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Perceptions of a Middle School Reconfiguration: A Descriptive Case Study

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PERCEPTIONS OF A MIDDLE SCHOOL RECONFIGURATION:
A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY

PERCEPTIONS OF A MIDDLE SCHOOL RECONFIGURATION:
A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to follow 1 principal's journey to assist the district in its reconfiguration goals, and help the school change through deep examination of district personnel's and parents' perceptions of the change process. This was done by acknowledging distinctions and differences between junior high schools, the current middle school, and the new middle school, delineated by current middle school-reform research. This study explored issues regarding the policies, personnel, decision-making strategies, timelines, and organizational structures of the new middle school.

The reconfiguration resulted in rezoning attendance zones, reconstructing the new high school, raising the new elementary school, repurposing the old elementary school, reconfiguring the grades, and reassigning existing staff among the district's buildings. The students in the 4 middle schools, the junior high school, and the new high and elementary schools were reassigned. The district established a 2012 planning committee to inform decision making.

Influences affecting perceptions were found in three primary trends: (a) communication, (b) leadership, and (c) the plan. Each trend was supported with axial and open codes from the triangulation of data, including standardized open-ending interviews, observations, and document collection.

Three key groups of participants were a major part of this qualitative case study: district administrators, teachers, and parents. Participants were interviewed to provide perceptions about the initial stages of reconfiguration and the reconfiguration itself. The overall findings and conclusions from this study showed that planning, communication, and superior leadership are keys to receiving viable results in a school-district restructuring. Recommendations for further study include (a) replication of this study in all middle schools in the district, (b) studying all

middle schools in the state following the National Middle School Association Model, (c) focus on the academic achievement of students in the 5–7 configuration, and (d) interviews should include students who were impacted by the reconfiguration.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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Writing a dissertation is not an easy process. It is with gratitude that I acknowledge and appreciate the following people who supported me throughout the process.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my fathers, Alfred Billingsley, Jr. and Lloyd Lasker, Sr. These two men instilled in me that hard work is rewarded.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	5
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Question	6
Significance of Study	6
Conceptual Design	7
Theoretical Sensitivity	8
Parameters of the Study	9
Definitions of Terms	9
Limitations	12
Summary	12
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	14
Introduction	14
School Reform	15
Historical Perspectives	17
Factors Driving Education Reform	28
Adolescent Development	31
Physical Development	34
Cognitive Development	34
Psychosocial Development	35
Understanding Change	36
Comparison of the Junior High School to a Middle School	40
Leadership	49
Summary	54
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN	55
Introduction	55
Focus of the Study	55
Research Question	56
Research Design and Timeline	56
Site and Sample Selection	59
Negotiating Entry	60
Depth Versus Breath	60
Data Collection	61
Conceptual design	61
Interviews	62
Observations	63
Document collection	64
Participants	66
Researcher's Role Management	66
Managing & Recording Data	67
Trustworthiness	67
Prolonged Engagement	67
Persistent Engagement	68
Triangulation	68

Peer Debriefing	69
Member Checks	69
Audit Trail	69
Evidentiary Inadequacies	70
Summary	70
CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS	72
Introduction	72
Audience	73
Transcribed Interviews	73
Initial interview with the superintendent	74
Conclusion	77
Audit-Trail Notations	77
Data Analysis	79
Findings and Major Themes	80
Presentation of Axial Codes	81
Descriptive Matrix	82
Benefits of the reconfiguration	82
Input and communication	89
Programming and practices	96
Leadership and support	101
Summary	104
Teachers	105
Presentation of Axial Codes	105
Descriptive Matrix	106
Communication with district administration	106
District reconfiguration	116
Involvement	123
Summary	131
Parents	132
Presentation of Axial Codes	132
Descriptive Matrix	133
Communication with administrators and teachers	136
Transitions	143
Middle school	148
Summary	154
Summary of Chapter 4	154
CHAPTER 5: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS	156
Introduction	156
Grounded Theory	156
Discussion: Theory 1	158
Discussion: Theory 2	160
Discussion: Theory 3	162
Summary of the Findings	164
Interpretation of the Data	164
Research Question	167
Recommendations to the Field	169

Recommendations to Policymakers	169
Recommendations to Parents	170
Recommendations to Teachers	170
Recommendations for District Administrators, Including Superintendents, Principals, and Assistant Principals	171
Recommendations for Further Research	171
Introduction	171
Conclusion	172
REFERENCES	174
APPENDIX: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER	184

TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1 School Reform	16
Table 2 Historical Perspectives.....	19
Table 3 Factors Driving Education Reform.....	28
Table 4 Adolescent Development.....	32
Table 5 Understanding Change.....	37
Table 6 A Comparison of the Junior High School to the Middle School.....	41
Table 7 Leadership.....	53
Table 8 Timeline and Activities.....	57
Table 9 Audit-Trail Notations: Interviews.....	78
Table 10 Audit-Trail Notations: Documents	79
Table 11 Descriptive Matrix: Axial Codes (Major Themes) of District Administrators.....	83
Table 12 Descriptive Matrix: Axial Codes (Major Themes) of Teachers	108
Table 13 Descriptive Matrix: Axial Codes (Major Themes) of parents	134

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual diagrams.	7
Figure 2. Axial and sample of open codes of district administrators.....	81
Figure 3. Axial codes and sample of open codes of teachers.	106
Figure 4. Axial codes and sample of open codes of parents.	133

Chapter 1: Introduction

America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters.

—Obama, 2009

Reform efforts in school settings have been a part of education for many years. Schools and school districts have decided to change the way they operate for one reason or another and most efforts have attempted to improve our public schools. According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (1989), this challenge is changing the way we look at education reform. The task has moved quickly from improving traditional standards and organization to more profound changes that affect the very essence of teaching and learning and the structure of schools. There are different definitions and different degrees of change, from reform to radical restructuring, but the purpose is essentially the same: to help our graduates achieve the highest levels of knowledge and experience and to enable them to practice the creative use of their knowledge and talent in civic responsibility, productive work, moral conduct, and personal fulfillment (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1989).

“Restructuring schools involves changing the nature of what schools do and what is required of their personnel,” noted Jehl and Kirst (1992, pp. 97–98). The core of restructuring includes an examination of the organization itself, to make it more responsive to the needs of its students. “Restructuring also assumes that old patterns need to be changed, but renewal assumes that the gateway to a better future requires a backward look; rather than embracing the latest innovations, it may be wise to reconsider time-tested traditions” (Deal, 1990, pp. 6–12).

For nearly a hundred years, both educators and researchers concerned with the lack of quality education have periodically called attention to the serious mismatch between the needs of

young adolescents, the educational organization, and the social environment of schools (Briggs, 1920; Jackson & Davis, 2000; James, 1972). As early as 1904, Hall warned that the future of humankind was, in large measure, determined by the quality of education received at the crucial age of adolescence (as cited in S. J. Boyer & Bishop, 2002).

In 2010, a new principal was hired to lead a middle school in central Arkansas. The new principal quickly realized that there would be many challenges. The district was proposing a restructuring of the school in 2 years. Defeatist information had been passed about the school, the students, and the staff. During the first summer before the new principal's inaugural year, the former principal was reassigned. The school remained on Year 5 of school improvement. Although the task was daunting, a vision of renewal and transformation of the school's culture to maximize everyone's potential was the first priority. Over the next months, the principal would fight teacher frustration, discipline problems, students' low socioeconomic status, low test scores, growing inequalities, and a lack of parental involvement. These variables helped to create a school with low student achievement and low teacher moral. The principal realized the importance of leading the improvement of instructional practices and achieving higher student performance. This was not a school that needed a total transformation, but rather a deep examination of instructional practices to meet the needs of all students. The principal's vision was to help lead collaboration among the staff and create an environment where all students could excel.

In *Turning Points 2000*, Jackson and Davis (2000) stated "no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students' performance than the school principal" (p. 157). With the reality of demographic shifts in student populations, it is critical for schools to have leaders who can create a culture that fosters both

adult and student learning and expands the definition of leadership to include all stakeholders (Davis & Thompson, 2004).

Throughout the years, young adolescents have constantly faced difficult challenges. Advocates of the middle school believe young adolescents are more successful at schools that are developmentally appropriate, socially acceptable, and academically excellent (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2002). In contrast, critics of middle-level education often seek evidence of student success only in the form of student-achievement data. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) clarified this accountability issue by stating that student academic success will be assessed through annual student-achievement tests for Grades 3 through 8 (NCLB). Thus, student-achievement scores officially serve as the defining measure of success and failure for schools.

Developing a new educational initiative presents a challenge for educational leaders throughout America. Schools throughout the nation responded to the call for comprehensive reform as the key to real and lasting school improvement, especially in low-performing schools (Ginsberg, 2012). After working to reform schools for many decades, educators learned that partial reform does not work.

In 1888, efforts were made to provide appropriate educational programming for young adolescents. Junior high schools were introduced in 1910 specifically to meet students' varying needs and individual differences (Lounsbury, 1992). Yet, without explicit guidelines or policies, junior high schools slipped into being mere junior versions of the high school (Gatewood & Dilg, 1975). The traditional junior high school reigned supreme in the early 1900s. Junior high schools were first thought of as schools to prepare students for the vocational and academic subjects they would experience at the secondary level. Critics of the junior high school described them as

being too formal and discipline centered without attention to the student as a person (Lounsbury, 1992).

“In the early 1960s middle schools emerged. Like the junior high school, middle school philosophy was based on designing education to be relevant to the interest and needs of young adolescents” (S. J. Boyer & Bishop, 2002, p. 2). Most early adolescents are driven by a strong need for independence. They want to be responsible for themselves and make their own choices (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Although they still need strong regulation and direction, they often resist and resent adult authority. During this time, the peer group sets the standards (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Individuality yields to the desire to be accepted. Students of this age may conform to group mannerisms, dress, speech, and behavior (Jackson & Davis, 2000). They are not ready for high school and the elementary setting no longer meets their needs. They are in a unique stage of life.

The term *middle school* refers to a school for early adolescents who are seeking to follow a certain philosophical orientation called The Middle School Concept (Clark & Clark, 1994). The concept of middle-level education is rooted in the nature of human growth and development (Eichhorn, 1998a). The Middle School Concept is based on the purposeful designation of a separate school to meet the special developmental needs of young adolescents, focusing on their physical, emotional, intellectual, and social growth (Clark & Clark, 1994).

Over the past half century, hundreds of schools throughout the nation have incorporated significant changes in program offerings for middle-level students (ages 10–14). Normally, those changes have been associated with a conversion from a Grade 7 through 9 junior high school to a Grade 6 through 8 middle school. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006), a great debate has been going on for over 40 years about how to best address

students in the middle. Unfortunately, these changes have been based on district budgets rather than what is best for these students who are stuck in the middle between those who want to pull them toward high school and those who want to pull them back toward the elementary level. Today, the more than 12,000 middle-level schools in the United States outnumber traditional junior high schools about two to one (NASSP, 2006). The middle school is also replacing the two-level plan of an elementary school ranging from kindergarten through eighth grade, leading to a 9th- through 12th-grade high school (Recognition of the Middle Level of Schooling, 1988). Middle schools were developed to provide an organization, a curriculum, and an instructional approach designed specifically for the early adolescent and to ease the progression of the students from the elementary school to the high school (Irvin, 1990).

