stress-filled game. “Principals that aren’t athletes are odd... traits do not fit. We [athletic types] are wired to be creative... instruct staff...take what we got and get the most out of them...like MoneyBall...pushing

people to think outside the box.” Christi was not particularly aware or politically motivated by feminist ideals, and even affirmed the primacy of men as leaders in schools “... because they don’t get as emotional about things as women. Men forget everything; women remember everything... to their demise.”

In her early twenties, Christi met her now ex-husband and quickly became pregnant, a moment that seemed to have plagued her and kept her in an unhappy place for too long. She has been divorced for about five years. She split custody of her twelve year-old son evenly, but the supervision and time-share battle continued and was often reflected in her daily spirit. When Christi described her ex-husband, she believed he was a good father, but said it with reluctance and discomfort because she clearly had a different vision for how her son would be raised and what his socialization and education would look. “He [ex-husband] doesn’t care much about school, he never went to college.” She relayed how this was a major source of tension and complicated the tone during parenting negotiations which brought her regular anxiety. She had hoped to instill a discipline and learning passion in her son, but was losing the battle in her eyes. There was a part of her that was reliving the lack of support she had received from her ex-husband during her previous professional and academic ambitions. Christi also expressed that the experience of heartache and struggle which filled most of her marriage “toughened her up a bit to conflict.” Similar to her marriage, parents and peers more often “... call to complain, not tell you that you are doing a great job.” She missed the days of teaching and often thought it would be nice to not have a day with so many

jagged encounters, but held she was now drawn to the struggle, was able to easily dismiss the onslaught of despair, and could not imagine going back to the classroom.

When looking back at her decision to become a principal, Christi seemed to have fallen into the field of teaching and working in public schools, claiming that she chose “education by accident.” Originally she wanted to be a physical therapist, tying that passion with athletics and her summer involvements with coaching youth. That dream was cut short with her pregnancy during her senior year in college and the responsibilities that came with it. Physical therapy to her meant more school beyond her undergraduate years, longer hours away from home, and a work schedule potentially conflicting with the raising of a young boy. “Teaching seemed like a better parenting deal... and ten weeks off.”

At first, Christi was extremely private about life outside of school and the effect it had on her past and present. In the early weeks of my observations, I noticed a large bouquet of red roses brazenly placed in the middle of her desk, but did not ask her about them because I felt unprivileged to that kind of information given her initial barriers with me. Months later those barriers contracted and she revealed that she had a boyfriend who she spoke of fondly. Their relationship seemed to blossom during the course of the year, so much that it was causing conflict with her son. By the end of the school year, because of her increasing connection with her new boyfriend and the incredible demands of her job, her son had chosen to spend the majority of his custodial time with his father. Christi and I spent some time discussing this struggle and it was apparent that her

personal life tended to encroach negatively on her professional attitudes and energies more than Alena. Additionally it appeared that the pleasure Christi received in the past from her professional successes as a principal were diminished because of this new found love and the complications involved in the raising of her young son. It was clear that she struggled with balancing her personal and professional commitments much more than Alena. She often questioned her previous life choices as well as the future of her profession. She frequently asked me, “Are you sure you really want to be a principal?” Christi mentioned on several occasions a fantasy about leaving the Southwest in the impending future and heading up to Oregon as if that would be the avenue for happiness.

To complicate the personal strains in her life, Christi also bore the brunt of the tension that existed between the school district and the teachers union. All the principals were aware of the impasse that existed during the summer and fall contract negotiations of 2011, but due to the fact that the union president was at Christi’s site, issues were more dramatically thrown in her face. As a result of funding depletions during the recession, the district office decided to forego larger lay-offs and simply not rehire any new spots created by retiring veteran teachers. Within the union contract however, teachers were to only have a maximum of thirty-six students per class, yet most were now closer to thirty-eight in order to respond to the depleted teaching force. The teachers union had filed a class-action grievance against the district because of class sizes rising beyond contractual agreement, coupling the despair over salaries that had been additionally slashed over the previous two years. Despite the tensions created by universal budget matters, the teachers at Sage Valley were mixed in their understanding of the dilemma and were being

led by a union president with questionable motives for his hostilities. Christi noticed the effect of the mixed pressures and the frustrations many of the teachers had with both the loyalty to their union and trusting the economic realities their district faced. Christi described that a “core group of bullies” were the loudest and led many of the picketing teachers that often greeting parents and students as they approached the school each day. This was a major source of embarrassment to Christi given the newness of her school and the promise it offered to those who were disadvantaged. “It can’t get much worse... it has been a struggle.” Christi had a harder time separating the tougher professional battles she faced from her personal emotions and commitments, which fed into a deepening disconnection to her work. “I try not to take work home... try to disconnect a bit more.” Venting to other principals seemed the most helpful when confronting issues dealing with her motivation and investment.

When considering her chosen vocation and her specific duties as a principal, Christi was certainly proud and thoughtful about her craft. She regularly questioned the overall systems and competing philosophies of education, the evolution of the management practices of the principalship, and the processes in which principals are chosen and groomed. In that reflection, she was conflicted and had serious doubts about her impact on students. She questioned both the role of the principals and various leaders in schools, as well as the role high schools had in the developmental sequence of learning. “[I would] rather be at a middle school...could influence them [at-risk] students more... [it would] be fun to see that progression... [I] don’t feel effective.” Christi also admitted that she “...missed being an AP [Assistant Principal]... because it is more

predictable. [As a principal], all must go right, but [I am] not really in charge or control of anything.” Measuring her success rested solely on the scores of her school, and no one ever observed her regular day to assess any other affect she had on the students or faculty at her school.

The future seemed fairly clear. In five years, Christi hoped to “...transition to a district level job... and stay local until my son’s high school graduation.” The coming changes related to the new federal policies and the Common Core meant that things in the near future were “...gonna be expensive and there is no funding... so we can’t implement if we are not supplemented for the cost of the transition.” The requirements that students be proficient at newly prescribed standards appeared daunting and unpromising. She had trained as a principal with particular guidelines and it had not been fun, transitioning herself and the entire school system to another scheme was not inviting. “Trying to convince me to stay [in the Sierra School district] will be a challenge.”

### *Sage Valley High School*

When first approaching Christi’s school at Sage Valley High, I was struck by the enormity and similarity of the modern American high school model. I have witnessed dozens of newly built high schools during my teaching and coaching career. All of them from Nevada to California to Arizona have that institutional prison-hospital look with high security fences meeting at right angles, immature trees sparsely placed among a concrete jungle, and tan overtones of stucco with never-ending cinderblock foundations.



Each costs around \$100 million to construct, includes a monstrous new football field with artificial turf, and radiates intense heat during the day from the mammoth volume of black-tar pavement that encompasses the entire campus. There are few variations given the demands of economic efficiencies and the limited companies that quickly build schools to meet the growth of new suburban districts. The unique characteristics of schools like these are generally expressed by the choices in paint, or the slight freedoms of expression exuded in the inner quads that are dependent on the tone set by the principal. The covered eating areas and the outdoor amphitheater were those examples (see Fig. 5).

For Sage Valley High School, the choice of crimson red could be seen from miles away as it coated the highest building in a field once used by farmers harvesting potatoes. The physical plant exuded the impression of what I would describe as penitentiary art deco in the midst of the Dust Bowl. There was also the competing vibe of modernity and technology, the legacy of ailing small farmers, and the dominating culture from Mexican immigrants. The school was an anomaly when considering its backdrop. Everything was new and fresh, from the shiny stainless steel drinking fountains to the brightly lined parking lots to the well air-conditioned rooms with the latest innovations. The school itself also symbolized a struggle over the mission of the modern high school system regarding diverse agendas and primacy in purpose demonstrated with its new agricultural development center, state-of-the-art football field, the robotics and iPad pilot program, and its English-learner counseling center.

The staff at Sage Valley faced a fraction of the challenges found at Jefferson High. About half the 2500 students at Sage Valley were considered economically disadvantaged and about 40% of the students were not meeting proficiency standards on math and English state-wide tests. When considering similar schools and the overall academic performance indexes for students, Sage Valley ranked about average. The school demographics included a Latino population that was about 65% while the rest were African American (10%) and white (25%). As opposed to Jefferson High students that claimed a diminished sense of optimism and overwhelming safety concerns when filling out the *Healthy Kids Survey*, less than 30% of the students at Sage Valley did not “feel connected” to their school and teachers. Common complaints issued by the students in the survey included a desire for life skills and vocational education classes, a larger volume of diverse school activities and clubs to join, and more teacher involvement in the programs that were offered. Sage Valley also faced less than half the bullying and violence issues despite its slightly larger size. Notwithstanding this less wieldy reality, Sage Valley faced unimaginable problems. Over 5% of the students were in foster care and one of the most recent transfer students I met had been raped in the back of a classroom at her previous school.

The overall public image of the school regularly came up as an important theme for Christi and appeared to inform both the esteem of the students as well as her own. Not only did the schools within Sierra School District fight against the social stigma that low achievement scores and PI status bring, but the school also fought up against poverty and ethnicity stigmas. Christi sighed at a November press article about the

unprecedented success of the varsity football team. The article provided an uplifting account of the team's effort, but would have been remiss not to mention the social class differences that separated the competitors in the regional finals game. The

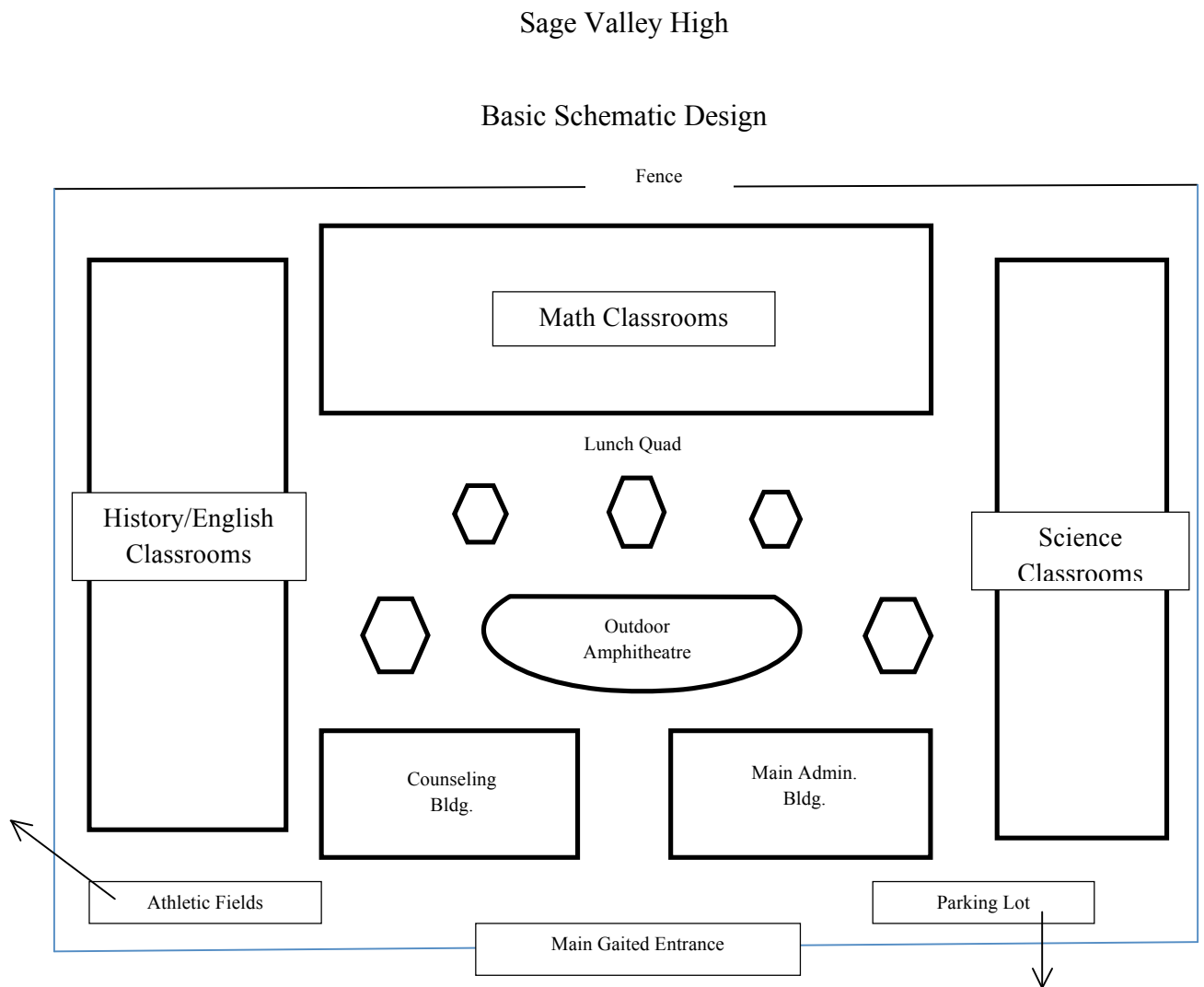


Fig. 5

team Sage Valley faced came from a much wealthier suburb, were accustomed to the traditional fanfare of success, and had been perennial giants in multiple sports over the previous 25 years. At the customary banquet that the state athletic association provided to both teams, it was noted in the press that Christi's football boys were upstaged and unprepared in their demonstration of social grace. "[Sage Valley] show up in jeans and polos... [the visitors] show up in shirt and ties."

The press for both Sage Valley High School and Principal Christi Jordan seemed to always be a mixed bag and often the result of misrepresentations and culturally held paranoia regarding the life of poor and minority high schools. Shortly after the fall season had ended for the football team and the disappointing press that focused on the informal attire of the players versus their athletic efforts had dissipated, January provided Christi another controversy about the school climate she was fostering. An eleventh grade Latino student had arrived at a basketball game flaunting with what the local paper described as a "Mexican firecracker" to other students. The explosive device was potentially harmful, technically an "M-80" that has been traditionally used by the military as pretend explosives and commonly distributed to farmers to scare away wildlife. The press was already present at the basketball game when one of the attending school secretaries called 911 as the rumor was relayed to her. The police quickly arrived that afternoon, as well as ten highly trained officers with the Hazardous Detonation Team (HDT). The basketball game was suspended and two young men were detained and taken to juvenile hall. According to the newspaper, those involved would quickly be charged with felony crimes and undergo expulsion hearings. One of the police officers

involved was quoted as saying, "...a parent brought the explosive from Mexico." The press also reported that the device was lit and exploded amidst the cheering crowd and that students were transported to the hospital for injuries related to the explosion. After Christi led an investigation of the event and after days of interviews, it was discovered that the firecracker was of minimal threat and of mysterious origin, it was not ignited, no injuries were sustained, and no students were taken to the hospital. Christi described that the administrative team present at the game "did a really good job" handling the situation. There was no redaction found in future press articles related to the incident.

The vast majority of teachers at Sage Valley were white and most lived within twenty to thirty minutes from school, commuting from the closer and more middle-class neighborhoods situated on the southern border of the district lines. The faculty was also younger and tended to be broader geographic transplants due to relative newness of the school itself, the lack of prime teaching gigs in more distant desirable areas, and the particular loyalty of certain teachers to the first principal that ran the school. Some of the younger teachers in the district were also forcibly placed at the new site because of union seniority privileges. Few seasoned teachers in Sierra District wanted to leave the comforts of their site and held strong against any transfer to Sage Valley. Recent college grads and the domestic flexibility of younger people with smaller families also appeared as major causes for the resulting less experienced faculty in the district as a whole.

While Sage Valley did not face the optimism crisis that was apparent at Jefferson High due to more pervasive poverty concerns, Christi had her fair share of environmental

factors that contributed to staffing challenges. Department chair people confirmed that “teacher morale is lower than normal.” Christi acknowledged, “It’s weird how much outside stuff can influence.” Christi relayed that over the previous two years, of the near seventy faculty members, eight have had some form of cancer. The most recent victim was a biology teacher that was diagnosed with breast cancer. The most impressive teacher and key confidant to Christi was also forced to leave during the course of the year because of complications related to a brain tumor. There had also been four pregnancies, a partial result of hiring such a young staff eager to start families. The additional expense of substitute pay coinciding with the ethical and legal commitment to paying out sick or family leave was near catastrophic to discretionary funding pools. Over the past month, Christi was shocked to find out that a recent full-time hire in the special education department was eight months pregnant and now on maternity leave, an oversight due to the teacher’s obesity. In addition and symptomatic of all schools in the United States, it has been easier to hire skilled and energetic English and Social Science teachers, while near impossible to find qualified and degreed applicants in the fields of math and science which tended to be less qualified and less enthusiastic.

The ongoing union contract dispute, declining salaries, and record-breaking high temperatures seemed to take some of the wind out of the positive vitality that seemed reliable among a core of higher energy people in the past. It was fall, and when considering the vitality levels of the staff for Christi, “... it already feels like the end of the year.” Teacher meetings and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), the trendy response to not having any money to train teachers and forcing them to gather and share

in “communities,” was visibly “more exhausted” and “less productive.” The faculty was also weary of the coming requirements and impending changes due to take effect because of new education federal laws related to the *Common Core* “monster.” “We just got used to the standards.” A collective sense of resentment was palpable in that all the previous toil and convincing to align instruction, develop common assessments, and prepare for the state-wide objective tests, was now realized as a complete waste of time.

Despite all this, Christi was generally pleased with her staff and appeared to enjoy them much more than Alena. She admitted that “... generally, I have a great staff, just one trouble maker, the union president.” Nearly every encounter Christi had with her staff included a respectable tone, with the exception of Bill, the union president and a history teacher near retirement who was committed to antagonizing the administrative ranks throughout the district. He was involuntarily transferred to Sage Valley given his hostilities with the other principals. Christi was the new kid on the block and had to manage what the district gave her. Bill appeared angry for many reasons, all of which included the regular involuntary displacement from the coziness of his traditional school and the friends of his original cohort. He also had recently suffered from the home mortgage crisis and was experiencing personal financial snags. Bill took his role as union president seriously and used his personal angst to fuel his tone during negotiations over the continual budget and salary cuts teachers were facing. When Christi complained to me about Bill, I was first a little sympathetic to his cause given my political solidarities and personal experience of marginal principals. My experience of Bill and Christi together quickly swayed me to a different understanding.

Christi briefed me on Bill before my first encounter with him and explained why he annoyed her on so many levels. “Bill misses most faculty meetings and he gets two periods a day (because he is union president) to stir up trouble around campus.” Bill took pleasure in disobedience and demonstrated this by his public dismissal of her authority and the avoidance of official gatherings. Christi developed a tactic to address characters such as Bill who purposefully disregarded the monthly faculty meetings. She required anyone absent to meet the following Thursday at 3:00 p.m., or set up individual meeting with her on their own time in the administrative board room to recreate the experience and the discomfort of her direct attention. She added that “...the make-up meeting is a personal choice, to cover my ass.” Christi knew of no other principal that took such an action and attention to faculty meeting attendance, and I had never experienced a principal that did so. The interaction that Thursday between Christi and Bill was enlightening.

Christi and I were together in her office that afternoon around 1:00 p.m. completing an interview and then shifted through the door to the administrative meeting room. Bill and Howard, a sixty year-old science teacher whom Christi described as “one of the worst” and also a union rep, had missed the last faculty meeting. The two men together had scheduled a 1:30 p.m. meeting with Christi during their prep time and were waiting at the long table. Neither man had a notepad or instrument for jotting down any information. Each was leaning back deeply in their chairs with both hands locked behind their heads exuding belligerence. The agenda items that were to be discussed included the preparation for upcoming state tests, discipline/classroom management strategies for



students, and the recent administrative concerns that teachers were not consistent in their distribution of punishment. The meeting lasted about ten minutes.

**Christi:** Regarding state-testing, the logistics of 700 kids testing will include three weeks of testing...

**Howard:** Can I make a comment... the schedule [for testing] breaks up period three lab.

**Christi:** Ok... I will take note of that.

*It was explained later that a few teachers such as Howard were uncooperative with state-testing demands and tended to be inflexible over the disturbance to the normalcy of their schedule. The positive willingness to accommodate the time needed to take the test and the disruption it brought gave Howard an opportunity to complain.*

**Bill:** You know it's a fiction piece.

*An abrupt non-sequitur changed the meeting tempo early. Bill pointed to a piece of paper near Christi, referring to an inspirational story that Christi had emailed to the staff and additionally read aloud at the last faculty meeting. The story related the circumstance of a child who sat neglected in the back of a classroom and did not succeed until the teacher took the time to notice and connect with her. Bill and Howard had been asked to read the story prior to the makeup meeting. The attention to the story broke the focus of the meeting and caught me off guard. Christi's emotions heated up as if she was anticipating something like this to happen, and the conflicting personalities were revealed in seconds.*

**Christi:** Ok... What's the difference! It's very impactful and resonates with our situation.

*Christi's face was red and she took an authoritative and deliberate tone I had never seen. The conversation oddly shifted back to the agenda and Christi explained the schedule and expectations for the monitoring and administering of the state exams. Both men stared blinking as she explained, not bothering to write down the important points. She then transitioned to the issue of discipline.*

**Christi:** Some teachers are not taking attendance and this places a burden on our staff. We also discussed enforcing dress code and tardies. There are inconsistencies in the faculty.

**Howard:** Spring time brings out the *hoochy* shorts... want to be more consistent and encompassing. *Howard's tone suggested gender bias in the enforcement of dress code policy.*

**Christi:** Okie dokie, thank you so much. *Said with sarcasm as the two gentlemen left the room.*

Christi later explained that Howard had been removed by her as department chair because he was “condescending and toxic.” He also had a history of not taking attendance and missing deadlines when turning in grades. Howard’s classroom was equally a blank slate. If a casual observer were to enter his classroom, it would be indistinguishable from any other plain meeting area. This bland commitment and his allegiance to Bill presented Christi with an example of some of the challenges she faced when motivating and maneuvering key faculty to raise the bar. For Christi, the union and barriers to improvement were represented by Bill and Howard and they colored her attitude toward democratic practices and her overall respect of the teaching profession.

To soften this, Christi had spent the past three years recruiting academically and socially more appropriate teachers to be among the union ranks. Even though she understood her pressures bordered on illegality and the conflict of interest, "...I try to pick union reps... push them to run." She met with the union reps every other month and saw this gathering as potentially vital toward school improvement. Bill was "... pissed off at the whole world, a failed banker and business man, bankrupt, lost his home." In response to his perceived incompetency and poisonous energy, the school district had moved him several times, most recently to the continuation high school, and last year to Sage Valley. Christi was forced to negotiate and meet with Bill and Howard at union meetings given they often ran unopposed. The lack of opposition was cited as a result of faculty immaturity, general apathy, and the cyclical distrust bargaining unit members had with their union and the organizational process of the district as a whole. Her efforts to garner positive union participation were only mildly successful and managed to solicit one or two allies a year.

