

LINKS AND CHAINS:  
A CASE STUDY OF HISTORICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS  
AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THE AREAS OF  
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT, ATTENDANCE, AND READING

by

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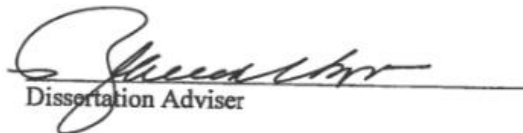
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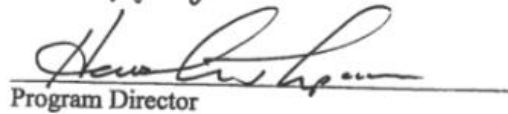
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The English poet, John Donne, said it best when he declared in his artistic prose that no man is an island existing entirely of himself. In the spirit of this proclamation, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge those who have helped me achieve my wildest dream of becoming a Doctor of Education. To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ...my Father God – we did it! You spoke and I followed your words. Thank you! To my family and friends, I thank you for your support, prayers, and encouragement. Special thanks to my husband and children for loving me, supporting me, and sharing me with my will to accomplish my aspirations; thanks to my parents - to my father specifically, for his undying interest in this project as well as all peaked interests of his middle daughter.

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## DEDICATION

Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000), sociologist and Harvard University professor, wrote a book on respect and its importance in society. In the book she indicated that respect is a means of creating equality and symmetry in relationships. With respect comes healing, understanding and progress. When we respect one another's journeys and back stories (thank you, Dr. Jay!) we are able to move forward in empathy and progress. This dissertation is centered on the need to respect the background and journey of African Americans in education, in order to empathize with and heal past scars that have ultimately led to a gap in academic achievement for African American students. Therefore, this dissertation is dedicated to those who have had to struggle with adversity, discrimination, injustice, inequality, mediocrity and misunderstandings.

This dissertation is dedicated to children everywhere, from all backgrounds, who simply want to learn and better themselves through educational opportunities. This dissertation is dedicated to those who will stand together, acknowledge problems, and have the audacity to roll up their sleeves and tackle the issues at hand. This dissertation is dedicated to those who will have the courage to stand for equality when it is not so popular to do so. This dissertation is dedicated to the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who refused to relinquish his conviction of the need for our country to truly stand for equality and justice for all; and the late Carter G. Woodson who fought the fight for equal education early

on when very few were recognizing and fighting.

Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to all who have been told that their dreams are unreachable. Omit the untruths that have been spoken over your lives, knowing that you are reading the complete dissertational study constructed by a young teenage mother of two children who simply wanted to realize her dream of obtaining the highest level of education. Yes, education is available to you so that you can believe, overcome and achieve!

## ABSTRACT

African Americans have experienced an educational history that has been riddled with challenges and disparity. Of particular concern have been the areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading. Presently, African Americans are achieving at a lower rate than their Caucasian peers, thus creating a gap in achievement known as the African American achievement gap. This study sought to revisit the historical events that affected African American education, as well as present current information pertaining to the persistent African American achievement gap. The study addressed the impact of programs, policies, and procedures implemented by a Midwestern school in order to target the three aforementioned areas. The school underwent federally mandated reconstruction as the result of four consecutive years of failing to make adequate yearly progress. A cohort of African American students from the school in its old state were re-examined four years after the implementation of the new school and its new initiatives targeting parental involvement, attendance, and reading. These implementations were assessed for their impact upon the targeted African American students and the school as a whole. The results showed that the newly introduced initiatives positively affected parental involvement, attendance, and reading.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The U.S. is considered to be the melting pot of western civilization (Morganthau, Wolfberg, Cohn & Murr, 1993). This is said to be true because the population as a whole is represented by various nationalities, races, creeds, religions, income levels, backgrounds, and other categorical classes of people who have come together to create an entire civilization called Americans. Many people came to America as a way of gaining opportunities of growth and advancement. Not all immigrants, however, came willingly. The country's ethnic mixture consists of voluntary immigrants, as well as involuntary immigrants.

African Americans have been a part of the United States as slaves since the inception of slavery in 1619 (Sinha, 2004). Africans were involuntarily brought to the United States to serve as manual laborers for individuals establishing the new colonies. This "marriage" between the Africans and their new home proved to be a complicated one. Throughout history, slaves were denied the rights and privileges granted to freemen. Slaves were also denied the right to an education. The journey of African American education has experienced major groundbreaking turning points, including the denial of education and unequal access to education. The educational milestones of African Americans in the United States have gone from restriction and punishable by law, to separate but equal, to desegregation (Dadisman, 1994).

## African American Achievement

Currently, African American students are achieving academically at a noticeably lower rate than Caucasian American students, as well as other subgroups (Sperling & Vaughan, 2009). This gap appears to be consistent across every state in the country (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009b). The etiology of this achievement gap can be traced across the last 400 years, but it is the current reality that is the focus of this study.

In one aspect of his humanistic personality theory, psychologist Carl Rogers believed that individuals' personas were shaped by their conscious experiences in their home and outside lives (Blair-Broeker & Ernst, 2008). In other words, we are the result of our life experiences. Our personal history affects who we are as human beings. Also, according to Bruhn (1990), memories of our life experiences affect our personality and shape who we are as individuals. Thus, individuals are affected by events that have taken place in their lives. This belief is known as Cognitive Perceptual Theory. Our perceptions affect our understanding and thinking. Therefore, experiences of African Americans may have affected their thoughts, actions, and attitudes about education.

## Historical Background

Research has shown that thoughts and beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001). As a group, African Americans have been subject to historical experiences affecting their education including prohibition of education and learning to read, segregation, inequality, and dismantling of their own schools (Lyons & Chesley, 2004). These historical impositions have affected reading, attendance and parental involvement rates of African Americans.

Events such as the institution of slavery and the groundbreaking court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which legalized separate but equal facilities for African Americans, aided in the beginning of a literacy battle for African Americans. During periods of slavery, African Americans were not allowed to learn to read (Anderson, 2005). After the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, blacks were subject to segregated schools that, in fact, were not equal to the conditions of white schools in structure and instruction (Lyons & Chesley, 2004).

By slavery's end, African Americans held a literacy of approximately 10% (Anderson, 2005). *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) helped to ensure the education of African Americans, but by 1900 the literacy rate had only increased to 50%. Currently, African American students continue to face challenges in reading as they are significantly behind Caucasian students in reading achievement (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009a). The implications for this lag in reading achievement are that it is critical to close the achievement gap in order to ensure success for all students and to avoid its impact on other academic areas, as well.

African Americans have faced attendance challenges, as well. During the late 1800's and into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans were denied public funding to build and maintain their schools (Anderson, 2005). In fact, many states refused to fund the public education of African American students, leaving the task up to private and voluntary donors (Anderson). Therefore, many African American students did not attend school. African Americans, in the past, have suffered from the consequences of an existing attendance gap (Anderson). Some schools continue to face this attendance challenge within the African American population. Daily attendance is affected by

mobility rates, truancy, suspension, and excused and unexcused absences. If students are not in daily attendance at school, it is difficult for them to receive a complete education and have the greatest opportunities for academic success.

Upon the execution of the Supreme Court ordered *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) legally desegregating schools, African American administrators, teachers, and students were transferred to all-white schools. Some teachers were demoted, while others lost their positions altogether (Lyons & Chesley, 2004). Not only did those inside the schools suffer, but parents as advocates of the schools suffered, as well. African American parents who had been involved in their children's education as members of local parent organizations also lost their oversight for their children's education. As a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, parent led organizations in African American schools also faced disbanding. In effect, these parents lost their voice with regard to the education of their children.

As early as 1908, there was an established parent-teacher organization founded by an African American (Virginia PTA, 2008). Selena Sloan Butler, an African American teacher, founded The National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teachers Association. This organization encouraged the creation of similar state-level organizations (Virginia PTA). The Members of the Alabama Congress of Colored Parents, a parent-teacher organization that advocated for African American students, viewed the *Brown* decision as bittersweet (Heffron, 2010). The organization attempted to join with the national Parent Teacher Association (PTA), a predominantly Caucasian organization, until it became evident that this union would leave them at an unequal status with executive members of the PTA. As a result of these inequalities, many members abandoned all efforts for



community development (Heffron). In addition, parents reported discrimination in their attempt to become involved in the predominantly white schools. Many African American parents today state that one of the barriers to volunteering in their children's schools is the fact that they do not feel comfortable and welcome in the school building (Noguera & Wing, 2006).

Parental involvement, daily attendance, and reading success are factors that contribute to student achievement. Many schools serving African American students are faced with the tasks of improving these areas. Schools are implementing programs that will address these challenges and help to increase African American student achievement. This study will focus on three factors contributing to the achievement gap including parental involvement, student attendance, and reading achievement. A historical perspective of each factor will be given as a background and a case study measuring the implementation of school programs, policies, and procedures targeting these areas will be studied and analyzed to measure the effects of such interventions on the overall improvement of each area respectively.

#### Statement of the Problem

African American students are lagging in performance on standardized learning outcome instruments, when compared to students of other racial groups (Sperling & Vaughan, 2009). This deficit, known as the achievement gap, has been a concern for educators and researchers alike. The purpose of this dissertation is to measure the impact of the implementation of programs, policies and procedures that seek to improve the areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading achievement, in order to

determine a proper course of action when attempting to eliminate the African American achievement gap.

### Background

Many groups came to this new country as indentured servants. However, African Americans most often came as slaves. A slave being a person whose life, liberty, and property is solely controlled by another human being or force. The institution of slavery provided America with opportunities of wealth and growth; however, it set a foundation of a pattern of inequality for African Americans in the United States.

One area of considerable inequality between African Americans and those of Northern European heritage was the area of education. African slaves were initially encouraged to be students of learning and makeshift schools were created for them (Anderson, 2005). Slave owners wanted slaves to read, particularly because this would be beneficial in converting them to Christianity and learning scripture (Anderson, 2005). Slaves were also taught to read in order to be able to do menial tasks such as reading signs and counting when sent to the store to purchase goods (Green, Stephens-McIntosh, Cook-Morales, & Robinson-Zañartu, 2005). However, the education of slaves would not last long.

With the spread of abolitionist materials, forged traveling passes and other documents, and the occurrence of slave revolts, the education of Africans became viewed as a threat to the societal way of life for slave owners (Anderson, 2005). Therefore, African American education became prohibited, banned, and punishable by law (Anderson). The laws that were established against the education of African Americans meant that there would be no attendance of African Americans in schools in those areas,

thus creating an attendance rate of 0%. The prohibition of education for African Americans also took away their accessibility of learning to read. Reading was no longer a priority for slaves, but was now considered a restricted act.

In addition to impacting education, slavery also affected the African American family unit. Families were torn apart as children were taken from their parents and sold. Furthermore, the bonds of husbands and wives were broken by sales and auctions, as well (Jones, 1996). This breakdown of the African American family unit continues today. Many African American families are broken and non-traditional, often consisting of an absent father, mother, or both. Grandparents are raising grandchildren. Parent absenteeism in the home not only affects parental involvement in the home environment, but in the schools, as well (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, 2010).

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) court decision marked the establishment of separate but equal educational facilities for Americans. This implementation of segregation led to African Americans having their own schools with their own administrators and teachers. However, the schools were not equal. Many schools suffered because states refused to fund them (Anderson, 2005). This meant that the African American students suffered from lack of resources and inadequate school structures.

Though African American schools were not equal to those of the dominant culture and lacked the same quality of resources, many of the African Americans embraced their schools as family-like structures (Green et al., 2005). Parents were highly involved and a part of the educational team. However, this aspect of the African American family would soon experience a challenging blow, mirroring the effects of slavery on the African American family.

*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a landmark case affecting all American schools in that it eradicated the institution of segregation. For African Americans, this meant the disbanding of their schools. Administrators, teachers and students were dispersed to all-white schools where they were met with resistance from white administrators, teachers, and parents (Lyons & Chesley, 2004). African Americans walked into schools that did not welcome them and were far from the family-like structure they were accustomed to in their own schools. African American principals were demoted to assistant principals, and some to teachers (Lyons & Chesley). African American parents were taunted as they brought their children to school being made to feel inferior and unwelcomed, thus planting a seed that would create a pattern of rejection in the black community.

As a result of slavery (1619-1865), *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), African Americans have experienced a sporadic pattern in education. This educational pattern of inequality, segregation, and desegregation, has affected the African American community in the areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading achievement. African American education is now plagued with low achievement in reading, low attendance rates and low parental involvement. These factors have been linked to the African American achievement gap. Is it possible to implement school programs and policies geared towards improving these factors and raising African American achievement?

Students at a Midwestern elementary school in a suburb of a major metropolitan city were experiencing an achievement gap between the success rate of their African American students and students of other ethnicities. This study focused on how this

school implemented programs to improve parental involvement, attendance, and reading achievement and the extent of improvement in these areas over time.

The study was a case study comparing the difference in progress of this Midwestern elementary school as it underwent a revamping and restructuring in an effort to improve student academic progress. Prior to the restructuring, the (old) school remained on the state academic watch list for failure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for four consecutive years. According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), all U.S. schools must demonstrate yearly progress in the areas of reading, math and science for grades three through eight. Failure to obtain this progress could result in the state action of restructuring the school.

In an effort to improve student achievement and to avoid further state action, the school was disbanded and restructured by the school district (new school). This reorganization included renaming of the school, as well as bringing in new administrators, staff, teachers, and curriculum. The school became a choice school by definition – meaning that parents of the current students as well as students in the other district elementary schools had a choice to go through a lottery process to have their children enrolled in the school. Those students whose parents chose to not enter their children in the lottery of the new school were sent to other schools in the district. Majority percentage of enrollment was given to current students who attended the old school and lived in the school's community.

The new school instituted new school programs aimed at improving student achievement. These programs included strategies that facilitated growth in parental involvement, student attendance, and reading achievement. This case study focused on a

comparison of the school policies and programs in existence at both the old and the new schools, in order to gain insight of the impact of the new program changes on the areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading achievement.

### Research Questions

This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting parental involvement impacted the number of parents who attended back-to-school nights, attended parent-teacher conferences, and had personal contacts with teachers?
2. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting attendance impacted the African American student attendance rate?
3. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting reading achievement impacted the reading achievement of the African American students?

### Description of Terms

The following are specific terms unique to this dissertation or not generally known:

*Academic Early Warning.* Schools that do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two consecutive years (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a).

*Academic Watch.* Schools that do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for four consecutive years (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a).

*Achievement Gap.* The disparity in achievement between white and black students (Finkel, 2010).

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).* Adequate yearly progress representing the annual academic performance targets in reading and math that the state, school districts, and schools must reach to be considered on track for 100% proficiency by school year 2012-14 (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a).

*Attendance Rate.* The total number of days of student attendance, divided by the sum of the total days of student attendance and total days of student absence, multiplied by 100 (Illinois State board of Education, 2009).

*Choice School.* All students enrolled in any Title I school identified by the state for school improvement, corrective action, or restructuring must be given the option to attend a public school that is not identified for improvement (a choice school) (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b).

*Chronic Truancy Rate.* A schools chronic truancy rate as determined by dividing the number of chronic truants by the average daily enrollment, and multiplying this number by 100. Chronic truants refer to the students who have compulsory attendance, being absence without specific reason for 10 percent or more of the total amount of regular attendance days (Illinois State Board of Education, 2009).

*Culture.* The behaviors, beliefs, and values of an ethnic group that are developed through experiences and passed down from generation to generation (Davis, 2005).

*Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT).* A state assessment that measures individual student achievement relative to the Illinois Learning Standards. Students in grades three through eight take the ISAT every year in March. (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2011).

*Mobility Rate.* reflects any change in enrollment that occurs between the first day of school in October and the last school day of the year. It is the summation of all student transfers – both in and out – divided by the mean daily enrollment, multiplied by 100. Students may be counted more than once if they transfer more than once during the targeted time from of the school year. (Illinois State Board of Education, 2009).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB 2002).* A federal law stating that all students in United States schools must make adequate yearly progress towards academic success, as measured by the standards of the individual states (No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, 2002).

*Pedagogy.* The act of teaching (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis & Haviland, 2009).

*Reorientation.* A cycle of radical change due to low performance (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985).

*Student Mobility Rate.* Mobility rate is based on the number of times students enroll in or leave a school during the year (Illinois State Board of Education, 2002).