Statement of the Problem

Historically, the middle school studied here is the lowest performing secondary school in a central Arkansas school district. It has a large, diverse, at-risk population and has been identified as a school in need of improvement by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) for not making adequate yearly progress (AYP). This school has been labeled a State Directed School for Improvement—Year 6 requirements—for failure to meet the state target for the subpopulations of students with disabilities, African American students, and economically disadvantaged students in literacy and mathematics, according to the ADE report (2011). Teachers and students are not connected as units of teaching. There is no motivation because of a history of isolation. The belief in the community and the students it serves is almost completely lost. The district's idea to transform this test middle school came from one district's recognition of the special needs of students and teachers in this school. To achieve district goals a

reconfiguration of grades had to occur. The name of the school is not revealed to protect the parents, students, and teachers in the building.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to follow one principal's journey to assist the district in its reconfiguration goals, and help the school change through deep examination of district personnel's and parents' perceptions of the change process. This was done by acknowledging distinctions and differences between junior high schools, the current middle school, and the new middle school, delineated by current middle school-reform research. This study explored issues regarding the policies, personnel, decision-making strategies, timelines, and organizational structures of the new middle school.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators about the facilitating and inhibiting factors of middle school reconfiguration? Subquestion: What was the impact of leadership through the reorganization?

Significance of Study

This is a study of the perceptions of a middle school reconfiguration, focusing on the descriptions that parents, teachers, and administrators used to describe their feelings as they went through this process. The significance of this study is to assist school districts as they journey through different grade configurations to maximize fewer transitions, and thereby raise student achievement. Although, much has been written about different grade configurations, in a number of ways, this study aids in the quest to develop effective reconfiguration guidelines by contributing to the literature. This study's recommendations will assist a district or school that wants to adopt practices that are effective and linked to the research.

Conceptual Design

Figure 1 displays a conceptual design to provide the reader with a better understanding of the three phases completed in the qualitative study. As indicated in the display, the three phases include an interview with the superintendent and standardized open-ended interviews with district administrators, parents, and classroom teachers. Observations and documentation collection were also employed. These qualitative research methods were used for triangulation.

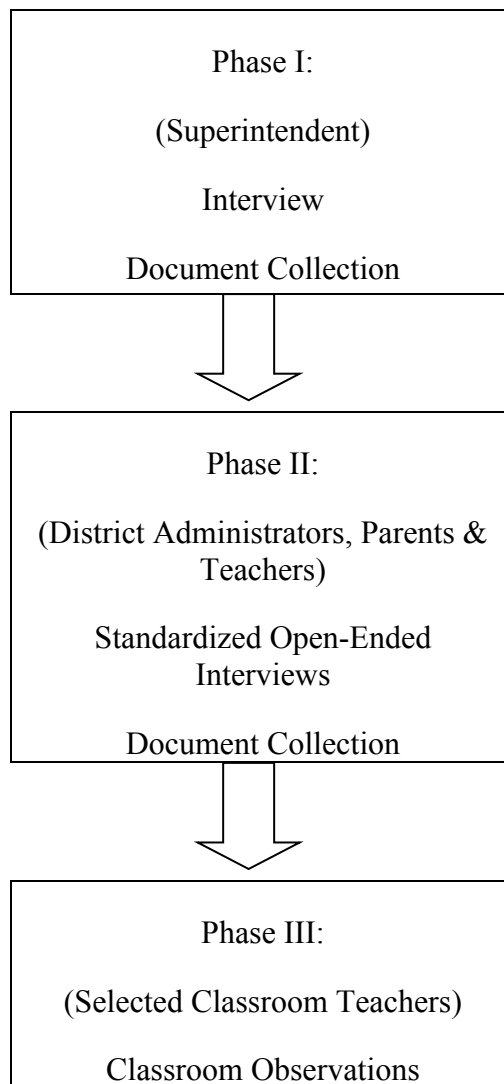


Figure 1. Conceptual diagrams.

Phase I included gaining entry into the school district to be researched. An interview was conducted with the superintendent to begin understanding the history behind the reconfiguration and the school district's approach to the reform efforts. This phase offered me the opportunity to meet with key district personnel in district-leadership meetings, collect documents associated with the history of the reconfiguration and its 10-year study, and initiate a relationship with these key personnel to provide a better understanding of best practices in this district's reform efforts.

Phase II involved conducting standardized open-ended interviews with district administrators, building administrators, parents, and classroom teachers. Coupled with related literature, the standardized open-ended interview questions provided an understanding of the school district's approach to restructuring schools; communication between the district and its patrons; perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators about the reconfiguration' and the impact of professional development on this major reform effort. I also collected documents as part of this study.

Phase III consisted of observations in key meetings with other administrators and multiple data-collection methods. The observations and analysis of documents helped supply background information. I was able to observe parent meetings and identify issues and concerns with parents and teachers about the reconfiguration.

Theoretical Sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand and capability to separate the pertinent from that which is not pertinent (Swartz, 2002). Due to having 26 years of experience in education and working in the test building as the principal for 1.5 years, I believe I was a good research instrument through which to conduct this study. In my current position as a principal of the middle school, I relied

on my experience to assist others in school-reform efforts. My primary responsibility is to provide what matters most: being the instructional leader in her school. The most vital reason to conduct this research study was to help other administrators help students with challenging demographics achieve at higher levels. This study identified the pressures of a school principal promoting professional development and improved student learning, while a major reconfiguration was happening in the district.

Parameters of the Study

The initial idea for this study began in the fall of 2010, with a conversation with the superintendent. This analysis was conducted in the case-study school district during the 2011–2012 school year. During the spring of 2012, the data analysis, findings, and recommendations were developed.

Definitions of Terms

Adolescents: Children from 10 to 15 years of age. Moss (1969) stated this is the period of physical and psychological development between childhood and adulthood.

Advisement program: A program designed to develop ongoing supportive relationships between a student and caring adult on the middle school campus. This relationship provides the student with security, advice, affirmation, and a positive adult role model.

Common planning time: A specific period set aside during a school day when members of an interdisciplinary team can jointly plan activities (Arth, Johnston, Lounsbury, & Toepfer, 1985).

Counseling: Direct services, including the act of giving advice, provided to students, staff, and parents by trained counseling professionals.

Culture: A system of values, beliefs, and standards that guide people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are transmitted from one generation to another or from current members to newly admitted member (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

Interdisciplinary teams: A group of teachers who share (a) the same group of students; (b) the responsibility for planning, teaching, and evaluating curriculum and instruction in more than one academic area; (c) the same schedule; and (d) the same area of the building (George & Alexander, 1993b).

Junior high school: A junior high school usually consists of Grades 7–9, but may also be comprised of Grades 5–9, 6–9, or 8–9. The junior high school was conceived primarily as a downward extension of secondary education organized by subjects and departments with a grade-level configuration (Van Till, Vars, & Lounsbury, 1967) that usually includes ninth grade.

Middle-level education: The inclusion of the grade level, according to Clark and Clark (1994), with the largest number of students who are beginning the process of becoming adolescents (any combination of Grades 5–8).

Middle-level schools: Schools providing education for students in Grades 5 through 9 (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993), that are developmentally responsive to the special needs of young adolescents. Clark and Clark (1994) referred to the middle-level school as a unique, autonomous unit, separate from the elementary school that precedes it and the high school that follows it. Curriculum and instruction include content that connects with everyday lives of students and instructors that actively involves them in the learning process through the use of interdisciplinary learning. Defining a middle-level school involves several perspectives; including purposes, separation, organization, curriculum, and program (Clark & Clark, 1994):

- Purpose—to be developmentally responsive to the special needs of young adolescents.
- Uniqueness—a unique, autonomous unit, separate from the elementary school that precedes it and the high school that follows it.
- Organization—the inclusion of the grade levels with the largest number of students who are beginning the process of becoming adolescents.
- Curriculum and instruction—the context that connects the everyday lives of students with instruction that actively involves them in the learning process.
- Program—programs that are developmentally appropriate and include interdisciplinary teaming, teacher advisers, cocurricular activities, and youth involvement.

Middle school: For the purpose of this study, the use of the term middle school will refer to those schools that adhere to the middle school concept described by the National Middle School Association. A middle school usually consist of Grades 6–8, but may also be composed of Grades 5–7, 6–7, 5–8, or 7–8. Middle schools are based on the social and academic developmental needs of young adolescents and provide the following:

- Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory;
- varied teaching and learning approaches;
- assessment and evaluation that promote learning;
- flexible organizational structures;
- programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety; and
- comprehensive guidance and support services (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 1995).

Limitations

1. This case study was limited to one middle school making the transition from a seventh- to eighth-grade middle school to a fifth- through seventh-grade middle school.
2. Data from the middle school interviews may have been biased because I interviewed teachers in my school. I had to consider that some participants disseminating information may have opposed the transition. In contrast, some participants may have been biased in favor of the transition to a middle school. I needed to address any problems that resulted from a lack of response in the interview process.
3. Participants in the interviews may have been reluctant to disseminate information about the transition process, particularly if the initial transition was problematic.

Despite these limitations, this study uncovered a significant amount of information about teachers' perceptions of the reconfiguration of a middle school. The focus was to highlight a principal's journey through this process and teacher perceptions of one middle school, and was not to compare schools or districts. This case study, along with interviews, has provided ample information on which to base analysis and make recommendations.

Summary

Chapter 1 presented the introduction, purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, and delimitations. The subsequent chapters present the research study. Chapter 2 will present a review of related literature on reform, research related to the history of junior high schools and middle schools, described by the NMSA, and explores leadership. Chapter 2 presents a context and critical framework for examining the implementation process. Chapter 3 provides the methodology (the rationale for using the qualitative-research approach) and

procedures used to gather data for the study. Findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 contains a summary of the study and findings, conclusions drawn from the study, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, it is the one most responsive to change.

—Charles Darwin

Introduction

This review of related literature focuses on three key elements: school reform and the major factors driving education reform, the middle school concept, and leadership. These three subsections can be separate dissertations, yet they are interwoven on several levels in this case study. This review of literature is organized to reflect the background information relevant to the study at hand, but a literature review must do more. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (1996),

a literature review is helpful in two ways. It helps the researcher assemble the ideas of others interested in a particular research question, but it also lets them see what the results of other similar or related studies of the question have been. (p. 65)

First, I will examine school reform presented from a historical perspective. Then I will examine why schools in general decide to change and will look at the junior high school as it emerged as a modern middle school, by looking at the historical background, the adolescent learner, the middle school movement, and the components of an effective middle school as delineated by the NMSA. In the final section, I will explore leadership. Importantly, it will delve into how the principal's leadership has a significant effect on student learning. Throughout this review of literature, I will focus on the purpose of this case study: teachers' perceptions of the reconfiguration of their middle school.

One of the most important obligations of our society is to educate our children. Public schools have seen a widening gap of our students failing to reach this goal (Schwartz, Symonds, & Ferguson, 2011). The media has helped politicians portray our system as an outright failure, not only over the last decade, but also historically according to Berliner and Biddle (1996, as

cited in Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1999). But history tells us that at one time the United States led the nation, if not the world, in preparing its young people with the education they would need to succeed.

Yet, as we end the first decade of the 21st century, there are profoundly troubling signs that the United States is now failing to meet its obligation to prepare millions of young adults and have fallen behind many other nations” (Schwartz, Symonds, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 1).

School Reform

The purpose of this section is to provide a summary of school reform and how it has transformed in the last few years based on current and past research. Table 1 provides information relevant to school-reform efforts.

Reform, according to Webster’s dictionary, means correcting weaknesses or deficiencies in existing patterns or practices. Efforts to improve public schools have concentrated on correcting visible structural flaws such as teacher evaluations, reward systems, unclear goals, or decision making authority, especially around instructional issues. Such changes overlook more durable and stable cultural values and mind sets behind and beneath everyday behavior. These deeper patterns provide meaning and continuity. They are also the source of many frustrations and problems. Modifying them involves major changes, a level that most reform efforts have missed (Cuban, 1993).

School reform refers to systematic approaches at the national, state, or local levels to make significant improvements in education (Murphy, 2001). “More than twenty years ago, when states first began the current period of education reform, no one would have predicted that reform would be sustained and steadily developed over such an extended period” (Elmore, 2004, p. 1). School reform has been part of the education community since schools were first opened.