When I asked Christi how she approached characters such as Bill and Howard beyond union and teacher meetings, she referred to what was a discipline and due process handbook commonly known and circulated amongst the administrative rank, *The Frisk Manual* (Andelson, 2001). She also described the professional process she deduced from the manual for handling perceived unsatisfactory teachers. The first step was to "...usually involve an informal conversation... to pick it up and do the right thing without a threat." If that did not succeed, "... a formal meeting with a union rep" would produce a conference summary with an action plan that was not kept in the teacher's

permanent file. The third step involved a formal letter of warning which would remain in the teacher's file and could eventually lead to a letter of reprimand should noticeable changes not occur. "I can't recall ever getting to that point." It was commonly understood by school district officials that the contested firing of tenured teachers costs hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees and lost wages during the discovery and negotiation process, which can often take years. The attitude and bureaucratic processes of avoidance used by Sierra School District were consistent with the majority of districts across the country (Barrett, 2010). Christi offered that "...it is just easier to ignore the legalities and just harass." This practiced confirmed the similar habit of Principal Swann.

An additional example of the challenges Christi faced regarding personnel emerged during an afternoon I spent with her interviewing a possible head baseball coach. Only two candidates materialized when the position was posted and offered the reward of hundreds of hours of commitment in return for a \$2500 stipend. Both prospects were teachers within Sierra School District because only a few could fit the daily needs of the post which required student supervision by 2:00 p.m. during the weekday and regular Saturday duty. The baseball team had marginal success in the recent past and had seen three head coaches in three years. The two potential candidates presented glaring red flags even before the interview process began. The first candidate had a notoriously difficult personality and taught at the rival high school that had stolen Principal Alena Swann's football coaches. Alena and Christi spoke regularly about their dislike of the hiring and cherry-picking practices of the principal at Desert Hills High School and wanted to maintain consistency in their position of hiring standards. The

Desert Hills coach was therefore doomed unless the Sage Valley candidate imploded at the interview. Christi declared ahead of the conference, “We need to be careful and hire on the inside.” The second candidate, a teacher at Sage Valley, also had a glaring red flag that Christi was hoping to overlook. The second teacher and coaching candidate, Matthew, had a torrid history with Christi and was the second coach in the previous three years of the baseball team to be fired. Matthew had been having a successful year during his previous coaching experience at Sage Valley, but had hired an assistant head coach that was also his volatile best friend. The best friend was regularly enmeshed in inappropriate alcohol-related altercations that were witnessed by students and families of the community. When Christi originally confronted Matthew on his friend and the events, he denied knowledge or association and did all he could to protect his friend and maintain him as an assistant coach. Through some investigations, it was revealed that Matthew lied to Christi, potentially endangered students, and was summarily released as head coach. Despite this history, Christi defended Matthew and warmed to the idea of potentially hiring him again. “We operate now not like it was when I was a kid... I appreciate things being kept within a team... I think he has learned his lesson.”

Coach Matthew entered the administrative meeting room that was attended by the Athletic Director, Christi, and myself for the interview. “This is Kyle... he is just doing some observation... he is not here.” The meeting took place during my first month of participant-observation study and Christi was still negotiating what to do with me when in crowds. Matthew sat at the long table and quick greetings were exchanged. A list of

six questions on white printer paper were taped to the table and methodically read to him soliciting an answer. Questions included:

- 1) Tell us about yourself and your experience?
- 2) What qualities do you have as a good head coach?
- 3) What is your seasonal plan (fall, winter, spring)?
- 4) What are your standard of ethics and grades?
- 5) What are your understandings and policies as it relates to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, missing practice, no gear?
- 6) What is your process for raising money?

Matthew was a large six-foot something white guy and his tone was very simple, straightforward, and unexcited. His delivery included little eye contact. His answers were canned and adequate, and he seemed pleasant enough not to draw out any major concerns. My sense of him was jaded from Christi's explanation of his past and my own coaching experience, yet Matthew's need to appear honest and conciliatory appeared to humble him enough for this interview experience. Christi agreed and re-hired Matthew that afternoon, even admitting her mind was made up prior to the interview. "I make mistakes, admit them, and it is easier if we do that."

Overall, Sage Valley was considered to be the middle rank of the three high schools in the district. Sage Valley drifted in and out of PI status during the past five years because they have been inconsistent in their efforts to sustainably raise standardized test scores. At one point, Sage Valley was granted safe-harbor status by the state because

it had shown impressive growth toward that elusive 800-mark goal during a previous two-year period. This status meant that the label PI was publicly removed and certain sanctions and reviews were no longer necessary. That status has changed given its recent decline again, and the API scores have hit a wall near 750, reinstating the PI label. When compared to schools of similar populations, Sage Valley was ranked as one of the best.

### *A Typical Day for Principal Christi Jordan at Sage Valley High School*

Christi was a morning person and woke at 5:00 a.m. on her average day. Mornings for Christi started a little differently than Alena, partially due to their age and dispositional differences, but much was also due to the circumstances of their personal life. Because Christi shared joint custody of her twelve year-old son, half the school-day mornings were spent doing the basics of preparing for work, visiting with her son over breakfast and helping him organize, jetting him off to middle school, then driving thirty minutes from her suburban home to Sage Valley. While Christi's younger age and family commitments had its disadvantages, a math teacher at her school commented that she saw it another way, a shared camaraderie in both professional and personal understanding. "Luckily, we have younger administrators [at Sage Valley] who have not been out of the classroom very long." Teachers seemed to relate to Christi more because of this, and found comfort in their mutual personal responsibilities. So half her life was spent as that traditional doting mother, the other mornings she met up with a few girlfriends at her boyfriend Rick's house to exercise and do what she described as a 60-

minute “boot-camp” training program. Rick, Christi, and her friends had made a pact to get into shape and had been at it for about three months. Christi was a college athlete and mentioned every once in a while a longing to be in better shape and stay connected to training. Where it seemed like Alena was always dabbling in snacking or drinking something, during the year I spent with Christi I never witnessed her eat anything. I did witness the sacks of food that Rick frequently brought over to her, but I never saw her partake.

Regularity to mornings was not ever consistent beyond this. The prior morning Christi and Alena had been at the district office at 7:00 a.m. for a four-hour *Response to Intervention* (RTI) training for principals on how to legally respond to at-risk students. “Leadership Days” also occurred two to three times a month at the district office and were described as “information dumps” in which the twenty administrators shared issues from their site and brainstormed how to resolve them. The morning before that had included an informal breakfast roundtable for county area principals in middle and high schools. Denny’s Diner played host to an evolving social network of about a dozen principals that gathered once a month for what Christi described as “emotional and logistical support.” Mornings such as these were import to her mental health because it provided that rare opportunity to openly and safely discuss “key moves” with her non-judgmental peers. A common theme was how to handle “complaints” levied against them. While Christi relayed that the group made no serious offering of new or innovative propositions for student achievement improvement, one of the most important nuggets



Christi had taken from the group was that when budget and organization dilemmas appeared, "...make the move then ask for forgiveness later."

At least once a month, Christi met up with Alena for coffee in the morning before school at the local Starbucks. Of any administrators that I witnessed in the district, they were the closest and seemed to support and understand each other in a unique way. Both openly spoke of each other with respect and admiration, and appeared to bond regarding their demographic challenges and their sisterly ties. They also found connection in their mutual disgust of the third male high school principal in the district from whom they never drew support and solicited advice. Christi responded that she additionally spoke with Alena "two to three times a week" and "texted at least once a day." Alena and the special education director in the district, Jane, were her two most important confidants with whom she could be open and honest about her life and professional challenges. Both principals agreed that healthy, deep, and regular friendships were nearly impossible given the commitments to their school and professional life.

A typical day for Christi today was "...not as it was when I first began as an administrator five years prior." Due to the PI status that looms over her school and the district as a whole, there was now "...more meetings, more intensity, more protocols." Much like Alena, 7:00 a.m. was the usual arrival time to her site. Christi would check in quickly at her office, drop of her bag, and then scan the campus paying particular attention to the entry of students. She usually stood out near the main entrance greeting students and faculty as they entered. This was an opportunity to catch up with people

that had immediate concerns and relay some of the upcoming business of the day. Her social conversations continued until the bell rang at 7:45 a.m. Christi's morning conversations were quick and to the point mainly due to her less garrulous personality and numerous demands. Her go to phrase was "Hey kiddo... how are you?"

From about 8:00 a.m. until the late morning, Christi was often directly involved with the discipline office or meeting with teachers during their prep period. She and the rest of the administrative team rotated in their involvement to directly handle discipline referrals. On this particular morning, three students sat in chairs directly outside the administrative discipline office. Before even entering the assistant principal room reserved for isolated meetings, Christi scooped up her first victim and pressed him to enter the space. She was a bit harder on the boys, sterner, more direct, and a bit shorter in patience. The young Latino had disrupted class for the substitute and was sent to the discipline office to be handled. Not much of a conversation occurred, Christi read the referral, asked the young man what the problem was, and he responded, "boring." Christi replied, "You get to spend the rest of the day in OCD [On-Campus Detention], which is way more boring." The site for OCD was a cleared out classroom in the adjacent building, essentially a holding pen with multiple desks lined in a row and a security guard or substitute that monitored the required silence while in attendance. Christi signed off on the referral slip, informed the student to check in with the secretary, and guided the student to OCD for the rest of the day.

The second Latino boy was a freshman and had been disruptive in his English class. He appeared to be a regular with Christi and was beginning his high school career with serious challenges regarding respecting authority and the mission of schooling. When he entered the office, Christi immediately turned to the computer and looked up his personal information and history on the district database. “Do you not like English? Why are you giving [her] such a hard time? I looked at your grades, kiddo... you know you have to do this for the next four years?” Then came the classic speech, one that I may have heard fifty times from my experience in schools and from both Christi and Alena. “Here is why school is important...refocus...gotta get motivated...talk to your teachers...this is the better process... I am gonna check in on you next week.” The boy listened, nodded, and was summarily sent off to OCD for the day.

The third student, a young Latina sophomore, reluctantly entered the office. Christi visibly softened and stared at the girl, “OK...give me the scoop.” Apparently the issue surrounded the female student witnessing a gay student on campus who had worn a “dick necklace” to school. Security had been warned and was in search of the culprit. The girl present was given up to the administrative team as a witness by another student, but no necklace or criminal had been confirmed or found. The girl was therefore accused of not being honest or respectfully responsive to the security team when approached on the matter. The girl remained obstinate, quiet, and the meeting ended without any closure. She was sent back to class.

Around 11:00 a.m., Christi had scheduled a grievance meeting with an English teacher that she had been closely monitoring this semester. Over the preceding weeks, Christi had responded to both faculty and parent grumblings over inappropriate pedagogical choices the English teacher was making. She was “showing too many movies... often showed entire movies... lacked any video permissions and not following appropriate processes.” Apparently the teacher had played the two-hour movie *Pay it Forward* during a week-long poetry unit. The English Department had specifically devoted that week as a focal point for poetry appreciation and was frustrated with the uncooperative teacher. Christi started the year’s evaluation of the teacher by informally questioning her during the passing periods, and then weeks ago began formally documenting the teacher’s classroom activities during observations and walk-throughs. The formal meeting took place in the principal meeting area at the long table and included the English teacher, her union rep Bill (the union president), Christi, and a fellow Assistant Principal, Jim. Christi commented that due to the legal protections she deemed necessary, “I never go to these types of meetings without an administrative witness,” much like a teacher was legally allowed union representation for any formal professional assessment. The grievance meeting was brief, merely five minutes long, and served as a return volley for Christi’s aggression toward the English teacher. The English teacher officially filed the grievance against Christi to the district office stating that “[Christi] harasses and is on her too much.” The grievance also gave Bill the opportunity to fire back at Christi and to create the headache of forcing her to more publicly respond to teacher criticisms. The meeting was short and to the point, and Christi merely

listened, but was then plagued with a summary report to the district and the paperwork that was legally required from it. She knew this would tap an hour or two of her time at the end of the day. “Any normal teacher would have involved an informal conversation... but because of who she is... with her, I tell her to bring a union rep... for my protection too.” Briefly following the meeting, Christi sat at her computer and typed a few notes that she would amend later. She smirked, “It’s hard to summarize stupidity!”

Time spent directly addressing the teaching and learning process was a bit disappointing during my observations at both high schools. The bulk of attention was demonstrated through meetings such as these, broader faculty meetings, formal observations that occurred very infrequently, and the now systematized *Five-minute walkthroughs*. The genesis of this idea partially came from large corporate efficiency tactics of the 1970s such as those found in Hewlett Packard’s management practices. The term affectionately known as *management by wandering around* (MBWA) helped to inform total quality management (TQM) techniques of modern industrialism. Managers engaging in MBWA would randomly patrol a plant to survey work output status taking impromptu snapshots to then construct broader organizational policies. Educational institutions have since adopted their own language for this leadership tool which has regularly been understood by principals as the *three-minute walk-through*, or *Downey walk-through model*. Named after the author Carolyn Downey who formalized the school leadership practice, principals have commonly adopted the pilfered technique to gather brief and “objective” knowledge of the teaching and learning process (Downey, Steffy, Poston, & English, 2004). Information can be gleaned by snooping school

administrators finding out such things as teacher and student attendance, whether classroom objectives are posted, the level or quality of student work being conducted, and the teacher style being utilized. Christi and Alena employed the practice and committed themselves to undertaking it a couple hours a week. The data collected on simple rubrics was never to be placed in a professional file or used in any sort of disciplinary setting, but certainly informed their perceptions of teachers. It appeared that both Christi and Alena would have liked to have a deeper hand and more time in monitoring and instructing teachers how to be better at their craft, but the time and the breadth of their commitments prevented them from doing so. Teacher evaluations were generally seen as a burden and the practice and paperwork involved with formally evaluating teachers was extensive, particularly for new teachers and those up for their three or five year reviews. The processes of principal involvement with instructional improvement could be described as anything but *instructional leadership*.

Emblematic of Christi's challenges when hoping to move a marginal teacher to a more effective one was the case of a Martha, a struggling math teacher. Martha had been in the district for nearly a decade and was on what Christi described as a "Seven to eight year improvement plan." Martha had "horrible class management... and a Filipino accent." Students regularly complained that the class was ineffective and Martha was found too often to not be understandable when describing lessons. Her classroom was chaotic, and her personal life even more problematic. Recently divorced from a jailed abuser and raising two young boys, Martha was meek and vulnerable, and to fire her at this point was inconceivable for multiple reasons. "It costs the district \$200K to fire a

teacher,” Christi additionally defended. Christi felt her only option was to put Martha “...with classes that are not tested.” That meant placing her in elective classes such as *Consumer Math* or senior elective classes that would not influence the overall test results from state standardized evaluations of freshman through juniors. “I hate that part.” For Christi, school improvement often meant hiding the worst teachers for those that are on the fringe, but ultimately affect the whole.

As Christi turned away from her desk, her spirit perked up a bit with the realization that her next move was to visit one of her favorite classrooms. The students and teachers of a Child Development class requested Christi’s attendance to a class meeting to inform her of their intent and involvement in a potential class project. At the meeting, students explained how they had brainstormed issues related to teen pregnancy and the slew of issues related to bearing children while going to high school. The purpose of Christi’s attendance was to affirm their student-led process and a plan of action that could inform school policy. Christi listened intently to their appeal and affirmed their efforts with a few minor suggestions about process.

After about ten minutes, Jim walked in the classroom and whispered to Christi and me that a young male sophomore had publicly threatened other students and needed her attention. Today was make-up picture day and the boy, a young man named Jared that was understood as emotionally disturbed, had declared that he “wanted to kill people” due to the fact that he was forced to stand in line a bit too long with other

students. The local police officer had already been called and was in Christi's office when we appeared there. He was already questioning Jared.

**Police officer:** You said you want *to kill people*? Is that a normal reaction for you?

**Jared:** Yes. *Jared replied with a stoic demeanor.* I got in a lot of fights, I want to do things my way.

*Christi sat at her desk and listened closely. The police officer was standing over Jared as he sat in a chair directly in front of Christi's desk. Two assistant principals, Jim and Rich, were also sitting in chairs in the room.*

**Jared:** Don't like my time wasted... I waited in line to get pictures taken, could not do my homework, I was infuriated.

**Police:** How did that make you feel, ever felt like you wanted to kill or hurt anyone or yourself?

**Jared:** No. *Jared appeared annoyed by the questions and gestured as if this was continuing in his wasted time. Christi cut in.*

**Christi:** I am really uncomfortable... *killing people*... running over people. What you gonna do when you really get angry? I am really uncomfortable.

**Jared:** I will find a place to cool down... my dad is kind of infuriating. *The father comment drew even further concern and they all paused and stared at one another.*



**Police officer:** Can I take a look in your backpack? *Jared agreed and gazed blankly forward.*

**Jared:** School is just a big waste of time...I can just read this on my own. *Then Christi motioned to Jared directly.*

**Christi:** You are allowed to be irritated, but you should not be at this level of anger. I think there are some deeper things that are at work here... you need to talk to someone here...that can help you express your feelings.

*Christi then glanced the room as if this was something they had handled many time before, and without speaking any words turned to the phone at her desk and made a call to the mother of Jared. Because Christi and the staff were mandatory reporters in the case of death threats, the police were automatic in their legally required involvement. She summarized the incident and informed the mother that the police were now involved. The mother was noticeably upset with the fact that law enforcement was complicating the matter. Christi listened but held her ground and then handed the phone over to police officer. The police officer expressed to the mother that the boy was a danger to himself and others, that it was not a criminal matter, but that Jared was being transported immediately to Family Treatment, a public mental health facility within ten miles. He would be further evaluated there and would need her attendance.*

**Jared:** I trust people as far as I can throw 'em. *Jared was then abruptly escorted by the police officer to his car and driven to the treatment facility for evaluation.*

As the encounter rapped up, I noticed Christi's boyfriend Rick standing near the administrative secretary's desk. The police and Jared filed out and Rick entered Christi's office like he was family. The administrators that were also leaving warmly greeted him, shook hands like jocks do, and asked him how he was. Sam was loaded up with a brown paper bag full of pastas and various salads and was hoping to steal a few moments with his girl since it was his day off. Christi looked at Rick and me and told us both that we were on our own for lunch. She would be sitting at her desk for the next thirty minutes typing up a report on Jared for the district office and drawing up an outline for the afternoon leadership meeting of department chairs. Rick and I sat at the two chairs facing Christi's desk and spent the down time discussing our lives and careers and the difficulty of dating a principal... Christi rolled her eyes and neither of us bothered to ask why.

School concluded at 2:45p.m., and after the principal passing period duties ended, the leadership team meeting initiated back at the administrative meeting room close to 3:00 p.m. This was a monthly activity and included the department chairs, assistant principals, and counselors. Christi explained that the purpose and focus of this meeting was to consider how to "improve school climate." This translated into an afternoon considering incentives beyond the classroom that could be used to improve standardized test scores. The tone of the room was positive, lively, and open. Each player was contributing, both serious and comical ideas were respectfully delivered, and sincere comradeship appeared among the leaders. Christi led with some guiding questions to consider when linking the activities to goals, "What are the three most important expectations for each student... and what are the ideas for activities to motivate students

during the testing week?” Christi had asked the department chairs to solicit concepts from their respective area groups and bring them to the table. “Pie in the teachers’ face booth...fast food truck... early release or late start privileges... pool party... extended lunch... movie day... beach day... carnival day... rock wall... water slides!” Christi responded, “Love the feedback... great ideas.” After some deliberation, Christi and the student activities director agreed to meet the next day to solidify the final possible options. Christi closed the hour-long meeting with instructions for their next gathering that would discuss institutional responses to funding received from a Safe Schools Grant and the recent addition of three medical marijuana businesses located within a mile of the school.

Together, the experiences and collective actions of two principals working in low-performing schools exhibited a sense of overwhelming burden, urgency, selective failure, and limited resources... triage. Those burdens included the added weight of poverty and the pressure on schools to fill the gaps (such as the costs of athletics, extra-curricular activities, transportation, and security). It also included heightened circumstances of discipline related to poverty, such as low motivation and depression. The circumstance of triage required a triage mentality in order to cope and survive as an individual perpetuating a legitimate institution. The subsequent chapters more adeptly situate the reality of triage for these two principals, relating more specific conditions and systems that facilitate triage-like responses. The detrimental consequences of this mentality are further exposed, pointing to potential abandonment for the neediest students.

## Chapter 5—Educational Triage

The attention to the term "triage" and the association I have given to it regarding principals working in poor schools came amidst some reflection after two months of observations and interviews at Jefferson High and Sage Valley Schools. The feeling and experience of triage-like circumstances was not new to me during my research, but the crystallization of the word was. The term primarily responds to an overall tone that existed; a tone that was more crisis-response centered than proactive or positive-culture building. The tone was one that more emphasized efficiency over equity. It also more specifically responded to policy directives that explicitly asked principals to focus their efforts on those who would statistically respond the most to their improvement efforts. Triage conditions at Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools encompassed themes regarding the prioritization of the physical and mental health concerns of too many students, managing the disproportionate numbers of delinquency cases, responding to the public and shame-filled identification and segregation outcomes for impoverished communities and students within their schools, defending the sophisticated tracking systems for high and low-performing students, and securing an enforcement system that hid weak students or weak teachers from harms way.

When considering reflexivity, the term triage may have also been informed by the fact that I came from a family with lots of Marines and medical personnel or lived as a child of the generation that watched *M.A.S.H.* It was also influenced by my experience as a public school history and economics teacher cognizant of managing large numbers and

prioritizing with limited resources. It all amended my experience in poor and low-performing schools, and *triage* seemed apropos when searching for a summarizing term that captured reactive and prioritizing discourse, policies, and practices evident in the experiences of Principals Swann and Jordan. My insight was confirmed when a theme for a spring administrator's workshop for Sierra District was entitled *Triage! Effective Approach to Data-Informed Instruction*.

Like generals far from the battle, district-level administrators sent regular communications regarding the success and defeat of those school administrators and teachers fighting at the front struggling to raise students' scores on annual standardized tests. Medics and improved weaponry often appeared through the form of software consultants and targeted grants. Aggressive and caring measures, different experimental tactics, and evolutions in healing accompanies the effort... to affirm and shine a light on the hard-working and morally resolute beacon that is America, defeating other less worthy members of competing nations. And it is all performed as part of the standardized test war. The collateral damage is the poor that remain poor, and the disenfranchised lose again and go less noticed, continuing to be historically unrecorded.