*Voluntary Immigrants.* Immigrants migrating to the United States of America by their own free will because they expect better opportunities than they experienced in their homelands (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

### Significance of Study

This study is significant because the African American achievement gap continues to linger and is a contributor to other gaps including the high school completion gap, college graduation gap, and income and salary gap (Anderson, 2005). Because African Americans are lagging in academic achievement, this in turn leads to a gap in their high school, college, and career success in comparison to other ethnic groups. Many



school districts across the United States are attempting to implement ways to close the achievement gap among the African American population. Finding effective ways to correct the factors leading to the achievement gap through school program and policy changes in the areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading achievement may prove to increase African American student success.

### Process to Accomplish

African American students have been experiencing an academic achievement gap when compared to the achievement of Caucasian students and other ethnic groups. Many schools are in need of implementing programs and policies that will help alleviate the factors that contribute to the existence of this gap. Some schools have already employed such tactics as an effort to help their African American students achieve at higher rates.

This case study involved a Midwestern suburban elementary school that was 62% African American, 29% Caucasian, and 4% Hispanic, with Multi-racial and Asian/Pacific Islander making up the remaining population. The population of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 49%. The school was located in a predominately African American neighborhood with mid to low-income levels. School report cards provided demographic information and social factors.

In the state in which the case study school is located, students in grades three through eight are tested annually in Reading. When a school fails to make adequate yearly progress on annual testing for two consecutive years, it is given an Academic Early Warning status. After its fourth year of failing to make adequate yearly progress, the school is given Academic Watch status and it stands in jeopardy of federal- mandated reconstruction. The school featured in this case study failed to show adequate yearly

progress for four consecutive years and, therefore, underwent mandated reconstruction. In its failing state (old school), the school lacked greatly in not only reading achievement, but it also faced challenges with African American parental involvement and daily student attendance. Parental attendance at school-sponsored functions was not at the highest rates. The areas of daily attendance and student mobility were additional challenges.

With its restructuring (new school), came many changes to the school. Firstly, there was the addition of new staff including a new principal, teachers and support staff. Additionally, students were given the option to opt into the new school through a lottery process or attend a different district school. Finally, policies and programs targeting various deficits including parental involvement, attendance, and reading were implemented. The case study was an evaluation of the impact of the incorporated programs of the new school on these three areas. Data derived from the last year of the old school was compared with data from the 4<sup>th</sup> year of the new school. The 4<sup>th</sup> year of the new school was chosen to allow for an adequate time progression, in order to look at changes over time between groups.

To address research question one, parental involvement data were collected for the areas of parent back-to-school night attendance, parent-teacher conference attendance, and parent-teacher contacts. Data were gathered through district archival databases of both paper and electronic files. Old school parental involvement data from the most recent year that information was available was compared to that of the fourth year of the new school, noting programs, policies and procedures put into place. Data were evaluated using a chi-square to determine if there were any significant differences

in distribution between groups. Additionally, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted in order to assess if there were any significant differences in parental involvement participation among the old school and the new school.

To answer research question two, African American students' total days of attendance in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade were compared to their total days of attendance in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, noting any differences. African American students' total days of attendance in 7<sup>th</sup> grade were then compared across groups to note any differences in those who opted into the new school and those who opted out of attending the new school. To analyze the significance of any differences in attendance across time and across groups, a 2X2 mixed model ANOVA test was completed. Additionally, an independent samples *t* test was conducted in order to compare the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade attendance days present of the African American students at the old school to those of the new school, to note if there were any significant changes in the targeted grade level. Old and new school attendance improvement programs and policies were contrasted, as well as the notation of any changes in programs and policies. Student mobility rates and issues with absences were also noted. Data were collected from public school records, district archival data, school and state report cards and written policies.

To address research question number three, test scores were derived from school report cards and school district data. To compare impact across time, ISAT reading test scores for all 3<sup>rd</sup> grade African American students in the last year of the old school were compared to their reading scores after four year's time, placing the focus on their 7<sup>th</sup> grade scores. To complete this, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade test scores for both groups were compared to their 7<sup>th</sup> grade scores. Additionally, to evaluate the impact of the new school reading

programs on student achievement, the tabulated 7<sup>th</sup> grade scores were then compared across two groups – those who opted into the new school and those who opted out by choosing to continue their education at other district schools. Therefore, a 2X2 mixed model ANOVA test was used to determine if there were any significant differences across time and across groups. Additionally, an independent samples *t* test was conducted in order to compare the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores of the African American students at the old school to those of the new school, to note if there were any significant changes in the targeted grade level.

To maintain confidentiality, students' names were coded through random, six-digit number identification assignment, starting with number 000001. For additional category verification, students who opted out of and said no to the new school option were given an N and those students who opted in and said yes to the new school option were given a Y attached to their number. Test scores were arranged by number and grouped.

A case was built using all data gathered for a comparison of the state of the old school versus the new school; comparisons were also made between students who attended the old school and either attended the new school or a different district school. Conclusions were drawn based on data results, as a means of concluding whether the implementation of parental involvement, attendance, and reading programs improved the success in these areas for African American students. The hypothesis was that with the implementation of new programs, policies, and procedures at the new school, these three deficit areas improved.

IRB approval was obtained through application submission to the attending University. School district approval was also obtained with consent of the school district Superintendent. Data were provided by direct access to public information through district archives, as well as the district providing archival data for research. There were no perceived limitations or barriers to gaining information.

Anonymity of student test scores was assured through student identification coding. There were no perceived risks in this study. This study did not require informed consent. The results of the study were applied to the general population as readily available information for schools servicing African American students who desire to implement specific programs that target the improvement of parental involvement, attendance, and reading. The dissertational information will be used in workshops and seminars provided by the researcher.

### Summary

A substantial amount of research was conducted concerning the achievement gap, factors that influence the gap, and possible solutions to the gap. Researchers vary in their reasoning for the achievement gap, as well as their approaches to closing the void left in African American achievement. Chapter two of this dissertation consisted of a review of the current research literature concerning the historical events affecting African American education, further exploration of African American low reading achievement, parental involvement and attendance, and current school programs that seek to narrow the gap.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Many have heard the saying, “You are what you eat.” This statement implies that we are the sum of the very foods that we consume. If one eats large amounts of junk food, is he or she considered to be junk? No. However, this same person will experience the results and side effects of this eating habit, including weight gain, sluggishness, and undesirable health issues (Anderson, 2008). The concept surrounding this theory is that humans are not intangible individuals who are not touched or affected by their choices and experiences. We are, indeed, the sum of our parts and then some. We are the sum of our personal experiences as individuals, as families, as cultures, and as society as a whole. These experiences ultimately affect our actions.

#### Background

African Americans have historically been subject to many levels of injustice from enslavement to racism. Many are familiar with the ongoing fight of minorities to gain equal rights when facing opportunities of employment, loan approvals, housing in certain neighborhoods, and cultural representation in film and television. The optimistic determination of the African American’s journey to fulfill the need to be accepted on all terms as an American, was often juxtaposed with their realistic plight concerning the fulfillment of that need. Such injustices and lack of equal rights have led to numerous gaps in success between African Americans and their White counterparts. The way in

which African American education has resulted in its current condition “can be understood only by studying the forces effective in the development of Negro education since it was systematically undertaken immediately after Emancipation. The conditions of today have been determined by what has taken place in the past” (Woodson, 1933, p. 6).

Historically, African Americans have been denied equal access to business opportunities, political organizations, and economic advancement (Jones, 1996). Not only have African Americans witnessed levels of injustice in the areas of social and lifestyle attainment, but forms of discrimination have been prevalent in relation to their education, as well. African Americans such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois, both notable advocates for African American educational rights, brought attention to and fought persistently to gain equal educational opportunities for African Americans and all students (Jeynes, 2007). Perhaps the most noticed and referenced issue in African American education has been the difference in success between African Americans and other ethnic groups. More specifically, African Americans have been noted for their lag in reading test scores, school attendance rates, and parental involvement in comparison to White students (Anderson, 2005; Ladd, 2010).

African American educational history has been riddled with historical challenges that have involved the issues of African American literacy, attendance and parental involvement. African Americans have been subject to an educational history that has endured many changes and restructurings. A comprehensive understanding of the academic progress of African Americans from one generation to the next is needed to gain understanding of the entire issue (Anderson, 2005). In order to fully understand the

problems with reading, attendance and parent involvement, we must first investigate the root of the issues.

### Slavery (1619-1865) and Reading

African Americans were brought to the United States in the early 1600's as a means of helping to advance the country's economic status through manual labor. Many were unwillingly detained slaves, owned as mere property, and often sold on auction blocks. African Americans were originally encouraged to learn to read for many purposes including the purpose of learning scripture (Monaghan, 2005) and Christian principles (Woodson, 1919). The education of slaves was also viewed as a means of improving the economic efficiency of the slaveholders. *An educated slave was able to complete transactions and errands requiring reading skills and mathematical computations (Woodson)*. Though the educational advancement of slaves was originally embraced, it soon became an act punishable by law. As slaveholders became aware of the forging of slave traveling passes and increased communication amongst slaves and abolitionists, more strict measures were taken in prohibiting the education of slaves (Anderson, 2005; Woodson). South Carolina was the first colony to pass law prohibiting the education of slaves in 1740. However, this law focused more on banning the teaching of slaves to write (Woodson). In 1770, Georgia banned the teaching of slaves to read (Anderson). The issue of slave revolts, including the infamous Nat Turner-led slave revolt of 1831, prompted other states to follow suit with similar bans on educating slaves. Impositions of restrictions regarding the social and religious gatherings of slaves were incorporated (Woodson). All such legalizations led to a decline in the literacy rate of African Americans (Anderson).



By the end of slavery, the illiteracy rate of African Americans was approximately 90 % (Anderson). The next few decades of post-emancipation would see a push on the behalf of northerners, ex-slaves, and abolitionists to educate African Americans. The illiteracy rate of African Americans began to shrink. However, the residual evidence of the effects of the legal restrictions of education on African Americans continued to emerge. As Whites gained strong political influence, restrictions on school access and funding declined for African American students in southern states (Anderson, 2005). With a history of a lingering illiteracy rate and limited schools to attend, African Americans faced the challenges of limited reading capability and little to no school attendance.

#### Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and Attendance

With the emancipation of slavery came the adverse reaction of former slave owners. Many states decided to employ other measures of restriction among newly freed African Americans, including the mandating of the use of separate facilities for African Americans. An effort to bring unity among the races was soon enforced. The Civil Rights Act (1875) granted all Americans equal access to public facilities including inns and places of public amusement, regardless of race. However, this act was found to be unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1883, citing that congress held no authority to impose such an act and that discriminatory issues were matters of the states, not the federal government. Most states were beginning to incorporate laws requiring separate facilities and modes of transportation for African Americans. States became busy imposing separation tactics that regulated the social interactions of African Americans with Whites. These legal impositions became known as the Jim Crow Laws.

From 1876 to 1965 Jim Crow laws greatly limited African Americans' capability to interact with White Americans in public facilities – including schools. These laws most greatly limited African Americans' abilities to interact with White Americans in public facilities, including schools. A system of segregation became the way of life for Americans. A condition of the segregation was that African Americans would be granted separate but equal facilities to those of White Americans. The complaint was that the facilities were in no way equal (Woodson, 1919).

In 1896, Homer Plessy, of 1/8 African descent, challenged the separate but equal law against intrastate travel by purposefully sitting in an all-White designated railroad car. The result of this challenge was the groundbreaking *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision establishing the regulation of separate but equal facilities as federal law. The decision included separate but equal educational facilities for African American students, as well. Thus, African American students were required to have separate schools. Though the facilities were separate, they were far from equal (Willie, 2005). This decision seemed to pronounce the segregation of African Americans as an untouchable practice.

The division mandated by the courts soon resonated itself as a common practice. Southern states maintained separate and limited facilities for African American students. Many northern states employed the same practices. Katz (1973) stated that although some northern White schools accepted African Americans in their schools, many maintained separate facilities for them. Also, if White parents complained, African American students were excluded (Katz). There was a strong resistance to African American education during this time. According to Butchart (2010), opponents of the

education of African Americans executed ways to discourage their school attendance. Educators were terrorized, including any White person willing to teach or support African American education. African Americans attending night schools were shot at and attacked. African American schools were vandalized and burned. Fear debilitated the African American communities causing some parents to keep their children home. In some states, the fear was monumental, causing little to no school attendance by African American students (Butchart).

Additionally, a false accusation that African Americans did not desire to be educated was created by those opposing African American education. Some Whites created an unsubstantiated assumption that African Americans did not desire to be educated, although many of these families protested and verbalized their desire to receive an education (Katz, 1973).

Another issue was funding for African American schools. According to Anderson (2005), unequal distribution of state funding amongst African American and White schools became a common practice in southern states. Tax monies went mostly to White schools while African American schools relied heavily on private support from donors and philanthropic measures. A lack of money meant lack of resources and facilities. Many African American schools were operated in stores, lodges, churches, and other private domains. Schools not operating in public facilities did not qualify for public education funds (Anderson). In an attempt to discourage African American students' school attendance, some facilities were even burned down (Butchart, 2010).

Another consideration is the issue of transportation. With the introduction of the mass transit system, some African American students were forced to bypass local White

schools and take public transportation to their distant schools with their parents assuming the costs, even if they could not afford them (Willie, 2005). Some children of parents who were unable to pay for transportation did not attend school regularly. If students did not take public transportation, they were expected to walk for miles on end, often times walking past White schools in order to get to their schools.

All of these practices outlined an issue of attendance in African American schools. With limited accessibility to proper and equal facilities and lack of state support for African American schools, school attendance remained a challenge for African Americans. As early as 1900, 55% of White elementary students attended school in the south while 36% of African American students attended school (Anderson, 2005). The difference in African American school attendance created the attendance gap, the second highest achievement gap affecting the African American community (Anderson).

#### Brown v. Board of Education (1954) – Attendance and Parent Involvement

For over many years African Americans faced the challenges of legalized segregated practices. However, there seemed to be a ray of hope in the mid-twentieth century. The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the United States Supreme Court ruled the separate but equal practices instituted through *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) as unconstitutional. The court decision ended legalized segregation in all public facilities, including schools.

The mandated educational reform of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision was met with strong opposition, mainly in the south (Anderson, 2005). There was a rise of a counter-reform movement by those who were determined to preserve the segregated way of life. Many students who attempted to integrate all-White schools under

the assumed protection of *Brown vs. Board of Education* found that the court mandated integration would not take place easily. States fought the integration on many levels. Many incidents gained national recognition and attention because of the severity of resistance. One of those cases was that of Ruby Bridges, a first-grade student attempting to integrate William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana. Another case became known as the plight of the Little Rock Nine – nine students who attempted to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas (Willie, 2005). In both cases, students were met with taunts, threats, spitting, and throwing of items as they made efforts to gain entry into their assigned schools. The National Guard was called in the case of Ruby Bridges as a protective measure to help her enter the school safely. To the contrary, the Arkansas National Guard was sent as a means of keeping the Little Rock Nine from entering their school. This was done under the order of the governor of Arkansas. A federal judge later enforced the integration of the students and President Dwight Eisenhower sent Army troops to replace the Arkansas National Guard (Willie, 2005).

The message that African Americans were not wanted in White schools was clearly communicated. The foot-dragging of some states when it came to the implementation of *Brown* prompted a need for further legal action which led to the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education II* (1955). This ruling called for schools to desegregate “with all deliberate speed”, and *Brown v. Board of Education III* (1979) that challenged Topeka, Kansas schools to fully comply with the original *Brown* decision. At least eight southern states did not follow the mandate of *Brown* until the

mid-1960's (Kusimo, 1999). Students met resistance along with their parents, who desired to help their children during the integration process.

*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) did not only drastically affect White schools, but it brought a massive change to African American schools, as well. As White schools were forced to welcome African American students, most African American schools were ordered to cease and desist. This order led to the disbursement of African American educators and administrators to White schools as well as some of them being laid off or fired. Kusimo (1999) found that over 38,000 African American educators were affected by *Brown v. Board of Education*. Such changes affected school structure as African American students knew it. Schools in the African American community consisted of family-like atmospheres (Green et al., 2005) with teachers and administrators acting as parent figures, counselors, and advocates for African American students (Kusimo).