Table 1

School Reform

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Cuban, 1993	Book	Document/literature review	Reported the historical perspective on change.
Elmore, 2000	Paper	Document	Offered advice on how schools should help students learn through reform efforts.
Elmore, 2004	Book	Document	Included essays and articles that embody the idea of backwards-mapping reform.
Henson, 2001	Book	Literature review	Presented curriculum-development processes and the nature of 21st-century education reform
Lashway, 1999	Digest	Document	Described key features of accountability systems.
Murphy, 2001	Dissertation	Case study	Provided suggestions and best practices for school-district transition and improvement.
Tyack, 1974	Book	Literature review	Provided a historical perspective on the basis of the U.S. educational system.
Tyack & Cuban, 1995	Book	Literature review	Explored basic questions about the nature of education reform.

When discussing the subject of school reforms, Tyack and Cuban (1995) professors of education at Stanford University, offered a 100-year history of reform in the United States in their book, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*. The authors stated that planned efforts to change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems is at the forefront of reform. Reforms usually entail strenuous and complex sets of procedures including discovering problems, devising remedies, adopting new policies, and bringing about institutional change (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

According to Henson (2001), the impact that curriculum change can have on society is tremendous: to change the curriculum is to fiddle with important values in American culture. The fundamental unit of accountability should be the school, because that is the organizational unit where teaching and learning actually occurs. Evidence from evaluations of teaching and student performance should be used to improve teaching and learning and, ultimately, to allocate rewards and sanctions (Elmore, 2000).

In an effort to understand the deeper meaning of past and present reforms to improve student achievement and the connection of broader policies to educators' behaviors, Cuban (1993) divided reforms of the past century into incremental and fundamental changes. "Incremental reforms are actions that aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing structures of schooling including classroom teaching. The premise behind incremental reforms is that the basic structures are sound but need improving." Fundamental reforms are actions that aim to transform and permanently alter existing structures. The premise behind fundamental reforms is that basic structures are flawed at their core and they need a complete overhaul, not renovations" (Cuban, 1993, p. 3).

Lashway (1999) suggested that educators once viewed reform as recurring with frantic efforts to mend the system, surfacing every 10 years only to return to the status quo. However, in the last 2 decades, that dependable cycle has been upset and replaced by schools now in a permanent state of restructuring.

Historical Perspectives

To better understand school reform first I present an understanding of the historical perspectives of education, looking at how American education has changed over the years. Specifically, how was reorganization first introduced in education and how did grade

configurations evolve over time? I will also delve into which historical reports helped to shape the educational system we know of today (see Table 2).

As far back as the 1700s the United States has been calling for education reform, advocating education as the cure for the troubles of society. Although education has been reserved as a state interest, public education has a long history of repeated reform intended to resolve socioeconomic, political, and moral ills (Parker, 1994a) of national interest. Parker (1994a), in an essay, *School Reform, 1744–1990s: Historical Perspective through Key Books and Reports*, traced the history of the school-reform movement from colonial times to the present. Parker (1994b) stated that schools used to serve mainly the elites. Education should not be reserved for the elite wealthy male but should be available to all students. Parker's report concluded by citing Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* to address the socioeconomic and political dilemmas confronting school reform (Parker, 1994b, p. 19).

The history of American education is, in many respects, synonymous with the recurring cycle of educational reform. Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) concluded from their analysis of the relationship between educational policymaking and educational practice in schools and classrooms that there is considerable disagreement over the meanings and cycles of reform. Other change theorists concluded that planned change attempts rarely succeed as intended, because reform efforts have been based on budgets and transportation (Fullan, 1982; Hirsch, 1996; Louis & Miles, 1990).

The National Education Association (NEA) created the council of 10 in 1892 to recommend a program of instruction for secondary schools. President Eliot of Harvard decided the existing system was inadequate to prepare the college-bound elite. The committee called for shortening the elementary school years and six years of high school (Hechinger, 1993).

Table 2

Historical Perspectives

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Allen, 2004	Article	Literature review	Offered suggestions to improve resegregation.
Barley & Dodson, 2003	Paper	Survey/literature review	Reported the results of a 4-year study on school reform.
Beare & Boyd, 1993	Book	Literature review	Revealed why reform/restructuring occurred at the same time in different places around the world.
Bell, 1988	Book	Literature review	Presented information on federal leadership in education.
Blueprints for school success, 1998	Guide	Document	Provided suggestions and best practices for school-district reform and improvement.
E. L. Boyer, 1983	Book	Field studies/document	Offered recommendations to schools committed to excellence.
Brimm, 1969	Article	Literature review	Offered a comparison of junior high school and middle school.
Chubb & Moe, 1990	Book	Literature review/survey	Recommended a new system of public education built around school choice/competition.
Conti, Ellsasser, & Griffin, 2000	Report	Literature review	Studied a series of reports with the consensus that when conditions, structure, and cultures change, teachers focus on teaching/learning.
Cuban, 1990	Article	Literature review/analysis	Outlined a plan as to why reform is recurring.
Ginsberg, 2012	Report	Literature review	Compiled reform reports for public education.
Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988	Report	Analysis/document	Suggested lessons from recent education-reform attempts.
Fullan, 1982	Book	Literature review/documents	Provided examples of the practical meaning of change and how it relates to people in schools.
Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006	Book	Literature review	Provided a framework for what is needed for the next radical breakthrough in education.
Goodlad, 1990	Book	Literature review/statistical data	Described the findings of a 5-year study of teachers.

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990	Book	Case studies/literature review/interviews	Provided a comprehensive historical perspective on teacher-education preparation.
Hechinger, 1993	Article	Document	Presented a historical overview of the development of junior high school for young adolescents.
Hirsch, 1996	Book	Literature review	Detailed historical study of the problems in our school system.
Kearns & Harvey, 2000	Book	Literature review/documents	Outlined a 3-year investigation about what students should know and be able to do.
Kozol, 1967, 1988, 1991	Book	Literature review	Described the injustice in public school systems.
Louis & Miles, 1990	Book	Literature review/survey/case study	Examined leadership and management skills needed to improve urban high schools.
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1988	Report	Document	Provided steps to upgrade the quality of teaching and public education.
National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983	Report	Document	Reported on secondary education and the state of American education.
No Child Left Behind Act, 2001	Law	Document	Outlined a federal law to reform schools and require proficiency of all students on high-stakes assessments.
Parker, 1994b	Book	Essay/literature review	Presented the history of the school-reform movement from colonial times to the present.
Popkewitz, Tabachnick, & Wehlage, 1982	Book	Literature review	Critiqued the ability of schools to solve personal and social problems.
Turnbull, 2002	Article	Literature review	Presented the findings from a study on teacher commitment to a school-reform program.
Tyack & Cuban, 1995	Book	Literature review	Explored questions about education reform and offered suggestions on how to focus instruction from the core concepts to the broader concepts
Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004	Book	Literature review/interviews	Offered a plan to reform schools and create an atmosphere focused on learning.

The idea of reorganizing schools in this fashion was met with resistance by those knowing not all students were college bound and argued for vocational options to be included in the reorganization. The opposing forces advocating college preparation and vocational competence exerted considerable political and social pressure on a series of committees that made many recommendations for school reorganization during the first decades of the 20th century (Brimm, 1969). The notion of how to best educate children opened the door to a long and continuing history of educational reform. Following the committee of 10's recommendation, many debates resulted regarding the proper education for preadolescents. In answer to consistent complaints about American schools, many reform plans followed (Cuban, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

In response to the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 provided funds to enhance national security by mandating specific educational courses and strengthening instruction in mathematics, science, and foreign language. This reaction to Sputnik was driven primarily by national-security concerns growing out of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Thus, the reforms that emerged from the Sputnik era were most concerned with providing advanced training to the most promising students to create a cadre of premier scientists (Berrands, Chun, Schuyler, Stockly, & Briggs, 2002). The call for restructuring of schools has been publicly echoed by educators and others since the launching of Sputnik in 1957, which prompted Americans to believe that schools must change.

In the 1960s reformations matched the social movements, like the federal civil rights legislation, and compensatory and equity programs. Popkewitz et al. (1982) argued that the 1960s were a time of confusion for most institutions in American society. Educational reform

efforts were suddenly faced with the challenge of responding to the social and political issues that commanded the nation's attention.

The civil rights movement called for improved education for minority children, whereas political changes created a demand for education that could assist in establishing a sense of community cohesion among citizens. This period also brought about one of the most important decision of the Supreme Court. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s build on the *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision and the necessity to integrate unjustly segregated school systems (Allen, 2004). The Supreme Court ruled that Black children could enroll in White-only schools, forcing integration in schools.

Conti et al. (2000) found all of this concern over education, and the nation's concern for its weakening economy, led to a 1983 series of evaluation reports that crystallized the national consensus for school change. These reports included the following: *High School* (E. L. Boyer, 1983); *America's Competitive Challenge: The Need For A National Response* (Business-Higher Education Reform, 1983); *Academic Preparation For College: What Students Need To Know And Be Able To Do* (College Board, 1983); *Action For Excellence* (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983); *A Place Called School: Prospects For The Future* (Goodlad, 1983); and *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The complaints raised in these reports included the following: concerns over the nation's economic and strategic competitiveness in the global market place, failing test scores, decreasing international competitiveness of students, the increasing inequalities between rich and poor, the desire to professionalize the practice of teaching, and an overall perception that the educational system was failing (Conti et al., 2000).

A Nation at Risk was issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). President Reagan reluctantly appointed Utah educator T. H. Bell as the cabinet member in charge of eliminating or reducing the U.S. Department of Education (USDE, Bell, 1988). To save the department, Bell appointed an investigating 18-member National Commission on Excellence in Education. This prestigious ad hoc committee sounded an education call to arms and unleashed a firestorm of reform activity. The report concentrated primarily on secondary education. Secondary-school curricula were closely examined and it was found that the curricula no longer had a central purpose unifying all of the subjects (Beare & Boyd, 1993). Furthermore, the state of American education was found to be poor. Bell concluded that “what was unimaginable a generation ago” had occurred in that other nations began to surpass U.S. educational attainments (Bell, 1988, p. 8). This report indicated that some 23 million American adults were functionally illiterate by the simplest test of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension. About 13% of all 17-year old people in the United States could be considered functionally illiterate and, compared to other nations, American students spent much less time on school work (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). *A Nation at Risk* report expressed the following:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments (Bell, 1988, p. 8).

The federal government interceded in response to public demand and eight national goals that were part of President Clinton’s Goals 2000: Educate America Act on March 31 of 1994,

which allowed the federal government a new role in its support for education. These goals were written particularly to “bring out precise targets for American schools, children, and the greater community” (Kearns & Harvey, 2000, p. 135).

Goals 2000 established a guideline that identified academic standards, measures of student progress, and support systems to meet the standards. This Act enacted eight education goals: (a) every child ready for school, (b) higher graduation rate, (c) higher student competency, (d) leadership in mathematics and science, (e) adult literacy, (f) safe and drug-free schools, (g) teacher professional development, and (h) parental participation. Goals 2000 also created a national vision and strategy to incorporate technology and technology planning into all educational programs in school systems. As part of this effort, the U.S. Office of Educational Technology was created in the USDE (Goals 2000, P.L. 103-227).

On January 8, 2002, President G. W. Bush signed NCLB (2001) into law bringing about more accountability for schools and teachers and particularly addressing the need to reform schools to increase student achievement. NCLB attempted to provide the framework to address the needs of all students by improving programs. This law was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, designed to redefine the federal government’s role in grades K–12 and close the gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. “The Bush administration, with its centerpiece NCLB, has presided over the largest single expansion of federal authority into state and local decisions in the history of this country” (Elmore, 2004, p. 2). The creation of this act legislated a series of educational reforms including requiring that all teachers be certified in the subject area they teach, teachers be able to demonstrate competencies in their teaching area, and school districts develop an improvement plan for those teachers who are not competent and increase professional development.