The states have made choices too. While states such as Arizona and California commit roughly half their tax-based expenditures on educational institutions, they also face competing demands such as the building of prisons, or expanding health care prescription medication payments to the elderly. I will not compare other social programs beyond here, but I believe it is important to hear the argument that broader state

and federal concerns and distractions have serious consequences to schools that often go unnoticed, forcing principals at the local level to employ triage tactics with depleting funds.

I was not the first to conceive of this idea of the *triage* metaphor related to schools. Apparently the British began using the term within education literature in the late 1990s. Similar to the United States, academics within the United Kingdom had been concerned with the growing market pressures on public schools to quantify success through high stakes testing. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) conducted ethnographic studies of two London high schools during rapid market-based educational reforms that included wide-scale standardized testing. They concluded that the standardized testing environment had caused schools to invest tremendous amounts of time and treasure into assessing and categorizing student ability, which then informed efficient resource distribution. While that was not particularly disturbing in and of itself, what became disturbing was that three basic ability groupings emerged and were used to characterize each individual student. The evolution of accountability and testing young British students had the consequence of managerial cataloging practices. Students were labeled under three distinctions: "safe" or smooth sailing, "dead" or "hopeless cases," and those "suitable for treatment (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000)." Most resources would be channeled to the "suitable" group given they had been determined as having potential in significantly raising the test scores for their school. The best bang for the British pound was investing money in those who could respond most significantly. Those at the top were given less attention because they needed little help. Those at the bottom were

essentially left to die because the cost was not worth it. Additionally disturbing within the study of financially challenged urban schools, it demonstrated that when schools engaged this cataloging process, the distribution of students across triage groups were significantly marked by social class, race, and gender. White, middle-class students, and girls were disproportionately allocated to the safe group. Working class black males were disproportionately allocated to the category of “hopeless” cases. White middle class boys were disproportionately allocated to the treatment group. This was one form of recognizable triage.

Youdell (2004) made the connection between market-based forces from the structural-functionalist and business models that coldly urge for efficiency, effectiveness, and the accountability in public schools. This model has been insensitive to hegemonic traditions, social injustices of the past, or the lived results that the poor get the least resources when the model is strictly applied. The practice of differentiation in which students are sorted based on their “perceived likelihood of attaining benchmark grades in high stakes tests (408)” has created this triage market-like phenomenon and infected multiple levels of the educational bureaucracy and structures of leading and learning.

Differentiation is not new, because we have seen it in the segregation of schools based on gender, age, and race. What is new is that the language of the day has changed and blatant racism and sexism is no longer tolerated. It is now framed in terms of rugged individualism and survival of the fittest. A climate of competitiveness now exists, regarding parents with children as independent consumers in the free marketplace

searching for the school with the highest test scores. Plans that boldly include the lexicon of educational triage, of which Sierra School District openly has committed, have been legitimized by a “prevailing discourse of meritocratic individualism” (411). This discursive shift is significant because it means money is being shifted around based on philosophical commitments that are fundamentally flawed. Resources that were once focused on the hopeless and least of our society are now being allocated toward those who are most promising, all in the name of school improvement and accountability. Principals have been forced to make an uncomfortable and sometimes unconscious choice under duress and the threat of losing their jobs and sacrificing precious dollars for their schools. Segregation and the perpetuation of income inequality is now arguably driven by the politics of educational productivity.

Youdell (2004) further recognized that triage policies had multiple levels. Most importantly and salient to this analysis, triage strategies emerge at three key structural places: the bureaucratic level, the institutional level, and the classroom. The bureaucratic level includes the government agencies that are outside the domain of the school site. The institutional level involves the structures and systems encompassing the overall management at a school site. The classroom level represents the specific teaching and learning practices within a class at the school site. The important results of studying principals in these low-performing high schools primarily focused on triage practices at the bureaucratic and institutional and level. The concentration of my access and attention to principals and how they act, think, and manage their specific sites was centered on



their responses to the immediate pressures of policy-makers, not the specific actions of teachers and students in the classroom.

It must be acknowledged that *triage* is just a word to generally describe the policies and practices of schools that mimic emergency medicine. Even though policy-makers and schools do not use the word extensively, or find connection of their practices to emergency medicine, it does not mean they are not doing it. An example of this was present in the work by Booher-Jennings (2005) on the effect of accountability measures in Texas. Booher-Jennings referred to the work of Gillborn and Youdell (2000), and acknowledged that other buzz words such as “bubble kids” and “data-driven decision-making” were common nomenclatures. Explaining the effect of the Texas Accountability System (TAS), Booher-Jennings described how certain labels and triage-like strategies, such as re-classifying students under special education status, were used by principals in coordination with teachers to limit the test-takers that drive aggregate test scores down.

Through a series of practices, including focusing on “bubble kids” (those on the threshold of passing the test), targeting resources to the “accountables” (those students included in the school’s accountability rating), and decreasing the size of the accountability subset by referring students for special education, teachers diverted resources to students most likely to increase aggregate pass rates—the “suitable cases for treatment”—and away from those viewed as hopeless cases. Some of these practices were supported at the district level under the auspices of “data-driven decision making,” while others, such as referring students for

special education to remove them from the accountability subset, were not (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p.233).

Taken from the testimony and participant-observations of Booher-Jennings, one could deduce that triage tactics could easily be suggestive of cheating the system. And hidden under the auspices of being a state or district that was “data-driven,” what may have once been considered a sub-conscious or informal tradition of labeling students and targeting resources was now evidence of an institutionalized laundering system. It could also mean that my use of the term triage to characterize the managing effort of our poorest schools is a bit euphemistic. A more accurate representation might be institutionalized racism or caste discrimination. Despite this conscious or unconscious direction, from the accounts of principals in Booher-Jennings Texas study, principals believed that “...becoming data driven has been the most important factor in improving the school’s test scores.” The principals in my study concurred and marched forward.

Having the time and energy to think about triage measures merely as they related to test scores might have been a welcomed problem for Principals Jordan and Swann. Triage practices as presented by Youdell and Booher-Jennings were certainly present among the principals, but a fuller and more literal meaning of the term was present for the schools of Sierra School District. During the fall semester, an example of a connection to the more complicated and medically related understandings of triage became apparent. Mixed in with all her concerns that most of the students entering Jefferson High were low-performing and poor, nearly all Principal Swann’s entering

freshmen walked through the gates with insufficient immunization records. Over 400 students had no documentation of their *T-Dap* (whooping cough) vaccine, a legal requirement for entry into the public schools. School went on for weeks without this realization, giving way to priorities such as class scheduling, security and transportation, and nutritional services. On a Monday morning in October after the clarity of the record-keeping dilemma was fully made aware, the 400 students were rounded up by Principal Swann and the administrative team and secured in the gymnasium. All available staff had called the parents of these students the week prior requesting their presence in the gym to bring documentation so that their child could re-enter class. By the end of the day, over half the students were still improperly documented. It would take weeks to clear the last students, which highly correlated with the poorest and most in need of class time. For weeks the marquee at the entrance of the school read, “No Immunization... No School!” The infectious were prevented from entering the grounds.

Public health concerns of students also included mental health. The fallout of poverty for Sierra School District surfaced higher proportions of students needing mental health services. The research is extensive and has confirmed the substantially heavier burden schools like this bear with larger populations of children living in poverty and of racial and linguistic minorities. The mental and physical health issues for the poor immigrants and their impacting on learning is significant and debilitating (Price, McKinney, & Braun, 2011). Resulting from explicit federal and state laws about mental disabilities and subsequently required services, hyper-documentation of mentally challenged students culminated in special plans (Individual Education Plans) and a

specialized bureaucracy (Special Education teachers and counselors) servicing nearly 1000 students at Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools. During an administrative meeting among principals, a leader commented that in the Sierra District, there was a lot of “crazy in the air.” And beyond the sophisticated bureaucracy and paperwork handling the mental health cases was the triage negotiation that often took place separating those who were technically “manifesting their disability” versus “just being fucking assholes.” Catalina, an Assistant Principal at Jefferson High brought a particular case to Principal Swann demonstrating the dance. The young man involved with the case was not fully documented as to having a clear mental health issue, but anger issues and disturbing classroom focus matters pointed in that direction. He had been bouncing around the various high schools within Sierra District and Principal Swann at Jefferson High was the end of the line. No course of intervention had occurred prior to the violent fight that caused the suspension hearing.

**Catalina:** Not good news... boy in line for being expelled is coming back tomorrow.

**Principal Swann:** Does the district know the damage of this kid, his medical situation... does the district not have a plan?

**Catalina:** The District wants an IEP and a mental health services contact.

**Principal Swann:** Why do we have to suffer?

**Catalina:** The parents are threatening with a lawyer... the issues have not been handled perfectly.

**Principal Swann:** We are pulling other services to serve this kid... tell the district they are paying for this then... Tell them!

Multiple cases on a near weekly basis at both Sage Valley and Jefferson High Schools mimicked this one. The administrative teams, which often included parents and their potential advocates, regularly argued at the *manifestation determination hearings* about their limitations and legal obligations to dismiss normally construed outcomes of suspension or expulsion for clear cut cases. Lines were further blinded by the failures of teachers and administrators to legally attend to the full requirements as articulated in special education law and the specific cases for each student. There was simply not enough personnel, not enough money, and not enough time to attend to these matters.

The faculty and staff at both Jefferson and Sage Valley were also not immune to the realities of triage health-care and limited resources. Sierra School District had seen 5-10% budget cuts annually over the previous three years, and the money had to come from somewhere. The classified and management staff had settled their collective bargaining agreement over the previous summer and agreed to eight furlough days (nearly 3% pay cut) and higher medical premiums. For some this represented hundreds of dollars a month in less pay and a delay in potential medical interventions or surgeries. Principal Swann simply shook her head when the overall budget talks arose, “I don’t know what to do!” The union contract was also clearly in violation given that classroom maximums were far exceeding the understood forty students. Special education laws were no longer cited given that no resources existed to keep autistic and remedial classrooms below a

25:1 ratio. Informational picketing by a few activist teachers sporadically occurred on the busy public corners around town, and nasty emails often stirred through the high schools complaining of the plight. “The teachers don’t know what they are fighting about... no one is talking to me, even the close ones, which is disturbing” cried Principal Swann. By the end of the school year, the certificated teaching staff had settled their contract dispute for similar pay cuts. The principals both declared and agreed, “We are just happy its over... unnecessary drama... people were mad and refusing services... glad its over!”

The daunting complexities of schools situated in poverty stretches any conventional understanding of the word triage. These anecdotal stories of abuse, neglect, and hopelessness must be understood in conversation with the more academic understandings of the bureaucratic (macro) and institutional (local) when considering student achievement challenges. The prior chapters have described some of those challenges. This chapter confronts the more systematic challenges facing principals in low-performing schools. The theme of bureaucratic triage addresses the broader context of federal and state policy, the impositions of PI status, the residual fallout of labeling schools and populations as failures, and the unintended consequences of intervention programs such as AVID that essentially further exacerbate inequalities for the poorest of the poor. Themes related to institutional triage target local practices at a particular site, the actions of administrators in facilitating triage strategies at their site, and the potential fallout for individuals at the site.

### *Bureaucratic Triage*

When considering bureaucratic triage measures at the state and local level, important insights can be made about the impacts of categorizing or labeling schools Program Improvement (PI) under the auspices of accountability and the free market. Sierra School District was surrounded by five higher performing districts, each with larger populations and significantly fewer poor and minority students. Family real estate purchases and mobility were highly influenced by the well-published test scores that are released in the late summer following the spring testing period. The aggregate test scores of school districts and their respective schools were listed in regional newspapers and explicitly pointed concerned parents to the best schools for their children. Sierra school district stood at the bottom, and at the very bottom of Sierra District was Jefferson High. Sage Valley stood just below the median, while Desert Hills sat comfortably above the median. The signal was sent to any potential customer to avoid Sierra School District, but if you couldn't afford the surrounding wealthier areas, at least avoid Jefferson High boundaries. Accompanying the test scores, should anyone choose to investigate, public distinctions, such as being a high-performing [Gold Medal] School and stellar overall school "Report Cards" were easily available on location websites. Accolades were commonly emblazoned at the highest point on the marquee, the huge outside wall of the basketball gymnasiums, and prominently displayed on the home page of a school's website.

For the poorest and lowest performing schools, noticeably blank walls existed around the campus, and more desperate signs such as inspirational posters declaring "Persevere" existed. Instead of Science Olympiad awards and baseball championship pictures, nutritional services referral websites, vocational training seminars, and Spanish interpreter information existed on the front page of the websites. As if this were not enough, if you could only afford a home or rent in the cheapest part of Sierra School District, you were forced to attend Jefferson High. When searching through the Jefferson High website, yet placed more discretely amidst the school report card, it legally had to inform investigative parents that their school was in Program Improvement (PI status). It additionally informed them that they had the option to attend Desert Hills or Sage Valley High should they so choose, and the district would pick up the transportation costs.

Further categorizing and labeling occurred beyond the published test scores. Titles were officially distributed by state oversight agencies, responding to the federal and state accountability measures imposed by NCLB and Race to the Top. Desert Hills was categorized as a *Gold Medal School*. Sage Valley remained undistinguished, but was commonly cited as a *Safe Harbor* school given that it had been in and out of PI status over the previous three years. Jefferson High was clearly recognized as a PI School, recently a *Persistently Low-Performing PI School*. So beyond the labels, socially reinforced historical traditions, and geographic loyalties of schools, state and federal bureaucracies further designated school districts, school sites, and particular subgroups at each site. At Jefferson High, the populations of most concern were the poor, English Learners, Latino minorities, and the learning disabled... or in other words, 95% of the



school. Direct correlations between these labels and socio-economics were apparent, and growing in disparity with the ability of parents to opt out of attending Jefferson High. Only the most attentive, mobile, and privileged of parents at Jefferson High chose to leave.

When describing the problems associated with PI status, the label and simple reality of being situated in an impoverished Latino community, and the potential brain drain to the two higher performing high schools in the district, Principal Swann responded:

I send a letter to explain PI and hold a PI meeting every year in the summer. I invite all parents and try to explain PI and options for families. The parents that show up to the meeting have the opportunity to ask questions and make an informed decision. Only a small number of parents have shown up to the meetings. I usually have about 15 – 20 students transfer to another school.

When asked specifically about those students who transfer, Principal Swann snapped back with a defensive tone; she was very proud of her efforts and did not want to appear delinquent in her efforts to help all her students and provide the best educational opportunity possible:

It is usually the students who have good grades that leave... Each year I will have some of them [students who leave because of PI status] return to [Jefferson High]. We have not had that many student leave, so there is minimal impact... I worry every year. I try to improve test scores and programs we provide so that the students choose to stay at [JHS]... I do not talk to the student that decides to leave. They fill out paperwork at the D.O. (District Office). They do not have to state a reason for leaving.

The impact of the top 2-3% of students that flee every year was never quantified, nor ever used as an argument defending the continued status of Jefferson High as a PI school. Principal Swann appeared to have never considered the impact and carried on with her efforts. Asking her these types of questions added to another level of frustration that previously went unrecognized.

District-level attention to student achievement was the focus of most administrative meetings, and the training and indoctrinating of principals to appropriately respond was regular and ongoing. All the principals within Sierra District formally gathered on the first Monday of each month for three to five hours at the district offices to reinforce the expectations of the principalship and the strategies for school improvement. Impromptu follow-up meetings called by the Superintendent occurred bi-weekly on average and lasted one to two hours. Topics ranged from changes in education code due to legislative maneuvers to summer budget matters to an October personnel meeting regarding how to manage teachers in moving class ratios from 35:1 to 40:1. This all seemed to fit in with the reinforcing of commonly practiced and expected legal and

structural matters of the principal role. An unexpectedly large portion of the meeting time for the monthly and impromptu meetings allowed for principals to share their particular site concerns and gather for emotional support. The Superintendent maintained a tone of relative openness, encouraging honest dialogue to foster a healthy deliberation about problems such as emerging discipline concerns, financial challenges, and the potential drama caused by the shifting of teachers between sites. Each principal expressed their experience of these meetings to be “helpful” and “positive” for their emotional well-being, but ultimately found them to lack the specific guidance or provide the precise tools to fulfill their duty to raise test scores to the levels expected. Each principal expressed their frustration with this given that each was to prepare an outlined game plan each fall detailing their efforts to raise standardized test scores at their specific site.

These concerns did not go ignored. The bulk of principal trainings that focused their efforts on the specific task of student achievement, however, did not take place during the school year given the obligations each leader had to their respective site. For Sierra School District, two essential places and times during the spring and summer months served as preparations for best practices in raising test scores. The first was articulated as an internally driven *Administrator’s Symposium*. This first spring meeting was a three-day retreat-style gathering of all principals throughout the district led by the district superintendent team. The second, held during the summer months, was a privately run off-site training directed by a partnering organization that has been growing exponentially in its influence in schools throughout America and abroad. The summer

training known as AVID, an acronym for *Advancement Via Individual Determination*, was a program developed in the San Diego public school system in response to the de-segregation policies of the 1970s and '80s. Large numbers of minority and low-income students were being transferred to high-performing college-bound high schools and a new induction program termed AVID took shape to accommodate the radical changes. AVID has since evolved into a non-profit educational consulting business and offers training primarily to teachers, but has developed two-day leadership summer academies for principals to develop systems and structures that support its agenda. AVID is currently led by Jim Nelson, a former Texas Superintendent and Governor George Bush appointee as Texas Commissioner for Education in the 1990s. The current Chief Operating Officer is Mark Tanner, former CFO for Pepsi Corporation International (AVID.org, 2012). Assessment of the positive outcomes (successful matriculation through college, academic achievement on standardized tests, gains in social capital) for AVID participating students has been noted in the research as generally being positive (Mehan, 1997; Mediola, Watt, & Huerta, 2010).

The district's *Administrator's Symposium* was an integration of federal and state policies, local district traditions, and the AVID agenda. I was able to receive permission to attend the symposium and was warmly welcomed by staff and leadership to participate in its activities. When speaking with the Superintendent about the decision to adopt AVID as a guiding premise for raising test scores, he described it as a collaborative effort of teachers and administrators. "These AVID strategies are exciting," and he enthusiastically endorsed the effort by AVID advocates, which primarily included

teachers, to create a structural framework to address low-performance of his schools.

“We need to move and change... and not just rest on the laurels of good test scores.” The focus of the AVID agenda and the symposium was constant and regular improvement.

The leadership meetings during the second week of June began early on a Wednesday morning, just a week after completion of the previous school year. It was scheduled every year at this time so that leadership teams at each site could use the summer months to plan, order, and budget for the coming fall. As each person entered the room, a folder entitled *Administrator’s Symposium: Who’s on First?* was handed to them, and I was generously granted access to a copy. The district conference room filled with dozens of tired leaders who finally had a chance to come up for air after a long hard-fought effort to hold their schools together. Three high schools and one middle school were placed in podded groups at tables designed in a semi-circle with a white movie screen and podium at its center. Model trains with inspirational quotes such as “courage” and “perseverance” dotted the table-tops along with notebooks, markers, and chocolate candies for that added energy boost. I gravitated to the Jefferson High group that included Principal Swann and her three Assistant Principals. The Sage Valley group neighbored us and was in ear shot of my chair. District administrators and consultants scattered throughout the room and included the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Education Services, Director of Pupil Services, Director of Special Education, academic coaches in math and English, and key specialists in charge of testing. The meeting was led by a managing consultant for AVID, Sean Doyle.

Sean was a charismatic and enthusiastic fifty-something character who was a former middle school math teacher now employed by the regional AVID offices as a coordinator and guest speaker to participating school districts. His booming voice called the crew together at 8:00 a.m. that morning with a “slap, bang, swoosh” gesture emblematic to the organization. Following the abrupt call to arms, the podium was handed over to the Assistant Superintendent who had planned the leadership meetings for the week. She wanted to start the meeting with some much welcomed news that the teachers’ bargaining unit and district had reached a tentative agreement and the contract was near complete. A visible sigh of relief was present and it perked up the energy in the room. “Hoping it passes with the Board... if not, we are looking at a district shut-down for the week of July 4<sup>th</sup>.” Principal Swann seemed at peace with it all and looked at her team, “We don’t have anything [during the week of July 4<sup>th</sup>].”

Sean Doyle then took over and impressed on the crowd the necessity of gathering the emotional investment he needed today and for the future of the children and that we should do this to “build community.” He showed a classic video of Arnold Swartzenegger as he first takes over a chaotic classroom in *Kindergarten Cop* to lighten the mood, does some ice-breaker activities, then goes into a PowerPoint presentation displaying some data about the successes of AVID. Sean is joined by his colleague, her doctoral credentials emphasized, who described AVID as nothing new or radical. “AVID has stolen from lots of programs” and is a comprehensive model of study skills, tutorials, strategies, counseling, and rigor. The ultimate goal is college attendance. The emphasis of the lecture was personal interaction and involvement in children’s lives and getting

role models. Particular comments emphasized the need of minority adult male leaders to mentor minority students. We must "...force them to interact [teachers and students], to see their eyeballs." AVID was portrayed as a program for those students who are "in the middle," meaning not so low they are unsalvageable (with a GPA between 2.5 and 3.5), but not so high that there is redundancy in their support systems. Principal Swann looked over at me with some doubts already, "My population is 2.5 and below... I get push back when trying to get my kids in AVID." Because the vast majority of students at Jefferson High were below a 2.5 GPA and living in poverty, the AVID program appeared out of reach in its potential. So for the first twenty minutes of the meeting, there was a visible emotional disconnect because of the reality of her circumstances. Principal Swann appeared uninterested in the potency of AVID and the themes pressed at the meeting. She was often found reviewing her strategic plan for the coming year and responding to emails on her cell phone. Principal Jordan was more attentive, but conveyed to me that "... we have heard this all before."

AVID and the response to it from the principals were consistent with triage principals. Because the students under Principal Jordan at Sage Valley were considered to attend a *suitable* school for improvement, the strategies and resources of AVID were interesting and applicable. Principal Jordan invested much of her more flexible funding sources in the training of AVID principles to nearly half of her teaching staff. Principal Swann was less interested given that the majority of her kids were not even eligible for the benefits that AVID provided. Her kids showed no sign of potential, according to the AVID model. Despite this, Principal Swann planned to attend a summer principal

training seminar and do her best to gain any insights she could to aid in student achievement. She also supported any initiative teachers showed individually to understand and implement AVID resources.

### *Institutional Triage*

The purpose of looking at triage from the micro or classroom level was generally to understand how it plays out in teaching and learning. The scope of this research and analysis was not looking at teaching and learning, but examining the place principals had in facilitating teaching and learning. Because of that, it was important to understand what principals understood about triage practices in the classroom and their role in fostering best practices in teaching and learning. The specific managerial practices and guidance given by principals to their teaching staff was additionally reinforced at the Administrator's Symposium and offered tremendous insight into the school-wide plan to raise test scores. When considering triage elements for administrative practices, two important points were apparent. A palpable conflict occurred by all the leaders and stake-holders within Sierra District over the reality of those students that were considered the most highly vulnerable, and the negotiations over how much time and treasure should be targeted upon them. Systems were sincerely created to address all students at all learning potentials, but consolations existed that ultimately freed responsibility from leaders dealing with those on the edge. Those on the edge were seniors clearly on their



way out with no hope of college, and those students who plainly demonstrated consistent and tested resistance to learning or raising their scores.