Along with the presence of school personnel as student advocates, was also the presence of parent advocacy and support groups in African American schools. In the early 1900s, local African American parent-teacher units were established with the help of such advocates as Selena Sloan Butler, founder of the Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. The organization would go on to form the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. The organization sought to merge with and gain the support of the National PTA, a White-led parent-teacher organization (Virginia PTA, 2008). The leaders of both organizations pushed to have other states follow suit. Though collaboration during this time period seemed hopeful, the same would not prove to be true post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

The desegregation imposed upon African American schools also affected their local parental support groups. Many of these groups saw little to no embracement by White parent organizations upon their children entering White schools. On the state level, reactions were slightly different. State parent-teacher organizations such as the Alabama Congress of Colored Parents were highly aware of the potential effect of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). An attempted merger of African American state parent-teacher organizations with the National PTA after *Brown v. Board of Education* was met with resistance on both sides. Some African Americans did not support the common practice of White members serving as the officers on the integrated PTA groups, which led to the exclusion of their African American counterparts in operations and decision-making (Woyshner, 2009). Also, certain practices and resources that had been developed within the African American parent-teacher organizations for the betterment of African American students were dissolved, as a result of the merger. Eventually, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers was disbanded in 1970. Many discouraged African American parents and teachers abandoned all efforts of education advocacy, thus starting a trend of low parental involvement in their communities (Heffron, 2010).

#### Cultural Consideration

According to Macionis (2008), culture is the very values, beliefs, and behaviors that collectively form its people's way of life. Cultures form ethnicities or groups that share traits, languages, and customs (Light, Keller & Calhoun, 1989). The African American culture, as a whole, has had a taxing education experience in the United States. As illustrated by the aforementioned repercussions of slavery, segregation and desegregation, these challenges have been met in the areas of African Americans' access

to reading instruction, assurance of school attendance, and parental involvement and advocacy in schools. The question yet remains, is a culture truly the sum of its experiences? Can certain occurrences affect a culture's way of life as a group? According to Scott (2005), values, beliefs, attitudes, and habits are not inherited, but learned through social experiences. The very things that we choose to value signify what we regard as meaningful in life. Furthermore, Thomas and Columbus (2009) indicated in their research that an individual's culture, as well as identify, undoubtedly illustrate their actions, thoughts and interactions.

Society groups people in many categories including those of race and ethnicity. Society has a tendency to associate certain people of certain cultures to stereotypical norms, as well as patterns that can be attributed to the culture based off of consistent observations of that culture. The African American culture has been noted for its failure to achieve academically in numerous areas as a whole. The African American culture has faced modern day challenges in the academic areas of reading, attendance, and parental involvement – challenges and concerns that have been evident in previous observations throughout time. The same educational issues of old have crept into the everyday realities of African American culture today. Events affecting a generation of people can affect their belief system, as well as the attitudes and beliefs of generations yet to come (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001). There is a specific and unique personal belief system in relation to the life circumstances of African Americans (Allen & Bagozzi). This belief system produces principles that provide individuals with direction and elucidation within their everyday life experiences (Allen & Bagozzi). The research of Allen and Bagozzi acknowledged a psychological effect of life experiences on the African American



community. They believed that multiple historical events have been said to have had long-lasting effects on African Americans' sense of self – particularly those events of the civil rights era (Allen & Bagozzi). The need for African Americans to recuperate from such experiences was evident when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated his belief that there was a need to remove the psychological barriers imposed by historical events that negatively affected African Americans (Smith, 1995). Strategies were employed by African Americans in their fight for civil rights. It is custom for cultures to transmit and employ strategies from generation to generation (Howard, 1989).

#### Psychological Theory Considerations

African Americans have experienced historical events that have affected academic influences on reading, school attendance and parental involvement. As previously stated, culture is the result of its experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Scott, 2005). These experiences create certain belief systems within a culture (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001). The educational struggles of African Americans have created levels of frustration within their community. Historical events such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) sent a ripple of educational angst among the community, particularly when African American educators were demoted and laid off. This blow to African American pedagogy and administrators negatively affected African American's thoughts and beliefs towards education for generations (Lyons & Chesley, 2004).

Additionally, because the fate of African American academic success historically laid in the hands of racial practices, the community as a whole has experienced a seemingly downplay of the importance of educational success by the dominant culture, as well as within the African American culture. The importance of African American's

ability to read fluctuated historically and we now see a low achievement rate in African American reading test scores in comparison to their dominant culture peers.

African Americans' school attendance suffered at the hands of burned down schools, long distance travel by foot, taunting and violence when attending desegregated schools, and limited access to adequate buildings and resources. We are now seeing an issue with African American attendance rates.

African American parents and parental support groups were strongly affected by desegregation laws, resistance to their involvement in their children's education, and the silencing of their persistent cries for equal schools for their children. African American parental involvement rates are currently lower than those of the dominant culture (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Such experiences have clearly had an effect on African American academic tendencies which is evident through their academic behaviors and beliefs.

Psychologist Carl Rogers theorized the development of human persona through his humanistic personality theory in which he believed that individuals' personas were shaped by their conscious experiences in their home and outside lives (Blair-Broeker & Ernst, 2008). We are the result of our life practices and experiences. Our personal history affects who we are as human beings. Moreover, according to Bruhn's (1990) Cognitive Perceptual Theory (CPT), we create memories of our life experiences. These memories impact our individuality and traits, and form our individual identities. Consequently, individuals are affected by events that have taken place in their lives. The idea behind CPT is that perceptions affect our understanding and thinking. Therefore, experiences of

African Americans may have affected their individual thoughts, actions, and attitudes about education, and led to their current state in education.

As a further consideration, research has shown that cultural beliefs are passed down through generations. Consistent with the findings of Pai and Adler (1997), culture is a repetition of learned attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and skills that have been produced within the group and conveyed from generation to generation. According to transgenerational theory, certain principles govern or direct the transmission of acquired behaviors and beliefs amid generations (Lieberman, 1979). There is what is known as a transgenerational passage that integrates the complete range of family-held beliefs and traditions. This includes national traditions on life, as well as educational aspirations (Lieberman). The beliefs, attitudes, and feelings that individuals hold are conditioned by their experience in different social and historical contexts. (Allen & Bagozzie, 2001). Thus, what has affected previous generations is passed down to subsequent generations.

#### The Gap

Generation after generation of African Americans has faced challenges in education. What appears to be a lineage of educational despair has snowballed into the result of the greatest concern in education today – the African American achievement gap. There remains a persistent gap in the achievement of African American students in comparison to students of other backgrounds – particularly White students (Eccleston, Smyth, & Lopoo, 2010). African American students are performing at a lower rate than White students (Ladd, 2010). This gap is significantly present on standardized tests and in general academics (Eccleston et al.). This break in achievement is consistently referred to as the achievement gap, or simply - the gap.

The issue of the achievement gap has baffled researchers alike. Many entities, organizations, researchers and vested groups have tried to aid in narrowing and eliminating the achievement gap. Though efforts have been implemented, the gap still remains.

When Africans arrived in America in 1619 undoubtedly this was the largest extent of an achievement gap between them and their counterparts (Anderson, 2005). Slaves were expected to learn to read for the economic advancement and religious satisfactions of their masters (Woodson, 1919). However, this benefit soon became a burgeoning burden as slaves became knowledgeable and enlightened about their masters' ill-intentions concerning them. Thus began a continuous fight for knowledge on behalf of the African American – a fight that involved slaves as well as White abolitionists and philanthropists. The struggle for equal education for African American students is evident in the achievement gap.

One of the firsts to use the term achievement gap was Walker (1963) in his article on the issue of desegregation in Englewood, New Jersey. Walker discovered that African American students at a predominantly African American school were two years behind their White counterparts, creating an achievement gap.

Historically, the length of the gap has fluctuated over time (Ladd, 2010). The achievement gap was recognized as far back as the 1800's with the presence of a literacy gap among African Americans and Whites (Anderson, 2005). In the early 1900's the gap seemed to lessen with approximately 50% of African Americans portraying that they were now literate (Anderson). By the 1970's the gap had widened. However, from the 1970's to the 1980's the gap saw a decrease; only to see an increase in the 1990's (Ladd).

Though recent years have seen a decrease in the achievement gap, the decrease has not been of enough significance to eliminate concern. The gap has been said to be the basis of which the most recent federal education reform, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, was formed (Blank, 2011). Though the gap has experienced some minimization, its existence remains significant enough to linger as a major topic of concern in education.

### The Factors

In an effort to eliminate the gap many have studied and analyzed the achievement of African American students in their attempt to determine what has caused the gap over the years, as well as its reasoning for fluctuating. Much blaming has taken place as to the origin and reasoning for the gap. Researchers have explored the factors that contribute to the achievement gap with some factors gaining more attention than others. Issues pertaining to parental involvement, socioeconomic status, curriculum, course enrollment, and teachers play significant roles in student achievement (Moses-Snipes, 2005).

### Teacher Impact

Teacher pedagogical levels of buy-in and bias have been of concern among researchers when studying student success rates. Some researchers agree that the level of teacher buy-in – the level to which teachers believe in and implement certain practices and attitudes concerning educational issues of which they are required to be connected – greatly affects the outcome of student success. Teachers who believe in what they are teaching, the practices that they are implementing, and the potential of their students have proven to see more success in the classroom amongst their students. The absence of these factors may affect the achievement of African American students. A key component to

eliminating the achievement gap is building relationships between educators and students of color (Ijei & Harrison, 2010).

Furthermore, personal biases concerning controversial social issues can affect a teacher's performance and success rate with certain types of students, as well. Teachers who have good rapport with students work diligently to comprehend and acknowledge a student's culture (Ijei & Harrison, 2010). Personal biases tend to manifest from a limited understanding of culture. Gere et al. (2009) stated that there is a need for teachers to develop cultural competence by valuing, learning about, and implementing into classroom curriculum the cultural resources of students. The authors examined research involving students enrolled in a teacher pre-service program called Teachers for Tomorrow (TFT). The program was designed to prepare prospective teachers to teach in secondary urban and/or under-resourced schools. In their study, Gere et al. (2009) paid particular attention to the development and demonstration of cultural response pedagogy (CRP) in the instructors as they interacted with their students. The authors wanted to know:

How does the raced consciousness of students impact their views of themselves and others as they seek to develop culturally responsive teaching stances?

How does race – both of instructors and students – inflect responses to and understandings of the cultural competence dimension of CRP? (p. 818)

The authors focused on an enrollment cohort of 12 White students and three students of color specifically enrolled in the Schools and Society course. Student data were collected from audiotapes, weekly journals, written assignments and interviews with

four students that were chosen as focal students. Two of the four focal students were also chosen as subjects of a case study. All information was used to obtain insight about the students' thoughts and experiences when facing racial challenges in a school setting.

Upon data collection and analyses of case study notes, the authors concluded that race has a large influence on both students and instructors. The authors noted that predispositions towards cultural responsiveness exist in pre-service teachers, causing diverse effects on their experiences in the classroom. The authors, who are White, also acknowledged their own racial biases that were evident throughout the study in the way that they analyzed data and interpreted interviews.

Some researchers also feel that there is a lack of cultural understanding and consideration among White teachers concerning African American students. Carter (2009) believed that this empathy gap has potential to hinder the success of such students. The concern is that some White teachers do not understand the African American culture and, therefore, have limited capacity in identifying with the struggles, concerns, and needs of African American students, thus hindering a much-needed connection that is indicative of student success. Watkins, Lewis & Chou (2001) noted that culturally appropriate pedagogy, in which teachers relate to and show interest in the cultural tendencies of students, is essential to student success.

Schulte & Bennett (2009) believed that before we can expect cultural understanding within the teacher-student relationship, schools must first tackle the issue of the same within the teacher-teacher relationship. According to their study, race not only affects adult-student relationships, but adult relationships, as well. Barth (2006) explored the fact that adult relationships within schools are one of the most influential

factors on student success. Therefore, it may not be feasible to expect teachers to maintain strong cultural synergy with students when they do not hold the same amongst each other. The suggestion is to employ diversity training and professional development opportunities that have been found to be effective in creating cultural sensitivity among school relationships (Schulte & Bennett). Focusing on the adult's individual interpretation of his or her own identity and racial consciousness then allows for them to comprehend their tendencies of interpreting their students' academic engagement and interests (Schulte & Bennett).

### School Structure

School structural makeup has been considered a factor when reflecting on the achievement gap. School policies and school environment play a role in student success. According to Sperling & Vaughan (2009), certain school policies do not ensure that all students receive high quality education. These policies include issues with standardized testing, the manners in which funding is given to predominately African American schools, and lack of efforts, strategies and teaching techniques to close the achievement gap (Sperling & Vaughan).

Ladd (2010) examined the impact of various school policies on the test score gap between African American and White students and found a correlation between the two. The author concluded that schools should aspire to implement school policy that aims to reduce the achievement gap.

Issues in the level of diversity among student bodies have been considered as school environment barriers. The concern is whether a school's level of culture embracement and diversity affects the achievement of African American students. A



study conducted by Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin (2002) focused on how school racial composition affected scholastic achievement and particularly the African American achievement gap. The authors acknowledged that racial composition is the result of a combination of factors including government and family choices. The authors' research goal was to separate racial composition effects from school quality, student ability, and family background factors affecting scholastic achievement.

The authors collected Texas school data created by the University of Texas at Dallas Texas Schools Project. The authors tracked three cohorts of Texas public school elementary students while progressing through school (Hanushek et al., 2002). Each cohort contained over 200,000 students from over 3,000 public schools. Data for African American, Hispanic, and White students were used. Data concerning student achievement were derived from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The authors examined achievement levels of students from the three racial backgrounds as they progressed through school, and compared this information to the school demographic make-up. The authors reviewed data that gave light to individual, school, and district factors that may have impacted achievement growth.

The authors concluded that certain patterns support the view that there are strong racial composition effects for high achieving African Americans and weaker effects for low achieving African Americans. These effects fail to appear to be driven by achievement differences among the students. Therefore, there is a need for a diverse environment.

There has been a push for all students to be afforded equal access to quality education (Lyons & Chesley, 2004). Carter (2009) noted in his study that there is still a

need for consideration in the areas of equal education and equal opportunities for all students. His study involved two northeastern and two southern high schools considered to be high achieving schools. The author observed the schools for half of a school year. Though the schools were labeled as being multiracial, two were majority-White and two were majority-minority. Carter found that there were visible differences in the academic experiences of the highly minority populated schools in comparison to the majority-White schools. Additionally, African American students were severely underrepresented in rigorous courses at the majority-White schools.

The author surveyed 469 students and concluded that the self-esteem levels of the African American students housed at the majority-White school were the lowest of all of the African American students in all schools. The African American students at the majority-minority schools held notably higher levels of self-esteem. The author observed that African Americans in the majority-White schools were segregated in academics and extracurricular activities even though they were in schools that were desegregated. The author concluded that there is a need to eliminate the “empathy gap” between White students and African American students, noting that African American students are seen and treated as if they are inferior or not capable of achieving in rigorous education environments. The author also concluded that there is a need for policy reform in upcoming years that addresses these concerns.

#### Consideration of Cultural Attitudes, Values and Tendencies

Another notable issue is whether or not the African American culture values the educational process as a whole, as well as the presence of ethnic tendencies within the culture that affect the achievement of African American students. A great portion of the

existing debate concerning the gap has placed blame on the attitudes and cultural tendencies present in African American families and communities (Anderson, 2005).

According to Ogbu (2003), the cultural-ecological theory of minority education takes into consideration two factors that shape the level of school adjustment and academic performance of minority students. These are 1. the manner in which societal institutions and systems have treated minorities and 2. the manner in which minorities interpret and respond to their treatment – which is contingent on the distinctive history of minorities and their status in America. To explain further, minorities' education is affected by their treatment in schools, as well as how they respond to how they are treated in schools. Such reactions can provoke negative beliefs, as mentioned previously in this study. In some ways those negative beliefs about education are evident in relative issues now facing African Americans.

Eccleston et al. (2010) performed a study concerning the race paradox of achievement and self-views of African American students. The authors found that although African American students held higher self-views than White students, they achieved at lower rates than White students. The belief of the authors was that African American students are not highly affected by outside influences such as test scores and grades, and view themselves highly when it comes to academic achievement. They hypothesized that low achievement does not affect the African American students' overall view of themselves because they have learned to cope with poor performance and devalue the academic process. There are various factors that contribute to the reasoning behind the devaluing and the way it is communicated throughout the African American community.