Fullan et al. (2006) presented a revolutionary new approach to educational reform in their book *Breakthrough*. They predicted that breaking away from the conventional paradigm to help educators create focused instruction, transform the classroom experience, and dramatically raise and sustain performance levels for students and teachers alike would dramatically improve classroom instruction and therefore cause schools and districts to *breakthrough* and reach a tipping point within 5 years.

Through the years there have been many books, papers, articles, guides, and studies written about reform and the role states and school districts should play in carrying out those reform efforts. Some of the research included *Blueprints for School Success: A Guide to New American Schools Designs* (1998), which provided suggestions and best practices for well planned and organized procedures for school districts to improve. In their book, *Transforming Schools: Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement*, Zmuda et al. (2004) provided a plan to reform schools and create an atmosphere focused on student achievement.

The review of literature indicates that there is a significant degree of controversy as to what form educational reform should take. Perhaps the controversy surrounding educational reform and program implementation is based on the premise that one conceptual framework must guide the development and operation of any reform initiative. Reformation is not considered in a positive light. Tyack and Cuban (1995) confirmed negative opinions stating that reformers who adopt a rationale planning mode of educational reform sometimes expect that they will improve schools if they design their policies correctly. Rationale planners may have plans for schools, and may blame practitioners if they think that the plans are not properly implemented.

Research indicated that teacher commitment appears to be a key element to school reform. Turnbull (2002) found that it is commonly believed that teachers who participate in reform-implementation decisions will have increased commitment, be more motivated to take action, and thus have greater impact on school reform. What Turnbull found in sampling teachers from the New Jersey whole-school-reform initiative over a 2-year period was that teacher participation in program selection was not a strong predictor either of immediate or long-term commitment. Turnbull also found training, support from program developers, support from staff members, administrator commitment, and control over classroom implementation were stronger and more constant predictors of teacher commitment to a school-reform program. Ongoing communication with teachers and involving teachers on teams to focus on and address specific academic reform efforts increased the rate of success (Barley & Dodson, 2003).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was created in 1987 after the Carnegie Corporation's Forum on Education and the Economy's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession released *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*. This document was intended to help increase the overall level of teacher quality and professionalism by establishing high standards for teachers. Shortly after its release, NBPTS (2002) issued its first policy statement: *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do*. NBPTS is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan, and nongovernmental organization governed by a board of 64 directors, the majority of whom are classroom teachers. Accreditation of Teacher Education programs by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education helps with the backing of American Federation of Teachers and National Educators of America. state-certified teachers with 3 or more years' teaching experience may apply for national board examinations, take subject content tests at assessment centers, be evaluated in a simulated clinical-teaching

experience, show their portfolios of past experiences, and show videos of their best teaching; and if they pass, become nationally certified, with the willingness of school boards to hire and pay them professional salaries. (NBPTS, 1988)

One of the country's most prominent educators on school reforms is John I. Goodlad. Goodlad (1990) in the book *Teachers For Our Nations' Schools* wanted to facilitate communication, optimism, and an agenda for improvement. The emphasis of the book is that teaching and teacher education involve moral imperatives (Goodlad et al., 1990). Parker (1994b) believed that because the United States only retains half of its teachers, with the other half leaving within 5 years, the cost of producing one lifelong teacher is as much as the cost to train a physician. The country will only be as successful as its willingness to put money where it is needed most, promoting and paying the cost it will take to educate our teachers.

Chubb and Moe (1990) stated that one of the most controversial school-reform efforts is school choice. Chubb and Moe declared that more than 20 years ago only market forces could improve public schools. Choice frees educators from bureaucratic interference and gives parents the opportunity to move their children to better schools. Many oppose this view because of the fear that choice will destroy public schools, but well-off parents have always had a choice to send to private schools. Choice experiments are being watched carefully in Milwaukee, Harlem, and many other cities whose opponents feel it allows for inequalities in public schools.

One of the opponents of inequalities is Kozol. In his books, *Death at an Early Age* (1967), *Rachel and Her Children* (1988), and *Savage Inequalities* (1991). Kozol included a rash of angry testimony about poor minorities needing equal education as well as equal opportunities. Kozol discussed Black children in Boston's poor Roxbury section, which won a National Book Award and described homeless children in filthy, overcrowded schools. There are many

questions that have gone unanswered in America’s ongoing search for the perfect public school system; the answers to these questions lie with educators. No one reform or innovation will work for a school all the time or even some of the time; that is to say there is not one best system (Tyack, 1974).

Factors Driving Education Reform

The purpose of this section is to provide a greater understanding of the widely acclaimed educational reform act. NCLB (2001) was signed into law by then President G. W. Bush (P.L. 107-110). This law was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). The literature provides research and additional insights on reform initiatives designed to strengthen the American education system (see Table 3).

Table 3

Factors Driving Education Reform

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012	Assessment/report	Document	Reported what students know and are able to do in reading and mathematics nationally.
National Institute of School Leaders, 2008	Guide	Literature review/case studies	Described high-quality, research-based staff development for principals.
No Child Left Behind Act, 2001	Law	Document	Outlined a federal law to reform schools and require proficiency of all students on high-stakes tests.
U.S. Department of Education, 2009	Report	Document	Described a competitive education grant that provides assistance to states that implement large-scale reforms.
U.S. Department of Education, 2010	Article/report	Document	Outlined the Obama blueprint to reform the No Child Left Behind Act.

To fully understand today’s reform efforts one must first understand the effects that NCLB and AYP have had on education reform in the United States. NCLB is a driving force in

education today. NCLB highlighted the achievement gap and created a national conversation about student achievement. Regardless of how one feels about the specific guidelines of NCLB, the idea of accountability as the basis for reform has proven to be the greatest reform efforts (Elmore, 2004).

This legislation mandates that all public school systems set standards, assess students, and report student progress toward meeting those standards. The states must create and distribute an annual report card that provides information on student achievement in the state. These reports must include certain criteria including the state version of assessment results by performance level (basic, proficient, and advanced). They also must include how many students were not being tested and identify their demographic group. Along with these stipulations, graduation rates for secondary school students and school districts' AYP measures must also be included. States must also include which schools are identified, professional qualifications of teachers, and a comparison of the more and less affluent schools.

The consequences for schools are very high. Each school district must include a specific rationale for not meeting AYP for 2 consecutive school years. A school failing to meet AYP for 2 years will be identified by the district before the beginning of the next school year as *needing improvement*. After the district has received such an extreme rating, a 2-year plan is created to help students reach their potential, and must involve others in the planning process. This may include educational agencies in the area that will help the district follow through with their plan. Parents will be offered the option of transferring their students to another school in the district, and, unexpectedly for public school administrators, could include a public charter school that is making AYP.

In subsequent years, if the school does not make AYP the school remains in *school-improvement status* and may have to take further *corrective actions* to improve the school. Many districts have replaced administrators and staff or implemented an entirely new curriculum. After this, if the status of the school has not improved, the school will face a *restructuring* phase. Many districts have reopened schools as charter schools, replacing some or all of the staff. Some have turned over school operations either to the state or to a private company with a proven record of effectiveness (National Institute for School Leadership, 2008).

In the reauthorization phase of NCLB, states are held accountable for ensuring that all students can read and do mathematics at grade level by 2014. There are several proposals that will allow some states flexibility in their improvement effort, such as growth models to measure individual progress that is being made toward grade-level proficiency by 2014. This will require states to have extensive data, well-established assessments, and set annual goals based on proficiency, not on students' backgrounds.

This flexibility will allow states to prioritize support for schools, focusing more federal dollars where they are needed most. Giving states this type of flexibility of funds allows them to help tailor the education of students with disabilities, with modified or alternative achievement standards, and with limited English proficiency, as long as they are of quality and promote challenging instruction (National Institute of School Leadership, 2008).

When President Obama took office he vowed during his campaign to help overhaul the economy. In doing so he, his top aides, and advisors released a report before he took office that has been named as the stimulus bill. The USDE stated:

On February 17, 2009, President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), historic legislation designed to stimulate the economy, support job creation, and invest in critical sectors, including education. The ARRA lays the foundation for education reform by supporting investments in innovative

strategies that are most likely to lead to improved results for students, long-term gains in school and school-system capacity, and increased productivity and effectiveness. (USDE, 2009, p. 2)

The ARRA provided billions of dollars for the *Race to the Top Fund*, a competitive-grant program designed to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement; closing achievement gaps; improving high school-graduation rates; ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
- building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- turning around our lowest achieving schools. (USDE, 2009, p. 2)

In March 2010, the Obama administration unveiled its *Blueprint for Reform, The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. This complete change of the NCLB supports state and local efforts to help ensure that all students graduate prepared for college and a career. Duncan stated “We’re offering support, incentives and national leadership, but not at the expense of local control. Our children have one chance for a great education. Together, we need to get it right” (USDE, 2010, p. 1).

Adolescent Development

The purpose of this section is to gather from the research an understanding of adolescents and how they are a unique group of students. Table 4 provides an outline of the research on their developmental levels and how educators should pay close attention to this growing group of teens.

Table 4

Adolescent Development

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Brown, 2005	Paper	Document	Explained how adolescence can be a turbulent time, but they can make it through.
Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989	Report	Document	Recommended ways to improve the educational experiences of middle-grade students.
Carr, 2002	Analysis/report	Literature review/monograph	Addressed literacy development in middle school students
Chirichello, Eckel, & Pagliaro, 2005	Article	Literature review	Suggested ways to teach adolescents concepts and connections.
Eccles & Wigfield, 1997	Article	Document	Provided extensive research on the development of young adolescents.
Jackson & Davis, 2000	Report	Document	Established the need to strengthen the academic core of middle schools.
Lounsbury & Vars, 2003	Article	Literature review	Suggested that middle-level educators do their best to influence future society and therefore make a difference in the world.
McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2005	Article	Literature review	Provided data on grade configuration and how it affects programs and practices.
Simpson, 1999	Book	Literature review	Presented 27 contributions examining the environment of the middle school student.

Adolescence and the developmental stages of adolescence have been referenced as the “turning point” between childhood and adulthood (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development [CCAD], 1989). Brown (2005) described young-adolescent education as an ongoing search for the appropriate combination of school organization, curriculum, and instructional practices for young adolescents. Adolescence is a time of remarkable change: the

biological changes associated with puberty, the social/educational changes associated with the transitions from elementary to secondary school, and the social and psychological changes associated with the emergence of sexuality. “In fact, adolescents grow and develop in more ways and more quickly than people in any other age group” (Brown, 2005, p. 1). Because they grow so rapidly it can cause problems. This is a very crucial time for them. The majority of individuals pass through this developmental period without a major episode, but there are high numbers of individuals that experience difficulty (CCAD, 1989).

The human growth and development that is unique to the adolescent includes physical, cognitive, and psychological areas (Simpson, 1999). Life for the adolescent would be simpler if all these changes would occur at once. Unfortunately biological maturation often has different effects for boys and girls (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997). One child may develop physically and still have the mind and relationships of a child, while another teenager looks very young but is thinking in more mature fashion and has more mature relationships. Early-maturing boys seem to have an advantage because increased size and strength are important for sports, are a measure of protection against bullies, and are attractive to members of the opposite sex (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997).