In addition, a *curricular triage* strategy was unequivocally acknowledged. This meant the focused mission of high school centered on math and English, almost abandoning any attention to other core areas including science, history, the arts, and physical education. And the focus on math and English contained within it a sub-technique of focus framed with the term *granularity* in triage attention. Principals were asked to press teachers to identify those key questions and sub-themes within their teaching and assessments that appeared as most commonly misunderstood and potentially mistaken on standardized tests. The focus of pedagogical efforts would therefore pay most attention to that cause. Thus the focus of teaching and learning at the high schools centered on what the average student missed... in math and English. Should an individual student have particular misunderstandings not common to the larger group, they would be ignored more frequently due to the triage strategies of granularity.

At the spring administrators meeting at the Sierra District, the actions that principals were to undertake to increase student achievement scores were most specifically described. Articulated both in "Break Out" sessions led by various district level coordinators, and reinforced in memos handed to principals entering the meetings, the strategies for addressing low performing students included the following focus points:

- AVID and SDAIE strategies must be utilized and displayed in each classroom (AVID, the college guidance program. SDAIE, Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English, or researched-based pedagogical techniques used for low-performing and English-learner students).
- Teachers should demonstrate the uses of the "3-S" curriculum structure (an academic instruction model developed over the last decade by James Henderson and articulated in his book *Transformative Curriculum Leadership*, emphasizing more democratic teaching in the area of Subject matter, Self-learning, and Social-learning.)
- Walk-throughs and correlative forms were to be used four times a year for each teacher.
- Data and grade analysis was to be completed by teachers and reviewed by administrators.
- Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were to be managed and clear connections to academic and workshop best practices were to be made

The principals understood these directives as integral to their professional role, but also as the focal points to their overall strategic plan for the school as previously mentioned and known as the SPSA (Single Plan for Student Achievement).

Important, and in connection with triage strategies, the intent of the SPSA plan was to identify weakness areas and managerial plans to attend to those weaknesses.

Known within the realm of triage and discussed in the administrative meetings, "leverage areas" in math and English were identified by their strongest and weakest strands. For Jefferson High, the SPSA plan articulated this specific effort in the area of how they use data "...to monitor student progress on curriculum-embedded assessments and modify instruction" in the areas of math and English.

- Teachers use data to analyze current conditions and focus on developing a standards-based curriculum and effective delivery system during the weekly Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The need for valid and reliable assessments of student achievement throughout the year is vital in determining mastery of standards for re-teaching.
- Teachers need to know if their students are mastering the standards and when to make specific modifications to classroom instruction so they can better guide students toward improved academic achievement. They use the data to increase the turnaround time for results of ongoing assessments in order to quickly and accurately respond to student areas of need and report summative and formative data during PLCs.
- The school uses an ongoing assessment and monitoring system that provides timely data from common assessments based on the ELD (English Learners) and intensive intervention programs. Student achievement results from assessments (i.e., entry-level placement and/or diagnostic; progress monitoring, including frequent formative and curriculum-embedded; and summative assessments) are used to inform teachers and principals on student placement, diagnoses, progress, and effectiveness of instruction.

For the sake recognizing the disproportional burden of students in Sierra District that were most troublesome and considering the weakest students with the lowest scores (poor English learners), the district breakdown by school included the following statistics: Desert Hills had 600 English Learners (20%), Sage Valley had nearly 1000 English Learners (40%), Jefferson High had approximately 1600 English Learners (60%).

So more specifically, what were principals doing in response and under the goals articulated by the SIPSA? Articulated in a break-out session and led by a guest software consultant at the administrative symposium, Principals were directed to watch the PowerPoint presentation and handed a memo about triage data management processes. Principals were directed to do the following:

- Organize teacher groups into PLCs, with particular emphasis on the teacher groups that were English and math.
- Use the PLCs to organize and administer quantifiably scoreable benchmark assessments that were "aligned" and "formative" (each teacher in each similar class was to be directed to use the same tests and same assessment criteria developed by curriculum teams coordinated by the district office).
- Within the PLCs, the critical, or most important statistical leverage points, were to be gleaned. Upon the realization of the weaker points, instructional responses were to be designed and implemented.

The role of the principal was to insure this process took place. Teachers were pressed by the administrative ranks to identify the causes of the errors on standardized benchmark assessments, brainstorm strategies, and demonstrate responses in the classroom that connected with failures and successes on the assessment tests. The walk-throughs and ongoing teacher evaluations would help to motivate teachers to engage the overall process. Principals reported the overall plan through the SPSA and regularly reported to district level officials of the progress.

The Assistant Superintendent of Student Services led the process in addressing the specifics of pedagogical practices expected at each site. Escaping the details, she reinforced the authority of the guest consulting speaker, Gerald. Gerald was apparently well-known to the crowd and a regular at leadership meetings like this. He was a private consultant, a former 4<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher, and now advised PI schools on how to analyze and use data to improve test scores. Gerald developed pre-test software and taught school personnel how to gather and understand the most important data. The principals described Gerald as the “intervention-data guy... who will benefit us the most by getting the biggest bang for our buck.” Principal Swann predictably rolled her eyes a bit and added, “...not helpful... we need specific site help!” Principal Jordan confirmed this stating these types of meetings with Gerald were “... a waste of time” because they did not address her specific needs at Sage Valley High School. When I spoke with Gerald privately, he described his biggest profession concern as dealing with “...a sense

of hopelessness and [principals and teachers] being overwhelmed.” He added that his purpose was to “... take it down to the granular level to allow teachers to attack the real problem.” Gerald’s efforts were therefore directed at providing principals guidance in helping them to focus teachers on the *granular level* of data analysis. This meant that those precise questions that were most commonly missed on standardized tests, such as determining the volume of a cube or explaining the definition of a metaphor, must be the focal point of teaching. Broad scores and general themes of success meant nothing when considering attacking aggregate test scores. The minutia and details of teaching, as most commonly affected, was the target of principal pressure. The principals clearly understood that granularity was important, but they continued to express emotional discomfort and subdued enthusiasm because they lacked the resources to translate the purposes of these larger gatherings to the local level of teaching where the real challenges existed. A misalignment existed between the aspirations at the district level and school-level realities.

Gerald’s PowerPoint plowed forward and included the critique that many schools were overloaded with irrelevant data, and his role was to get them focused on what was important. He displayed statistics that pinpointed what it meant to improve student achievement, which ultimately meant improving standardized test scores by 3-5% in the areas of math and English for those students with the highest potential of learning. In order to do this and get at the granular level, each math and English standard and subsequent question must be broken down and dismantled on a student-by-student basis. Broad scores were not adequate data, and the only relevant information to a teacher was

which question was missed by each student, which then would help them to understand what new information was needed to teach or re-teach.

This granular level analysis presented itself as a daunting task given that high school teachers were often in charge of 200 students, and there were thousands of test questions that could potentially be included on standardized tests. To understand which question among potentially thousands of test questions was relevant for each student could not be understood simply, and had the consequence of potentially paralyzing a successful teacher, shutting them down. And if a teacher did specifically know which questions and what subject matter was not understood by each student, how could a teacher navigate which information should be taught first and to whom? Gerald recognized this ultimate dilemma that plagued all schools. The response was to develop a *triage mentality*; to look upon schools as triage medical units, focusing their efforts on those students that would potentially respond most to their treatment efforts. Gerald spoke plainly to this fact, even asking principals to impress on their teachers a dismissal of “the walking dead and the nearly dead,” which are those students on the edge of failure. They were simply a “waste of time and effort,” energy spent that rarely saw improved test results with added resources. Significant funds spent on the lowest and least motivated students was ultimately seen as a consumed and depleted resources that could better used and see more significant results with other targeted groups. This premise fit nicely with the AVID model that focused its efforts on the middle, those with GPAs between 2.5 and 3.5, those who were still “treatable.”

Principals Jordan and Swann had similar strategies for dealing with “the walking dead.” Both were repulsed by the metaphor, but understood there was some truth when forced to address problematic students. “Intervention” classes were developed at both sites and included those students with the most extreme behavioral problems (violence and truancy), special education students, the lowest performing English-learners, motivationally challenged students, and those testing in the lowest 5%. For Sage Valley, this resulted in two classes of thirty students... the walking dead. “Two great teachers” were assigned to these crowds, and “less attention” was paid to the quality of teachers working with Advanced Placement (AP) students. This served as somewhat of an example in contrast to triage sensibilities and a personal sabotage of the triage directive. However, the worst teachers were “squeezed” or hidden into elective classes, clearing them away from potentially harming standardized test scores in math and English. Principal Swann at Jefferson High had no such “great teachers” to draw from and utilize for her lowest students.

An example of this squeeze existed at Sage Valley High School. A veteran math teacher named Maya had been struggling for years and for many different reasons. A Filipino immigrant, a single mother of two, and recently recovering from injuries sustained from domestic violence, she was hidden on campus by Principal Jordan. Maya was on an “informal improvement plan” that was lasting the duration of her tenure. “She has horrible classroom management, a thick Filipino accent” and was an emotional mess. The plan was essentially to “put her in classes that are not tested.” Those classes were senior electives such as Consumer Math. Principal Jordan admitted, “I hate that part, but



it costs over \$200,000 to fire a teacher... I can really only fire a teacher if they break the law.” Maya’s existence was fallout from triage practices of hiding poor teachers in corridors that did not infect or distract the process of raising test scores. Testing in math and English ended for juniors, and those unlucky seniors with little hope of college attendance had the pleasure of her attention for the year.

The outside consultant, Gerald, posed another problem that schools faced when creating systems that focused their resources on testing in math and English. He relayed that those who construct the standardized tests throughout the United States, *Education Testing Services* (ETS) or the *College Board*, refuse to offer any data at the granular level that could truly help teachers with their teaching. They simply crank out a number that broadly stamps a child, subgroup, school, or district. To offer helpful information would jeopardize the validity and secrecy of their tests from which they incur profits. School districts were thus forced to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for software programs and consultants that crack the codes of standardized tests and help them plan, project, and teach to anticipated questions on standardized tests. Companies such as Kaplan and Princeton Review have found new K-12 markets, making them millions. The information that testing software companies and consultants provide was not new learning content because the teachers and the knowledge they pass on were clear. Outside companies were utilized to provide data that helped target which students were missing which questions, and then guided schools on how to focus their resources to get the most bang for their buck (ie. higher aggregate test scores for their schools and peaceful release from *Program Improvement* status).

The best of intentions were often behind this triage mentality. The English Learner Coordinator for the Sierra School District stepped to the microphone after Gerald completed his presentation and pleaded, “More of our students are not prepared, not going to college... we need to do better!” She followed her brief monologue with a video montage of district leaders once as children, and now as leaders in schools, appealing to emotions in gaining their support for more aggressive measures. Principals were asked to think about their responsibility in getting kids to the next level and post again their “three essential goals for the coming school year.” Doctor Swann posted “...1. increase standardized test proficiency rates, 2. improve English Learner proficiency in Math and English, and 3. improve school culture and connectedness.” Principal Jordan displayed the near identical goals. After each leader posted their goals, the action plans for enforcement of those goals were discussed.

The granular level data problem appeared to be resolved within Sierra Schools by district-wide *benchmark assessments*. Targeted evaluations were specifically researched and developed for every potential math and English class in every grade. Teachers and administrative teams met during the summer months to articulate chapter or unit tests and quizzes serving as evaluative tools further guiding teacher practice and re-teaching strategies. Hundreds of assessment tools were devised, correlating with the dozens of math (elementary enrichment math to high level calculus) and English courses (new learner to AP literature) to the dozens of chapters and units for each course. Pressures from the district have been to develop daily or weekly quizzes to garner more immediate feedback. Teachers felt overwhelmed, not just by the exaggerated numbers of students

now jammed in their classrooms, but by the plethora of benchmark tools they must now employ to create data that to them, was redundant. The math department chair at Sage Valley remarked,

...Benchmarks are ok, but they don't tell me that much. [District benchmark assessments] do no explain what only I can see after time with my students. Students can guess [on the bubble-filled standardized tests], play in an equation. They [the students] can have a good or bad day at a benchmark test... My own personal assessments are my best tool to know if my teaching is working in learning... and I make them show me their work. I don't give them multiple choices.

Both Principal Swann and Jordan disagreed with the math chair, citing that the benchmark assessments were the “most important” evaluative tool in the standardized testing game. Ultimately they represented the best tool for targeting triage strategies efforts of their patrol.

Principal enforcement of the benchmark assessment process and the correlative teaching and learning manifested itself in *principal patrolling*. This included regular walk-throughs in the classrooms, staff development led by principals centered on those goals, and the manipulating of resources that best adhered to those goals. Both Principals Swann and Jordan regularly committed themselves to the “Five-minute walkthrough,” commonly referred to as “pop-ins” by the principals and “drive-bys” by the English teachers. Within each week, anywhere from two to three hours were spent by

the administrative teams rotating attention throughout the high schools, placing teachers on notice that at any moment they could be observed and cited as to the appropriateness of their efforts. Principal Jordan considered them a helpful tool “to keep pulse” on the culture. Principal Swann had the goal of “visiting all classrooms each week,” which she boldly positioned in dark black letters high upon the white board at the head of her office. Both principals carried clipboards with them accompanied by standardized walk-through data worksheets, noting if standards were posted in viewing range, the type of teaching taking place, and specific student activities. When the activity was carried out, principals would target a department and a specific theme (such as student use of technology), walk over to a set of three to five classrooms, and then enter a classroom unannounced. The principal would walk through the room, note the activity in which the students were engaged, even ask students what they were doing, and quickly make remarks on their standardized sheet. Teachers were given copies in their mailboxes upon completion. Principal Swann commented that during pop-ins, “I ask students what they are doing... smile, walk through the entire classroom... check for scaffolding, the standards... various instruction differentiation.” Officially, this type of documentation was not allowed as evidence of professional duties performed. Instead, the paperwork was used as informal evidence with more casual conversations with teachers, and it ultimately provided insight into key themes that could be addressed at broader staff meetings.

The formal process of teacher evaluations and the authority of enforcement meant different things to different people in Sierra School District. For new teachers (two years or less), formal teacher evaluations by the administration took place three times a year.

Teachers within this “probationary” range lived under the threat of being released “without cause.” The tenure status provided by unions was not available to them until the third full year of employment. Managing new teachers was very important, therefore, and the principals paid particular attention to this unique power. For both principals, teachers would schedule an evaluation of their class prior to an announced visit, and also schedule a follow-up meeting to dissect the teaching moment observed. Principal Swann, for example, would enter a classroom and remain the entire period. She would sit in the back of the class making notes meticulously on her laptop computer, wander through the room taking note of the activity, and document a play-by-play summary of the actions of the class. The particular academic standard would be articulated first, followed by notes on the class goals, the agenda of the day, key moments of the class, documentation of “talk” that occurred, and anecdotes of student comments. The key was to decipher if authentic learning was taking place. “A classroom looks like all the parts and action is by the book... the teacher is nice... but the kids [could be] totally unengaged.”

For Principal Jordan, the evaluation and pop-in process was less a tool of enforcement and more a barometer of school culture. She attributed this to the fact that Sage Valley High School was under less scrutiny due to their infancy in PI status, the contrasting student populations, and the fact that she considered her staff much stronger than the one found at Jefferson High. “[Alena] is on the radar, just had Federal Program Monitors... under different scrutiny, different demographics, socio-economics, and a more transient population.” Principal Jordan regarded the policy pressure on teachers

and leaders to be policed and constantly improve as “scare tactics... don’t get what you want from it.”

The consequences of triage-like conditions were apparent and only partially recognized during my year-long stay in Sierra District. Whooping cough was only one disease, and hundreds of cases of mental illness captured administrative attention on a daily basis requiring their diligence in its management. The severity of exceedingly high numbers of discipline cases were judiciously handled and logically ranked, so much that reactive efforts often went unnoticed by fellow leaders at the school site. The level of academic illness was publicly acknowledged in the press, posted on marquees and on the walls of the high schools, and present in the vocabulary of the actors within each school, but successful treatments were sparse and focused on only a few. That did not mean the social structures of schools and the roles of the principals were not planned or agreed upon. If anything, the social structures and systems that defined the principalship for low-performing schools were often abundant.

## Chapter 6— Structural Challenges faced by Principals

The preceding chapters specifically documented the personal lives, the professional realities, and the typical daily actions that took place for two principals in two low-performing high schools. The management theme of *triage* and its subsequent fallout has also been described. The purpose was to show what actually occurred as these two principals performed their roles at their respective high schools, regardless of what might be expected or assumed by policy-makers. This chapter addresses the organizational challenges facing the principals and uses descriptive analysis to explain how the more prescriptive, formalized, or *normative* structures of schooling informed the actions of principals Swann and Jordan, further demonstrating the triage paradigm. In what follows, the policies, goals, environment, and idealized authority systems are described. The tremendous regulatory pressures from multiple directions coupled with monetary incentives, negotiations between formal role expectations and nuanced personalities with supervisory powers, and complexities and volume of immediate circumstances which confuse rational decision-making, all shed light on the challenges these two principals faced.

This chapter is organized into three parts. The first part identifies the social structures that exist for principals and the localized issues that inform their behavior. These structures include the physical arrangement of the school site, the hierarchical systems and displayed signs of power and authority, the formal and informal job descriptions and their adopted roles, and the breadth of principal expectation as

understood by the law. The second part describes the federal, state, and local goals that are relevant to the principal leading a failing school. The money trail is traced, targeted programs are listed, and the incentive game identified. The third part narrates the structures of authority in Sierra School District as a whole and the human resource game that is known as the dance of the lemons. Given the triage paradigm and threats of failure that emit from policy-makers, rational decision-making and honesty become inconsistent results.

As we have recognized, school systems in the United States have essentially developed out of the structural-functionalist/scientific management model. Stemming from the work of Charles Taylor (1911) at the turn of the twentieth century, an institutional archetype has been implanted with an expectation that rational workers labor within a highly standardized system to create easily objectified results. While that adopted business model utilized in schools has adjusted to the sensitivities of human needs and been amended since industrialism began, the core routinized arrangements of schools has historically been fairly constant. The modern period has equally welcomed the objectified assessment tools found in standardized testing. In 1965, Bidwell captured this rationale in his seminal piece *The School as a Formal Organization*. He described how schooling could be logically summarized as a *client-serving organization* in which students are trained and indoctrinated. There exists a clear *role-structure* in which a professionalized class of adults is *hierarchically* assembled under a *functional division of labor* to fulfill the duty of teaching and learning. There is a *public set of rules* with the



ultimate goal of producing a *uniform product of a certain quality*, all of which requires *standards and order* (Bidwell, 1965).

Beyond these core organizational structures that educational institutions share, modern academics such as Scott (1998) have further considered tangible social patterns that serve as guideposts when analyzing the regular dynamics of schooling. This more complicated and involved examination looks at understanding the *social and political structures, institutional goals, key actors and their important actions, outside environmental influences*, and issues of *power and authority*. The structural summations of Bidwell will be assumed and elaborated within the analyzed data of this study, but important elements suggested by Scott provided the basic platform for shaping the analysis of the multiple social effects on principals at Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools. In particular, the social structures that influence and define leadership, the educational goals that drive leadership, and specific structures of power and authority surrounding the principalship were explored.

Motivating the discussion in becoming familiar with the science of structural systems, institutionalism, and social influences in our schools, was the concern over the purpose and scope of the principalship in low-income schools. Are principals to rigidly comply with prescribed policies and historically entrenched patterns, or be adaptive, creative, and responsive to their particular context? Do principals get to decide what success is or be solely bound by the categories passed down from a highly standardized system? How much of their world can really be rationalized or routinized? There are

similarities and patterns to be found in each school, but there are also unique situations often unpredictable and unimaginable. Recognizing the multiple paradoxes is vital to appreciating the role of principals and the further development of school policy.

### Social Structure Effect on Principals

Scott (1998) described social structure as the "...patterned or regularized aspects of the relationships existing among participants in an organization." Within these patterned aspects are two essential components—that which *ought to be*, and that which *is*. Scott submitted that the first component of what ought to be as the *normative* structure, which includes the values, norms, and role expectations. Explained further, *values* are the criteria employed when determining the goals of behavior, *norms* govern the rules of behavior, and *roles* are the expectations of specific actors in the system of social relationships. The second component, referred to as the *behavioral* structure and previously addressed in chapters three and four, focused on the actual or factual order and behavior of the actors involved. Where normative structure is more prescriptive, behavioral structure is more descriptive of the activities and interactions that actually occur. The more normative structures ultimately imply some sort of order, whether ideally held consciously or tacitly, and often merge or stand independent from behavioral actions.

Scott (1998) further distinguished between the formal and informal aspects of the social structure. A formal structure is one in which "...the social positions and the

relationships among them have been explicitly specified and are defined independently of the personal characteristics and relations of the participants occupying these positions.”

An informal social structure is a less fixed or ruled place. Combining the formal and informal understandings of actors in institutions would be more appropriate when accurately accounting for those actors and their actions. Prescribed relations merge with personalities and nuanced relations. Roles and relationships affect one another, continually develop, and are renegotiated. It would be impossible to not account for both the formal and informal developments. The comparative element of looking at two principals helped to isolate some of the more nuanced and informal responses even though the formal expectations existed for both.

So connecting these theoretical suppositions of academics such as Scott and Bidwell, an important piece in understanding the principals at Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools was getting at the formal social structures and guiding premises that focused their efforts. What were the most important pressures that consumed their thoughts and actions? What priorities defined who they were professionally? Who were the important players in the construction of the value system (norms) that guided leadership-type behaviors in high schools? What were the public and private understandings of their specific roles as principals? Was there a disconnect between what was expected (normative) and what was performed (behavioral), between what was formally and informally adopted? Answers to these questions helped to provide guideposts in examining the efficacy of principal tasks on student learning among the disadvantaged.

Both principals in Sierra School District dealt with similar traditional social systems that informed the leadership structures in which they were embedded. The principals were the unquestioned and visible leaders of their site and discernible signs existed all around them much like in any other high school in the United States. There were many clues that would inform any visitor to each campus of who the principal was and where their center of power resided. When one arrived at either campus from its main street, designated “visitor parking” signs directed incomers to pass near the clearly designated administrative buildings that were strategically placed at the main entrance emboldened with dark metal letters labeled “Administration” stapled high upon the wall. When exiting a vehicle, marked postings herded all visitors to the only gated entrance available where a security team requested identification, purpose of entry, signature with that purpose, and the wearing of a sticky badge on your chest that labeled you an outsider. The security staff wore bright yellow t-shirts with the term “security” unmistakably branded in black on their backs. Passing by the administrative building was a requirement of entry, and quite literally, a formalized rite of passage.