According to research on culture, our values affect our behaviors. Students who do not value education are more likely to underachieve (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). Recent research has provided supportive information about the significant role that school engagement plays in the academic performance of African American students. Sirin & Sirin conducted research to study psychological and parental factors as they relate to the academic performance of middle-class African American adolescent students. The authors examined the school engagement, educational expectations, self-esteem, and parental involvement levels of students in an effort to explain their impact on academic performance. The authors concluded that there was a positive correlation between academic performance and educational expectations. Educational expectations were the largest predictors of academic performance with school engagement following.

One particular influence that has been found to significantly affect African American adolescent attitudes is rap music. Rap music is a genre of music that is on the rise in the American society, particularly in the African American community. This form of music is related to the Hip-Hop culture, which represents a way of life through music, clothing and urban experiences. The Hip-Hop culture is significantly associated with African American adolescents.

In his research, Au (2005) examined rap lyrics of songs that were about education. The purpose of the research was to gain enlightenment on the Hip-Hop rap culture's perspective and possible influence on education. The author performed a qualitative study consisting of textual research, discourse analyses of rap and education, and grounded theory. The author retrieved 37 sets of lyrics from rap songs that contained references to education. The lyrics were analyzed for full content, paying attention to

opinions mentioned about education and the rapper's own educational experiences. The author concluded that most lyrics referred to the rappers' educational experiences as being dysfunctional. Some lyrics explained rappers' view of the educational system and their choice to drop-out of school because of failure to learn. Other lyrics, like those of the infamous rapper Kanye West, rejected the notion that higher education is necessary in order to be successful.

Though the findings seemed to create a negative influence for adolescents, the author chose to perceive the findings as an indication that school systems were failing those associated with the Hip-Hop culture – including African American adolescents. The common themes among the lyrics were:

Schools do not provide content deemed worthwhile.

Schools do not teach the skills necessary for economic survival.

Schools are associated with enforcing/teaching Whiteness.

Schools do not pedagogically engage or interest students.

The school curriculum is full of racist lies and miseducation. (Au, 2005, p.216)

Finally, the author concluded that rap lyrics about education were a call to action, noting that the lyrics of rap music illustrate the conflict between this culture and schools' failure to educate youth.

An additional study on rap music conducted by Henfield, Washington & Owens (2010) also revealed that the entertainment piece may be affecting African American students' attitudes towards gifted education. The authors looked at the influence of Hip-Hop culture on the attitudes of African American students towards gifted education. The

authors indicated that some African American students view participation in gifted education classes as acting White (Henfield et al.). The authors implied that African American students' definition of acting White and acting Black are directly correlated to the influence of Hip-Hop culture on African American youth. A case study of an African American student enrolled in gifted education was provided in the article. The authors' conclusion was that Hip-Hop culture is a major influence of the African American achievement gap because it may limit the perceptions of African American youth's value of gifted education. In a different study, Ogbu (2003) concluded that some African American students devalue academic success because it is viewed as acting White. Finally, O'Connor (2006) conducted a study concerning the lack of African American students in advanced placement classes. The author noted that many of the teachers interviewed believed that the African American students felt pressure to not act White and that some African American students may not be made to feel welcome in rigorous courses.

Racial socialization is an additional factor to consider when assessing the achievement of African American students. Racial socialization is the developmental processes by which adolescents attain the behaviors, insights, principles, values and attitudes of their respective ethnic group, and how they identify themselves and other members of the group (Rotherman & Phinney, 1987). Racial socialization can be affected by many factors.

Brown, Linver, Evans & DeGennaro (2009), researched the impact of gender on the relationship between African American racial and ethnic socialization. Through the examining of prior research, the authors observed that gender differences occur in the

way that African American parents discipline, monitor, and support their children (Brown et al.). The authors believed that this impact on racial and ethnic socialization affects the academic outcomes within the African American community.

Data was collected from a racially and economically diverse high school. The sample population was 218 students who self-identified as African Americans with parents who were African American and natural-born United States citizens. The sample included 114 males and 104 females ranging in age from 14-19 years of age. The adolescents were asked questions regarding family structure, parental employment, and parental education levels. The adolescents were also asked to identify two of their main caregivers – one maternal and one paternal – and report the socialization strategies of each. The participants also completed racial and ethnic socialization surveys, and reported their grades in Science, Social Studies and English.

The authors concluded that there were significant interactions between gender and African American cultural pride, in addition to gender and celebrating African American heritage. Celebrating African American heritage was negatively related to academic grades, while academic grades were positively associated with African American cultural pride. When considering the school grades of adolescent males, the socialization constructs were found to be either neutral or positively related; the same was true for female students (Brown et al., 2009).

An additional consideration is the success rate of African American males. Over history, African American males have consistently faced greater academic challenges than African American females (Watkins et al., 2001). The low success rate of African American males contributes to the existence of the gap. The gender gap continues from

elementary education through collegiate education. There has been research regarding the reasons for this gap in reference to cultural tendencies within the culture. The relationship of that between mother and son has been viewed as a factor that impedes the success of African American males. Although there has been significant psychological research on the subject of African American gender differences, little has focused on the mothers' role in influencing this gap (Wood, Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, & Okeke-Adeyanju, 2010).

Wood et al. (2010) conducted research concerning the mother-son influence. The purpose of this research was to determine if mothers of African American boys and girls held stereotypical attitudes towards the academic capabilities of their sons and daughters; and if so, did these attitudes affect the academic achievement of these sons and daughters.

The research questions were as follows:

Do African American mothers “hold lower educational attainment expectations for their sons than for their daughters and would rate sons as less academically competent than daughters?”

Do “African American mothers, on average, endorse the academic gender stereotype that girls as a social group perform better than boys in academic domains?”

Are “mothers’ academic stereotypes related to education-related beliefs about their own sons and daughters in a stereotype-consistent manner?” (Wood et al., 2010, p. 522-523).

The study included 334 mothers of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, as well as input from these same students. Mothers specified their marital status, level of education



completed, annual household income, area of living status (urban vs. rural), their beliefs concerning their sons'/daughters' academic competence and their level of expectations for the achievement of their sons/daughters.

Through the use of a 7-point Likert scale, mothers gave responses concerning their educational expectations of their children, their beliefs about their own child's academic competence, and their academic gender stereotypes. The students who participated gave input about their own perception of education, their personal stereotypical beliefs, and their social identity in relation to their race. Finally, the academic achievement levels of all participating students were obtained through standardized test scores.

The authors concluded that 1. mothers of sons indeed held considerably lower expectations of their sons than mothers of daughters held for their daughters, 2. mothers held gender stereotypes, and 3. mothers' expectations were pre-cursors to their sons' and daughters' academic outcomes. Moreover, the authors found a correlation between these stereotypes and the mothers' academic beliefs about their sons and daughters. The authors recommended that further research be conducted to help determine and understand factors that may enable academic success for African American boys.

#### Socioeconomic Status

A student's socioeconomic status is perceived by some to be a predictor of a student's achievement level. Many assume that students who are of low-income status are low-achieving students and students who are of a higher income status are higher-achieving students. Additionally, some studies have concluded that African American students of low-income status achieve at a lower rate than those of a higher income

status. Research has been conducted that supports both a positive and negative correlation between income status and student achievement. Murphy (2011) concluded that it is the achievement gap that is a direct cause of the socioeconomic gap between African Americans and other ethnic groups.

Diamond (2006) also conducted research concerning the effects of socioeconomic status on African American achievement. He examined what appeared to be separate and unequal educational opportunities and achievement in an integrated suburb, while addressing the myth that African American students who live in affluent suburbs are not affected by achievement and opportunity gaps.

Diamond (2006) conducted a study at a high school located in an affluent suburb in the Midwestern part of the United States. The population of students was equal to 3000, with a make-up of 1,440 Whites, 1,200 Blacks, 210 Hispanics, and 60 Asians – no information was given about the ethnicity of the remaining 150 students. School district data was analyzed to determine a comparison of African American student achievement and White student achievement. The information gathered documented that even in an affluent suburb there remains the existence of an achievement gap between Whites and African Americans.

Ogbu (2003), reached similar findings concerning the achievement gap and affluent African Americans. African Americans of an upscale suburb employed the help of Ogbu to help determine why their children were failing – wanting an explanation of the existence of an academic achievement gap between their children and White children. The students were academically behind their White peers in the areas of standardized test scores, grade- point averages, and enrollment in advance-placement courses. Results

concluded that there were multiple factors fueling this particular gap, however, socioeconomic disadvantage was not one of them. The most dominant factor was the academic attitudes of the students and their parents (Ogbu).

#### Parental Expectations and Involvement

There has been research focusing on the fact that parent beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and level of involvement in relation to their child's education affect their children's learning and academic achievement. Many schools face the challenge of improving all levels of parental involvement. However, there is a gap in the parental involvement level of African American parents and White parents. Abrams and Gibbs (2002) found that African American parents tended to be uninvolved in urban school settings. A study conducted by Smith, Krohn, Chu and Best (2005) concluded the same.

There has been research concerning the reasoning behind this parental involvement gap. Some school personnel assume that African American parents simply have little to no desire to be involved in schools (Chatmon et al., 2006). A gap exists between parents and schools that prevents both entities from understanding the needs and expectations of both environments of school and home – two areas in which students must thrive (Gardner & Miranda, 2001).

Chatmon et al. (2006) gave detail account of their interaction with parents of African American students and how the parental role affects the achievement of African American students. The authors made reference to misconceptions of the attitudes of African American parents made by school administrators and teachers. The authors concluded that school personnel make the assumption that African American parents have little-to-no interest in the education of their children. Through their study, the

authors found the opposite to be true: African American parents have a vested interest in their children's education, but feel shunned and left out by school staff and officials.

Chatmon et al. (2006) challenged schools to become more open to the involvement of African American parents while seeking to understand their culture, and to create valuable academic support for the betterment of the education of their children. In the same token, African American parents were encouraged to remain involved in schools. When African American parents are totally involved and take ownership in their children's education there is a positive change in African American students' success.

#### The Current Issues – Reading, Attendance and Parental Involvement

Most recently, many schools serving underachieving African American students have placed much focus on the issues of parental expectations and involvement, school attendance, and reading achievement among African American students. Many schools are witnessing issues in these areas and continue to address issues concerning African American reading achievement, student attendance and parental involvement.

#### Reading.

The current outlook on African American reading test scores is bleak. Many schools are faced with the reality and challenge of the need to increase scores. Thernstrom & Thernstrom (2003) reported that among high school seniors, 77% of all White students read better than the average African American student, while merely 23% of African American students read better than the average White student. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2009) reported that there was a gap of about 0.6 standard deviations between African Americans and White students. According to a College Board (2011) report, African American students had reading SAT scores that

were on average 100 points lower than those of White students. There was also a 25-point score gap in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading test scores between White and Black students in 2011 (NCES, 2012). There is an evident skills gap between White students and African American students not only in reading, but in math and science, as well (Thernstrom & Thernstrom). Reading is a skill that is necessary in order to be successful in all subjects. Lack of proficient reading skills can hinder African American students in other areas.

#### Attendance.

Students who attend school regularly are more likely to be successful because they are present and able to receive all valid information necessary for academic achievement. When students fail to be present in school because of absences, suspensions and drop-outs this affects their overall achievement.

Ford, Obiakor, and Patton (1995) reported that every 49 seconds of a school day, an African American student drops out of school; every seven seconds a school suspension occurs. African American students have higher dropout and suspension rates than their peers (Green, Stephens-McIntosh, Cook-Morales & Robinson-Zañartu (2005). When compared to their White counterparts, African American students lag in overall attendance in school. Freeman and Fox (2005) reported statistics pertaining to African American attendance rates. The percentage of eighth grade African American students who had no absences was lower than that of White students. Also, when assessing the percentage of students in kindergarten through 12th grade who were suspended or expelled, the rate of African American students more than doubled that of White students. Additionally, when considering the amount of students aged 16 to 24 years-old

who were high school dropouts, African American students dropped out more than White students.

#### Parental Involvement.

There are various components of parental involvement including parental education values and beliefs, parent and child relations and interactions, and parental participation in school activities (Siren & Rogers-Siren, 2004). A vast majority of research supports the fact that parents attitudes and values shown towards their children's education affects their learning (Hui-Chen Huang & Mason, 2008).

A study performed by Hill and Craft (2003) found African American parents' home involvement level lower than that of White parents. African American parents have been said to be absent from major school events such as Back-to-School nights (Chatmon et al., 2006), and to lack knowledge concerning the student services that their children received at school (Kohl, Lengua & McMahon, 2000). Though African American parents have shown high expectations of their children (Jasso, 2007) there is yet a need to increase African American parents' levels of involvement (Trotman, 2001).

#### Resolution.

The question now to be answered is what will work to help close the gap? According to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (Chassman, 2001, p. 108). Dr. King saw the civil rights movement as a means of healing the psychological effects of historical wrongdoings concerning African Americans (Smith, 1995). With the enactment of the Civil Rights Act (1964), a road towards repercussion, resolve, and equality for all began. Over the years, many have taken note concerning the lack of achievement of African American students. The many

researchers studying the education of minorities have led the quest in attempting to discover the best route towards improving the achievement of African Americans. These researchers, as well as others have devoted a significant amount of time and effort concerning the reduction and elimination of the gap.

Murphy (2011), a long-time researcher of the achievement gap, theorized that it is not one strategy or solution, but a combination of strategies that will help to close the gap, paying close attention to the manner in which African American children learn. He suggested a big picture approach that includes the implementation of improvement-based programs that are preventative versus remedial, as well as coherent and cohesive. In addition, he considered high expectation and motivation among students and staff, rigorous curriculum, smaller class sizes, and parental involvement as tools for success in schools (Murphy). Murphy also believed in targeting the entire school population in order to reach those that are struggling. Berends, Lucas & Peñaloza (2008) agreed that there is a push by current educational reformers to increase the achievement of the entire population while reducing inequalities among groups. They believed that though the goal was an important one, it would prove to be a distinct challenge (Berands et al.).

There have been proven big picture methods of ensuring success for African American students. Such research has resulted in the suggestion of various strategies and policies that, when implemented, help to narrow the achievement gap. The National Education Association (2011) published its 4<sup>th</sup> edition guide to reducing the gap, citing such techniques as implementing strategies of cultural appreciation, high expectations, building caring relationships, and community and family involvement as big picture approaches that help to eliminate the achievement gap.

Knight-Diop, (2010) conducted research to generate ways in which schools can formulate their school structure in order to improve the educational experiences of African American students. The research consisted of 15 middle class Black students and the perceptions of their teachers and administrators. Through the research, the author determined that the institution created a positive school culture by maintaining high expectations and collaboration among school departments. The author concluded that, through the collaboration of teachers, administrators and counselors, schools will be able to invoke high school reform efforts to create an atmosphere of care, thus aiding in the improvement of African American students' success.

Ladd (2010) explored numerous school policies and strategies that could possibly aid in the decreasing of the achievement gap. These suggestions included the implementation of various school accountability policies, employment of highly qualified teachers, reduction of classroom sizes, and the consideration of parental input.

Various federal, state, and local district programs have been put into place to lessen the gap of African Americans, as well as assure success for all students. Local districts have implemented programs and receive consultations from achievement gap experts in order to develop gap-eliminating strategies. States have mandated annual testing in order to measure student growth and impose accountability to ensure student learning. Federal reform measures have taken place in order to lessen the disparity of performance between certain groups.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (2002) was a federally mandated education reform act reauthorizing and expanding the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965. NCLB was a governmental attempt to bring unity in achievement among



students across the states (Reed, 2009). Additionally, NCLB held and continues to hold districts, school buildings, and teachers accountable for student achievement on state-administered tests (Krieg, 2011). There has been research that has shown that NCLB has been successful in improving achievement among students (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2009). Since its implementation, test scores for some subgroups have improved. A study conducted by Dee and Jacob (2011) showed gains in Math test scores among average fourth graders, in addition to those students who were previously scoring in the lower percentiles. Improvement in eighth grade math test scores was noted, as well. However, the implementation of NCLB has also been criticized.