Females, on the other hand, seem uncomfortable with the padding that precedes hip growth and breast development. According to Brown (2005) this among the paths of development can cause problems. Because these adolescents make many choices and engage in a variety of behaviors during this period that can influence the rest of their lives, it is critical that those who are charged with educating this group of adolescents understand what factors influence whether young people stay on a healthy pathway or move onto a problematic, and potentially destructive pathway as they pass through this important developmental period. “We

differ in many ways and these differences are magnified during the middle school years as we pass through massive physical, social, emotional and intellectual changes of puberty at different times and at different rates” (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003, p. 24).

Physical Development

Physical development in a teenager is probably the development that we can see. Most of us refer to it as puberty. These changes that occur in the adolescents body causes them to think that everyone is always looking at them. Because some are taller, shorter, fatter, and skinnier, they are painfully self-conscious about their appearance (Brown, 2005). They usually want to look like everyone else, but some days that is impossible. Individual differences in maturation rates, temperaments, and adult and social influences mean that age is not a definitive indicator of where a particular child is along this developmental continuum. The age at which biological changes due to puberty begins varies between 9 and 14 for boys and 8 and 13 for girls in the United States. Children’s progression through these stages is determined not only by biological growth and change, but also by adult expectations and societal contexts (Brown, 2005).

Cognitive Development

Another important aspect of adolescent development has to with their mind and methods of thinking. “This process, known as cognitive development, continues well after the physical changes of puberty are complete” (Brown, 2005, p. 2). Some theorists believe that adolescents are not capable of thinking deep cognitive thoughts. Carr (2002) said teachers find variation among students in levels of thinking but they noted differences within students as well. Students who are able to write a complex persuasive essay or debate a political issue still may need to continue using objects to assist mathematical thinking. Although learning theorists disagree with how and why this happens, most accept that rates of learning differ (Carr, 2002).

Adolescents begin to think in a more adult fashion at about age twelve and some teenagers may develop these adult methods of thinking more quickly than others. An adolescent continues to get better at this kind of thinking, and at about fifteen years old, this adult cognition is fairly in place. (Brown, 2005, p. 2)

In contrast, young adolescents are usually moody and do not know where to position themselves or get their bearings. They occasionally feel that they are the only ones in the world experiencing these feelings. This can lead them into feelings of low self-esteem and other unquestionable behaviors (Brown, 2005).

Psychosocial Development

Cognitive development and psychosocial development can be interrelated because at no other time are adolescents likely to encounter differences between themselves and their peers. The increased desire for autonomy and resolving identity issues can refer to the teenager's growing ability to relate with other people. Development of this type may show itself for years, but before a person can be considered an adult it should come to a close (Brown, 2005). For this type of development, Brown

outlines three stages, although these ages are not absolute, they work as a good general guide (a) early adolescence: from about 10 to 13 years old, (b) middle adolescence: from about 14 to 17 years old, (c) late adolescence: from about 18 to 22 years old. (2005, p. 3)

Growing up during the period of time known as adolescence is difficult at best. This process takes much of an individual's energy. It goes by extremely quickly and is stressful for the adolescent and the parent. These individuals need unconditional support and love to become positive contributing adults in society (Brown, 2005).

Young adolescent minds are constantly adapting to internal and external alterations and conflicts with parents, teachers, and peers. Their goal in moving toward adulthood is to adapt to the growing responsibilities and the demands placed on them by families, schools, and community, and finally to figure out their roles and responsibilities in society. (Chirichello et al., 2005, p. 39)

“The history of young adolescent education can be viewed as an ongoing search for the appropriate combination of school organization, curriculum, and instructional practices for young adolescents” (McEwin et al., 2005, p. 24). In 1986, Carnegie Corporation of New York established the CCAD (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1986) to place the compelling challenges of the adolescent years higher on the nation’s agenda. In 1987, the Council established the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, a distinguished group of educators, researchers, government officials, and media leaders, to examine firsthand the conditions of America’s 10 to 15 year olds and identify promising approaches to improving their education and promoting their healthy development. In 1989 this Task Force produced the report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, which provided a comprehensive approach to educating young adolescents (CCAD, 1989). A decade later, *Turning Points 2000* was created. Like its predecessor, *Turning Points 2000* aimed to help bridge the gap between current, unacceptable levels of intellectual development and a future in which every middle-grades student meets or exceeds high academic standards and other key indicators of a successful school experience (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Understanding Change

This section summarizes literature identifying the area of change. Change isn’t new and neither is the study of change. Table 5 lists different educational theorists and perspectives from other disciplines on change as it relates to school reform.

At least three types of change exist: procedural change, technological change, and structural and cultural (systemic) change (Schlechty, 1997).

Procedural change consists of altering the way the job is done, technological change consists of changing the means by which the job is done, and Structural and cultural (systemic) change consists of changing the nature of the work itself, reorienting its purpose, and refocusing its intent. (Schlechty, 1997, pp. 204–205)

Table 5

Understanding Change

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Cuban, 1990	Article	Literature review/analysis	Presented explanations for recurring reforms.
Cuban, 1996	Article	Literature review	Suggested tools to understand change and offer suggestions for better evaluations of success and failure.
Cuban, 1998	Article	Literature review	Presented the journey of school reform as a story of adaptation that undermines the common criteria used to judge success or failure.
Ellsworth, 2000	Book	Literature review/information analysis	Presented a strategy to seek guidance from educational-change literature.
Ely, 1990	Article	Literature review	Described 8 conditions that should exist in the environmental for the change process to be adopted.
Fullan, 2001	Book	Literature review/case studies	Offered insight into the dynamics of leadership and educational change.
Kotter, 1996	Book	Literature review	Presented an 8-stage process on leading change with examples on how to go about it.
Schlechty, 1997	Book	Literature review	Provided the day-to-day work of implementing school reforms.
Zaltman & Duncan, 1997	Book	Literature review	Suggested strategies to help overcome resistance to change.

Cuban is a professor at Stanford University and previously served as a high school superintendent. Cuban and associates wrote extensively about the history of education reforms and is known for two great publications: *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots* (Cuban & Usdan, 2003) and *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Cuban participated in writing and publishing many articles and books teaching about school reform, policy and practice, and teacher and student use of technologies. the most recent

projects were *As Good As It Gets* and *Against the Odds* (Cuban, Lichtenstein, Evenchik, Tombari & Pozzoboni, 2010).

Cuban (1990, 1992) believed that there are two types of change: incremental and fundamental. An incremental change typically does not require any existing structures to change. But fundamental changes usually require major changes to structure and process. Many changes start out as fundamental but shift to incremental. The terms incremental and fundamental are based on the concepts of first- and second-order changes. First-order changes (incremental), or surface-level changes, are those that “improve the efficiency and effectiveness of what is currently done without affecting the basic organizational features including teaching” (Cuban, 1996, p. 76). Second-order changes (fundamental), the more critical of the two, strive to alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together, including new goals, structures, and roles. These changes tend to be focused on addressing beliefs, values, assumptions, and norms within the school (Cuban, 1996, p. 76).

Schlechty (1997) wrote that

change is usually motivated by one of two conditions (1) a threat so rave that change is mandatory for survival or (2) a vision so compelling and attractive that the preservation of the status quo and the security of present arrangement pale in significance. (p. 18)

Therefore a positive vision for the future will create commitment and passion. Educators need to create a sense of urgency and to do this they must point out why schools must reform.

Fullan is recognized as an international authority on organizational change, engaged in training, consulting, and evaluating change projects around the world. Fullan authored the *Six Secrets of Change* (2008), *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2001), *Breakthrough* (Fullan et al., 2006), and *Turnaround Leadership* (2006) to name a few. Fullan (2001) believed that schools should be recultured to become zones of shared responsibility.

Remember that a culture of change consists of great speed and nonlinearity on the one hand and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on the other. Understanding the change process is less about innovation and more about innovativeness. It is less about strategy and more about strategizing. (p. 31)

Kotter (1996) is widely regarded as the foremost expert on the topics of leadership and transformation. A professor at the Harvard Business School, Kotter's book *Leading Change*, stated,

The methods used in successful transformations are all based on one fundamental insight: that major change will not happen easily for a long list of reasons and to be effective, a method designed to alter strategies, reengineer processes, or improve quality must address the barriers and address them well" (p. 20)

However, even the most effective change effort usually encounters some resistance. *Strategies for Planned Change* (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977) can help narrow the cause of resistance. In *A Survey of Educational Change Models*, Ellsworth (2000) created a framework that organizes these change perspectives to make the literature more accessible to the practitioner.

"One of our most consistent finding and understandings about the change process in education is that all successful schools experience implementation dips as they move forward" (Fullan, 2001, p. 40). This dip is commonly referred to as a dip in performance and confidence in what one is doing. Most people experience problems with the fear of change and the lack of know how or skills to make the change work (Fullan, 2001, p. 41).

Other obstacles may arise from the environment in which change is implemented. The *Conditions of Change* (Ely, 1990) can help address those deficiencies. Possibly a clearer statement of commitment by top leaders is needed. Maybe more opportunity for professional development is required, to help stakeholders learn how to use their new tools (Ellsworth, 2000).

Comparison of the Junior High School to a Middle School

The goal of this section is to explore literature on the development of junior high schools and examine the distinctions from middle schools and the organizational and programmatic practices that make these concepts distinctive (see Table 6).

For a long time educators have been directly and deeply involved in the search for better education for children in the middle school years. This search has lasted throughout the 20th century, with the junior high school developing early and becoming the dominant school model between elementary and high school during the 1920 to 1960 period. Dissatisfaction continues with the junior high school and with the still common K–8–4 plan of organization: 8 years of elementary and 4 years of high school led educators to propose early in the 1960s the alternative organization now commonly called the *middle school* (Maryland Task Force on the Middle Learning Years, 1989). One cannot fully comprehend the middle school movement without an understanding of the rapid development of junior high schools in our country.

The junior high school story began in an address in 1888 by President Charles Eliot of Harvard before the NEA, who raised questions about the purpose of elementary and secondary education and led to several NEA study committees (Eichhorn, 1998). National committees were organized and the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education presented a recommendation for the creation of separate schools housing Grades 7, 8, and 9. These early advocates proposed that the junior high school should be a lower level of the high school, not a separate level (Eichhorn, 1998). C. W. Eliot, president of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909, has been recognized for his efforts in establishing the junior high school (Hanna, 1989).

Table 6

A Comparison of the Junior High School to the Middle School

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Ahrens, 1957	Article	Literature review	Described the unique purposes and functions that helped evolve the junior high school to today's model.
Alexander, 1995	Paper	Document	Described the features of the junior high school student who needed to be retained in middle school.
Anderman & Maehr, 1994	Article	Document	Examined developments in research on social-cognitive theories of motivation during adolescence.
Burke, 1990	Dissertation	Case studies	Presented ways to aid in the development of effective transition guidelines.
Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989	Report	Literature review/document	Task force called for specific recommendations for transforming middle-grade schools.
Echhorn, 1998	Article	Literature review	Suggested ways to reach young adolescents in the middle school.
Egnatuck, Georgiady, Muth, & Romano, 1975	Paper	Document	Recommended ways to develop an educational program designed for the preadolescent.
George & Alexander, 1993	Book	Literature review	Presented the basics of the middle school philosophy.
Hanna, 1989	Paper	Literature review	A position paper that refuted the notion that the junior high school warrants the term movement.
Hochman, 1997	Book	Document	A workbook about middle school issues and what one actually thinks about it.
Jackson & Davis, 2000	Report	Document	A follow-up report of <i>Turning Points</i> (1989) destined to build on the efforts of the original work of a comprehensive implementation model for schools to guide efforts.
Lounsbury, 1992	Book	Literature review	Suggested different viewpoints on the middle school.