The second structural wave included the administrative secretarial staff, all of whom had tiny placards on their desks with their title and names, and each perked their additionally inquisitive heads like a mother-hen to cross-examine any unrecognizable incomer, again soliciting your purpose. Beyond the secretarial barriers and tucked in more remote offices lied the leadership team. Administrators visibly dressed up and looked more professional than the rest of any other actor on campus, drove nicer cars, wore distinguished badges, and carried with them a clanging chain of keys reminding the

world of their lone authority to open any door at any time. Names and titles were emblazoned on their doors, and the numerous degrees, certificates, and professional accolades were prominently displayed on their office walls.

The public authority of the principals was reinforced by their freedom of movement throughout the campus, most visibly in their ability to not be forced to be in a classroom and live under the authority of the bells that moved teachers, staff, and students like whistles moving laborers in a steel mill. Additional rules against carrying communication devices such as cell phones, or going on and off campus at their will, did not apply to them. The principals could additionally reassert their place in the hierarchical structure through the morning announcements resounding through the corridors every morning near 8:00am. “And now Doctor Swann/Principal Jordan with her *Words of Wisdom*,” served as a daily reminder of who was in charge. The principals had the authority to walk into any classroom at any time to monitor that teaching and learning was taking place under their watch. Any major discipline or academic concern required the attention of the principal as well as their approval of any official response. Personality conflicts, control of the calendar of events, the hiring and firing of teachers, and the discretionary budgets all were clearly in the hands of the principal and publicly decreed in staff handbooks, job descriptions, and strictly adhered within social and professional traditions.

The principals at each site received the highest salaries on each high school campus in the range of \$115,000 to \$120,000 a year. The average teacher at each site

was about half that at about \$60,000 per year. These figures were well known, officially published both on the district website and on annually published accreditation and state accountability reports. With this salary upgrade given to principals, however, each oversaw an enormous site. Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools each included nearly twenty acres of athletic fields, over 100 classrooms filled with desks and technology, multiple computer labs, dozens of bathrooms, a junior Olympic-sized pool, libraries and college research centers, and parking lots filled with hundreds of cars. Over 150 staff and faculty served in each school with student populations neighboring 2500. Dozens of unexpected visitors entered each site and the health and safety of it all was ultimately under the responsibility of the principal.

The official job descriptions for the principals included a purpose statement that avowed, “Under the direction and supervision of the Superintendent, the Principal leads and directs the education program of the high school within the framework of district policy and supervises the responsibility of all site personnel.” The following twenty-five point job description was officially published on the district website as well as in any potential job posting. I observed both principals perform each of these actions in some way throughout the year. The high school principal in Sierra School District was directed to do the following:

- Maintains and administers the adopted policies of the Board of Trustees, and interprets and applies state and county laws, regulations, procedures and policies at the school site

- Plans, directs, coordinates and evaluates instructional programs at a comprehensive high school to ensure that research based and proven classroom instructional methodologies are used to assist the school in meeting its AYP and NCLB targets in accordance with State and federal laws, District regulations and other specially funded program requirements
  
- Interprets the school program and its curriculum to parents through the Booster Clubs, open houses, personal conferences and bulletins; promotes greater community understanding of school objectives, accomplishments and programs; and represents the school in professional and community groups
  
- Develops a thorough understanding of the area served by the school, homes, citizens, activities, problems, key organizations, and attitudes concerning education in general and the school in particular
  
- Plans personnel needs and makes appropriate recommendations to the Human Resources Department for employment, re-employment or dismissal of personnel
  
- Supervises the planning, administration and evaluation of the school budget and translates the school's financial needs
  
- Supervises the organization of all transportation that affects the school
  
- Supervises the regular inspection of the school plant and promotes proper student respect for school property

- Directs the educational activities of the school, giving direction to the instructional programs and education methods
- Responds to the needs of students by involving them in committees, involving the staff and students in developing programs centered on student needs, hearing student concern, and including students in the evaluation of school programs
- Works with district personnel, co-administrators, teachers, students and laymen in evaluating and improving the curriculum and the educational program of the school
- Directs assigned programs for exceptional children, recommends the initiation of new programs for exceptional children, and organizes the coordination of these programs with the existing regular school program
- Directs activities necessary to support a strong, educationally sound program of student counseling which includes vocational, personal and school counseling
- Directs activities necessary to support a strong, educationally sound program for student discipline
- Assumes the responsibility for the detailed organization and efficient administration of all school activities which includes student clubs, student government, athletic programs, and school dances
- Directs, and assists the assigned staff in carrying out an effective instructional program through conferences, meetings, bulletins, in-service



workshops and demonstrations, experimentation, interpretation of guides, and classroom visits

- Acts as a staff leader to stimulate and encourage personal growth and professional development through the use of counseling, participation in study and conferences and committees
- Conducts regular staff meetings to communicate policies, to solve common problems, and to appraise the total educational program
- Directs the on-site evaluation procedure for all certificated and classified employees according to district policy
- Prepares a detailed and functional school site handbook
- Provides for all emergencies in case of accident, fire, etc.
- Able to conduct verbal conversation, write, and read in English
- Establishes and maintains participatory and positive team management approaches for problem solving and improvement
- Performs other duties as assigned by the Superintendent

These formal job descriptions, role expectations, and visible social structures are some of the most common and recognizable elements to the modern principalship. The list is extensive and challenging. And much like the vague literature that exists on the qualities and actions of good principals, these delineated job descriptions were equally problematic

and contained infinite interpretations and realizations. “Perform *other* duties assigned...directs the *educational activities* of the school... *provides* for all *emergencies*.” Even implanted in the role jargon itself were terms that expected principals to *interpret, act, evaluate, establish, and assume*. How could it be possible to standardize and objectively evaluate such a position? Years of traditions, Board of Education policies, lawsuits, and the ever-present structural-functionalist business model have come to define the anticipated actions and purposes of the principal, and yet this was only a fraction of the idealized job.

The job descriptions and assignments were further disaggregated within each school’s administrative rank and included the more specific site roles for the principal, three assistant principals, athletic director, and activities director. A published matrix of “administrative responsibilities” was available to the entire faculty and staff to be referenced should thematic issues appear. With those thematic correlations was the expectation that each administrator assigned would “manage” and “evaluate” that program. The matrix at both Jefferson High and Sage Valley shared strong similarities and correlated highly with the matrix published at my own school site. The administrative duties table (Fig. 6) serves as an example of the matrices used by the schools. The rows demonstrate role function and include the personnel, the primary departments they are responsible for evaluating, and the various departments and areas of focus for their concern.

Beyond these varying role structures that existed both formally and informally, the scope of their professional prerogatives was also substantial. Education code, coupled with the traditional practice of what has been considered the domain of a “school,” recognized that the authority of principals and school jurisdiction extends far beyond the walls of the institution itself. It would be one thing for a principal to operate and react within the realm of occurrences that only took place amidst the twenty acres of the high school. So if a sophomore should choose to punch another student in the face at lunch under the football stadium bleachers on a Wednesday, that would clearly fit within the domain of authority of the principal because it occurred on the school site during the school day by an understood school actor. The story does not end here, and it was not

<b>Principal</b>	<b>Ast. Princ. #1</b>	<b>Ast. Princ. #2</b>	<b>Ast. Princ. #3</b>	<b>Athl. Dir.</b>	<b>Activ. Dir.</b>
<i>English</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Social Science</i>	<i>Science</i>	<i>PE</i>	<i>Student clubs</i>
Oversees all academic programs	Alternative Ed	GATE	Aides	Security	Student Government
Activities	Assessment	AVID	Attendance	Coaches	Clubs
Budget	Curriculum	Career Ctr.	Cheer	Athletics	Fundraising
Dept. Chair Meetings	Data	Counseling	Awards	Schedules	Activities
Faculty-Staff Relations	Syllabi	Course Catalog	Open-Houses	Supervision	Calendar
Health office	English-Learners	Evaluations	Custodians	graduation	
Human Resources	Software	Master Schedule	Facilities		
Library	Professional Learning Communities	Scholarships	Orientation-Registration		
Office Functions	Seniors	Suspensions/Expulsions	WASC Accreditation		
Student Newspaper	Staff Development	Bells and Schedules	Technology		
Site Council	Suspensions/Expulsions	Food Services	Suspensions/Expulsions		
Student Handbook	SAT/ACT	Emergency Plan	Transportation		
Yearbook	AP Testing	Graduation	Saturday School		

Fig. 6

just a question of geography and time. Schools in America traditionally begin near 8:00 a.m. and end at 3:00 p.m., and a casual observer might reasonably suspect a principal cannot possibly regulate anything beyond the dominion of the school during its operating hours. According to the law, however, the students and actions that occurred within a potential twenty mile radius was also within their jurisdiction, and possibly even further. And the bells that call students to task and dismiss them to return home did not signify in any way the authority of schools. The jurisdiction of the school was understood by the principals to extend from the moment the child leaves the house and was either dropped off by the parent at the school, or when a child reached the bus stop to pass on to school. That critical supervision and liability time did not end until the child was picked up by a parent or "touches the door" of their home. So potentially, a child could be dropped off by their parent at 6:00 a.m. at their respective bus stop twenty or more miles from school and then return to their home and touch their doorknob after soccer practice at 8:00 p.m. The scope was broad when considering the arrangements of nearly 3,000 families and their efforts to get a child to school.

Exemplifying this quandary was a case at Sage Valley High School involving a young female being regularly threatened by a young male with whom she rode the bus. The girl testified that the boy said near her bus stop, "I am gonna kill you and your family," because she had occupied his regular seat on the bus when he arrived to be transported home after school. The tension between the two students had been ongoing and recently took a turn for the worse, far beyond the consistent harassing words they often chided to each other upon meeting each afternoon. Events and heated words

exploded to new levels one afternoon and involved multiple families at a bus stop on a rural road about five miles off campus. The case for Principal Jordan involved a two day investigation including fifteen “Declarations of Incidents” taken by witnessing students. Parent and police conferences ensued at Sage Valley with regularly updated reports being delivered to the district office. Multiple families with long histories over many years were entangled in the incident. Nothing happened within five miles of the school or during the normal operating school hours, but the principal was still responsible given the events legally occurred within the jurisdiction of what is understood as the “school.” To complicate matters, families and witnesses told the police dissimilar information from what they told Principal Jordan. No staff or official representatives of the school were witnesses, and testimonials of the students and families were too contradictory to issue any punishments. “I can only give consequences for what I can prove!” Principal Jordan exhorted. “This reminds me why I hate to do discipline.” Whether she hated it or not, the law and the school community expected her to officially mediate the crisis.

### Multiple Goals Imputed on Principals

A *natural system* theory recognizes that the behavior of actors in an organization is often not guided by the formal rules of an organization, and it is impossible to predict behavior based on these formalized rules. The focus of the natural system then is to recognize both the formal rules of the organization as well as the actual activity that actors do despite the goals. Goals are therefore more complicated and changing because

of the human need element, the conscious willingness to contradict or sabotage formalized policies, and the lived realities that collide with insensitive goals. The informal needs of actors such as social relations and group belonging, as well as personally held convictions that contradict institutionalized policies, often guide behavior stronger than the formally prescribed behaviors that are predictable within the rational system. The formal rules are thus a façade, or an idealized presentation, in comparison to the reality of the natural activity of human life. Authority as a construct, and the obedience to dogmas necessitated for standardization, is thus diffused over multiple interests and multiple circumstances. Despite even democratically contrived federal and state goals and policies on education, the adherence to any of it therefore requires consensus at the local and personal level for each and every event. Goals are therefore often in a constant state of flux and renegotiation. Those within the chain of command are really not in charge without the agreement of those in the entire social organization. The question for principals Swann and Jordan therefore surrounded issues of which goals should be strictly adhered to and why.

Mary Metz (1978) recognized this tension in her work studying desegregated schools during the 1970s. It was acknowledged in her qualitative analysis that most organizations have goals that are both publicly and privately recognizable, and socially determined. Churches seek to foster their values by indoctrination and communal gathering. Businesses offer products or services with the hope of making profits. Politicians press agendas into policy and strive to be elected. None of that seems particularly irregular. Similarly, public schools appeared to Metz as institutions that

equally have a clear overarching goal, which is “to educate the children of a geographic area” (p.16). There would seem to be little dispute with that basic premise, yet when one is asked what it means to “educate,” the consensus falls apart and debate begins. Is it more important to memorize standardized curriculum or foster creative and critical thinking? Are resources to be more focused on security, class-size reduction, or technology? Are children to learn foreign languages, the theory of evolution, the historical significance of key homosexual Americans, Shakespeare or Faulkner, modernity or the classics? When we apply these types of questions to other fields, it would help explain things like the Protestant Reformation, the Communist Revolution, and the schism between Democrats and Republicans over tax policy.

The pronounced goals of education in the United States are therefore voluminous, and the bureaucratic networks that consider those goals parallel the largest institutions in the world such as the military, the church, healthcare, and finance. The attention placed on the management of schools is considered by all branches of the federal government, governors, state legislatures, local districts, school boards, and every parent. The educational goals of each constituency are considered and articulated in federal policy, court decisions, state education codes, city and county ordinances, and school handbooks. Every city and every campus bears traditions and unique customs. Each principal at every school site must consider it all. Most notably, and germane to this study, was that should a principal and particular school be an outlier, one that is not performing appropriately within what is considered normal, further policies and goals were

enunciated. Both Jefferson High and Sage Valley High were those outliers and subject to additional goals applicable only to Title I schools.

It is also important to understand the relative *weight* of influences on principals when considering the articulated goals from various levels of authority. And by weight, I mean the power of money and its disproportionate influence on the attention principals pay to constituency goals. Since the addendums to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001 (No Child Left Behind) and 2009 (Race to the Top), the authority of state and local school district officials have drifted more into the hands of the federal government. This has not been due to significant revenue source changes or a boon in federal contributions to state education programs. Instead, it has primarily been due to the supplemental funds the federal government has been offering states with the more recent conditions of organizational and policy change. This does not mean the authority of the state and local districts is not significant. In fact, they appear to still represent the bulk of legal, political, and financial authority. It is hard to quantify or directly correlate the attention a principal pays to the articulated goals from multiple funding sources, but one could reasonably assume managerial responsiveness is sensitive to where they get their money.

Across the United States, local school income sources have traditionally and on average been a collection of federal (8%), state (46%), and local revenue (46%), fluctuating insignificantly for the past twenty years (Guthrie, Springer, Rolle, & Houck, 2007). There has been some disparity in the receipt of federal education dollars, however.



States such as South Dakota, Louisiana, Mississippi, and California received nearly 15% of school funding resources from the federal government in recent years, with New Jersey and Connecticut closer to 5%. The disparity appears to correlate with poverty concerns (Maxwell, 2012). States such as Arizona, California, and Nevada have additionally passed *equalization* measures, combining local and state tax revenues to more equally distribute the money to all its schools instead of granting local districts autonomy in the raising and spending of funds. Equalization policies have thus shifted some authority away from local districts to the state level because of money control. The trend with states that have attempted to equalize the distribution of public resources across districts and schools means that it is often illegal or substantially prohibitive for local districts to pass bond measures to improve funding streams. Instead, districts must rely on state-wide bond or tax measures to determine increases in their resources. So when one looks at per-pupil funding disparity between states, clearer differences appear between states that have been equalized.

The specific expenditure practices of American schools has also been fairly consistent in recent history, even among charter schools, and has included the following budgetary spending categories—63% on instruction (teacher salaries and supplies), 11% on school administration, 10% on facilities operation, 9% on transportation and food service, and 7% on student services (health, guidance, etc.) The states in the American Southwest generally sit below average in per-pupil funding when compared to the rest of the states (Monk, Pijanowski, and Hussain, 1997; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Odden, et.al., 1995; Fernandez & Rogerson, 1999).

### *Federal Goals*

The specific federal goals for principals in poor and low-performing schools in the United States were first articulated during the Johnson administration and his *War on Poverty* efforts. Aiming to curb poverty and shorten the achievement gap among ethnic and socioeconomic groups, federal funding streams to the states commenced with the *Title I* section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Publicly stated, Title I has had the specific goal to provide:

... financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Federal funds are currently allocated through four statutory formulas that are based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (ed.gov, 2013).

Since 1965, roughly \$100 billion dollars in aid has ushered into schools identified as underprivileged. Today, over 50% of schools within the United States are Title I eligible because they can claim that high percentages of their students come from low-income families. Federal supplemental money accounts for nearly 10% of public school funding due to the fact that schooling has been legally and constitutionally determined a state-directed institution. *School Improvement Grants* (SIG), a federal Title I sub-program created with the reauthorizations of ESEA through the Obama administration's Race to the Top, has been the primary avenue for states to additionally solicit grant dollars

specifically for added creativity in improving student achievement of the poor. Publicly expressed, SIGs

...are awarded to State Educational Agencies (SEAs) that then make competitive sub-grants to those Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) that demonstrate the greatest need for the funds and the strongest commitment to use them to provide the resources required to substantially raise student achievement in their lowest-performing schools (US Department of Education, 2013).

Conducted through the Department of Education, Title I and SIG has been the largest federal funding source targeted with the goal of improving student achievement among the poor, augmenting states nearly \$15 billion a year. Until 2001 and despite the billions of dollars sent to the states, limited federal oversight and regulations had been passed down.

Under Title I of ESEA and subsequent addendums found in NCLB (2001) and Race to the Top (2009), specific federal conditions and regulatory benchmarks have now been more intimately linked to monetary distribution to the states. To receive any federal money, states have been asked to develop clear and rigorous “standards” for each subject at each grade level. These standards, such as requiring all sophomores in history be able to understand the effects of industrialism on the United States and Great Britain, or requiring that all third graders in math be able to understand the relationship between whole numbers and fractions, were to be clearly articulated and legally binding upon schools by each state’s board of education. Upon the development of these standards,

correlative standardized tests must be administered at each grade level in math and English serving as yearly assessments. In the spirit of accountability, the results of these assessments were required to be published, available to all constituents, broken down by demographic subgroups, and reported at intervals to the state and federal departments of education (Wirt & Kirst, 2005). Should a school or district fail to show progressive improvement (Adequate Yearly Progress) in their aggregate and subgroup scores over time, financial and organizational consequences arrived. While standards and assessments developed among the states include the core areas of the science and history, the weight of the test scores and federal concern lie most exclusively on results in math and English. The basic premise of this system has remained under the newest of conditions within Race to the Top and the new *Common Core* standards. The programmatic shift has essentially been away from individual state standards to more federalized standards and assessments linked to federal funding.

The federal dollars have been far too desirable. All fifty states, U.S. territories, as well as the Bureau of Indian Education, have applied and received federal support for their low-income schools, particularly given recent budget shortfalls during the recession. For the 2011-2012 school-years, Arizona received over \$320 million in federal aid, with nearly \$12 million in SIG grants. Nevada received nearly \$100 million in federal aid, with nearly \$4 million in SIG grants. California received over \$1.7 billion in supplemental federal aid, with over \$60 million in SIG grants. The Bureau of Indian Education, whose authority is concentrated in the American Southwest, received over \$100 million (US Department of Education, 2013). State departments of education have,

in turn, applied for the federal dollars, then required individual districts to justify their receipt of Title I allocations.

Taking the federal offering of Title I or any other federal supplemental grant money has been a celebrated choice for Sierra School District and its high schools. Districts and individual schools can opt to take or pass on the dollars for various reasons, including the avoidance of the stigma associated with being a “Title I School” and all that comes with that, or repelling the potential government oversight that accompanies the addition to federal money. Schools and districts can also refuse the money because they are unaware of the plethora of potential federal grants such as SIG, or don’t have the personnel that can file the appropriate paperwork needed to solicit the money. Because they welcome the federal dollars, both Jefferson High and Sage Valley were handed federal goals and oversight simultaneously with the promise of correlative dollars.

Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools were supplemented by *restricted* funds an additional 16%, or \$1,200 a year per student because of disproportionately elevated participation in Title I. Known to the principals as *categorical* funds that were targeted but enabled them to have some creativity in their enrichment interventions for poor and low-performing students, the principals lead and managed the delivery methods of Title I goals. The following programs and pedagogical aids resulted from these unique dollars. When the money was translated into meaningful action, the principals at Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools concluded with the following action steps by creating:

- Parent outreach and education program
- Gifted & Talented Education (GATE)
- Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) college readiness program
- After school tutoring
- Math, English/Language Arts, and English-Learner Coaches
- Incentive programs
- Vocational training
- The Latino Family Literacy Project
- Parent Institute for Quality Education (room for community/parent help)
- On-site bilingual parent-community liaison in the parent center
- Career technical education
- Technology purchases (computers, software)
- Staff development targeted at low-performing students
- Learning center (pull-outs for low-performing students)
- English Language Learner support (training, aides, technology, textbooks)
- Credit recovery support classes
- Standardized tests intervention classes (enrichment math and English)
- Summer boot-camp intervention for incoming 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders
- Title I Coordinator designee (part-time teacher)
- Violence, alcohol, drug, tobacco, suicide interventions
- Special Education interventions and aides

For principals Alena Swann and Christi Jordan, specific federal policy and monetary allocations were not regularly referred to beyond their desire to respond to the district via state mandate that math and English scores consistently rise every year, and

that their budgets were sound and transparent. They both were well aware that many of their programs had some sort of Title I connection, but the direct link or specific amounts were often mysterious. Due to the complexities related to Title I and regulatory demands, a teacher at each site was designated “Title I Coordinator” and given a release period to address the myriad of issues involved. This designee was primarily seen as a pedagogical or programmatic aid who worked more closely with the poorest of students and parents, not necessarily a managerial aid helping to negotiate budgets and institutional structures. When I asked the principals to offer a ballpark estimate of how much they received in Title I funds in general or the specific connections of programs to money, they often replied “I don’t know... it changes so much every year... let me get back to you.”

Further confusing the matter for principals, about a third of the state’s school funds were committed to categorical aid, which had been drawn from both federal and state sources. Categorical funds were generally fixed or “restricted,” and specifically targeted at “special” programs and students such as special education, English-learners, and low-income students. So when the state allocated categorical funds to districts and schools, they combined state and local tax revenue with federal Title I funds and grants. The state additionally created a program known as Economic Impact Aid (EIA), the primary bureaucracy that addressed low-income and limited-English speaking students. Funding for this agency came from the counties, the state, federal Title I, and federal Title III (program for students with limited English proficiency). Altogether, it was estimated that over fifty sources and programs overlapped in mission and revenue. The principals ultimately had no mechanism to decipher which dollar came from where and

whom to thank or be weary of at times. They simply trusted the direction of their district leaders and their school site business managers, functioned the best they could to report their efforts and programs, and spent little time speculating about the complicated equations involved with school finance.