Reed (2009) examined the effects of the federally mandated program upon equal student achievement across the states. Reed noted that states have been given the capacity to employ differentiating benchmarks to determine student proficiency in math and reading – creating an expectation gap. This gap may lead to different performance standards across certain demographic groups. The author suggested that schools and federal interventions implement programs that use uniform high performance standards when attempting to close the achievement gap.

Additionally, Krieg (2011) noted NCLB's tendency to trigger severe sanctions on schools and districts whose subgroups – bilingual, low-income, special education, or ethnic groups – do not make adequate yearly progress on state-given exams. Such mandates have affected the performance of certain racial groups over time (Krieg).

Local, state, and federal reform efforts have left some communities in a desperate attempt to improve student achievement. Though these efforts were implemented to bring about positive changes in the success rates of students, many are not happy with the

minimal and sometimes void results. This has led to some schools taking action by adopting and implementing specific programs in order to reverse the effects of failure among underachieving groups. Many schools have begun to incorporate a belief system that all students can achieve regardless of race, income status, and other factors that are precursors to the failure of students, including those discussed in the following section.

#### Green Dot Public Schools.

The Green Dot Public School (2010) organization was founded by Steve Barr in 1999 because of concern for the failure rate of students in local Los Angeles high schools. Upon noticing that most of the students who were failing were of low income status, Barr decided to introduce an alternative model to education and opened a school that serviced low income, high risk students. The desire was to provide a quality education for these students in order to ensure their success. There are currently 17 Green Dot high schools and one middle school that are serving over 7,000 students (Cevallos, 2009).

Green Dot Public Schools follow a six tenet model that includes the following:

Small, safe personalized schools

High expectations for all students

Local control with extensive professional development and accountability

Parent participation

Get every dollar into the classroom and

Keep schools open later for community use (Green Dot Public Schools, 2010)

Other practices include a requirement of students to wear uniforms, standards-based assessment and curriculum, a maximum population of 525 students per school, a maximum of 22 students per classroom, and mandate that parents volunteer at least 35 hours per school year (Cevallos, 2009).

Green Dot Public Schools (2010) have been noted for making significant gains in test scores, as well as providing an opportunity for all students to succeed. A 2009-2010 report concerning one of the Green Dot high schools showed notable gains in English, Math and Social Science test scores (Green Dot Public Schools). Despite having a 92.7% low income population, the school continues to enjoy consistent student success in the areas of academic achievement and student graduation and college attendance rates.

#### KIPP.

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) (2011) was a public school program for fifth grade students founded in 1994 by Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin – both being educators. The program gained attention for its academic success, despite its vast number of minority and poor students enrolled. More than 95% of enrollees are African American or Latino and over 80% of the student population qualifies for Free and Reduced Lunch. KIPP is known for enrolling a high proportion of limited English speaking students, as well (Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2010).

The KIPP Foundation was formed in 2000 with the help of donors. The mission of the foundation was to create interactive public schools that provide students with the knowledge, skills, and character traits essential to their success from kindergarten through college, and into real world experiences. KIPP is now a national network of 109

KIPP public schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia, enrolling more than 32,000 students (Knowledge Is Power Program, 2011).

The KIPP schools operate under five pillars of principle which include:

High expectations (no excuses)

Choice and commitment (students have chosen to be a part of the program and to be successful)

More time (longer school days starting at 7am and ending at 5pm)

Power to lead (great leaders are valued) and

Focus on results (focusing on student performance and test cores)

(Macey, Decker, & Eckes, 2009)

Despite facing the factors that are believed by some to ensure failure among students, KIPP schools continue to outperform other schools in local districts. KIPP students experience significant gains in test scores, often making larger gains than other schools (Macey et al., 2009). Certain practices have helped to ensure this success.

KIPP teachers are high quality, highly qualified teachers who are encouraged to go above and beyond in order to ensure student success. Excellence is of utmost importance when selecting teachers. This is because the educators are required to teach rigorous curriculum and must work collectively together in order to maintain the goal of increasing the levels of student achievement (Macey et al., 2009).

Students are expected to adhere to all discipline policies. Strict behavior expectations have been put into place, as well as an expectation for a strong work ethic (Angrist et al., 2010). Students also wear uniforms.

Parents are expected to sign an agreement to support his or her child prior to their child entering KIPP. Parents are granted online access to their child's grades and weekly newsletters are sent home to help ensure home-school communication. Strong efforts are made to get parents involved in their children's learning experience (Macey et al., 2009).

Urban Prep Academy.

Urban Prep Academy was started by Tim King and various African American education, business, and civic leaders. The network consists of three, all-African American male, public charter schools. The mission of the schools is to provide high-quality college preparatory education for all of its students, and to ensure collegiate success (Urban Prep Academies, 2009).

Most students who enter the academy read below grade level. The Class of 2010 entered into Urban Prep with 4% of its students reading at grade level; Class of 2011 with 11%; Class of 2012 with 20%. Eighty-two percent of the student population is low-income. Though these numbers are grim, students who enter Urban Prep make significant academic gains in test scores. The school is averaging scores above the CPS public school system in the ACT test and has a higher attendance rate than CPS schools, as well (Urban Prep Academies, 2009).

Urban Prep Academies (2009) believe in maintaining a positive school culture that exudes and promotes high achievement, healthy self-esteem and accountability. The schools operate under 8 core values: accountability, exceptionality, faith, integrity, relentlessness, resilience, selflessness, and solidarity. Furthermore, the students are beseeched to abide by the school creed which focuses on the reiteration of accountability,

hard work, and dedication. Additionally, students are required to wear uniforms that promote professionalism and a positive outlook (Urban Prep Academies).

Quality instruction is of utmost importance. Students receive nearly 400 minutes of instructional time per day – approximately 180 more minutes than the customary time for CPS public school students. Classroom lessons incorporate the eight core values of the school. The administrators, teachers, and staff adhere to the values of the school, as well. Additionally, parents are welcome to be a part of the learning process.

The school gained national recognition and has been featured on CNN, The Tavis Smiley Show, Radio France International, and WLS-TV (ABC-7). They have also been the subject of write-ups in The Chicago Tribune, Chicago Magazine, Chicago Defender, Chicago Sun-Times, Huffington Post and more. Also, the values, attitudes, and practices being employed at the Urban Prep schools are visibly paying off. For the second year in a row, 100% of the graduating class was accepted into a 4-year college or university, thus defying the negative stereotypes plaguing African American males and their ability to obtain educational success (Urban Prep Academies, 2009).

### Conclusion

Schools across the country are lessening the gap. This is occurring through a big picture outlook that employs statistically proven strategies. The abovementioned schools share common factors for success. All of the schools hold high expectations for students, value school-family relationships, provide rigorous coursework, and employ highly qualified teachers.

According to the National Center for Educational Achievement (2011) (NCEA), there are at least 20 non-negotiable characteristics of high performing schools. These

characteristics were published by NCEA in April 2011. Of the characteristics listed, these three schools have already put many of them into play, including implementing career readiness standards into their curriculum, selecting curriculum that is adhered to by all teachers, recruiting talented teachers, and creating programs based off of research. Schools that choose alternative ways to educating low-achieving students are seeing significant results in student achievement.

In this study, I will look at a Midwestern, majority African American population, largely low-income elementary school faced with the challenges of many of the factors that contribute to the achievement gap. This case study will include an overview of the school, as well as an in-depth study of the various program implementations that were incorporated over a period of time to help ensure the success of all students.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

African Americans have been subject to various historical events affecting the status of their education in America, including slavery during the 1619-1865 period, *Plessey v. Ferguson*, 1896, and *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954. American schools continue to experience an achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students. This issue has been investigated by educators and other concerned researchers. As a result of this research, programs have been developed and implemented by schools in attempt to close the lingering achievement gap.

A predominately African American, Midwestern suburban elementary school consistently experienced low reading test scores, as well as issues concerning attendance and parental involvement. Consequently, the school was placed on the state Academic Watch list due to its failure to sustain adequate yearly progress on state ISAT testing for four consecutive years.

The school underwent a federal-mandated reorientation period of restructuring, making significant changes to the school staff, policies, programs, and procedures in an effort to improve student achievement. These changes created a new school version of the old school. Specifically, for this study, data from the areas of parental involvement,



attendance, and reading were examined for both the old school (in its last year of existence) and the new school (in its fourth year of existence). This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting parental involvement impacted the number of parents who attended back-to-school nights, attended parent-teacher conferences, and had personal contacts with teachers?
2. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting attendance impacted the African American student attendance rate?
3. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting reading achievement impacted the reading achievement of the African American students?

### Research Design

The study was a case study conducted for the purpose of gathering quantitative data concerning parental involvement, attendance, and reading scores. A case study is a research approach involving an empirical study that uses numerous forms of evidence and focuses on a particular phenomenon as it exists in its current context (Robson, 2002). Robson went on to say that case studies could include a study of a school and its implementations of policies, as well. Additionally, for the purpose of this research, a case study was used to gain in-depth data concerning the new school program implemented for the school selected for this study. Furthermore, the results of this research increased the understanding of the effects of program implementations enforced in failing, predominately African American, schools.

For the purpose of answering the first research question, How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting parental involvement impacted the number of parents who attended back-to-school nights, attended parent-teacher conferences, and had personal contacts with teachers?, quantitative and qualitative methodology were utilized. Sources of data consisted of archival data that were available through school improvement plans and school report cards. Archival information pertaining to parental involvement and attendance at various school events was also used.

For the purpose of answering the second research question, How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting attendance impacted the African American student attendance rate?, quantitative and qualitative methodology were also used. These data were archival and were derived from student attendance records stored in school district electronic files. The number of days of attendance for each student was used.

For the purpose of answering the third research question, How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting reading achievement impacted the reading achievement of the African American students?, quantitative and qualitative methodology were used to analyze archival data. The data were individual student ISAT reading test scores reported annually by the state and available through school district records.

### Population

This case study involved a suburban Midwestern, kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school. The student population at the time of the study consisted of a total of 441 students. Of this total, 62% were African American, 29% were Caucasian,

and 4% were Hispanic, with Multi-racial and Asian/Pacific Islander completing the remainder of the population. The population of students receiving free or reduced lunch was 49%. The school was located in a neighborhood predominately consisting of African Americans, with mid to low-income levels, as determined from the school's state report card (Illinois State Board of Education, 2010).

The school underwent restructuring as a result of consistently low performance as defined by state regulations and definitions. The restructuring led to the creation of a new program for the failing school. The new program involved the implementation of a newly assigned principal, newly assigned staff, and the incorporation of a new school curriculum and educational philosophy – thus creating a new district school. With the newly formed school came a change in parent and student populations. As a result, the school transformed out of its old state into a newly structured state. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the school in its old state was referred to as the old school and the school in its newly restructured state was referred to as the new school.

The three areas of focus for this study were parental involvement, attendance, and student reading. These areas were the subject of comparison between the old school and the new school in order to examine how the newly implemented programs affected these particular areas. This study compared school and student data from the last year of the school in its old state before restructuring, to school and student data of the school in its new state, four years after restructuring. Question one required the comparison of data between the parental populations of the old and new schools, while questions two and three required the comparison of data focusing on the student populations of the old and new schools.

For the purpose of answering research question one: How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting parental involvement impacted the number of parents who attended back-to-school nights, attended parent-teacher conferences, and had personal contacts with teachers?, information pertaining to the entire school parent populations of the both the old and new schools was used. Parental involvement data was not individualized by student, but was observed as a school category – comparing the state of parental involvement of the old school to the state of parental involvement of the new school after a period of four years. Therefore, question one compared overall school data only, for the purpose of creating an entire outlook of parental involvement for both the old school and new school parent populations.

According to Murphy (2011), targeting the larger school population, in turn, helps those students who are identified as struggling students. Though research has been conducted to study how students' individual parents' level of parental involvement affect their learning specifically, any and all parental involvement affects the entire school as individual parents not only interact with their children, but interact with other students, as well. Since this study is a comparison of the status of a school in its former state to that of its latter state, the condition of parental involvement in this manner was appropriate to gauge considering the fact that school-wide efforts to improve parental involvement were implemented.

Students of the old school were given the option to remain in the newly restructured school or to choose to enter other schools in the district. Not all students of the old school opted to remain in the restructured new school, thus making the choice to attend other district schools as an alternative. Consequently, for the answering of research

questions two and three, How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting attendance impacted the African American student attendance rate? and How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting reading achievement impacted the reading achievement of the African American students?, information pertaining specifically to the African American students who originally attended the old school and remained a student of the district after a period of four years – whether in the new school or a different district school – were the main focus. Considering the fact that some students opted into the new school and some opted out, two groups of students naturally emerged – those who opted in the new program at the new school, and those who opted out of the new program by attending other schools within the district. Both were the focus of research questions two and three.

The first group consisted of the students who attended the old school and opted to attend the new school while remaining in the district over a four-year span;  $n=14$ . The second group consisted of the students who attended the old school and opted to attend a different school in the district, and remained in the district over a four-year span;  $n=46$ . Thus, the total population for questions two and three consisted of 60 identified African American students. Figure 1 explains this process.



*Figure 1.* Illustration of the group classification of the identified African American student population.

The old school year being examined for this study was the year in which the identified students were enrolled in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, while the new school year being examined for this study was the year in which the identified students were enrolled in 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

#### Data Collection

The data collection process began with first acquiring approval through the Olivet Nazarene University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This next step in data collection involved gaining approval from the school district in which the Midwestern school resided. A formal letter of request was submitted to the superintendent of said school district, along with the proper paperwork requested by the school district which included verification of the researcher's status in a doctoral program. No further consent was needed seeing that this study did not involve the use of human subjects. Approval was granted by both the Olivet Nazarene University Institutional Review Board and the superintendent of the said school district.

Data were collected from district archival data and public database in the cases in which district archival data was not available. The district was asked to provide

information pertaining to the areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading. Data was provided through the district research and data collection office. The office provided documentation and records including school improvement plans, student test scores, attendance rates, and school historical documents. Additional information concerning school demographics and background information was obtained by accessing the school report cards for both the old school and the new school from public database.

Specific data relevant to parental involvement consisted of information obtained primarily from historical documents and school improvement plans. Because the old school was in an Academic Watch status, the state mandated that parental involvement data be a critical area addressed in the school improvement plan. Therefore, numbers were reported pertaining to parental attendance at back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences. Information relevant to the number of parents making at least one teacher contact was gathered through public database. All data provided gave this researcher insight into the status of parental involvement of both the old school and the new school.

Specific data related to attendance were derived from archival records. The school district office of curriculum and instruction was asked to provide the total number of days present for the targeted student population for both their 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and 7<sup>th</sup> grade years. The department provided the information for each targeted student. The information for was anonymous and coded by number. Reading test scores were collected from district archival data, as well. The school district office of curriculum and instruction provided the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and 7<sup>th</sup> grade ISAT scores for the targeted student population. As with attendance data, all data was anonymous and coded by number.

## Analytical Methods

In order to answer the proposed research questions, data was analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 19. All collected data for all three research questions were entered and computed according to SPSS suggestion, with suitable statistical tests being run accordingly in order to meet the requirements of answering the research questions.

For the purpose of answering the first research question:

1. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting parental involvement impacted the number of parents who attended back-to-school nights, attended parent-teacher conferences, and had personal contacts with teachers?

It was most appropriate to use a chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) statistical measuring tool. A chi-square is an interesting nonparametric test that allows you to determine if what you observe in a distribution of frequencies would be what you would expect to occur by chance. The chi-square test assesses the differences between an observed occurrence and what is perceived to be a probable occurrence (Salkind, 2011). A chi-square analysis is suitable to use with data this is nominal or categorical in nature. Considering that the data relating to parental involvement consisted of the number of participating parents in each of three categories, the chi square statistical measure was selected.

Information concerning parental involvement in the targeted three categories of question one was obtained and organized in the SPSS system. For each parent accounted for in the old school and each parent accounted for in the new school it was observed



whether each attended back-to-school night, parent-teacher conferences, and made at least one contact with his or her child's teacher. For each of the three categories, each parent was given a yes or no score of 1 or 0, respectively; yes meaning that the parent participated in the activity and no meaning the parent did not participate in the activity. A participation score was then computed for each parent for each category. A chi-square nonparametric analysis was performed, showing if there was indeed any significant difference in parental involvement in each activity among each school.