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Lutz, 2004	Dissertation	Case study	Attempted to describe the degree of adaptation of middle-level programs due to accountability demands for student achievement.
Maryland Task Force on the Middle Learning Years, 1989	Report	Literature review/document	Presented recommendations from a study on Maryland middle schools.
National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, 2006	Book	Document	The missing link that will help middle-level and high schools join forces and align efforts for secondary school interest.
National Middle School Association, 1982, 1995	Position paper	Literature review/document	Set forth the rationale and definition of middle schools designed to advance efforts to provide the best possible education for America's youth.
Southern Regional Education Board, 1997	Book	Document	Designed to look at what teachers teach and how they teach adolescents, focusing on 10 essential elements.

The junior high school, invented in the early 1900s, resulted from an “increased birth rate after World War I, and other factors increasing our population, [leading to] mounting school enrollments and overcrowded schools” (George & Alexander, 1993, p. 25). One new educational organization was a junior high school created in Columbus, Ohio in 1909, consisting of the seventh and eight grammar grades and the first grade of the high school. An intermediate school was established in Berkeley, California at approximately the same time and is often credited with being the first junior high school (Lounsbury, 1989).

In the beginning, the junior high school was seen as a vehicle to train 12-year-olds for industrial jobs. “Although observers agreed that the junior high school, properly implemented, would improve the educational delivery system by easing the grade school/high school

transition, they disagreed on exactly what elements were necessary for the attainment of exemplary status” (Burke, 1990, p. 19).

By 1918, more than 500 junior high schools had been established in many parts of the country and by 1930, the number had increased to about 4000. Children twelve years of age and higher went to schools organized by subjects instead of being under just one teacher. (Maryland Task Force on the Middle Learning Years [MTFMLY], 1989, p. 67)

By the 1960s junior high schools had narrowed their mission and had been transformed into smaller, uniform versions of the high school in curriculum, instruction, and organization. The junior high school program became an integral part of America’s educational system. The junior high school was perceived primarily as a younger high school and an extension of secondary education, organized by subjects and departments, with a grade-level configuration that usually included ninth grade (NMSA, 1995).

The junior high school was created to help those students between elementary and high school and spread rapidly following the war. The traditional plan of 6–3–3 was the plan preferred by most because it better enabled schools to meet the specific biological, psychological, social, and moral needs of young people of this age (MTFMLY, 1989). The junior high schools provided choices for youth, like exploring different classes and interest. It also has had its critics that argue its identity has never been really established (MTFMLY, 1989).

Beginning around mid 1900s, schools started looking more deeply into the physical and psycho-social needs of adolescents. This caused some to realize through medical evidence that young people were maturing earlier than they had before. Studies by G. Stanley Hall, conducted in the early 1900s, began to gain acceptance. Hall determined that early adolescents often experienced emotional confusion, unpredictable behavior, and self-doubt (MTFMLY, 1989).

All of this caused quite a stir and concern about meeting the developmental needs of adolescents. Some school systems started reevaluating their organizational plans, by rearranging

the elementary grade configuration and placing the ninth grade in the high school. “The [middle school] as a unique educational establishment thus began to emerge” (MTFMLY, 1989, p. 68).

The junior high school in its inception was based on the same premises that the middle schools are based on today. The middle school was birthed from the junior high movement, which was to focus on the students in the middle and somehow connect elementary and secondary education. In the late 1950s and early 1960s critics of the junior high school argued that the junior high had failed to reach its full potential because it mirrored the rigorous atmosphere of the senior high school (Lake, 1989). Early adolescents need more than high school students. They needed to be wanted and not compete with each other like high school students do. Lake believed they needed five basic premises: (a) a more personal environment created by team organization and teacher-advisor programs, (b) interdisciplinary instruction, (c) varied learning strategies to accommodate adolescent curiosity and restlessness, (d) exploratory and elective programs to help expand students’ horizons, and (e) appropriately designed cocurricular programs. New research indicated that when implemented, middle-level practice is effective (Lake, 1989).

The junior high school had become common but it has never been without its critics. It was coming under criticism, and another school in the middle was in the offing (George & Alexander, 1993b). Some educators felt that the junior high school too readily adopted the college preparatory curriculum. Also, some felt that the major failing of the junior high school was that it duplicated the senior high school in credit and grading systems, methods of teaching, time schedules, and student activities (Ahrens, 1957). Unfortunately, this did not allow for the implementation of the recommended program, one designed to better meet the needs of middle-level students.

To determine the future of the junior high school, those concerned about early adolescents are to “put the house in order” to reexamine and reformulate the purpose and function, to develop a program which will meet the general and unique needs of this worthy group of young people, to plan buildings which will provide facilities for this distinctive program and to develop teacher education which will supply teachers who have specific skills, understanding and abilities necessary to work effectively with early adolescents and perhaps to provide a name for the school which is more descriptive of the purpose and functions. (Ahrens, 1957, p. 467)

Lounsbury (1989), editor for the NMSA, discussed four principal reasons for the development of the junior high school and noted that this time period, between 1890–1920, was one of great change. These four reasons were (a) to teach college preparatory subjects earlier; (b) to revise and enrich the curriculum to encourage students to stay in school longer; (c) to bridge the gap between elementary and high school caused by differences in philosophy, curriculum, and organizational structure; and (d) to meet the needs of early adolescents. Lounsbury summarized the discussion of the junior high school with this discouraging notation, “Initially, the junior high school served this special age group, [of early adolescence] and although the junior high continues to serve young people well in many communities, its overall development has been disappointing” (1989, pp. 92–93).

The middle school movement has gained support from educators because of a belief that students are physically maturing earlier, because of a concern over early academic specialization, and because of dissatisfaction with the traditional junior high school (NMSA, 1995). “The history of education shows that every attempt to break out of the student as a consumer syndrome has been hindered by routine steps backwards to the basics and elementary schools and high schools are no exception” (Hochman, 1997, p. 40). “The present-day junior high school fails to achieve its original objectives and deteriorates into a watered-down version of the senior high school, precluding use of the term junior high school” (Egnatuck, Georgiady, Muth, & Romano, 1975, p. 5). A new term, new programming, and a new idea about educating youth

must be accepted by the boards of education to develop school organization that will be successful and encourage students to excel (Egnatuck et al., 1975).

The first publication with which we are familiar that voiced these dissatisfactions with the junior high in particular and recommended experimentation with different approaches for this age group was a monograph prepared by collaboration of many Florida educators under the Florida Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development of the Florida Education Association, for ASCD publication. (George & Alexander, 1993, p. 25)

These educators did not suggest creating a completely new grade organization, but they did propose and illustrate changes from departmentalization to block scheduling and little school arrangements, a type of team organization and to broaden choices of exploratory subjects and activities, as well as other special interest activities, all characteristic of the middle school to be planned later.(George & Alexander, 1993, p. 26)

Although dissatisfaction with junior high schools was being voiced, the middle school concept was beginning to be developed. Alexander (cited in George & Alexander, 1993)

presented an interpretation of the need for and characteristics of a new school in the middle at a junior high conference at Cornell University in the summer of 1963, stressing certain contributions the junior high had made, and other characteristics to be sought in the new middle school. (p. 27)

The middle schools were created to capitalize on the great things that the junior high schools were doing, and in the meantime meet the unique needs of the adolescent child.

According to Alexander (as cited in George & Alexander, 1993)

this unit included (1) a well-articulated 12 to 14 year system of education; (2) preparation for, even transition to, adolescence; (3) continued general education; and (4) abundant opportunities for exploration of individualization, interests, a flexible curriculum, and emphasis on values. (pp. 27–28)

By the mid 1960s, the middle school movement was in full swing across the United States, with surveys and studies to help determine periodically how the numbers and types were progressing. Many schools across the country increasingly were called middle schools, although names remained junior high or intermediate.

The term “middle school” is defined as most appropriate for a school planned and operated as a separate school to serve the educational needs of students usually enrolled

in Grades 6–8 or 5–8 and 10–14 years of age, building on the elementary and leading toward the high school” (George & Alexander, 1993, p. 28).

Different philosophies of middle school education continue to be discussed and debated. Learning research has provided middle school educators with much valuable information and concurrently raised a number of questions about how middle school students’ needs should be met (Anderman & Maehr, 1994).

In the past decade, research on the development and learning of early adolescents has led to a widespread conviction that schools should provide middle grade students with 1) significant exposure to a wider range of subjects, 2) increased attention to cognitively demanding tasks, and 3) a greater variety of models of learning in which they can participate much more actively than merely being listeners, calculators, memorizers, and scribes. (Becker, 1990, p. 457)

Innovations, particularly in the computer and electronic-communication areas, have been publicized as being important for students to learn so they will be prepared for life in a technological society. However, many middle school students are not afforded opportunities to learn about these innovations (Becker, 1990).

Steps for accomplishing this change have been outlined in *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, which has been widely disseminated as a national blueprint in restructuring efforts (CCAD, 1989). *Turning Points* called for changes in what teachers learned in becoming middle school teachers and how they learned it. The teachers would need to possess a strong core of middle school curriculum in one or two subject areas, understand principles of guidance in order to serve as advisors, learn to work as members of a team, and ultimately, to understand adolescent development through extensive coursework and direct experience teaching middle grades. The Carnegie report identified five broad goals for the education of young teens. Specifically, the report proposed that a

15-year-old student graduating from middle school ought to be (1) an intellectually reflective person, (2) a person in route to a lifetime of meaningful work, (3) a good

citizen, (4) a caring and ethical individual, and (5) a healthy person. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 22)

The middle school movement gained a powerful advocate in 1973 with the development of NMSA. NMSA's landmark position paper, *This We Believe* (1982) has been a key resource to middle-level educators looking to develop more effective schools. There have been several revisions of *This We Believe*, such as *This We Believe, Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003), and the 1989 groundbreaking report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, which provided a comprehensive approach to educating young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Turning Points (cited in Jackson & Davis, 2000) offered eight recommendations for improving education during the middle grades:

- establishing smaller communities of learning
- teaching all students a core of common knowledge
- ensuring success for all students
- empowering teachers and administrators
- preparing teachers for the middle grades
- improving academic performance through better health and fitness
- reengaging families in the education of young adolescents
- connecting schools with communities (p. 2).

The authors of *Turning Points* noted that middle school students need to become socially competent individuals who are able to cope successfully with everyday life. They need to believe they have promising futures and the competence to take advantage of societal opportunities when they arise (CCAD, 1989). We now know that many other studies have been provided to middle school practitioners such as *Turning Points 2000, Educating Adolescence in the 21st Century*,

(Jackson & Davis, 2000). Their purpose is to provide an in-depth analysis of the *Turning Points* model of middle-grades education based on the most current research and the experiences of hundreds of middle-grades schools that are attempting to improve results for young adolescent students.

In 2004, the National Association of Secondary Principals, published *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*. The latest publication is *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform*, (National Association of Secondary Principals, 2006), designed to provide middle-level principals and other school leaders with a field guide to school improvement. It purposefully avoids the question of grade configuration at the middle level and instead focuses on solid educational practices for young adolescents no matter where they are being educated. It is similarly aligned with the other middle-level reform efforts. The Southern Regional Education Board middle-grade initiative, *Making Middle Grades Work* (1997), is designed to help states, districts, and schools look at what they expect, what they teach, and how they teach young adolescents to prepare for success in further education. They ask for a commitment to implement 10 essential elements that focus on a rigorous and challenging academic core curriculum for all students and on teaching and learning conditions that support continuous improvement in student achievement.

Leadership

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the role of leadership and why it is important. This framework for leadership offers a definition of leadership to help the reader understand the characteristics of leaders and the impact leadership has through the reorganization of middle schools.