Principal Swann appeared more cognizant of this quagmire and was particularly more controlling with the dollar management game at Jefferson High School given her greater reliance on these special funding sources. To safeguard her own regulatory systems, she paid close attention to fostering a trusting relationship with her more detail-oriented site accounting manager, Maria. Maria, whom Principal Swann proudly referred to as “the money lady,” was a confidant of privileged access and communicated with Alena in an almost coded language when determining where money should come from and how it should be justified in the paperwork. When observing their interaction, more nods and groans existed than any use of words. Maria also operated as a fiscal watchdog, popping into Principal Swann’s office almost daily to remind her that she “needed to spend incentive (testing) money by October 1<sup>st</sup>,” or that it would be required to “have an assignment sheet and agenda” to accompany district reports on spending, or that she had “the P.O. [purchase order] for the meeting held at the Mexican restaurant from last night” which needed her signature. Principal Swann’s fiscal management style could be described as hierarchically top-down, operationalized more like a stereotypical union boss when resources were at stake, cautious not to include others directly when discussing anything not fixed to categorical funds. The volume and tone of her voice tended to rise and with a gruffer demeanor when resources were being negotiated.



The principals knew that enmeshed in the federal allocation of Title I money were other federal programs tangentially connected to the mission of helping poor and low performing schools. And again, because it was often hard to distinguish which dollar went with which grant or which government agency (district, county, state, and federal), elaborate record keeping schemes and site account managers existed at both schools. It was clear, however, that the principals were expected to acknowledge and report every dollar they spent, justify its purpose, show evidence of its success, and connect the dollars with a funding source. When the principals contemplated new programs, or how to authorize and pay for existing programs, they negotiated with their accounting managers about where to draw the funds and creatively siphoned money in unpredictable manners. “Is this a Title I account... or a general fund matter... a categorical fund? ...or do we need to fund raise for this? How can we justify this?” Altogether, the high schools of Sierra School District received categorical type funding (joint state-federal) from the following “known” entities:

- Economic Impact Aid (EIA/LEP)
- English Language and Acquisition Program
- Teacher Training and Student Assistance Program
- State Lottery aid for instructional materials
- Special Education
- ESEA Title I (poverty)
- ESEA Title III (English learners)
- ESEA Title X (McKinney-Vento Homeless assistance)
- Transportation supplement program
- Department of Agriculture vocational grants

- Department of Justice, Health and Human Services, and Education
- Joint federal-state tobacco use, violence, drug/alcohol prevention programs

An example of the complicated juggling of funding streams and justifications occurred during the 2011-2012 school years and the managing of a new federal *Safe Schools* grant awarded to both sites. Due to federal Title IV cuts in 2010 that were targeted at violent schools, a new collaborative grant program inclusive of three Federal agencies (the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice) offered at-risk schools potential funds through a *Safe Schools/Healthy Students* (SS/HS or S3) Initiative. Originally developed in the late 1990s, the SS/HS Initiative had the goal of developing "... real-world knowledge about what works best to promote safe and healthy environments in which America's children can learn and develop" (sshs.samhsa.gov, 2013). Both Jefferson and Sage Valley schools had relied on the money without applying for the grants previous to 2010, but now had to spend days organizing data and applying for the once dependable money. They both "surprisingly received" SS/HS funds equating to an additional \$100,000 at each site. In return for the aid, the schools were required to develop plans and offer timely evidence addressing five key elements: safe school environments and violence prevention activities, alcohol and other drug prevention activities, student behavioral, social, and emotional supports, mental health services and early childhood social and emotional learning programs.

The paperwork, regulations, and oversight was daunting in regards to the Safe Schools grant alone, particularly to Principal Swann given her school had almost triple

the violence and safety concerns comparable poor schools experienced. During the month of November and in response to the receipt of Safe Schools funding, a contracted observer was sent in by the state department of education and helped conduct a two-day seminar at Jefferson High School. Principal Swann was to organize and attend the meeting, including other administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members. Starting early in the morning on a Thursday, the introductions of community members and staff turned to the realities of the “school climate.” Community expectations, evidence gathered from surveys and reports, and testimonies of staff and students were delivered. The day’s minutes were steadily packed and ended with an outline of a strategic plan of action. Friday would be spent on specifics of the plan. While the days were an important symbol of her success in accessing much needed money and an opportunity for the primary players to talk, it was another few days of unwanted distraction. “I have not even turned on my computer today!” Principal Swann exclaimed. “These days, these weeks, I hate!” Results from the meetings, minutes from the discussions, and tangible connections of the money to specific actions were required in a formal report delivered to the Department of Education by mid-December. For the high schools in Sierra School District, the following programs were developed and/or expanded because of the new relationship with the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program and the meetings related. Each required narrative and statistical evidence of their success and relation to funding:

- District violence training for faculty and staff
- Regular and ongoing community and kids surveys

- Data collection and analysis
- Increased campus supervision staff
- On-Campus Intervention (OCI) reorganized—detention/suspension mechanics
- PLASCOTrac software technology tardiness intervention/referral program
- School Readiness Program (summer and break boot camps for low students)—*Summer Connections*
- African-American advisory council (student, staff, community)
- Latino advisory council (students, staff, community)
- Student Advisory Team
- Safe Schools Ambassadors
- Brother’s Keepers club
- Seminars addressing race and poverty
- Field trips for at-risk kids
- Violence substance abuse/alcohol/tobacco training and interventions
- Harassment and bullying training
- Suicide training and interventions

A Federal Program Monitor (FPM) for Title I allocations was also scheduled to visit in the coming days to check and report on how each school was spending its ESEA categorical funds.

A more detailed example Principal Swann used to demonstrate the use of categorical funds came through the *Summer Connections* program. Primarily underwritten by the recently acquired Safe Schools (S3) grant in conjunction with some Title I money, a summer boot camp was designed to “support students in math and/or

English and character development.” Costing the students and parents nothing, Principal Swann hoped to target the lowest seventy-five students at the freshmen and sophomore levels in order to raise test scores. Inviting the lowest incoming freshmen was a difficult task given the legal limitations and potential recruiting restrictions on high school administrators. During a planning session, Principal Swann described, “We can’t get grades and [test scores] until mid-summer... not sure if it’s legal.” Instead, all freshmen parents were contacted in the hope of soliciting those more at-risk cases with plans to then glean the lowest students. The blueprint was to conduct enrichment courses in math and English during the months of June and July in the mornings from 8:00 a.m. until 12:00 noon on Mondays through Thursday. Incentives included the earning of five credits on their transcripts, the meeting of future students, prioritized access to the culture and site of the school, and a fun Friday field trip day. Letters were sent to every parent, district officials stopped by homes of the more disadvantaged families, the auto-dialer system called every potential phone number, and regular announcements were made promoting the summer program. Before the summer started and in the last week of the school, only four families had responded with interest. Principal Swann expressed frustration with both the program consultant and herself for not paying closer attention to recruitment activities. Unanticipated time and money needed to be devoted to gaining attention to the program and securing participation... “Fuck!”

*State and Local Goals*

Given the absence of any language mentioning schools within the United States Constitution, power to control educational bodies has been essentially left to the states (Wirt and Kirst, 2005). Consequently, political structures within each state are more sophisticated when compared to the federal Department of Education. Popularly elected State Superintendents of Schools/Public Instruction, State Departments of Education, State School Boards, all work to develop policy, monitor school districts, articulate standards, propose initiatives, and manage revenue. The Governors within each state additionally have a heavy hand in education policy given that the endeavor of education constitutes about half of all expenditures within each state. And where the federal government more exclusively offers policy and money, each state does the same with the additional burden of actually organizing and operating their schools. Given that the majority of States within the Southwest have additionally approved *equalization* measures, the authority of the county or local school districts has been trumped by state authority. Thus, the articulated goals emitting at the state level potentially have the greatest weight as considered by the principals.

Each state therefore publicly articulates schooling “goals” for its citizenry through their educational political structures. For Nevada, their goals are collaboratively delivered by the State Superintendent, the Board of Education, and the Governor. Their vision for schools has been to:

- 1) Elevate student achievement results for all students

- 2) Improve the graduation rate including expanding the advanced diploma rate
- 3) Ensure college and career readiness when students graduate from high school
- 4) Ensure Nevada's students are educated by effective teachers and administrators
- 5) Support and expand innovative programs to improve learning
- 6) Increase productivity and return on investment (Nevada Department of Education, 2013)

California politically operates in a similar fashion, having their goals separated into three strands:

- 1) *Standards*. Adopt and support rigorous academic content and performance standards in the four core subjects for kindergarten and grades 1 through 12.
- 2) *Achievement*. Ensure that all students are performing at grade level or higher, particularly in reading and math, at the end of each school year, recognizing that a small number of exceptional needs students must be expected, challenged, and assisted to achieve at an individually determined and appropriately high level. Advocate for mandatory intervention for every child not at grade level. Do everything possible to ensure that "the job is done right in the first place."

- 3) *Assessment.* Maintain policies assuring that all students receive the same nationally normed and standards-based assessments, grades 2 through 11, again recognizing that a small number of exceptional needs students must be separately and individually assessed using appropriate alternative means to determine achievement and progress (California Department of Education, 2013).

One can clearly see the language use of federal goals implanted within the state goals. This ultimately blurs the lines between state and federal authority and influence. Regardless of this rhetoric, the meaning of these goals tends to only bears weight if they included money and/or regulatory authority.

The states have targeted their regulatory efforts and equalization dollars by identifying failing schools, commonly describing them as *Program Improvement (PI)* schools. PI schools are those that receive Title I funds and failed to show progressive improvement (Adequate Yearly Progress) in their math and English standardized test scores for over two consecutive years. States have furthered disaggregated their PI schools and identified ones that are the lowest five percent, recognizing them as the *persistently lowest-achieving schools*. Graduation rates below 60% have also been factored in the labeling process. Jefferson High was in its third year of PI and recognized by the state as persistently low-achieving. Sage Valley High school had escaped the “persistent” label due to high enough test scores, but had been recognized as a PI school because they could not consistently meet the yearly required advances in test score improvement among each of its subgroups in math and English. Even though Sage



Valley was technically in its first year of PI, it had been there before because it had drifted in and out of “safe harbor” status. It had previously been a year-one PI school two years prior, but recently showed a drop in scores during the 2011-2012 school years. When scores showed improvement, safe harbor was granted by the state and oversight withdrawn for a short time and the clock was allowed to reset.

Because both Jefferson High and Sage Valley remained in some fashion PI schools under both federal and state oversight, goals for their schools were articulated in state policies delivered at district-level leadership meetings. The course of action required for the respective districts and schools given their year and status within PI was articulated by the authority of the state department of education and entailed by the following matrix as understood by the principals.

**PI year 1: (school improvement phase 1)**

- Schools were to formally notify parents of the PI status. Parents are to be additionally notified they could option to remove their child and place them in another school of their choice within the district. The district was responsible for any transportation costs related to the choice to move their child to another school.
- The PI school was to set aside a minimum of 10% of their Title I funding for professional development
- A peer-reviewed process was to be established informing the school-wide plan

**PI Year 2: (school improvement phase 2)**

- Continue to provide Year 1 assistance and include all Year 1 regulations
- Provide supplemental services to all eligible students
- Advance in professional development and school-wide plan

**PI Year 3: (corrective action)**

- Continue in Year 1 and Year 2 Plans
- Corrective action must include at least one of the following: (replace school staff, implement new curriculum, decrease management authority in school, appoint outside expert, extend school year or day, restructure internal organization of school)

**PI Year 4: (restructuring)**

- Continue in Year 1-3 Plans
- Prepare plan for alternative governance of the school by choosing one of the following: (reopen school as a charter, replace all or most of staff including principal, contract with outside entity to manage the school, state takeover, any other major restructuring)

**PI Year 5: (restructuring)**

- Continue in Year 1-4 Plans
- Implement alternative governance plan

Principals Swann and Jordan had yet to see serious interventions given they were in either year one or two during my observations. Both had to publicly inform their parents in detailed letters regarding the option to remove a child and transfer them to another school. This legal option and the channels for removal were additionally advertised through their respective school websites. This further exacerbated the stigma problem of being the lowest of high schools. Most significantly, it additionally abetted in the fleeing of the most informed and proactive of families and students. An essential “brain drain” was legally allowable enabling freedom of movement for students to leave for one of the high schools in the district not in PI status. Fueling the drain was the legal requirement that the district must provide free transportation for any student requesting a transfer from a school labeled PI. For those less informed parents with a knee-jerk reaction to the stigma of PI, low-performing poor student could potentially flea a Title I funded school with multiple intervention programs and head to a non-PI school without any intervention programs. To avoid the consequences of the PI status and such a drain, the schools needed to demonstrate improved scores in math and English for two consecutive years. If that should occur, the clock would reset and oversight and labeling would be withdrawn.

The Superintendent and the leadership at Sierra School District were generally proud and supportive of Principals Swann and Jordan and their efforts amidst PI status. The Assistant Superintendent of Education Services remarked in a leadership meeting, “We don’t deserve PI...we have a difficult population... we are in this together...we all work hard!” For Principal Swann and Jordan, being a principal of a school under PI

status was only part of the image they had to dispel. Shedding the “ghetto image,” “gang” image, and “worst athletes” image coupled their anxiety. Under it all, the work associated with data collection and documentation for principals of a PI school was enough anxiety.

To aid in the regulation of Title I schools, the federal government in conjunction with the states have asked their schools to produce a near 100-page report of the relevant data on academic achievement. A general rubric was offered to the states on how to report their data and it has become known as *The Single Plan for Student Achievement* (SPSA). The goal of the SPSA document was to create a blueprint of a school’s efforts while causing the leadership team to more thoroughly reflect on the course of actions they have employed to raise the academic performance levels to the performance goals established under the state’s performance index. Inclusive of the SPSA were statistically identifiable schools goals such as (from Jefferson High’s SPSA plan):

#### **School Goal # 1: English/Language Arts**

All students will become proficient or better in reading/language arts by 2014 as measured by the [state] test. ***Goal for 2011-2012:*** *A minimum of 78.4% of the students will score at proficient or better on 2011- 2012 [state] tests.*

#### **School Goal # 2: Mathematics**

All students will become proficient or better in mathematics by 2014 as measured by the [state] test. ***Goal for 2001-2012:*** *A*

*minimum of 79% of the students will score at proficient or better on 2011- 2012 [state] tests.*

### **School Goal # 3: Improving graduation rate**

The rate for 2009 was 77.4

The rate for 2010 was 85.1

The goal for 2011 is 87.7

The goal for 2012 is 88.7(estimated)

The demographic profile of the school, a twenty-page analysis of student academic student achievement and educational practices, a twenty-five-page plan of action to improve reading, math, and graduation rates, clear accounts of support systems, programs, key players, and appendices with future recommendations and potential improvements were included. The action steps, leadership person responsible, timeline, and cited program of funds were articulated. Each subgroup's (ie. African-American, Latino, English Learners, Disabled, Economically disadvantaged, male, female, etc.) state standardized test scores over the past three years in the areas of math and English were to be compared. Reading programs, supplemental texts, key staff, software, math interventions, peer-reviewed references... all were referenced and justifiably tied to the goal and funding sources. Weeks of planning, typing, gathering of data, and editing consumed the principals and leadership team when developing the SPSA. The report was to be redrawn at the beginning of each school year and sent to state education auditors. The one glimmering light regarding the SPSA production was that it closely mimicked the requirements of another regulatory agency that accredited schools in the western

United States, the Western Association of Schools as Colleges (WASC). The primary stamp of approval for schools in the western states, every two to three years WASC sent in teams of nearly a dozen to each school for an involved weeklong visit to assess organizational systems, goals, and achievement data and strategies. Jefferson and Sage Valley were scheduled for 2012-2013 school year.

Both federal and state law further required that each school produce a ten-page summary *Report Card* that was to be made available to the public on both the district and school website. Each school was to publish the abridged version of its mission and goals, demographic information, academic data, teacher and staff information, and the conditions of their facilities. The state additionally held these records based on school and districted provided information and made the data available on the state department of education website. The purpose of the Report Card was to enable parents to make informed decisions about the schools their children could potentially attend. For the principals at Jefferson and Sage Valley, the report card served as potentially dangerous opportunity for certain kinds of people “not to choose” their school. Doctoring and being euphemistic about the realities of their school when public relations opportunities occurred were important skills. The primary architect and authoring force behind the reports were the principals, and they took great care in their efforts to construct it. The district officials further managed the process with workshops and regular consultation at monthly leadership meetings. Principals Swann and Jordan corresponded through email and texts on a weekly basis, advising each other on articulations. When Principal Swann

described the schools mission on the Report Card, it was stated that the staff at Jefferson High

...are committed to look at how prosperous we have been and identify ways to continue. Prosperity is the state of flourishing, thriving, success, or good fortune. Now is the time to open your hearts and minds to possibility. All of our students have infinite possibilities and the ability to become prosperous in their educational journey. The [Jefferson] High staff is committed to creating environments where our students are successful. There is no end to what they can achieve. The possibilities are abundant and endless.

Sierra School district resided in one of the most populated counties in the nation. With tens of thousands of students within its borders, the county also developed a government education bureaucracy with goals and oversight. Primarily serving in a supportive role to state officials under the guidance to "...Ensure the success of all students," the county office of education was looked upon by the principals as an ally and charged primarily with a two-part mission. It was to help those students who were outside of the normal educational programs and services of their local school districts, and to work with the local school districts to ensure they were providing students with the best educational programs and services possible while remaining financially solvent in the process. The county office was also a mediator between local districts within the county and the state, and potentially the federal government. They often produced easily accessible interpretations of state and federal law that were then disseminated to local

superintendents and principals. The county office additionally provided free services and training to teachers and principals on matters such as English Learners, differentiated instruction techniques, special education law, and the suspension/expulsion processes.

Sierra School District itself had goals. I was admitted to the district summer leadership symposium for the 2012-2013 school year and allowed access to the deliberations and goal-setting. At the school district offices, principals and leadership teams from the three high schools met and conferred about the education goals for the following year. Prepared by the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, 3-ring binders greeted each leader upon entry to the 8:00 a.m. meetings for the week. Articulated on gold paper at the forefront of the binders were the Sierra School Districts *Goals for 2012-2013*. On the page, it requested that each administrator *pledge* that they will ensure that:

- All students will reach high standards, at a minimum, attaining proficiency or better in Reading and Math, by 2013-2014
- All limited-proficiency students will become proficient in English and reach high academic standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in Reading/Language Arts and math.
- All students will continue to be taught by highly-qualified teachers.
- All students will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug-free, and conducive to learning.



- All students will have necessary skills for successful career and college readiness (application of skills).

“You are responsible for your results... Its time you turn up the heat... you are now aware,” was resounded by the superintendent within the first hour of the meeting. The previous school year had just ended the week prior. The bulk of the rest of the meeting was spent by each school leadership team planning to raise standardized test scores, implementing AVID, and completing the work necessary to develop the SPSA and school-wide plan. Principal Swann and Jordan seemed noticeably unmoved by the emotionally filled appeals by district officials to step things up. “We have seen and heard this before,” responded Principal Jordan as she casually thumbed through the various texts she received on her cell phone. Principals Swann confirmed by stating, “I just have [resistant] teachers going off in my head....” An assistant principal sitting amidst smirked with approving glances, “The majority in the room are not on board...just another set of programs and policies that will be replaced down the road.” The leadership teams plowed forward organizing their respective plans.

Much like a proud mother who protects the stardom of their child during a tough dance competition, or a proud wife who stands tall next to her publicly unsuccessful husband, the principals of Jefferson and Sage Valley High were extremely protective of their schools and somewhat callous about emotional pleas or accusations made against them and their role as principal. And it seemed almost debilitating for them to regularly reflect on the endless negative pressures that surrounded the managing of poor and low

performing schools. So despite the reality of their circumstances and the daunting volume of directives from multiple vantage points, the principals kept their gaze forward to survive mentally. Ultimately, even those colleagues that lived and worked at Sierra District and offered support or critique were viewed as outsiders by the principals. The guidance provided at the district level was filtered through the lens of a principal on her own.

Principal Jordan, despite being more pessimistic about her overall mission, was a contained and quiet leader less verbally expressive about her ultimate professional motives or despairs when pressed. As an administrator in disadvantaged communities, "... there is not much good stuff flying around us." On her office door was the symbolic posting of the "School-wide goals," but they existed more as an expression of solidarity with district-level positions than her own personal convictions. I never witnessed her genuflect before the posting and reflect upon the words like a pilgrim before a shrine to Mary, but they were there for the world to see should anyone question her overall purpose. Solitarily, the school-wide goals for Sage Valley High School were:

1. All students move up 1 proficiency level in math and English on the state test
2. All English Language learners will move up one level on the language tests annually
3. Every student will score at least 380 on the state test

Independently, Principal Jordan saw her task as more comprehensive and less bound to the specific conditions of standardized testing. She was visibly more passionate about protecting young women, infusing technology to all the students, promoting a more positive self-esteem, and introducing vocational skills curriculum.

For Principal Swann, there was no such posting on her office door, but there were more pervasive posters and inspirational quotes scattered throughout her space. “Perseverance” seemed a common theme. The marquee greeting those driving to or by the school read “Never Give Up!” As mentioned when describing her profile, Principal Swann conceived of her purpose sometimes using religious language, considering her mission like that of a mustard seed that spreads goodness. While she played along with the statistically quantifiable game in the minimalist of senses and laid the foundation for improvements in student test scores, she appeared less bound to any unreasonable expectations and more driven by character development among her students. She lit up more with the opportunity to “create good men” than significantly raise test scores. The most passion-filled moment I witnessed included an exchange regarding a football player who beat up another student in the bathroom during a lunch break. None of the players came forward when asked by administration and the football coach was unable to discern the culprits. The fight had been witnessed by nearly twenty-five players on the team. When Principal Swann was advised of the lack of advancement of the investigation, she immediately marched to football practice and disrupted its course, demanded the entire team move to the locker room, and required they stand at attention as she railed them with fury and not a hint of tears...

I trusted you... you looked me in the eye and lied. I found money for you,  
I fed you, I look to you for leadership! Now I call you *boys*, not men...  
Men don't fight. You all need to find a way to fix this!

Fifteen minutes later a young man on the team who witnessed the fight came forward and the redemptive process began. Suspensions were issued, the unwilling confessor was dismissed from the team, the football players were all reprimanded with more conditioning and more supervision, and conversations and apologies were formally heard. "We are here to make good men."