Additionally, a participation score for each school was calculated and an independence samples *t*-test conducted in order to determine if there was a significant difference between overall parental participation in both schools. As stated previously, each parent was given a score of 0 or 1 for each event he or she attended; a score of 3 was the highest score obtainable if a parent attended all three events. After all scores were calculated for each category, an overall school participation score was computed and used to compare the overall participation of parents at both schools.

For the purpose of answering the second and third research questions:

2. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting attendance impacted the African American student attendance rate?
3. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting reading achievement impacted the reading achievement of the African American students?

A two-way (2X2) mixed model ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) statistical test was used. The two-way mixed analysis is suitable when a researcher is using one repeated measures independent variable, as well as a between-group independent variable (Field, 2009).

For this study, students' attendance rates and reading test scores are being compared between groups, as well as over time. Therefore, there was a need for a statistical test that would assess the differences between schools, as well as the interaction between these variables. This ANOVA statistical test accounts for differences between subjects (between groups), as well as within subjects (from year to year). Considering that this study called for the comparison of two groups over two different time periods, the 2X2 mixed model ANOVA was the likely choice of statistical testing to use to answer both questions two and three.

Specifically for research question two, the attendance rates for African American students who attended the old school and were still in district attendance after a four-year time span were used. Students' number of days present was used as the targeted statistical data. The student's number of days present in the old school during 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was compared to their number of days present while attending the new school or another district school four years later, during 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The purpose of this comparison was to gauge whether school environment impacted a student's attendance. Additionally, the attendance rates of the 7<sup>th</sup> graders attending the new school were compared to the attendance rates of the 7<sup>th</sup> graders attending other district schools. The purpose of this comparison was to gauge whether there was a significant difference in attendance days present for students who opted into the new school and students who opted out of the new school.

Specifically for research question three, The ISAT reading scores for African American students who attended the old school and were still in attendance in the district after the four-year time lapse were used. Students' ISAT reading scores while in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

at the old school were compared to their 7<sup>th</sup> grade ISAT reading scores while attending the new school or a different district school. The purpose of this comparison was to gage whether school environment impacted a student's reading score. Furthermore, the ISAT reading scores of the African American students in the new school were compared to the ISAT reading scores of the African American students attending the other district schools. The purpose of this comparison was to gage whether there was a significant difference in reading scores for students who opted into the new school and students who opted out of the new school. Once all of the specific populations were identified, data were collected.

Additionally, the means of the attendance days present of the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students in the old school was calculated and compared to the attendance days present of the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students in the new school using an independent samples *t*-test to determine if there was significant difference in the means. Similarly, the mean of the reading scores of the two groups were also calculated in the same manner. Any differences were noted.

### Limitations

While conducting the study certain limitations arose in the areas of population and data collection. Those limitations are noted in the following section:

#### Population

A notable limitation of the study was the limited population size of identified students. In a day and age when schools are impacted by large mobility rates, the likelihood of students remaining in the same school district for a significantly consistent time period is low in some districts. Additionally, the time period of this study of the year

2006 to the year 2010 was greatly impacted by the decline of the housing market with many homes going into foreclosure. School mobility rates are based on the number of times students enroll in or leave a school during the year (Illinois State Board of Education, 2002). When families lose their homes and are forced to relocate, this action affects the mobility rate of local school districts (Been, Ellen, Schwartz, Stiefel & Weinstein, 2011).

An additional limitation of the study is that the groups of identified parents used for the study did not entirely consist of the same parents from the old school to the new school. Considering the fact that some students remained in the new school, while others left, as well as the fact that new parents entered into the new school, a new parental population accumulated in the new school. Therefore, even though this study is comparing the state of parental involvement of the old school to that of the new school, it is important to acknowledge that the parental population did change as a result of the reconstruction initiatives. However, the information was still useful for the study because the study sought to create a picture of the state of parental involvement of both the old school and new school considering the parental population of each during the targeted years in which the two schools were assessed for this study.

Another limitation is related to numbers reporting. In order to determine the number of parents who made at least one contact with his or her child's teacher, the state asks the schools to report – for every child enrolled – the number of students whose parents have made at least one contact with the child's teacher. This number qualifies as the state's definition of parental involvement, as reported annually by the school. It is customary for the state to report this number in percentages. Because this study called for

numerical categorical numbers, it was necessary to convert the percentages to actual numbers. To do this, the percentage reported was multiplied by the total number of students enrolled in the school. In doing this, it is possible to affect number accuracy as percentages do not always equal whole numbers. However, every effort was made to obtain the most accurate numbers possible.

An additional issue with numbers reporting is how schools collect numbers for parental attendance at certain events. When considering the number of parents that attended back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences, the school derives these numbers based off of parent attendance at each event as observed for each child. Parental attendance is assessed when a parent makes contact and/or visitation for each one of their children. Therefore, it should be noted that parents can account for more than one child in the school, thus one parent may have been counted as attending back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences more than once because he or she may have had multiple children in attendance at the school. However, each child is relevant in indicating whether his or her parent participated in the targeted school event. Additionally, this procedure is simply the result of how the schools calculate these parental involvement numbers.

#### Data Collection

A final limitation of the study affected the collection of parental involvement data for the old school. It was the intent of the researcher to compare data for all three research questions across time for the same years of 2006 and 2010. However, parental involvement data for the old school for the targeted year of 2006 was not available. The most recently available parental involvement data for the old school was from the year

2003. Therefore, this year was used to gather attendance numbers for back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences. The lack of written data gives testament to the state of the old school and some of the reasons why it was deemed in need of a mandated restructuring.

Most of the noted limitations were the result of the nature of the case study. Naturally, over time, school districts will lose students because of mobility. Additionally, when a school undergoes federally mandated restructuring, major changes take place giving parents the option to allow their children to remain in the newly restructured building, choose to attend a different district school or completely un-enroll his or her child from the school district altogether. Also, the manner in which numbers for parental involvement are reported has potential to affect outcomes, making it difficult to paint an accurate picture of the status of parental involvement in schools. Though every effort may be made to produce a study that is flawless, with increased validity, and reliability, all studies are subject to some limitations and occurrences that are beyond their control.

### Summary

The African American achievement gap is present and prevalent in countless schools. Many of these schools face the burden of understanding the reasons for this gap and how to eliminate the disparity between the achievement of African American students and their counterparts. This study was an attempt to conduct research pertaining to three specific areas including parental involvement, attendance, and reading achievement, in relation to a school faced with a persistent issue concerning African American achievement. It was desired that the results obtained from this study would aid

in the understanding of the existence of the African American achievement gap and how schools can incorporate effective programs to eliminate the gap.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Introduction

African American students experience a lag in educational achievement, including college attendance, college graduation, school grade point average, and high school dropout rates (Freeman & Fox, 2005; “Achievement Gap”, 2011). Of particular attention has been the gap between the test scores of African American students and Caucasian students. A review of the literature concerning African American student achievement reveals that, not only is there a gap of this nature, but the gap is persistent and of major concern among school districts. The overall academic success of African American students has been reviewed and studied in an attempt to create a solution that will help to eliminate the achievement gap.

Detailed information has been presented earlier pertaining to the historical, psychological, and cultural factors that fuel the disparity in African American student achievement. This background information, along with an extensive literature review, was presented in an effort to provide further understanding of this issue and its importance, as well as to validate the need to conduct additional research concerning the underachievement of African American students. The current investigation was a case study of the identified school. A case study consists of the gathering of comprehensive data related to the focus of the study, including explicit information relevant to the focus



school in the areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading, as well as the results of the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

This case study provided insight into specific elements of a school experiencing low achievement among its African American student base. The school was a predominantly African American, Midwest elementary school. This school was restructured as a result of failure to make academic yearly progress (AYP) for four consecutive years, due to low test scores in math and reading. The restructuring included the implementation of new programs and policies targeting areas of concern. The three areas of particular concern were parental involvement, attendance and reading scores. This study investigated the historical antecedents that led to restructuring. The purpose of the study was to provide schools with information that would aid in the development of programs and plans that may lessen and/or eliminate the African American student achievement gap for this school.

The main focus for this study was these newly implemented programs, plans, and policies and their impact on student learning. The reorientation of the school afforded current students the option to enroll in the new school or attend other district schools. This study focused on a population consisting of the African American students who attended the old school in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and remained in the school district four years later. For the purpose of this study, this population was divided into two groups, those students who opted into the new school and those students who opted out of the new school. The study focused on a comparison between the two groups of students in the areas of reading and attendance, as well as a comparison of the status of parental involvement in both the

school in its old condition prior to restructuring, and the status of parental involvement in the school in its new condition, after restructuring.

Under the new structure of the school, several changes occurred. Perhaps the most important was that the school became a district choice school, allowing for any district family to choose to have their children attend the school. A maximum of 25 students were allowed in each classroom, thus placing a cap on enrollment. , All interested families took part in a lottery selection process to determine admission into the newly restructured school. Student placement in each grade level was proportionately divided among four communities of which the district was comprised. Students from the local neighborhood school were given 40% of the seats in each grade level. The largest community in the district was given 35% of the seats, and the last two communities received 12% of the remaining seats each.

Additional changes included replacement of administration, teachers and staff. Staff consisted mostly of current district employees housed at other district schools. All staff was aware of the school's history of failing to make AYP, as well as the need for school improvement in all areas of importance including parental involvement, attendance and reading. These changes were targeted in the school's action plan and led to the school identifying other areas of necessary change.

Changes pertaining to curriculum, as well as approaches to discipline and school climate, were also implemented. All staff members were extensively trained in the use of the newly adopted curriculum and educational philosophy components. Administration purposefully sought to create an atmosphere of clear understanding of expectations at all levels, including the clarity of expectancies concerning staff and student behavior and

actions. There was a student uniform requirement enacted, which included some leniency in apparel choice and color, thus providing structure for students, but also giving students some choice. New systems and policies were implemented, in order to enhance and improve the previously failing state of the school.

This study focused on the implemented changes affecting the areas of parental involvement, attendance and reading. This dissertation sought to answer three research questions:

1. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting parental involvement impacted the number of parents who attended back-to-school nights, attended parent-teacher conferences, and had personal contacts with teachers?
2. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting attendance impacted the African American student attendance rate?
3. How have the new programs, policies, and procedures targeting reading achievement impacted the reading achievement of the African American students?

## Findings

### Parental Involvement

Previous research has shown that parental involvement is a key factor in helping a child achieve academic success (Hui-Chen Huang & Mason, 2008). There are numerous activities that can be considered parental involvement; any and all interactions between parents and their children when engaging in school-related activities can be considered parental involvement (Siren & Rogers-Siren, 2004). Not only can parents

engage in learning activities with their children at home, but at school, as well. Schools interact with parents by way of parent-teacher contact, back-to-school and curriculum nights, parent-teacher organizations, and the like. All of these events are occasions in which parents can take part in educational activities that concern their children. The school that was the focus of this study underwent significant changes, as the result of a federally-mandated restructuring order. Prior to restructuring, the school experienced some challenges in many areas, including that of parental involvement.

According to the state report card for the old school, in its last year of existence, the school made parental contact with 100 % of all parents. Parental contact was defined to mean any parental contact through parent-teacher conferences, telephone calls, parental visits and written communication (Illinois State Board of Education, 2006). The school also offered opportunities for parental involvement. A parent-teacher organization (PTO) existed; however, the number of parents actively involved in this group was unknown.

Additional information concerning parental involvement was available from the school's most recent accurate and available school improvement plan of 2003. According to the school improvement plan, in the year 2003, 39% of students were represented at the school's back-to-school night and 91% of the student body's parents attended parent-teacher conferences. The school improvement plan also indicated that opportunities for parents to be involved with the school through family reading nights, family movie nights, and parent workshops would be implemented over the course of the year. However, no data were available that provided numbers of attendance for these events.

The most recent parent survey given to parents of the old school in the 2002-2003 school year indicated that the majority of parents surveyed felt that the school was a welcoming environment for parents (85.5%). A high percentage of the parents surveyed also indicated that they felt that the school provided opportunities for parental involvement (84%). Additionally, the comment section of the survey offered further insight into the thoughts and concerns of the parents surveyed. Though some parents commended the school for doing a great job, some parents identified concerns with feeling accepted, welcomed and taken seriously by teachers and staff, as well as the school environment not feeling safe and welcoming overall (see Appendix A for a sample of the survey given).

The school in its newly restructured state also made efforts to connect with parents. A specific action plan targeting parent involvement was developed and administered. The plan involved introducing a parent-student-staff compact, a contract in which each identified stakeholder agreed to be committed to the education process. Specific agreements for parents, students and staff were outlined in the compact, with all three signing in agreement to follow the specific directives. Parent involvement was expected and mandatory, and was tracked by teachers through a tracking system. Any parent and student not meeting the expectations described in the compact were subject to a review of the child's continuance in the school (see Appendix B for a sample of the parent-student-staff compact).

Another effort implemented by the new school to increase parental involvement was the creation of monthly newsletters for parents. The newsletters were tools used to foster a line of communication with parents. The newsletters highlighted student

progress, weekly activities, upcoming events, and strategies that parents could use at home to help their child be successful in school.

The new school's reorientation plan also included a movement to bring parents into the building as partners in education and school climate. The school incorporated several school activities that would draw parents in as volunteers and participants, including curriculum nights, parent-teacher conferences, family skating parties, Earth Day activities and a parent university that offered workshops for parents in the areas of reading and math. These events were implemented and well-attended by parents. In the new school's 4<sup>th</sup> year of existence, district archival data concerning the new school indicated that 90% of students had parent representation at curriculum night, 85% were represented at back-to-school night, and 97% at parent-teacher conferences. As an incentive, students whose parents attended school events were given non-uniform day passes.

Finally, a PTO was established that not only included many parents, but also many opportunities for parents to be involved. Parents were a part of the PTO as PTO officers, school volunteers and room parents for the classrooms. The PTO also sponsored parental involvement opportunities including Parent Nights Out, Christmas tree decoration parties, school store sales days, used uniform sales, book fairs, and extra-curricular activities featuring parents as instructors and coaches. On record were forty-five parents who regularly volunteered throughout the school year. Of this number, 25 were African American, comprising the majority of the PTO membership.

In order to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the parental involvement of the old school and the parental involvement of the new school in

back-to-school night and parent-teacher conference attendance, as well as the number of parents having made at least one contact with teachers for the school year, a chi-square test was used to compare the distribution of parental participation among the three parental involvement events. Additionally, a participation score was computed for each school and an independent *t*-test conducted in order to determine if there was a significant difference in overall parental participation among the two schools.

The chi-square analysis revealed that there was a significant difference between schools for parental involvement in the back-to-school night attendance,  $\chi^2(981) = 267.4$ ,  $p < .05$ . The chi-square analysis also revealed that there was a significant difference among schools in the number of parents that attended parent-teacher conferences,  $\chi^2(981) = 16.8$ ,  $p < .05$ . Finally, the chi-square analysis concerning parents that made at least one contact with their child's teacher during the school year showed that there was no significant difference between the two schools,  $\chi^2(981) = 2.45$ ,  $p > .05$ . Table 1 illustrates the chi-square findings.

Table 1

*Parent Participation in Parental Involvement Events by School*

Variable	Old School		New School		$X^2$
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Back-to-School <sup>a</sup>					267.4*
Yes	211	39.0	397	90.0	
No	329	61.0	44	10.0	
Parent-Teacher <sup>a</sup>					16.8*
Yes	489	91.0	428	97.0	
No	51	9.0	13	3.0	
Teacher Contact <sup>a</sup>					2.4
Yes	540	100.0	439	99.5	
No	0	0.0	2	0.5	

<sup>a</sup>  $df = 1$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

In order to further examine parental involvement differences among the schools as a whole, a participation score was derived for each school. Each parent was given a participation score based off of their attendance in each of the three outlined events. A score of 1 was given as an indication that the parent participated in the parental involvement activity; a score of 0 was given for nonparticipation, equaling a possible



score of 3. After all individual parent participation scores were entered into the *SPSS* system, an independent samples *t*-test was performed. The independent samples *t*-test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the overall participation scores of parents at the old school and the new school,  $t(976) = -22.004, p < .05$ . For detailed information related to the participation scores of each school, see Table 2.