There is a vast amount of literature on leadership. Nahavandi (1997) stated the “subject of leadership is neither new nor exclusive. ... As long as people have organized into groups to accomplish a task, there have been leaders and followers” (p. ix). Webster’s Dictionary (1997) defined leading as providing direction or guidance. Although there are various definitions of leadership, all definitions, according to Nahavandi,

have the following characteristics in common: First, leadership is a group phenomenon; there are no leaders without followers. Second, leaders persuade, they use their influence to guide. Third, the presence of leaders often assumes some form of hierarchy within a group. (p. 4)

Gardner (1990) said,

in every established group, individuals fill different roles, and one of the roles is that of a leader. They are integral parts of the system ... perform certain task or functions that are essential if the group is to accomplish its purpose. (p. 1)

Effective leadership is vital to the success of a school. Educators know for certain that schools need leaders with different forms of effective leadership. From nearly 2 decades of research, *The Leadership Challenge* described five key practices essential for effective leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2002): (a) challenge the process, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) enable others to act, (d) model the way, and (e) encourage the heart. They found that love is the root of leadership. “When leaders encourage others, through recognition and celebration, they inspire them with courage—with heart. And when we give our heart to others, we give love” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 305).

Research has shown that highly successful schools must have strong, competent leaders (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Useem, Christman, Gold, & Simon, 1997; Valentine, Trimble, & Whitaker, 1997; all as cited in Clark & Clark, 2004). In a study of principals in highly successful middle schools, conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Forum’s Schools to Watch Initiative, “three factors appeared to contribute significantly

to the success of the middle schools: (1) Commitment to a vision, (2) focus on learning and (3) building and sustaining relationships” (Clark & Clark, 2004, p. 49). *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools* by Sparks (2005), who is a national voice on staff development for school leaders, gave leaders a roadmap of engaging, useful, and relevant information for thoughtful principals who want to do something different to improve schools. Elmore (2004), in essays on school reform, suggested that successful school reform begins from the inside with the teachers, administrators, and school staff. It begins by changing programs and practices in the school, not through mandates or standards. Leadership plays a major role: “it is the guidance and direction of instructional improvements” (Elmore, 2004, p. 57).

According to Schlechty (1990), school leadership had significant effects on student learning. These effects are only second to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers’ instruction. Research implies that school leadership, the building principal, is a key component to school reform and raising academic performance, and in addition, “school leaders must lead the change process that remains crucial to improving student learning” (Schlechty, 1997, pp. 204–205). Marzano (2003) indicated that “effective leadership is linked to the moral of teachers, the organization of curriculum and instruction, and the climate of the school, therefore, leadership is the foundation for change at all levels” (p. 173).

Leaders play a crucial role in the demand for accountability, The Association of Washington School Principals (1998), as cited in Lashway, 1999,

found seven key responsibilities for school principals, including: (a) promoting a safe, learner-centered environment, (b) providing a culture of school improvement, (c) implementing data-driven decision making, (d) providing organizational management, (e) implementing standards-based assessments, (f) scrutinizing improvement plans, and (g) effectively communicating with parents and patrons. (p. 5)

In addition to the many hats that a middle school principal must wear, their role of being a manager and coordinator of administration duties must transform to that of the principal of instruction. The principal is viewed as the instructional leader in the school and this is presented throughout much of the research listed in Table 7. An instructional leader leads many aspects of the school-improvement process. Dealing with all instruction, culture, management, human resources, strategic planning, political influences, and modeling best practices continues to define the role of an administrator.

Some leaders exhibit different leadership styles. For instance, a collaborative style of leadership is used by an administrator who is committed to the involvement, provision of resources, and opportunities for professional development supportive of this leadership style (Clark & Clark, 1994). Middle school-building principals must exhibit a strong commitment to involvement in decision making, and this commitment must not only be verbalized but must be backed by actions (Clark & Clark, 1994). In *Turning Points*, Jackson and Davis (2000) stated that “no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students’ performance than the school principal” (p. 157).

Table 7

Leadership

Author	Research	Methods	Conclusions
Clark, & Clark, 1994	Book	Literature review	Provided administrators with resources on restructuring schools to help adolescents achieve intellectual, social, and emotional success.
Clark & Clark, 2004	Article	Study/interviews/ observations	Described what principals of highly successful middle schools do to make them successful.
Elmore, 2004	Book	Document/literature review	A critique of common-sense strategy for linking education policy with instructional change.
Gardner, 1990	Book	Literature review	Provided a philosophy and personal reflections on what characteristics are helpful to lead others.
Kouzes & Posner, 2002	Book	Document/case studies	Described what leaders do, explained principles that support their practices and provided case examples.
Lashway, 1999	Digest/ article	Document	Described key features of accountability systems.
Marzano, 2003	Book	Literature review	Presented positive approaches that could make the dream of effective public education a reality.
Nahavandi, 1997	Book	Document	Provided a broad review and analysis of the field of education.
Schlechty, 1990	Book	Literature review	Suggested that an education-reform movement cannot proceed without a clear purpose for schooling in the 21st century.
Schlechty, 1997	Book	Literature review	Provided the day-to-day work of implementing school reforms.
Sparks, 2005.	Book	Document	Informed about the leading edge of ideas and practices and improving the quality of leadership, teaching, and student learning.

Summary

This review of related literature focused on three key elements: school reform and the major factors driving education reform, the middle school concept, and leadership. I found that the literature specifies information on school reform in great quantities and indicates what best ways to educate our students in the 21st century. I explored the history of school reform and brought out what was considered the major factors that have influenced education. I compared the junior high school and the middle school based on countless studies and expert recommendations. I explored change and how it plays a major role in our school system. Lastly, I uncovered that the unifying force of every school is leadership. In this age of increasing accountability, educators will continue to debate education reform: change is inevitable, there will always be students in the middle who need quality classroom teachers to teach them. Educational leaders are to serve above all as the instructional leader in their schools to improve teaching and learning.

Chapter 2 presented a review of related literature on reform and factors that have driven reform. Research related to the history of junior high schools and middle schools was described by the NMSA. The chapter also included a discussion of change and adolescent development and how they affect learning. Also, in the chapter I explored leadership and how important effective leaders are in education. This chapter presented a context and critical framework for this study. Chapter 3 will describe the qualitative research methods used to complete the study and answer the research question.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to describe the qualitative research methods used to complete the study and answer the research question. Specifically, I conducted a qualitative case study at one school district through the examination of interviews, district observations, and artifacts. This chapter provides a background and rationale for the selection of the qualitative design for this study. Each phase of the data collection is discussed. A conceptual design is included to help the reader understand the process used to gather data. The procedures used for data analysis and measures taken to ensure credibility of results are discussed in this chapter. Standards for establishing and judging the trustworthiness of this study are provided to allow readers the opportunity to decide for themselves the quality of this research.

Focus of the Study

The primary focus of this qualitative study is to follow one principal's journey in assisting the district in its reconfiguration process, and simultaneously help the school change through a deep examination of district personnel, parent, and teacher perceptions of the change process. This has been achieved through acknowledging distinctions and differences between the traditional junior high school, the current middle school, and the new middle school, as delineated by current middle school reform research. This study explored issues regarding the policies, personnel perceptions, decision-making strategies, timelines, and organizational structures of the new middle school.

This qualitative study involved structured open-ended interviews, observations, and the collection of documents. Upon receiving answers to the interview questions, documenting the observations, and collecting documents from the district, data were analyzed to answer the

research question presented in this study. By studying this school, other schools and districts can use the data to help their schools in a transitional mode.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators about the facilitating and inhibiting factors of middle school reconfiguration? Subquestion: What was the impact of leadership through the reorganization?

Research Design and Timeline

To ensure the study contained persistent engagement and persistent observation, the following research design and timeline are provided. In January 2012, I began as a participatory researcher with a district in Arkansas. I serve as the principal of the school I am studying, by attending meetings and being part of the initial process of reform. At this time I realized my dissertation topic could continue to emerge. Throughout this process I conducted an extensive literature review.

Permission was received from the university's Institution Review Board to conduct the study. After approval was received, I requested written permission from the district superintendent to conduct the study in the district. Open-ended interviews with the superintendent, district administrators, teachers, and parents were conducted. Documents that included observations of district meetings were collected during the time period from the approval of the proposal until completion.

This qualitative case study included three major phases: (a) initial interview with the superintendent; (b) standard open-ended interviews with teachers, district administrators, and parents; and (c) classroom observations. The collection of related documents occurred throughout all three phases. I was able to attend and observe district leadership meetings. The

grounded-theory model allowed me to be able to generate theories with the assistance of interpretive procedures.

Table 8 presents an outline of the interviews, timelines, and activities used to determine the influences affecting the deep examination of district administrator, parent, and teacher perceptions of the reconfiguration process.

Table 8

Timeline and Activities

Phase	Date	Activity
Phase I	January 2012	Initial interview with superintendent; Observations/leadership meetings; Document collection
Phase II	February–March 2012	Standard open-ended interviews with teachers, parents and administrators; Document collection
Phase III	March–April 2012	Standard open-ended interviews with superintendent, and district administrators; Document collection/observations

Qualitative methods were employed, which involved the collection of extensive data on many variables over an extended period of time in a naturalistic setting. Naturalistic setting refers to the fact that the variables being investigated are studied where they naturally occur, as they naturally occur, not in researcher-controlled environments under researcher-controlled conditions (Gay, 1996). “Qualitative researchers are intrigued with the complexity of social interactions as expressed in daily life and with the meanings the participants themselves attribute to these interactions” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2). Rossman and Rallis (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 1999)

emphasized eight characteristics of qualitative research and researchers. It (a) is naturalistic, (b) draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in

the study, (c) is emergent and evolving, and (d) is interpretive. Qualitative researchers (e) view social worlds as holistic, (f) engage in systematic reflection on their own roles in the research, (g) are sensitive to their personal biographies and how these shape the study, and (h) rely on complex reasoning that moves dialectically between deduction and induction. (p. 2)

Gall et al. (1996) stated that one of the main characteristics of qualitative research is its focus on the intensive study of specific instances, that is, cases of a phenomenon. Case-study research is only one of several approaches to qualitative inquiry and in particular qualitative case study is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of educational phenomena (Merriam, 1998). Case studies get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can by direct observation in a natural setting.

This study used a qualitative case-study design based on exploring a single entity or phenomenon bound by time and activity and collecting detailed information by using a variety of data-collection procedures during a sustained period of time. I believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to education. Furthermore, researchers should be sensitive in their data collection and interpretation of data and humans are best suited for this task.

I followed Merriam (1998) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) and their work as qualitative researchers and experts in the field of case-study research in education. It is important to note here, Merriam put forth that unlike experimental, survey, or historical research, case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. I explored the attitudes of teachers, parents, and school officials residing in this community.

This qualitative case study included three major phases that involved the three types of methods used to solve the research question. The phases included (a) initial conversation with the superintendent, (b) open-ended interviews, and (c) observations. Data were collected

throughout each phase. Phase I included gaining entry into the school district to be researched. In this particular study, entry into the site was encouraged by the working relationship I had established as an administrator in the school district. It began with the initial conversation with the superintendent. I kept a researcher's journal that is included as part of the research and data collection because it gives a historical aspect to the entire study. My writings include descriptive notes, as well as my emotions, thoughts, and reflections concerning this reform process. This phase offered me the opportunity to meet with key district personnel, attend district leadership meetings, collect documents associated with the history of school and its student achievement, and initiate a relationship with key personnel to provide me a better understanding of best practices in this district's reform efforts.

Phase II involved conducting standardized open-ended interviews with the superintendent, district administrators, parents, and teachers. Coupled with related literature, the standardized open-ended interview questions helped me better understand the school's best practices, leadership model, perceptions of administrators and teachers, and the impact of professional development on this major reform effort. Document collection was also completed as a part of this study.

Phase III included observations of district-level meetings and document collection. The observations and analysis of documents provided me with data to use in determining this school's ability to transform. Each phase is discussed in-depth.