### *Manifestations of Power Structures*

When considering issues of power within an organization, it is important to consider both the formal bureaucratic types and informal organic types of power (Scott, 1998). Three distinct theoretical approaches emerge when considering both the formal and structural integrity of an organization, as well as the social dynamics that are considerate of informal and environmental factors. These understandings—the *rational*, *natural*, and *open system* definitions— are helpful when considering all the aspects of an organization. A *rational system* is often used to describe the more formal bureaucratic structures in an organization. In *rational* system, a purposeful and collective goal is pursued with specific intentions that are clearly defined and logically followed in the most ideal circumstance. The *natural* organizational system entails an organic and

collective group of spontaneous and indeterminate processes. It recognizes the flaw in any rigid expectation of logic in all situations, but still adheres to the formalized rules of a bureaucratic culture. An *open* system involves organizations that are more sensitive to and considerate of external environmental factors. Its rules are more fluid and there is an expectation of localized sense-making. As Bidwell and Scott described in their bureaucratic descriptions of schools, there is an entrenched functional division of labor (each secretary has a specific task), there are definitions of staff roles, a hierarchical ordering of offices, and rules and procedures that guide practice in schools. Those hierarchies, roles, and policies however, must operate within a power structure of various potential tenors. While actors in schools may appear more natural or open in their tenor, the standardization and routinizing of goals, expected outcomes, and power structures continues to bear heavy on the modern principal.

Power is clearly defined through a recognized hierarchy and chain of command that enforce and police the rules governing behavior—offering rewards and punishments based on the rational following of those roles and rules. Social order often results from the suppression of others and the coercion of the dominant over the weak and less powerful. Compliance would seem to be based on utilitarian calculations. A rough schematic of the recognizable and rationalized power structures for the principals in Sierra School District is described. The chain of command mimics major institutions... the military, the Catholic Church, the government itself. As one goes up the chain, more authority arrives with higher salaries and more distinction. Rewards logically follow a pattern of additional money and power, punishments include demotion and less



resources. Those with more power have a greater say when judging the effectiveness of those lower in the chain of command. Reason guides it all.

When considering what could happen should principals “not do their job” in the Sierra School District, the threat of removal or dismissal was real. The Superintendent at Sierra School district had removed five administrators (one Principal, four Assistant Principals) in the previous five years. There were only four principals and ten assistant principals total in the district, so that meant nearly half the administrators in the district were in new leadership positions within the last five years. Another tactic at the Superintendent’s disposal was to move administrators to less desirable sites, or simply not promote them. One of Principal Jordan’s assistant principals, Marcos, had been an administrator in the district for nearly ten years, recently coming off tough duty at the continuation high school called “The [Citadel].” The continuation high school served as a non-traditional site in which nearly 200 students with behavioral issues, credit deficiency concerns, and motivational problems were taught with the hope of receiving a high school diploma. Neither administrators nor teachers sought duty there and it was generally acknowledged as a place to either be hidden or a place for desperate new teachers or administrators to begin and then eventually escape. Marcos was a veteran teacher and administrator near fifty years old. Principal Jordan described Marcos as “...not super assertive, lacked follow-through, created more work than helped... and now to [Sage Valley].” The Citadel was the place to hide those kinds of administrators. Marcos had “bounced around” during his eight years of administrative service for the

Sierra School District, a practice commonly referred by those of us in the educational profession as the *dance of the lemons*.

Davis Guggenheim mentioned this lemon metaphoric description in his film *Waiting for Superman*, suggesting its exercise and understanding as “secret” language privy only to a clandestine group of school district leaders in extreme parts of America. Bound by obstinate unions, principals in the worst performing schools would hide (the dance) ineffective teachers (the lemons) when the exhaustive and expensive processes of legal termination were too much. The litigiousness and the uncompromising resistance of teachers unions was often cited by the film as the reason the dance occurs, taking any blame away from administrative incompetence, favoritism, or the systemic and financial realities of paying teachers low wages in dire communities. The idea that administrators often hire and protect their own, or even dismiss and fire people who are not part of their in-crowd, regardless of industry, was never seriously postured as a potential reason for the dance in the documentary film. While there are clearly cases of teacher incompetence, extreme cases were offered as the norm and stubborn teachers were collectively to blame for the dance.

Whatever reason was given for hiring an incompetent principal or teacher, it was clear from the behavior of Sierra School district that the illogical dance of the lemons was in practice, at least when considering the management of non-union protected administrators. Unions could not be blamed for the hiring of incompetent principals such as Marcos, nor could they be blamed when district leadership maintained or hid them in



questionable places. Both Principal Swann and Jordan felt the illogical practice was alive and well and confused their sense of their superintendent's display or reason. Equally baffling was a chummy and "mysterious" relationship that had existed for years between the superintendent and a near universally understood incompetent principal at the third high school in the district. His name was Greg and he ran Desert Hills High School. Desert Hills had the highest test scores in the district "despite him" and it appeared his survival rested on that fact. District school lines had historically carved out the largest pocket of middle class and white families within the Desert Hills attendance area. In leadership meetings mostly at Jefferson High, when Desert Hills was mentioned, alternative descriptions were offered to describe Desert Hills culture. "Hitler High" was the most striking. This title was popularly understood among minority administrators and faculty and due to the recognition that the leadership and staff at Desert Hills were overwhelmingly conservative and white. The head football coach at Desert Hills was known to have recruited some of his players into a white supremacy organization. Every principal, assistant principal, and teacher that mentioned Greg's name, despite their ethnicity, continued usually with negative comments. At district meetings and among teachers, he was referred to as a "joke," a "clown," and one of my favorites... "Mr. Belding," the bumbling idiot of a principal in a popular sitcom in the 1990s known as *Saved by the Bell*. The superintendent was apparently keeping Greg's dance alive despite a unanimous vote of no confidence in 2010 by his entire faculty as officially conducted by the teachers union. The disastrous results were published in the local newspaper and his firing seemed eminent. Similar democratic processes occurred at Jefferson and Sage

Valley High as to avoid the appearance of a witch hunt by the union. Principals Swann and Jordan escaped comfortably. Greg continued as principal of Desert Hills High.

The ironic and confusing twist to the relationship between the superintendent and the principal at Desert Hills High School was that “[Greg] is a super-conservative. The superintendent is a full-blown liberal!” It was well known that the superintendent had very progressive sensibilities, sympathized with the task of the two female principals, and did not include himself in the same fundamentalist Christian circles as Greg. Greg passed neither democratic measures of assessed competence or informal social characteristics of comradery with key power-holders. Maybe it was a male-thing, a golf-thing, a white-thing, an I-don’t-want-to-deal-with-this-thing. It may have been a measured response of placing stronger or more culturally sensitive principals in the weakest schools. Principal Jordan oversimplified her frustration by stating, “Politics... ugh!” What was most threatening to both principals, particularly and despite their regular compliments of the superintendent and their moderate confidence regarding job stability, was that Marcos was being moved yet again next year, Greg seemed firmly entrenched in his position as principal at Desert Hills, and the pressure was mostly on them. Equally concerning was that no one had ever taken the time to discern or investigate Marcos and his behaviors, and similar supervisory behavior was being experienced by Principals Swann and Jordan. Marcos relayed that in his administrative career, no superintendent had ever “...done an evaluation of his efforts. He was surprised of the move... sucky.” The clearest signs pointed to the fact that no matter what any principal did, so long as their test scores were high enough, no serious indictment was ever postured.

The exact reasons for dismissal or movement were somewhat of a mystery when pressed to connect them to legal due process matters. From the outside looking in, linking test scores to principal performance seemed like the only legal explanation, and yet a principal's direct connection to test scores was dubious. For the high scoring site of Desert Hills, however, any principal placed there would have the advantage of higher socioeconomics, low immigrant and English-Learner populations, and the tradition of success among a proven crowd. In leadership meetings, and despite the regular success on standardized tests, the administrative team as a whole was referred to by Principals Swann and Jordan as a "joke." A logical fear could then be that should a principal be interpreted by the superintendent to be of concern, simply placing them at a PI school could serve as evidence of their professional failure and grounds for dismissal or movement. The goal would then be for a principal to secure a post at a non-PI school in the hope of any sort of vocational longevity. Attracting good principals to PI schools therefore could potentially be problematic and nearing professional suicide.

A less formal reason for departure or transfer was assumed by the principals than was published in job descriptions or as articulated in the evaluative isolations found in standardized test scores. Yet I found no formal role requirements such as "be friendly with the superintendent," "appear hard-working and diligent," "don't ask too many provocative or overtly critical questions," or "do anything you want that does not boldly appear illegal and unprofessional... so long as your test scores sit above *xyz*." Despite these not being formal requirements, it was clearly understood the appearance of these behaviors constitute the essential elements to job constancy by the principals. Also and

most salient to their more patrolled position as principals within the poorest and lowest-performing schools, it was understood that professional incompetence could more easily be veiled when leadership assignments were situated on a smooth sailing ship in fair weather. The dance of the lemons in Sierra School District appeared to be used to hide an incompetent principal in a high performing school and not the other way around, and this might be construed as a positive and ironic twist, or unintended consequence of the era of accountability and the pressure it bears upon poor and low-performing schools.

There could have been some altruistic reason for Greg's maintenance as a principal... but only if there were not any other potentially good principals to choose among. It was a mystery. What was not mysterious was that both Jefferson and Sage Valley High were on a path to more serious oversight and regulations given their stagnant test scores. Stage four of PI meant that the superintendent might not be able to protect anyone's position at either school.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

The poor quality of American public schools has been central to the modern education policy debate. The urgency in addressing these concerns has been charged primarily by international and interstate comparisons through standardized tests, suggesting that our educational systems as a whole are fundamentally broken. Additionally charging the debate, but to an arguably lesser degree, has been the growing disparity in student achievement levels between ethnic and social class groups. In reaction, both federal and state governments have imposed broad stroke policies upon schools in the hope of corrective action and higher acclaim. These policies and ensuing programs are the conclusions resulting from the flawed premise that leadership and teachers are primarily to blame, that schools simply lack rigor, and that student failure is rooted in the contributory factor of individual motivation. The hegemonic influence of business and conservative interest groups has controlled the rhetoric on why low-income schools are failing since the Reagan administration. They have diminished the evidence related to cyclical poverty, entrenched segregation, oppressive histories, and the more complicated role of other social institutions. Thus, policies addressing achievement inequality for the past twenty years have essentially been school-centered, and consequently an utter failure (Ream, Ryan, & Espinoza, 2012). Regrettably, accountability policies now guide the policing of our schools and principals have been targeted as those leaders that can move schools to a better place. This focused pressure

and irresponsible understanding of poverty alleviates pressure on the outside to address any broader social concerns or consequences of injustice.

Principals have become an instrumental part of the ensuing triage practices meant to respond to the demand for accountability and higher test scores. Punitive measures (threat of firing or relocation) push them to work harder, standardized curriculums and correlative high-stakes tests assist as bookkeeping markers, and market-based competition models (charter schools, open-enrollment districts, vouchers) chide principals on how the grass could be greener. Unfortunately, the call for efficiency and the triage-like climate of current education reform does not necessarily foster brilliance in leadership. Instead it exacerbates inequality and damages more altruistic strategies of principals. Examples of this for the principals in Sierra District included the regular and confusing threat of removal and relocation, the continual pressure to standardize their practices and focus their labors on test scores, and the endless collective effort to gather and analyze data.

What the principalship looks like now, how their schools function, and the immediate social circumstances of these underprivileged schools, continues to go unappreciated. Principal Swann's frustrated words, "We are different!" speaks to that tension. As the evidence gathered from this participant-observation study of two high school principals suggests, the impact of modern reforms on at least some low-performing poor schools has too often been anything but corrective in nature, and often substantially demoralizing in terms of morale. Modern policies and market measures

have made leading and learning in disadvantaged schools even harder. Instead of helping principals focus their efforts on student improvement strategies, they are bound to activities that game the system, legitimize their efforts, and overwhelm leadership with distractions. More sophisticated dysfunctions are to be expected should faith in market reforms and isolated school-related factors be the only solutions. Any further development of trust and honesty within school systems seems dubious.

My critique of the adopted conservative philosophy and business-market models imposed on the management of schools is that it is ultimately based on the scaffolding of half-truths, and that it fails to recognize the complexity of the craft involved in leading and teaching within schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged children. And most disconcerting was the fact that these half-truths and ill-targeted punitive measures on low-performing schools went unchallenged by leaders within Sierra District. As mentioned earlier, even the Obama administration seems unwilling to acknowledge to this reality and instead is drawn to the promises of market-like policies, symbolizing bipartisan support and an emerging consensus for its adoption. Too quickly policy-makers have dismissed the unique circumstances that each child or school faces and the complicated educational strategies used to address complicated children. More bluntly, there exists a grand cognitive dissonance and naïve political hubris surrounding federal, state, and local the politics policies of current education reform.

Exemplifying this dysfunction and confusing the debate are regularly cited reports from *Education Trust* and conservative interest groups such as *The Heritage Foundation*

that identify “high-flying” schools that appear to beat the odds utilizing market strategies (Carter, 2000). The Davis Guggenheim film, *Waiting for Superman*, polishes these types of reports in dramatic fashion. The news media has gravitated to sensationalist reports and documentary films such as those that identify the heroic efforts of principals that have “produced” soaring test scores at their respective schools. Unfortunately, the details behind the daily grind of leading and teaching within these schools, including high rates of teacher departure, are visibly absent. Success stories are exaggerated at times, and often outright fabrications. Multiple studies have shown that many of these success stories are produced more through a focus on “teaching to the test” or the “bubble-kids” (Jacob & Levitt, 2003; Booher-Jennings, 2005) than by superhuman or selfless leaders. Unfortunately, these “successful” schools disproportionately punish lower-performing students (Figlio, 2006), often reassign failing students to special education roles to avoid taking tests (Booher-Jennings, 2005), and simply push failing students out of their schools and off their hands (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Offered as models of achievement success and systematic turnaround, schools of “choice,” better known as *charter schools*, systematically recreate and reinforce class inequalities. Unfortunately, charter schools have been found to further segregate students by ethnicity or learning ability, cherry-pick the best and the brightest, or crop-off services to needier populations (special education, low-income, English Learners) because of their market efficiency tendencies. Furthermore, some evidence demonstrates that student achievement actually changes little when he or she enters a choice program (Ball, Bowe, and Gerwitz, 1996; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; Hassel, 1999; Ouchi, 2003). The actions and



immediate social circumstance of school personnel and their students have not been fully represented, and the evidence that school outcomes are primarily correlated to social and economic disadvantage have essentially been overlooked (Harris, 2007). Ultimately, this perverted and popularly consumed version of schooling failure confirms the imprudent foundations and assumptions that underlie No Child Left Behind and the era of accountability. It is therefore important to recognize that this broad framing of the educational crisis has, in part, been a manipulated, manufactured, and misdirected one (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Harris., 2007).

Broader systems of success touted as exemplary are equally troubling, such as that found in the “Texas Miracle” in which test scores for the state rose 20% and achievement gap narrowed among ethnic groups in the 1990s. The Texas turnaround has essentially been debunked as accounting fraud (Haney, 2000). The federal General Accounting Office (GAO) has reported that districts in El Paso, Texas, Washington, DC, and Columbus, Ohio have engaged in pervasive cheating scandals, boosting test score results by pressing students to change answers on tests and encouraging low-performing students to drop-out. The superintendent of Atlanta schools, along with thirty-four other educators in the district, have most recently been indicted for changing test answers. Scandals such as these that involve high-ranking education officials exist through the United States. All have primarily occurred in working-class communities with high minority populations and under the heightened pressure to raise test scores (Stanford, 2013).

In the end, one must recognize the intricacies of pedagogy, motivation, and the trusting bonds built by those leading schools. There is no miracle, no hero, and no silver bullet. Instead, those leading and teaching our children are skilled technicians embedded within complicated worlds and engaged with children over long periods of time. They are not assembly-line workers cranking out widgets with simple tools. Principals and teachers are also not typically monetarily motivated like those in the business world. Merit and performance-based pay schemes ultimately fail, can often create unproductive competitive tension within schools, and show no significant correlation to advances in student achievement (Murnane & Cohen, 1986; Caillier, 2010). And those working in schools recognize learning cannot be captured solely by curriculum standards and test scores targeted at math and English (Labaree, 2003). At the heart of schools is fostering the development of trusting bonds among its stakeholders. The literature continually affirms heightened social conditions of trust as developed by leadership with improved teacher professionalism. Principals develop trust by affirming the independence and creative abilities of teachers, fostering collaboration and communication. They lose trust by clinging to standardized and bureaucratized models of authority (Tschannen-Moran, 2009; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010).

The important insight from this detached policy trend has been recognizing the failures both in the philosophical premises of current policy reform and the political volleyball that now is public education for poor children. At the extreme, conservatives would like to reason school failure as more of an individual problem. Because of this, blaming the student, teacher, and principal is the more expedient course. At the other end

of the continuum, liberals consider school failure as the result of broader social problems. Because of this, recognizing and attending to the consequences of hegemonic forces and entrenched economic disparity is imperative before individual assessments can be made. The adoption of a premise determines whom we beat up; principals and teachers, or those systems that perpetuate economic injustice. While educational researchers continue to produce data that portrays the detrimental affects of this misguided premise and faith in market-like structures, policy-makers appear to have given up on any kind of debate, forcing the hand of continued testing and accountability measures. The latest administrative efforts at the federal level continue to bear the imprint of market logic demanding more competition in schools, more accountability and quantitative data collection, more charter schools, more value-added teacher models, more incentive structures in pay for teachers, and more efficiency. As a result, triage tactics continue to expand, and poverty and segregated schools proliferate.

Reflecting this paradigm were many practices in the schools within Sierra School District. The purpose of this study was to find out what the actual lived experiences were among principals that managed low-income schools in the era of accountability. The principals were not surveyed, they were not quickly interviewed, there was no media hype, and no statistical analysis took place. I spent a year engaged in participant observations analysis documenting the daily activities and sense-making processes that took place for two high school principals in some of the most troubled schools in the American Southwest. Interviews took place daily and in concert with the broader examination of the schools as a whole. It was found that modern accountability policies

and the pressures of Program Improvement were profound and distracting. The manifestations of poverty for these low-performing schools were equally comprehensive and underappreciated. Teacher recruitment and retention was hard enough, but now there was public shame and no plan for incentives to entice better teachers to work in these schools. Raising test scores was hard enough, but now became more challenging when the strongest students were allowed to flee to higher performing schools at the expense of the school district. The three high schools within Sierra District now mimicked social class differences. Within the schools, tracked classes further separated the strong from the weak. For Jefferson High, the consequence of sinking performance meant higher leadership turnover and an ugly and unshakeable stigma.

The unique circumstance of schools situated in poverty was explained through the eyes and observed actions of Principals Swann and Jordan. While there were instances of measures that tracked students and teachers, and curricular agendas that focused resources on the “bubble kids,” these principals essentially engaged their school with concern for their most disadvantaged of students. They targeted resources that reached out to the poorest of students through summer boot camps and tutors, and they spent extra time and energy with the most problematic of students. Ultimately these decisions, along with the reactive nature of leading impoverished schools, may have hurt their aggregate test scores by a slip in focus from the bubble-kids, and could ultimately lead to their future dismissal as principals.

### *Policy Implications and Future Research*

The main purpose of this work was to paint as clear a picture of the life of two principals working in two of the most disadvantaged schools. The ultimate hope was for those who would read this work to then deduce potential policy recommendations, find holes in understanding that require further exploration, and instill a more sympathetic understanding to those living in the trenches of underprivileged schools. The following are more concrete summations of my conclusions to offer to the academic and professional discipline of the science of education with regards to the principalship.

- 1) **We need to always improve leading and teaching in schools, but stop blaming principals and teachers for educational shortcomings among the disadvantaged. Place blame more appropriately on the broader causes of depravity. Stop using principals to implement the dysfunctional aspects of the standardized testing culture (use more to guide teaching than purely assessment), stop the punitive measures associated with low test scores, and stop wasting the time and energy to collect data on where low-performing schools are.**

Scholars have found that schools, as with any other field, include about 5% problematic teachers (Bridges, 1992; Tucker, 1997). The fact is that most schools and students are fine, most teachers are great teachers, and most principals are great principals. One does not need to test every student in the United States to discover where our schools are failing. We know where failing schools and failing students are, and we know why and in what subject areas.

Continuing the search for where and why questions is an expensive and opportunistic distraction. And punitive measures are simply cruel and unproductive showing no real chance for long-term success (Mitchell, Ream, Ryan, & Espinoza, 2012).

Possibly the most disturbing evidence we have from educational research has been the dismal outcomes from the enterprise of standardized testing itself. The billions spent on the process, data collection efforts, curriculum design... all essentially has had little if any impact on the overall learning taking place in our schools, particularly for poor and minority students. Nichols, Glass, Berliner (2012) said it best in their work on the effect of standardized tests in math and English and accountability pressures.

In spite of a growing literature indicating that high-stakes testing has had deleterious effects on teaching practices and student motivation, policymakers continue to argue for its effectiveness in increasing student learning (4).

Research targeting the effects of standardized exams, particularly exit exams that involve incentives or threats, have shown that they have little to no impact on student achievement over time (Bishop, Mane, Bishop, & Moriarty, 2001; Grodsky, Warren, & Kalogrides, 2009; Reardon, Arshan, Atteberry, & Kurlaender, 2011). Looking at more recent literature considering the achievement gap between income and ethnic groups, marginally effective or negative effects

were found when considering the standardized testing affect on student achievement (Reardon, 2011; Timar & Maxwell-Jolly, 2012).

There is little dispute or debate over the quantitative outcomes that shed light on American schooling challenges in math and English for particular populations. But it is important to know that it is here that the modern political debate has been almost exclusively held up. It is also here that divergence begins about framing and explaining how American schools are a failure and why those leading them are to blame. This premise of blaming students and their educators has ultimately overtaken any consideration or rhetoric that connects broader cultural and economic failure to academic failure. It is important to note that when considering the place in which the United States sits at the global economic table, it has consistently been at the top, despite the rancor over educational shortcomings. The U.S. currently has the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at nearly \$15 trillion, three times greater than the next countries found in Japan and China. The World Economic Forum (WEF), the premier Swiss-based global competitiveness reporter that considers a fourteen-point economic health index, has also placed the U.S. at or near the number one spot every year since its inception in 1971. The only exception to that was in the recent WEF report that placed Switzerland on top. The recent and slight drop of the U.S. was specifically recognized as being due to the recessionary financial market crisis and banking failures. The disappointment in the rigor of American schools, the lack of

leadership from our principals, the obstinance of teachers unions, were not cited as reasons for the U.S dip in the rankings (World Economic Forum, 2012).