Table 2

*Parent Participation Scores by School*

Variable	Old School		New School	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Participation				
Score	2.3	.46	2.8	.35

Attendance

The school in its old state experienced some challenges with school attendance. In its last year of existence the school had an attendance rate of 93.8%, according to the school's state report card (Illinois State Board of Education, 2007). The state target attendance rate for schools for that academic year was 89% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a). Though the school did better than the targeted state rate, its attendance rate fell slightly short of the state's reported attendance rate of 94% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2006). Therefore, the school did better than what was expected by the state, but did worse than the actual state average.

Many schools experience challenges with student mobility. Students transfer in and out of schools for numerous reasons. Some students transfer both in and out of the same schools within the same year. Each transfer affects the school's mobility rate. Student mobility has been named as a factor that contributes to the African American achievement gap (Anderson, 2008). The mobility rate of the targeted school for this study, in its last year of existence was 37.9% - more than twice the rate of the state's mobility rate of 16% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2006). Additionally, two students were identified as being chronically truant on the school report card (Illinois State Board of Education).

The administrators of the new school made efforts to increase the school attendance rate. These efforts included making parents aware of the importance of attendance by having conversations with parents during school events, placing current attendance updates in school newsletters, and giving parents calendars making them aware of all required attendance dates and non-school days. Suggestions and helpful tips were also given to help parents improve their child's attendance.

The attendance rate for the new school in its 4<sup>th</sup> year of existence was 96%, with no students being reported as chronically truant (Illinois State Board of Education, 2010). The target state attendance rate for schools for that year was 91% and the actual reported state attendance rate was 93.9% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a). Furthermore, the school's mobility rate was 1.8%, while the state's mobility rate was 13% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2010).

In order to investigate any within-subjects differences of student attendance over time, as well as between-groups changes in attendance between the two schools, a two-

way mixed model ANOVA was conducted. The test was used to compare any effects related to school choice – opting in versus opting out of the new school – and effects related to changes over time. For this test, the African American student's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade attendance days were used. Students' 3<sup>rd</sup> grade attendance days were compared to their 7<sup>th</sup> grade attendance days in order to note if any individual improvements in attendance were acquired over time as a result of time lapsed in the school of choice. Additionally, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade attendance days for both groups were compared in order to account for any changed in attendance as a whole, based off of school choice.

The ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences in attendance between the students who opted into the new school and the students who opted out of the new school,  $F(1, 58) = 1.5, p > .05$ . The test also showed that there was not a significant difference in attendance within-subjects over time  $F(1, 58) = 1.6, p > .05$ . Additionally, the results of the ANOVA test revealed that there was no interaction effects between school and time  $F(1, 58) = .37, p > .05$ . Table 3 gives further insight into these differences.

Table 3

*Attendance Descriptive Statistics by School*

Variable	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Attendance		7 <sup>th</sup> Grade Attendance	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Opt In	165	15.8	170.1	3.5
Opt Out	161.6	16.9	163.4	16.8

Additional testing included an independent samples *t*-test in order to assess if there were any differences in the overall 3<sup>rd</sup> grade attendance over time, between schools. The attendance days present for the African American 3rd grade students at the old school were compared to the attendance days present for the African American 3rd grade students at the new school, in its fourth year of existence. The test results revealed a significant difference in the means of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade test scores of the two schools,  $t(91) = -2.22, p < .05$ .

## Reading

The ability to read is a skill required to perform satisfactorily in every school subject. Daily reading during school hours, for example, includes reading textbooks, library books, and directions for assignments. Therefore, reading is instrumental to school success. The old school failed to make adequate yearly progress, as a result of many factors, including low reading test scores.

In its last year of existence in 2006, the old school experienced gains in reading scores in comparison to previous years. According to the school's state report card, 62.5

% of all students tested met or exceeded the state learning standards in reading, compared to 40.9% in 2005 (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2011). In 2006, 61.3% of African American students met or exceeded the state standards overall, compared to 41.2% in 2005 (Illinois Interactive Report Card). Though gains were evident, a look into previous years' reading test scores was needed in order to understand how the school arrived at Academic Watch Status. Previous test scores caused the school to gain Academic Warning status for the year 2005-2006. Therefore, in its last year of existence, the school was labeled an Academic Warning school. Table 4 explains the yearly scores for the school from 2002-2006.

Table 4

*Yearly Reading Scores and Statuses of the Old School, 2002-2006*

Year	% of A Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards in Reading	% of African American Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards in Reading	AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) achieved?	Status <sup>a</sup>
2001-2002	32	30	No	----- Academic Early
2002-2003	35	36	No	Warning <sup>b</sup> Academic Early
2003-2004	26	26	No	Warning Academic Watch
2004-2005	40	40	No	and <sup>c</sup> Academic Watch
2005-2006 <sup>d</sup>	61	62	Yes	

*Note.* All scores have been rounded to its nearest whole number and obtained from the Illinois Interactive Report Card website.

<sup>a</sup>Statuses are obtained the year of testing, but affect the following school year.

<sup>b</sup>Second year of failing to make adequate yearly progress.

<sup>c</sup>Fourth year of failing to make adequate yearly progress; this year propelled the school into restructuring status for the 2005-2006 school year.

<sup>d</sup>The last year of the school before restructuring.

The school experienced a history of failing to make adequate yearly progress. Failure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 caused the school to obtain Academic Early Warning status at the end of the 2002-2003 school year. For the years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, the school continued to fail to make AYP. Consequently, the school was given Academic Watch status at the end of the 2004-2005 school year. The school's test scores for the 2004-2005 school year marked a four-year succession of failure to make AYP, resulting in Academic Watch status. At this point, the school qualified for the federally mandated restructuring process.

The restructuring of the school was a plan that included targeting an increase in test scores. The first step towards this was the school's adaptation of an alternative curriculum philosophy and program. The school implemented a thematic program that would serve as its centralized theme of educational operations and philosophy. This thematic program, known as the International Baccalaureate (IB), helped students to develop "the intellectual, personal, emotional and social skills to live, learn, and work in a rapidly globalizing world" (International Baccalaureate, 2012a, para. 2). With the IB curriculum came the philosophy that children are capable of being lifelong learners. The IB curriculum stresses intercultural respect and understanding among all stakeholders. Additionally, students are encouraged to be knowledgeable and inquisitive through inquiry-based units of study (International Baccalaureate). According to the IB, in a recent study assessing the effects of the IB curriculum on reading achievement in grades 3-5, there was a statistically significant difference in test scores between IB curriculum students and non-IB curriculum students (International Baccalaureate, 2012b).

Along with curriculum changes came specific changes in the area of reading instruction. Those changes included hiring a part-time reading instructor, the implementation of a reading intervention program for students in grades 3 through 5 who were struggling in reading, and an all-school focus on the importance of reading. Students were required to spend a set amount of time reading per night, per grade-level requirements, indicating the time spent reading on daily reading logs. There were also reading incentive programs put into place to reward students for engaging in reading. Such incentives included students being able to earn theme park tickets, as well as opportunities to eat lunch with the principal, if reading goals were reached. When students ate lunch with the principal they were also allowed to pick a free book to read. The school also participated in quarterly reading assessments in order to monitor student reading progress throughout the year.

The new school saw a progression in reading test scores. In its first year of existence, the school made adequate yearly progress and 80.6% of its students met or exceeded the state standards on the ISAT reading test. In that same year, 79.2% of the African American students met or exceeded the state standards in reading on the ISAT test. For the first four years the school continued to make adequate yearly progress. In its fourth year, 85.4% of all students and 81.4% of African American students met or exceeded the state standards in reading. The reading initiatives implemented were designed to help bring about such gains.

In order to investigate any within-subjects differences of student reading scores over time, as well as between-groups changes in student reading scores between the two schools, a two-way mixed model ANOVA was conducted. The test was used to compare



any effects related to the school of choice and any effects related to changes over time. For this test, the African American students' 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores were used. Students' 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading test scores were compared to their 7<sup>th</sup> grade scores in order to assess any differences in scores over time. Additionally, 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores of the opt in group were compared to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores of the opt out group to account for any differences in scores based upon school choice. The ANOVA revealed that there was not a significant difference in reading test scores between the opt in group and opt out group,  $F(1, 58) = .378, p > .05$ . However, the ANOVA analysis showed a significant difference in reading test scores within groups over time,  $F(1, 58) = 121.4, p < .05$ . There was also a significant interaction effect between schools and test scores over time,  $F(1, 58) = 7.78, p < .05$ . Table 5 gives further insight into these differences.

Table 5

*Reading Scores Descriptive Statistics by School*

Variable	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade		7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Opted In	206.7	26.9	228.5	20.7
Opted Out	194.5	25.9	231.1	28.8

Additional testing including an independent samples *t*-test in order to assess if there were any differences in the mean of the reading test scores for the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at the old school and the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at the new

school, in its fourth year of existence. The test results disclosed a significant difference in the means of the two schools,  $t(91) = -2.5, p < .05$ .

### Conclusions

Schools and communities are taking note of the need to ensure that all students succeed and that no child is left behind when it comes to academic achievement. The lack of education plagues communities and the impact is transgenerational (Murphy, 2010). The achievement of African American students has been a focus of discussion and research for many years. The term, achievement gap was first penned to represent the gap in achievement of low-income African American students and wealthy white students, all attending school in the same district in 1963 (Walker, 1963). Of major concern were the differences in math and reading achievement.

The term began to appear in subsequent years in public reports (Coleman, et al., 1966; Hauser, McMurrin, Nabrit, Nelson and Odell, 1964) as referring to gaps in achievement between performance groups. In 1970, the term was used to refer to the achievement gap between whites and nonwhites (Gwartney, 1970). Though the term has been loosely used to refer to the gap in space of scores between various groups, it is most generally used to refer to the differences in test scores of Caucasian and African American students (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007). The gap emerged as being applicable to numerous areas when concerning the underrepresentation of African American students.

The achievement gap has shifted from solely being a gauge of educational dissimilarity to also being distinctly connected to socioeconomic inequality (Murphy, 2011). The gap has been linked to other disparities including minority gaps in college

attendance and graduation (Knight-Diop, 2010) and minority salary gaps (Murphy). The existence of such evidence provided further evidence for the need to close the achievement gap.

Many assumptions, presumptions, causes and hypothesis have been proposed as explanations for the gap. Extensive research has been conducted in order to determine the major factors surrounding the achievement gap. As a result, a manifestation of many areas of focus ensued, including parental involvement, attendance, and reading. Further understanding of these areas was necessary in order to understand and implement programs that may ultimately help increase the educational progression of African Americans.

#### Parental Involvement

Parental involvement entails the engagement of parents in school related activities, the relationship and interactions parents have with their children concerning education, as well as the parent's own beliefs and values concerning education (Siren & Rogers-Siren, 2004). Numerous research has concluded that the values and attitudes displayed by parents in response to their child's education have great impact on their child's learning (Hui-Chen Huang & Mason, 2008).

Thernstrom & Thernstrom (2003) found that the rate in which African American parents are involved in their child's education is less than that of Caucasians. Additionally, Abrams and Gibbs (2002) conducted a study of parents in an urban school and concluded that African Americans tended to be uninvolved in their child's education. The evidence revealed that the lack of parental involvement amongst African American

parents is of major concern, as was the case for the school that was the focus of this case study.

Research question one sought to determine how the new programs, policies, and procedures of the new school targeting parental involvement impacted the number of parents who attended back-to-school nights, attended parent-teacher conferences, and had personal contacts with teachers. In order to address this inquiry, a chi-square statistical analysis was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in the participation of parents in the aforementioned categories, for the old school and the new school.

The chi-square results revealed that there was a significant difference in the back-to-school and parent-teacher conference participation between the new and old schools. The new school garnered 90% parental participation for back-to-school night while the old school acquired 39%. Additionally, the new school reported a 97% participation rate of parents at parent-teacher conferences while the old school accounted for 90.9%. Concerning the number of parents making at least one contact with the teacher, there was no significant difference. Both the new school and the old school reported high percentages of parents making at least one contact with their child's teacher; 99.5% for the new school and 100% for the old school.

In addition to the chi-square analysis, a *t*-test was performed in order to gather further information concerning the state of parental involvement of both schools. A participation score was generated for both schools. The result of the test indicated that there was a significant difference in the participation scores of the two schools. On average, the new school had more parents that were involved with the school in the areas

of back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences, as well as the total number of events attended by parents overall. As a result of this study, it is concluded that the newly implemented programs, policies and procedures targeting parental involvement at the new school positively impacted the number of parents attending back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences, as well as the state of parental involvement in the new school overall.

### Attendance

Student attendance is of utmost importance. Students who attend school are able to participate in instructional learning, while students who fail to attend school forego the opportunity to partake in daily educational activities that exist within schools. Lack of learning reflects lack of achievement. There exists an attendance gap between African American students and Caucasian students (Anderson, 2005; Ladd, 2010). African American student attendance lags that of Caucasian students (Freeman & Fox, 2005).

The African American attendance gap has been noted as being of major concern considering its significant impact on the African American community (Anderson, 2005). Additionally, African American students are more likely to drop out of high school than their Caucasian counterparts (Freeman & Fox, 2005). As a result of the existing patterns in African American attendance, there was a need to investigate African American student attendance and possible programs that can be used to increase attendance.

Research question two sought to determine how the new attendance programs, policies, and procedures of the new school impacted the African American student attendance rate. In order to address this inquiry, a 2X2 mixed model ANOVA test was completed to determine if there were any significant differences in the attendance

patterns for the old school and the new school. The results of the ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences in attendance of the identified students who opted into the new school and opted out. Additionally, there was not a significant difference in student attendance over time. There were no main effects or interaction effects detected.

In order to investigate further, an independent samples *t*-test was performed as a means of assessing any differences in the means of the attendance days recorded for the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at the old school and the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at the new school, four years after existence. The test results disclosed a significant difference in the means of the two schools. The state of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade attendance in the last year of the new school was compared to the state of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade attendance in the fourth year of the new school. For the old school, the mean number of days of school attended by African American students was 162.4; for the new school, 168.9. The results of the test indicate that the new school saw an increase in the attendance of African American 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, yielding a significant difference between the two schools.

As a result of this study, it is concluded that the newly implemented programs, policies and procedures targeting attendance at the new school did not necessarily impact the attendance of the targeted African American students for this study. The study did reveal, however, when comparing the attendance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students in the old school in its last year of existence to the attendance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students in the new school, four years after implementation, there was a positive effect.

## Reading

Reading proficiency is a skill that is essential to learning and is a requirement in the understanding of all core subjects. Both the state and federal governments have

recognized the importance of developing reading skills. This acknowledgment is evident through annual, state-mandated testing of students in the area of reading, as a result of educational reform imposed by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002).

The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) was said to have been an attempt to help close the African American achievement gap and ensure that no child was left behind in annual progression of achievement (Blank, 2011). However, a persistent gap in reading achievement continues to exist between African American students and Caucasian students (Anderson, 2005). The gap in achievement is evident in reading test scores (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012) as well as college readiness reading assessments (College Board, 2011). This research added weight to the argument that school programs and policies need to be developed in order to help ensure that all African American students are successful in reading achievement.

Research question three sought to determine how the new reading programs, policies, and procedures of the new school impacted the African American student attendance rate. In order to answer this question, a 2X2 mixed model ANOVA test was completed to determine if there were any significant differences in the reading test scores for the identified African American students in the old school and new schools. The results of the ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences in the reading scores of the identified students who opted into the new school and those who opted out. There was a significant difference in reading scores for students over time with the opt out group being more successful on tests than the opt in group over time. There were also interaction effects detected when comparing the effects of school on time, suggesting that school of choice may have impacted test scores.

In order to explore the issue of reading test scores further, an independent *t*-test was performed to assess any differences in the means of the reading test scores for the African American 3rd grade students at the old school and the reading test scores of the African American 3rd grade students at the new school, four years after opening. The 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading test scores for the African American students in the old school in its last year of existence were compared to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading test scores for the African American students in the new school, in its fourth year of existence. This test helped to garner a school-to-school comparison. The test results disclosed a significant difference in the means of the two schools. For the old school, 62.4% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade African American students met or exceeded state standards on state testing, while 84.2% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade African American students met or exceeded state standards on state testing in the new school. The results of the test indicated that the new school saw a significant increase in the reading test scores for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade African American students.

As a result of this study, it is concluded that the newly implemented reading programs, policies and procedures at the new school did not necessarily impact the reading scores of the identified African American students in the new school. The study did reveal, however, when comparing the reading test scores of the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at the old school in its last year of existence to the reading scores of the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students at the new school, four years after its implementation, there was a positive effect.

#### Implications and Recommendations

No Child Left Behind (2002) was federal legislation implemented to ensure that all students made adequate yearly progress in academics. The bill was an indication that



there was evidence of certain subgroups not achieving academically at a consistent and satisfactory rate. African American students have been and remain the subject of discussion, research and studies outlining their inability to consistently perform successfully on state and national testing. This study sought to give information concerning historical, psychological, and cultural factors contributing to the African American achievement gap, in order for educational leaders to further understand the need to implement appropriate programming to aid in the reduction of disparity in African American student achievement. This study focused on three factors said to be connected with the African American achievement gap: parental involvement, attendance, and reading.

#### Parental Involvement

The involvement of parents in their children's education is a factor that has been named as a contributor of success for students. A parent's thoughts, beliefs and attitudes about education have been known to influence the academic success of their children (Hui-Chen Huang & Mason, 2008). Parental involvement benefits both parents and children (Hui-Chen Huang & Mason). Children receive the parental support needed for school success, and parents become more informed and equipped to be that necessary support system for student achievement. Parental involvement acts as a mediator between student family conditions and their success (Cooper et al., 2010).

The school that is the focus of this study experienced some obstacles to ensuring parental involvement in certain instances. The newly restructured school implemented changes in order to increase parental involvement among its parent population. Those changes included the execution of a parent-student-staff compact outlining expectations

for all involved stakeholders, as well as the implementation of more parental involvement opportunities.

When comparing the state of parental involvement of the old school to the new school, this study found significant changes in back-to-school night and parent-teacher conference attendance, as well as overall school parental involvement participation scores; no significant change was found in the amount of parents making at least one contact with teachers. The school provided more opportunities for parents to become involved and created an urgent initiative to increase parental involvement. The parent-student-staff compact provided clear expectations for parents regarding the role in which they were expected to abide as equal stakeholders in their children's education. Implemented initiatives yielded success.

When considering the lack of significant change in the amount of parents making at least one contact with teachers, this is most likely due to the fact that the old school reported 100% of parents making at least one contact while the new school reported 99.5%. Therefore, there was no major difference in these percentages. The state reported that contact with teachers could include face-to-face conversations, phone calls, letter-writing, or emails. Not all parents make face-to-face contact with teachers. Therefore, the state's definition of teacher contact gives schools a number of options when reporting parent-teacher contact.

It is suggested that schools not only make parental involvement a top priority, but it is also recommended that schools provide numerous opportunities for parents to become involved, sending a message to parents that their participation is welcomed and needed. Establishing parent-teacher organizations is helpful and is a means to creating

volunteer networks for parents. Additionally, it is imperative that schools make their parental expectations clear to parents – as well as outline the school’s own commitment to being fully involved in the education of students. This can be done in the form of a compact or contract. Providing a contract of sorts makes sure that everyone is clear concerning expectations of all stakeholders involved, and that all are aware of the need to agree to the outlined terms. School parental involvement initiatives help increase the overall participation of parents in the school by helping to motivate and encourage parents to be involved. Murphy (2010) believed that schools should target the big picture in order to reach that which is lagging. School-wide parental involvement initiatives encourage all parents, no matter the ethnicity, to become and remain connected with their children’s school.

#### Attendance

Attendance in school is essential to students’ learning. Not only does student attendance warrant state funds for schools, but school attendance is detrimental considering that students who attend school receive instruction that is beneficial and pertinent to their academic growth. Students who are labeled truant, or having multiple unexcused absences, typically experience low achievement as well as discipline infractions (Finlay, 2006). African American students have the highest high school drop-out rates and have faced challenges regarding school attendance (Freeman & Fox, 2005).

This study found that over time, there was no significant difference in the attendance of the targeted African American students – from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, there was no significance difference when comparing the 7<sup>th</sup> grade attendance of both groups. The lack of significant differences may be due to the fact that

the African American students identified in this study had small increases in attendance over time and between groups.

Of the possible 175 days of attendance, the opt in group started out in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at an average of 165 days, and ended in 7<sup>th</sup> grade with an average of 170.1 days. The opt out group started out in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade with an average of 161.6 days, and ended in 7<sup>th</sup> grade with a 163.4 average. Though not statistically significant, the new school experienced a larger percentage of increase in attendance of a little over 3% with the old school students experiencing a little over 1%. There was also a 6.7 difference in days attended between the opt in group and the opt out group in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, with the former experiencing the greater amount of days attended.

Though significant differences were not seen between the opt in group and opt out group over time, there were significant differences in the attendance of the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students of the old school and the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students of the new school. This data showed that when looking at the school as a whole, significant changes were accrued in African American student attendance. Table 6 shows these differences.

Table 6

*3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Attendance Descriptive Statistics by School*

Variable	Old School		New School	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Attendance	162.4	16.6	168.9	4.2

Student attendance remains a challenge for many schools. This study found that the implementation of school-wide initiatives to increase student attendance affects African American student attendance as a whole. It is recommended that schools create programs and incentives that encourage students to attend school on a daily basis. Also, making parents aware of all that is at stake concerning student attendance and effectively communicating attendance expectations is beneficial.

Reading

Reading is a fundamental skill that is applicable in all academic subjects. Students who fall behind in reading have more difficulty retrieving skills that have been lost as they progress through grade levels (Murphy, 2010). The importance of acquiring effective reading skills has been made evident in research and studies alike. As a result, many schools have employed a range of strategies in order to ensure that students are reading at or above grade level.

This study found that there was a significant difference when comparing the students' scores over time. The students generally obtained better reading test scores in

7<sup>th</sup> grade than in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. The new school not only targeted failing students. Moreover, the school incorporated school-wide initiatives in an effort to foster a school-led dedication to reading, and to increase the reading test scores of all students. Though the opt in group of African American students experienced reading success, the same was true for the opt out group; this result was worthy of further exploration. Although there was no significant difference seen between the reading test scores of students who opted out of the new school and those who opted in, the opt out group did better than the opt in group during 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading tests. There may be a few explanations for these findings that further support the need to implement reading programs that look to increase test scores.

During the first documented assessment in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, there was a 12.1 difference in the reading test scores of the students before the restructuring of the school, with the students who eventually opted into the new school doing better on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade test than the group of students who would eventually opt out of the school. As the students progressed yearly throughout the district, the opt in group experienced increases under the newly incorporated reading initiatives provided at the new school. However, district-implemented interventions in reading did not solely occur at the new school, but interventions also occurred in other schools in the district. Therefore, students who opted out of the new school did not necessarily miss out on new reading programs and policies; these students were also engaged in these initiatives at their own schools.

An additional consideration is that most reading intervention programs are designed to target students that are failing or falling behind, and to prevent reading failure (Carlisle, Cortina, & Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, 2009). The opt

out group consisted of more students that did not meet or exceed on the state reading test in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Other schools in the district implemented reading programs that targeted low achieving students. Therefore, these students received reading supplemental services in their subsequent schools as an effort to increase their test scores. Four years later, we see a significant increase in the opt out group's test scores (going from an average of 194.5 in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to an average of 231.24 in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, compared to the new school's change from 206.7 to 228.5). The opt out group experienced an increase of nearly 19% in reading test scores to the opt in group's increase of almost 11%. Though there was not a larger increase in reading test scores among the higher performing new school students, the study gave indication that targeting low-achieving students increases performance.

The study found that there was a significant interaction effect between school choice and group. In other words, there appears to be an effect on test scores in relation to the school in which the students attended. There was also a positive impact on the school as a whole. When comparing the percentage of African American 3<sup>rd</sup> graders from the old school that met or exceeded on the state reading test (62.4%) to the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> graders of the new school (84.2%), there was a notable and significant difference in test scores. There was nearly a 32% increase in students meeting or exceeding state standards in reading. Therefore, it is concluded that reading programs targeting low achieving students, as well as the entire school as a whole, benefit students and increase reading test scores; such practices should be implemented in schools. Table 7 gives further insight into the differences.

Table 7

*3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading Scores Descriptive Statistics by School*

Variable	Old School		New School	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading	197.4	26.4	210.4	18.5

General Conclusions and Suggestions

As a result of this study, certain conclusions and suggestions arose. First to be considered was the population size. The population size for this study was considered small ( $n=60$ ) and may not have been sufficiently adequate to draw a more generalized conclusion. Additionally, when placed into groups for comparison, the groups became smaller (opt in group,  $n=14$ ; opt out group,  $n=46$ ), thus providing a disproportionate number for each group. Of particular concern was the small number of students that opted in the new school and remained in the district after four years. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), larger population sizes generally provide better opportunities for thorough research. In further studies, this researcher suggests that a larger population of students be used, if at all possible. A larger, more proportioned population would make for a better account of program effects on students. Though the participation number was small, the results yet remain important in helping schools experiencing academic



challenges to compose programs that will ultimately benefit those students that are underachieving.

Another suggestion is pertaining to the area of data collection. To provide for stronger validity, it is suggested that researchers receive the most accurate information that applies to the particular year of study being targeted. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the old school did not have proper documentation of parental involvement for the school being targeted in this study. Instead of comparing data from the 2005-2006 academic year to the 2009-2010 year – as in questions two and three – data from the 2002-2003 academic year was compared to 2009-2010. The lone disadvantage to this is that the results of this study cannot be fully presented as an overall comparison of the three areas of parental involvement, attendance, and reading for the same academic years. Lack of proper documentation as well as lack of congruency threatened the validity and reliability of the study. However, the information concerning parental involvement remains usable in itself, in that it stands alone as an accurate assessment and comparison of parental involvement for the school as a whole. Additionally, a larger gap in time between the years being studied allowed for a deeper comparison that gave even more history concerning the challenges of parental involvement in the old school.

An additional suggestion for further studies concerning student attendance is for researchers to not only study daily attendance trends, but also student truancy, mobility, and suspension patterns. These issues lead to student absenteeism and are barriers to student learning. Chronic absences affect student achievement and classroom management – garnering a disruption in classroom routines and flow, causing students to

fall behind and inducing a disruption in classroom teaching as teachers attempt to bring absent students up to speed (Chang, 2009).

A further recommendation is that additional research be conducted in order to identify which particular parental and attendance incentives, as well as reading strategies were most successful with African American students. Being cognizant of this information will help schools serving large African American student populations to implement specific initiatives. Also, additional studies focusing on cohorts over a more extended period of time may prove to be beneficial in that such studies allow for a more in-depth view of the effects of programs over time.

As a final word, while it is important to note that the new school's success in increasing parental involvement, student attendance, and reading scores can be attributed to new programs and policies, other factors may have contributed to the incline in success, as well. Most of this study reflected upon the academic and structural changes that took place in the school. Another consideration is the fact that the school was new and was viewed as the answer to a failing school; thus, the momentum of all involved may have been amped for success.

When taking on the task of mandated school improvement, there is pressure to succeed; all staff was aware of the dire need for success. Staff arrived at the school fully invested in its success, thus creating an indomitable atmosphere that was hard-pressed for success. Teacher buy-in has been named as a factor that contributes to the success of students (Ijei & Harrison, 2010). Furthermore, affective organizational commitment theory states that members of an organization are more likely to become involved, committed and identifiable with the organization when expectations are made clear and

are communicated in a way that makes the members feel valued and accepted. Expectations were clear, teachers were trained, and thematic philosophies were communicated to everyone – from the principal to the janitor, and the secretary to the students. Expectations help to determine school structure. The components of school structure and atmosphere affect student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2002).

The school of this study continues to experience progressive success for its entire African American student population. In 2010-2011, 97% of the African American 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students met or exceeded state standards in reading (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2012a). In the same year, the African American achievement gap for the entire school was eliminated in reading and math (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2012b). In reading, 94% of all African Americans met or exceeded state standards, compared to 92% of Caucasian students. The hope is that when schools experience increases in the success of African American students, the positive outcomes will prove to be perpetual.

The conclusion of this researcher is that school programs, policies and procedures will lead to the lessening of the African American achievement gap when they include 1. curriculum embedded in the belief that all children can succeed, 2. school-wide initiatives that target increases in all deficit areas, 3. clearly communicated expectations for parents, staff and students, and 4. an environment that is conducive to care, consistency, and support for all. Initiatives of this manner help to ensure success for African American students and heal the historical challenges faced by African Americans in education.

This study sought to provide knowledge of the historical, psychological and cultural factors that laid the foundation of the African American achievement gap in order to understand the history of three factors connected with the gap: parental

involvement, attendance, and reading. The purpose of this study was to provide insight into effective programming, policies, and procedures that potentially help to close the African American achievement gap and help African American students to be successful academically. It was the intent of the researcher to provide valuable and practical information that will lead to the understanding of the need to provide viable resources for African American students, in order to ultimately make certain that all students are achieving at the rate in which they are expected to achieve – and are truly not being left behind.

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Appendix A  
Parent Survey

Parent Survey

1. Number of children attending the school \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Grade Level (circle all that apply):           K    1    2    3    4    MORE
3. Community of Residence:                    C    M    PF    UP    OTHER
4. Ethnicity:                                    AA    C    H    OTHER

Please rate your level of agreement with the following by checking the appropriate response:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Enough Info
Faculty members make me feel welcome.					
Staff members make me feel welcome.					
Generally, adults in the school treat everyone with respect					
Generally, students in the school treat everyone with respect.					
I feel my child is safe and secure in school.					
This school is clean and well-maintained.					
There is an efficient method by which to communicate w/individual staff members.					

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Enough Info
The faculty (administrators, dean, counselors, etc.) listen to my concerns.					
The support staff listens to my concerns.					
Overall, faculty act upon my concerns in a timely manner.					
Overall, the staff acts upon my concerns in a timely manner.					
The school rules are fair to all students.					
The faculty and support staff have high academic expectations.					
The faculty and support staff have high behavioral expectations.					
The faculty and support staff enforce consequences to school rules.					
I am satisfied with my child's academic progress.					

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Enough Info	Blank
I feel this school celebrates students' success.						
This school addresses my child's individual needs.						
My school provides opportunities for parental involvement.						
This school keeps me informed of daily events, issues, and activities.						
I am satisfied that extracurricular activities meet my child's needs.						
I am satisfied with this school.						

Appendix B  
Parent-Student-Staff Compact



## Parent-Student-Staff Compact

### **As a Parent/Guardian, I agree to carry out these responsibilities:**

Make sure that my child attends school every day, on time and with homework completed.

Call the school or send a note when my child is absent.

Support the school's discipline policy.

See that my child is dressed in accordance with the school uniform policy.

Provide a quiet time and location each day for my child to do homework.

Ensure my student reads daily for at least 20 minutes.

Read school notices and check student work daily.

Participate in a minimum of 3 activities per school year. Including but not limited to:

1. Field Trip
2. Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)
3. Parent Night
4. Classroom Presentation

Attend Parent/Teacher conferences.

Know how my child is doing in school by communicating with teachers.

Ask my child about school each day.

Praise my child every day.

Respect the school, staff, and students and families.

Return progress reports, weekly folders, or any parent communication in a timely manner.

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**As a Student, I realize my education is important. I agree to carry out these responsibilities:**

- Come to school on time, ready to learn, and with the necessary supplies each day.
- Complete quality class work and homework daily.
- Participate in classroom activities.
- Share all school communication with my parents/guardians.
- Wear my school uniform in accordance with school uniform policy.
- Adhere to the school discipline policy.
- Read daily for at least 20 minutes.
- Regularly talk to my parents/guardians and my teachers about my progress in school.
- Respect myself and take pride in my school.
- Respect and cooperate with staff, students, and parents and ask for help when I need it.

Student Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**As a School Staff, we agree to carry out the following responsibilities:**

- Provide a safe, caring and positive learning environment for all students.
- Provide high-quality curriculum and instruction.
- Provide clear expectations and procedures.
- Meet the individual academic needs of our students.
- Promote student decision making, self-confidence, and responsibility.
- Seek cooperation from parents/guardians regarding student progress and achievement of expectations.
- Assign consistent and meaningful assignments.
- Provide parents/guardians with opportunities to volunteer and participate in their child's education.
- Respect our students, staff and families.

Teacher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_