Of course our schools can always improve. Of course there are bad teachers and principals. Of course we should always consider the place of schools and their effect on our broader economy and culture. These issues would be better addressed with focus on student achievement strategies, the focus to improve teachers and principals, and the focus on curriculum that best equips our students for success. Instead, the focus has been lost to ad hoc generalizations about the failure of education as a whole, and relating that failure to a lack of organizational discipline. If principals could just push harder, teachers teach more, and students study more... it will all be grand. Conservative rhetoric and libertarian ideology has pressed failure as an individual problem void of social circumstance, suggesting that historical injustices of the past and present are weak excuses; the poor should just get over it and those who don't speak English should just learn it tomorrow. Conservatives have engaged a rhetorical jujitsu on those working in schools, accusing them of lacking discipline and not understanding the real problem of poverty and failure in schools, placing heavier blame on the individual and their lack of motivation. A striking example was during the George W. Bush presidential run in 2004 when he accused the Democrat's defense of schools and its "...soft bigotry of low expectations." The tables have been turned, and now the liberals are accused of bigotry, not because of their



involvement in the legacy of slavery or Jim Crow and restrictive covenants, but because they aren't willing to push principals, teachers, and students hard enough.

## **2) Recognize the complexity of leading and teaching in schools.**

The ruling policy of accountability now rests on the notion that our schools are microcosms insensitive to the broader cultural trends of poverty, and yet schools are heavily blamed for the perpetuation of poverty. Modern scholars have recognized that schools are not “closed systems” that operate in a vacuum independent of outside environmental factors (Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Schools are open systems, mediated by the social, cultural, and institutional forces that influence school leaders. Schools are differentiated according to social class, their unique communities, and the distinct actors involved. And much like it is inappropriate to understand school as uniform and static across the board and thus in need of standardized protocols, it is equally inappropriate to conclude that social class alone determines the life of a classroom or the actions of actors within schools. Schools are affected by their environment, thus in need of particular and evolving solutions to meet the challenges they face. Life within schools also differs significantly because of the particularities of both students and teachers, community surroundings, and the specific achievement levels of the relevant students. Our policies and management strategies, resource distribution, and accountability goals must be allowed to adjust to this reality.

Proper investigation and development of school leaders must necessarily seek to understand the comprehensive settings that weigh in on the mental world of the actors in schools. Principals currently, however, are expected to operate their schools like an idealized corporate executive not getting distracted by the minutia of their complicated world and ultimately being judged by their one variable...profits (higher test scores in math and English). To not live under this premise has been unacceptable. During private moments of frustration and anxiety over these unreasonable and simple-minded expectations, Principal Swann would look at me and declare, "We are different... fuck! Even my district people can't see it. We need more help!"

The principals involved with this study were complex individuals, as were the schools in which they managed. There were no heroes, no heroic systems. There was no template that they could look to in discovery of heaven. And the deeper I dug in my understanding of the worlds of these two principals and their schools, the more nuanced they became. And this was partially the point... the standards and accountability movement has created unsophisticated and limited tools to assess principals in their efforts. While I do find importance in standardized testing to serve as an instrument in our diagnostic tool kit, the evidence I have gathered in this study to discern success and potential prescriptions could hardly be gathered and deduced from impersonal surveys or aggregated standardized test scores.

In contrast, I do believe there are some generalizable variables that can be identified within American schooling and the principalship based on this research, ones that can be brought to light and serve as points of commonality when developing policy to help principals in low-performing schools. I see those important guiding variables more associated with professional development, more democratic leadership structures, less labeling and competition among our schools, more resource funding to our poor schools. I also recognize it is unfeasible to intermittently conduct in-depth year-long anthropological studies of each school in the United States to determine success and offer suggestions. We cannot hide behind the notion that just because each person or school is complicated and special that we should throw away any accountability measures. I am pushing back however, with the suggestion that there is a more happy medium, one that involves more thoughtful examination of the fundamental human element in schooling, the particularly crucial social circumstances at each school site, and the intense broader historical influences that affect each school.

The focus of this study was trying to understand what principals do in low-performing schools, to understand their daily tasks, the internal and external influences, their roles and goals, and how all of this ultimately affects the education of poor children. Quantitative education scholars have generally recognized there has been little evidence to suggest that school leaders have a large or direct connection with student outcomes (test scores). Possibly the most concerning point during my research was never witnessing direct connection of

principals to the task of students and their learning. I never witnessed a principal directly teach a student math or English, or teach a teacher how to teach math or English. I found it amazing some days to spend hours with a principal of a high school and never see children. This discovery finds contradiction with the current policy climate that places school leadership in a primacy role of pedagogical expertise for targeting school improvement and raising test scores (Robinson, Lloyd, Rowe, 2008). Yet a persistent civic pressure calling for the “heroics of leadership,” or that charismatic leader who will come in and save the day, problematically drives policy (Spillane, 2005). I was flipping the T.V. channels during a break from my dissertation writing and came across a Charlie Rose interview. Davis Guggenheim was his guest and he was discussing his film *Waiting for Superman*, the acclaimed documentary about our failing schools that blamed teachers unions and unmotivated principals for our educational demise. When Charlie asked him about any shortcomings of the film, Guggenheim made the admission that if he were to change anything, he would do a more thorough presentation of the social circumstances of the schools and communities... thanks.

Traditional beliefs in the myths of a singular champion, like those displayed in *Waiting for Superman*, unfortunately has placed undo pressure on the principal and not the collective professionals, communities, states, and nations needed to solve educational problems. The American culture has expectations of school leaders that are completely at odds with the realities of the broader cultural context, often asking them to be too good to be true (Wolcott, 2003). Principals

know their jobs in particular are tied with test score and student achievement improvement, and thus they acutely feel the bulk of accountability pressure (Mintrop, 2004). This imprudent weight does not alleviate school leaders from their role in addressing the indictments of school failure, but it does bear misguided pressure from the business and political community, and complicates the daily activities and the posture represented by a school leader. That became clear in this participant-observation study. And again, the results appeared to me to impersonate triage measures. Triage measures amidst a misguided war. So at the heart of the criticisms of triage-like policies is the fact that the desire for accountability, standardization, market-like institutional approaches, individualism, and the call for more rigor in our schools... is both the intended and unintended consequence of exacerbating segregation and income inequality, the dismissal of those who need resources the most, diminished self-esteem, and overall academic equality.

The principals of Sierra School District were faced with a moral problem. While they understood the paradigm of accountability in which they existed was unfair, they had to do their best within the constraints of the system, cheat or game the system, or forego it altogether and in the process risk their career to operate under their own set of principles. Bidwell brought this sort of forced choice to light with his introduction of Willard Waller's work on activities of teachers in individual classrooms. Waller explained how teachers faced a basic dilemma—follow the systematic and bureaucratic rules and standards of teaching

pedagogy, or live and teach with the realization that student motivation to learn is largely a product of close, warm relations between teacher and student sensitive to social circumstance. This concept finds no connection to the classical organization model, or to modern education reform imperatives. As principals instinctually and practically understand, good teaching cannot possibly be so thoroughly standardized, so in effect, teachers must strategically disobey the rules and regulations in order to truly be good teachers. Classical theory ignores the human part of being human—that students and teacher have needs, social groups, subcultures, creative demands, and passions outside of the desires of an efficient business model.

From an administrative perspective, principals are faced with the complicated task of relating and enforcing the rules and standards of the system, and balancing this with moral questions and the need for teachers and students to be creative and thoughtful in their given circumstance. There are the additional concerns over how to appropriately evaluate, offer helpful critique, and motivate in arenas that are completely unstandardized and subjective. School leaders are continually faced with the conflict between official procedures and the affective components of teaching.

Metz (1990) recognized this also and clearly articulated the key frustration that many professional in the field of education instinctually understand, but fail to convey or even believe is true. That distinction is that the current educational

reform movement brings with it a set of theoretical assumptions about schools and teaching. Those assumptions are that the actors involved (teachers and students) are not necessarily the focus of attention, rather the structure in which teaching and learning takes place needs addressing. Current school reformers assume that all schools are alike and equally responsive to broad changes, generic curriculum requirements, external monitoring, and internal structural changes. In this model, school personnel are thrown into the same pile as business owners and factory workers and expected to operate and respond the same, and the interactive and social atmosphere of schooling and the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship are ignored.

The position of principal must be appreciated as a dynamic one. The discipline and science of educational administration is unique, and business models offer only a limited insight into the complicated world of managing teachers and students. Scholars in the field of educational leadership must continue to separate themselves from other disciplines and articulate best practices and emerging science. There must be a recognition of the *contingent* leadership styles that are responsive to the various needs within a school and the regular adjustments that must be made considering the fluidity of student populations and pedagogical needs.

**3) Help principals manage schools like schools, not businesses. Rethink the public labeling and market measures, handing certain authority and reform strategies back to education experts.**

Stipek (2002) has confirmed widely held achievement motivation scholarship and recognized a vitally important common thread pointing to the detrimental effects of negative labeling. This bedrock understanding among education psychologists is that self-perception of ability plays a vital role in determining the action or inaction a person takes when confronted with a challenging task. Perceptions of ability influences task choice, effort, thoughts, and feelings about an action. Specifically, this perception involves self-esteem and how people attribute their own ability. In other words, self-perception of low ability has severely debilitating consequences, and if we label kids or schools as Program Improvement (PI), low-achieving, below basic, persistently low-performing... they will continue to own that and remain that. And students often safeguard any potentially perceived flaws by minimizing participation, being absent from school, procrastinating, creating excuses, and manufacturing a false sense of effort. This all has disastrous consequences for underprivileged school children.

The Congressionally reauthorized versions of ESEA and Title I in the modern period, popularly known as *No Child Left Behind* under Bush and *Race to the Top* under Obama, has focused the policy effort to address failing schools by



identifying the lowest 5% throughout the states. Known as “turnaround” schools, the label was determined by standardized tests in math and English and has been imposed on both Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools. Turnaround schools are near universal in their commonality of being populated mostly by the poor and ethnic minorities. The prescriptions and sanctions found within the policy statements of NCLB and Race to the Top ironically offer no direct efforts at alleviating poverty, homelessness, racial tension, or hunger. There is no mention of the enforcement of equitable distribution of resources, no significant funding sources to better train teachers in low-income schools, no significant investment in recruitment, no major policy shifts to address English learners or those that are disabled, no healthcare or social service provisions, and no major dollars toward pre-school or after-school programs for families that lack resources. Instead, a test-and-punish approach has been utilized in which the lowest performing schools are chided with the threat of being turned into charter schools, reconstituted with large-scale firing of staff, or simply being closed if they don’t show adequate yearly progress in their test scores, all by being black-mailed with the dangling of federal dollars to the states. The goal of the federal government has remained since 1965 as “...improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” (NCLB, 2001), but appears now to be wrapped up in a carrots and sticks approach of testing-and-punishing. Essentially the plan has evolved into labeling and pushing... not the case in 1965.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the nation of Israel has dismantled external accountability measures and the carrots and sticks approach. Israel has instead created a professional self-regulating educational system. Although grappling with a highly standardized educational system and demographic concerns similar to the U.S., Israel has taken a different course and is now one of the most de-politicized countries in the world when addressing school achievement anxieties. Israel has effectively removed the traditional political players involved in school reform that one would find in the U.S. and Great Britain. These traditional external players have included business interests, parents associations, economic think tanks, and politicians. Israel keeps these groups at the fray, and instead looks to an inner circle of top educational administrators, academics, and teacher representatives to guide their education policies (Shwarz, 2000).

Robert Shwartz (2000) conducted a comparative analysis of educational accountability systems in the U.S. and Israel and found some interesting results. Instead of relying on external review measures which include state and federal oversight and policing, schools in Israel utilize national ministries of education officials to help coach schools to improve achievement. Taking guidance from this inner circle of power, the Ministry of Education is the dominant policy player in this accountability effort. Israeli schools face similar public bickering about student performance as is found in the U.S., and have similar immigration and poverty problems, yet stakeholder interests such as parent organizations and

politicians have strategically remained at bay. The executive government leadership and the Israeli congress merely offer rough ideas to the Ministry of Education on education policies, leaving the bulk of policy construction to professionals in the ministry. Teachers unions also are not active in initiating policy change.

There is an important sign of public and interest group maturity on the concern over school achievement in Israel. There is a public acknowledgement, not unlike the U.S., over student achievement, dropout rates, and the quality of teachers, yet calmness in the realities of school life seems to strangely emanate. The Israeli public also understands that the massive immigration that has taken place in the past two decades has caused teacher shortages, a proliferation of non-credentialed teachers, and a fiscal crisis that has stagnated wages and school funding. The teaching profession itself has seen a significant dip in status and prestige, also causing the best and the brightest to search for other professions. Public polls confirmed that the status of teachers has been very low and that getting good teachers has now become an extremely high priority. The Israeli public oddly seems to understand the irony that external accountability measures bring to a system that is struggling to hold its own, let alone strive to be the best in the world.

The country of Israel further decided to forego publishing achievement data that further labeled failing schools and teachers when little resources were

available to solve the crisis. Ministry regulations now prohibit the publication of student achievement test results because the publication of intuitively known results further exacerbates the image of troubled schools. It has been argued that the squelching of these published scores, which started in the early 1990s, has calmed the interest group frenzy that had enveloped earlier Israeli education politics. The teachers and education officials now have control of the conversation.

When considering if the various interests groups in the U.S. would allow a similar regulation that prevented scores from being published, this is uncertain. It would seem almost un-American to not publish them, and undoubtedly groups would rise up in demand—particularly parent groups, business and real estate interests in high achieving areas, and testing corporations. Israel, despite their muffling efforts, has faced problems with covert activities from parent groups that seek published scores with the hope of illegally distributing them to similarly disgruntled public groups. Teacher unions have lobbied and successfully kept the official scores hidden from the press, and the same battle would most likely occur in the U.S. The National Educational Association (NEA), the largest single union in the U.S., would most certainly lead the charge to stifle the further proliferation of test scores to the public. Testing corporations, libertarian and free-market interest groups, and parent organizations would unite under the battle cry of freedom of information to force the hand of published test scores in the local newspapers. So there will always be the tension between what is appropriately

consumable, and what could potentially be a disaster if scores are published. The conversation over the social and economic detriments of publicized scores is necessary, requiring cool-headed leadership from a respected politician in the U.S.

Much like the Israeli public is often distracted with their foreign policy matters with Middle Eastern rivals, the U.S. educational system and its pinball politics from the outside could get some attention relief with the current priorities shifting away from educational micromanagement toward the war on terror and the failing economy. The U.S. Department of Education may have an opportunity to seize the day. Either way, a public debate needs to occur regarding the publication of high-stakes test scores, their effects on the economy and schools, and what is a reasonable expectation for schools given the realities of funding and teacher attrition. A further conversation may need to address the sanctity of the professionals in education and if they can reclaim their professional authority in educational policy matters. Do they need external review from anyone, or can they operate much like the American Medical Association, or the American Bar Association? While neither of these groups are immune to American politics, they certainly have much more authority and autonomy than professionals in education. There is the private-public sector designation that exists between these professional groups that may grant doctors and lawyers their market-like independence, but they all share a common fiduciary duty that garners similar public concern to that of public schools.

The U.S. experience speaks to how unreasonable external interest groups emerge when schools are under a microscope that examines only a few indicators. It also helps to highlight how business interests have seized the day and directed the conversation. Interest groups such as fiscally conservative economic think tanks or the Chamber of Commerce expect schools to respond like businesses, the only paradigm in which they are experts. How can we expect schools to adopt market-driven incentives when it is clear that teacher's salaries cannot reflect the market? While business interests may cry foul at union demands for pay scales and tenure laws, society needs teacher pay to be marginal and dependable, or pay the tax consequence. Unions have never unreasonably demanded business-type wages, so they fight for items such as job security and autonomy. Market interests do not get their cake and eat it too. The teaching profession has conceded that they are in a special place that resides outside the capitalistic driven world, and that teachers are called upon to serve. Yet they must find some way to maintain pride in their professional craft. Israel seems to recognize this precarious position, and has symbolically and strategically structured its educational policy politics on the notion that professionals and academics in the field should guide the field. For the U.S. to adopt this attitude is a stretch for multiple reasons.

Essentially, to place more authority of education policy in the hands of educational academics and professionals would require a propaganda campaign that bolstered the quality and competency of educational professionals in

leadership. Education departments and academics in the field would need to earn the trust of the public by becoming more politically savvy, making their work more consumable to the public, and find personalities that would take charge of the conversation. The Department of Education has traditionally been one of the weakest cabinet positions in the executive branch. This would need to change, requiring intense political maneuvering.

**4) Increase attention to the field of educational administration to heal educational leadership shortcomings**

The principals of Sierra School District had prominent university undergraduate degrees, master's degrees in educational leadership, and were near completion of doctoral programs in educational administration. They had both taught among low-income students in public schools for nearly ten years, and had been high school administrators for over ten years. And yet they were ill-equipped and frustrated with their mentoring and academic experiences that could have better prepared them for their positions as leaders among disadvantaged communities. They struggled to develop the systems that could guarantee progressive gains in math and English test scores. I have already argued that test scores cannot be the ultimate barometer for principal success, but I also acknowledge that principals do need to press their teachers to always do their best to improve academic achievement in all curricular areas... but how exactly does

one do this? Development in the field of educational administration is vital to providing clearer answers.

The sociologist Willard Waller described in his book *The Sociology of Teaching* that "...the reformation of the schools must begin with the teachers, and no program that does not include the personal rehabilitation of teachers can ever overcome the passive resistance of the old order" (1932, p. 458). Waller's summations of schools painted a picture in which the focus of education policy has been misdirected, distracted by everything but the primary importance of good teaching. Principals, however, are not teachers. They are administrators of systems that facilitate teaching and learning. The place principals have in the teaching process needs to be clear, and we need to be as diligent and scientific in our approach to managing schools as we are to the craft of teaching in order to ensure teaching can occur under the most ideal of circumstances. The science of educational administration is to develop clearer maps in leadership preparation, particularly when considering disadvantaged communities. Using science to create the most ideal leadership practices ultimately fosters good teaching.

At the heart of improving the principalship is a societal paradigm shift that turns to educational scientists instead of business scholarship and assumptions in motivational instinct. Questionable trends have existed within American society in the treatment of leadership roles as a collection of personal attributes that are instinctual to only a chosen few. Elmore (2004) discussed the fact that school



leaders need to know real things about the fundamental tasks they manage, therefore dismissing inherent attribute theory. Elmore argued that this dilemma and dysfunctional societal belief "... has not been central to the discourse about leadership in America," and has ultimately led to problematic strategies for identifying and training effective leaders. Principals are forced to confront dynamic situations, placed as a "buffer" between a hostile public and a complex political world, discerning reactions to often thousands of people within their site. The growth agendas for compulsory education, the diversity of professional demands, and the clamoring for school improvement have all lead to daunting administrative expectations. Principals also remain in a more distanced relationship to pedagogy with teachers wielding tremendous authority beyond regular and direct administrative control. Administrators are thus not the managers of instruction, but the managers of the structures and processes around instruction. They do this by protecting teachers and creating the appearance of a rational management process that aligns with the standards movement and objective assessments. Elmore believes this model and the dysfunctional game that is played around it has been complicit in the proliferation of school failure.

In my observations of the principals in Sierra District, a care and effort existed when considering the plight of disadvantaged children and the challenges of teaching them. The deficiency existed in the training and actualization of that care into sound and effective practice. In his review of the literature on the leadership praxis and preparation programs, Furman (2012) said it best:

...to date, the literature offers few specifics about the actual practice of social justice leadership in K-12 schools and the capacities needed by school leaders to engage in this practice. In turn, the literature on leadership preparation is thin in regard to explicit methods for developing these capacities. As Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) state, “current preparation programs aimed toward social justice tend to focus on critical consciousness. . . [and] find it difficult to prepare leaders to acquire the actual skills needed to make equity-based changes in schools” (p. 218).

Leithwood (2012), a major contributor to the Wallace Foundation leadership study, confirmed this in his most recent work citing that idealized leadership models are insufficient. The science of educational administration needs to spend its efforts looking more closely at leadership in the specific action of practice. We can consider the models and idealized actions that principals should commit, but the current science is inadequate in understanding what that means and what it looks like in practice under specified conditions. Describing those conditions, the actions and challenges of principals, the policy and social pressures upon them, was central to the display of science within this work.

### *Final Remarks*

I would leave Jefferson and Sage Valley High Schools after a long afternoon of observations and attempt to unwind during the drive home. The stories of homelessness, hunger, violence, and despair were coupled with memories of student sassiness, awkward and comical exchanges, and incredible teaching moments. The principals were inspiring, resilient, vulnerable, and complicated through it all. When looking over my notes, my tone appears extremely critical. But I meant it not to be centered at the principals themselves, even though there are tangible moments of critique. The focus of my concerns centers on the social systems and relationships of power in which they are embedded, which are intimately tied to the current policy movement of accountability and high stakes testing couple with limited resource allocation. Should the analysis of the principalship as portrayed in this work be on point, a renewed conversation of education reform direction is due, and one that is led by professionals in the field. Conversations about insufficient funding for schools, segregation proliferation, exacerbated income inequality, and the deleterious affect it all has on schools must stand above conversations about school accountability and accusations against school leaders. We can press social scientists to squeeze the most out of our principals, teachers, and students, but if we do not address social stratification, broader inequities in how we allocate resources, and the place our schools have in consciously or unconsciously reinforcing those traditions, perverted triage tactics will remain within educational administrative practice with sophisticated rationalizations.

There is an interesting irony when considering the word triage within the education vernacular. For principals working in low-performing schools today, job

security and stability is tenuous, accountability structures are elaborate, and resources are few. Government bodies have placed educational funding priorities far behind other social institutions, yet expected greatness. If we apply the word triage to the military, which seem like a more comfortable metaphor, the situation is much different. Thomas Ricks, the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter on the military for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*, described military budgets and defense policies over the past 50 year as having a “fire hose of cash on them” with essentially no accountability measures. Ricks commented that, “...we have a military that really doesn’t know how to spend money effectively at all.” Equally troubling has been our correlating military policies. Since the Korean War, U.S. military policy has been “murky” and inconsistent, the training and success standards for our Generals even worse, scorecards of military achievement is contestable, and warfare as a whole has generally been unpopular (Gross, 2012; Ricks, 2012). Yet the money keeps coming, accountability and oversight of our Generals is weak, our officers often retire for higher paying jobs with defense contractors (over 70%) (Johnson, 2012), and we keep marching on without serious clamor, spending restrictions, or major legislation that confronts it all. Thus is the state of education in contention with military policy... a consequence of governmental triage and a prioritization of public support that place our schools at the bottom.

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