Site and Sample Selection

The site selected for this case study is a suburban school district located in Arkansas. The case-study school district has a diversified economic base that includes a strong and stable collection of world-class businesses and industry. It is among the most diverse economies in the

United States, enjoys low unemployment, and is fueled by an extremely educated workforce. Home to three colleges, a thriving business community, scenic lakes and parks, and a vibrant community with endless opportunities for culture, recreation, and shopping, this is a creative blend of modern and quaint energy of a big city while it maintains its small-town quality of life that is second to none (Chamber of Commerce, 2012). This study was a purposeful sampling of participants. There were no random selections for participation in this study because each individual selected served as a representative of their category.

Negotiating Entry

Access is a process. It refers to the people in the field setting with whom to make initial contact, selecting the best method of communication to deliver a request, deciding how to phrase the request, and being prepared to answer questions and address concerns that might arise before and after permission is granted (Gall et al., 2003). Entrance into the school site was accomplished by letter requesting permission for access from the superintendent. Then an initial interview was arranged to discuss specifics of the dissertation study.

Depth Versus Breath

Patton (2002), “describes depth as permitting inquiry into selected issues with careful attention to detail, context and nuance” (p. 227). There is generally a greater emphasis placed on depth of research than on breadth by many qualitative researchers. A descriptive qualitative case study involving in-depth interviews of 23 purposefully selected interviewees were used to discover themes and seek answers related to the research question. The interviews delved deep into the interview process and I was immersed in the data leading to the answers to the research question.

Data Collection

When the actual data collection phase took place, I discussed the purpose of the dissertation study with teachers, district personnel, and parents. I used this opportunity to distribute informed-consent forms to those participating in the study. All areas of confidentiality were followed in working with district personnel, teachers, and parents; they are outlined in the IRB protocol of the university and the district. “Interviews are used extensively in educational research to collect information that is not directly observable and typically inquire about the feelings, motivations, attitudes, and experiences of individuals” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 288).

All artifacts received from the school were handled with extreme care and confidence. Examples of artifacts included school-board deliberations, faculty meetings, in-service training, communication with outside resources, and any financial resources available to support the transition process. One important way to strengthen a study is through triangulation, relying on multiple methods of data collection (Patton, 1990). Interviews, observations, and data collection will be used to provide the reader a broad, yet practical view of the reconfiguration process.

Conceptual diagram. Figure 1 is a conceptual design to provide the reader with a better understanding of the three phases completed in the qualitative study. As indicated in the display, the three phases include an interview with the superintendent; and standardized open-ended interviews with district administrators, parents, and teachers. Observations and documentation collection were also employed. These qualitative research methods were used for triangulation.

Phase I included gaining entry into the school district to be researched. An interview was conducted with the superintendent to begin understanding the history behind the reconfiguration and the school district’s approach to the reform efforts. Phase I offered me the opportunity to meet with key district personnel in district-leadership meetings, collect documents associated

with the history of the reconfiguration and its 10-year study, and initiate a relationship with these key personnel to provide a better understanding of best practices in this district's reform efforts.

Phase II involved conducting standardized open-ended interviews with district administrators, parents, and teachers. Coupled with related literature, the standardized open-ended interview questions provided an understanding of the school district's approach to restructuring schools; communication between the district and its patrons; perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators about the reconfiguration; and the impact of professional development on this major reform effort. Document collection was completed as a part of this study.

Phase III included observations in key meetings with other administrators. Multiple data-collection methods were used in this qualitative study. The observations and analysis of documents helped to supply background information. I was able to observe parent meetings and identify issues and concerns with parents and teachers about the reconfiguration.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted as part of this research study. I served as participatory interviewer, data collector, and observer. One initial interview was conducted with the superintendent and 24 standardized open-ended interviews were conducted as part of this study. Patton (2002) stated that the "standardized open-ended interview consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence of questions and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words" (p. 342). I carefully worded each question before the interview, including the same probes in each interview. This ensured that each participant was asked the same questions in the same way and order.

The standardized open-ended interviews were conducted using an interview guide. The interview guides were used in a small pilot interview and three questions were removed because of replication. The pilot group believed these questions were repeated in the interview. One of my dissertation committee members approved the final data-collection instrument prior to beginning the open-ended interviews. Appendix A, shows questions asked the 11 teachers, 7 of whom were staying in the test middle school, and 4 of whom were going to other schools in the district. Appendix B, shows questions asked the seven parents chosen from the test middle school, and were conducted in my office. The initial interview with the superintendent was conducted in the superintendent's office. Upon completion of the superintendent's interview I documented in my research journal with a majority of the conversation and how I thought the interview went. Appendix C, shows questions used for the six district administrative interviews including the superintendent, the two directors, and the three principals, each conducted in their offices. The standardized open-ended interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Each interview was collected in the same manner. Each participant who selected to participate was asked to read and sign the informed-consent form (see Appendix D) and to agree to be audiorecorded. The data were collected using the audiorecorder, which were then transcribed, analyzed, interpreted, and used for data analysis and review. All information was gathered and held with strict confidentiality to ensure integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

Observations. Observations are a major part of this descriptive qualitative study. According to Patton (2002), "observational data, especially participant observation, permits the researcher to understand a treatment that is not entirely possible using only the insights obtained through interviews and the data must have depth of detail" (p. 23). The data must also be descriptive so the reader understands what has happened: "the observer's notes become the eyes,

ears and perceptual senses of the reader” (Patton, p. 23). The foremost observations involved district-level meetings with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, district directors, and other principals. I took notes in my observation journal for my personal interpretations of what went on in this transformation. I used my journal as a means to check my impressions; a place to write down what I have seen occur. My journal is historic in nature because it sets the stage and goes back to the point at which I first became involved. It provides a background of what happened before I came and what I have done since getting involved. Most of this writing took place on my iPad and then was transferred to my journal.

Document collection. Merriam (1998), “uses the term document as the umbrella term to refer to a wide range of written, visual, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (p. 112). Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted, “the first and most important injunction to anyone looking for official records is to presume that if an event happened, some record exists” (p. 253). Many documents were collected during this research study. Data were collected from many different sources. The following is a list of documents collected for this research study:

- researcher’s journal
- district-leadership meetings
- district/state department meeting for 5–7 requirements
- building master schedules
- professional-development literature
- parent guide
- all principal-meeting agendas
- middle school-principal agendas
- faculty-meeting agendas

- teacher-feedback forms
- parents' meeting agenda
- transition team agendas
- next-step checklist
- district-population zone maps
- district-teacher list
- leadership-team agendas
- middle school timeline
- timeline for assigning staff for 2012
- teacher-input questionnaire
- letter of intent forms
- letter of state department waiver
- 2012 personnel placement list of tasks and timelines
- 2012 assignment letter to teachers
- 2012 supply list
- 2012 curriculum courses for 5–8
- parent-orientation talking points
- bell schedules
- course-selection sheets
- sample student schedule
- e-mails, memoranda, and other forms of communication

These documents were stored in a secure and protected setting. Documents were dated, coded, and filed to ensure organization and anonymity. All documents were reviewed to determine support for data collected during interviews.

Participants

The participants representing the school district in this qualitative case study included (a) district level personnel who were directly involved in the reconfiguration, (b) building administrators who made the transition,, (c) teachers who stayed in the test building and teachers who had to leave the building to go to other schools in the district, and (d) parents.

Researcher's Role Management

Throughout this qualitative study, I served as the only interviewer and participant observer. Entry was gained through a written letter to the superintendent with follow-up telephone calls to arrange interview times. Personal contacts and written consent forms were signed with all participants interviewed and observed. To minimize disruptions to the educational process, the least intrusive methods of data collection were used.

Reciprocity is the process of gaining entry, according to Patton (2002), in which the researcher obtains the data they need and participants in return feel as if their cooperation is worthwhile, whether that something is a feeling of importance from being observed, useful feedback, or the pleasure from interactions with the researcher in some task. Participants prior to the interview received a copy of the purpose of the qualitative study and the consent to participate form that was signed in advance. I reiterated the researcher's commitment to confidentiality and answered any questions pertaining to the study.

Managing & Recording Data

Data were secured on my computer and backed up with a USB scandisk to provide protection and safe data. The data were recorded on a digital recording device and notes from the interview were completed as part of my journal and notetaking. A major strategy of qualitative researchers to promote accuracy of data is the use of audio equipment. Given that qualitative researchers take voluminous notes, their primary tools are traditionally a pen and pencil and a note pad (Gay, 1996). The advantages of using recording devices like audio equipment are obvious. First, researchers are sure of an accurate and complete record of what is said or transcribed. Second, tapes can be replayed as many times as desired at a later time; researchers do not have to worry that something was missed (Gay, 1996).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness or soundness/credibility was ensured by using three types of data: interviews, observations, and document collection. Research requires credibility to be useful. Researchers seek truthful, meaningful, and believable supported findings. “The researcher does not set out to manipulate the data; he enters the arena with no ‘ax to grind,’ no theory to prove and no predetermined results to support, but rather to understand the world as it unfolds” (Patton, 2002, p. 51). To ensure the findings are based on credible information and are transferable and dependable, prolonged engagement, persistent engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and an audit trail were considered a vital part of this research.

Prolonged Engagement

I worked to ensure prolonged engagement, which, according to Swartz (2002), is the single most important way to gain credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research. The research for this study took 6 months to complete, and the data collected through multiple

sources included interviews, observations, and document collection. This gave sufficient time to collect data in a variety of ways: build trust with administrators, teachers, and parents, and become familiar with patterned behavior and best practices. Building trust, as Patton (2002) pointed out, is a developed process to be engaged in daily, to demonstrate to the respondents that their confidences will not be used against them; that pledges of anonymity will be honored; that hidden agendas, whether those of the researcher or of other local figures to whom the researcher may be familiar, are not being served; that the interests of the respondents will be honored as much as those of the researcher; and the respondents will have input into, and actually influence, the inquiry process.

Persistent Engagement

Persistent engagement is done by employing negative case analysis or rechecking the data for inconsistencies. In brief, negative case analysis eliminates anomalies and selects relevant data through a logical process of elimination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the most basic terms it means researchers should stay long enough to be accurate and observe in adequately diverse situations to get a full and precise picture (Mertens, 2010).

Triangulation

The term triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods, data-collection strategies, and/or data sources. Although participant observation may be the primary data-collection strategy for a qualitative study, collection of artifacts and use of interviews serves two purposes. The researcher gets a complete picture of what is being studied, and has a way to cross check the information (Gay, 1996). Multiple data-collection sources provide intersecting lines that corroborate and validate evidence (Gall et al., 1996). To ensure triangulation in this study, data-collection methods included participant observation, document review, journal writing, and

extensive interviews. Emerging themes are drawn into question or strengthened through triangulation.

Peer Debriefing

During this study, I communicated with the dissertation-committee chair. I was also involved in many summative sessions with one of the dissertation-committee members. Regular sessions were held with both professors to discuss the research, timelines, and process to complete the study. Outside of the committee members, I met with other researchers from the University of Arkansas to analyze the interviews, observations, and papers.

Member Checks

“Member checks involve taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Participants were provided the opportunity to expand, clarify, and correct their responses during and immediately after the interview. Some participants asked questions after the interview, but most were satisfied with their responses.

Audit Trail

Confirmability of the data was provided by an audit trail. The researcher should, “increase credibility, by having a disinterested expert to render judgment about the quality of data collection and analysis, for those who are unsure how to distinguish high quality work” (Patton, 2002, p. 562). Data were stored on my computer, and a memory stick was stored securely in a private-office cabinet. The following were held in a secure area:

- Recording of interviews
- Transcripts of interviews
- Field notes, personal notes, e-mails, letters, and memoranda

- Analysis of documents
- Data analysis
- Journal notes
- Interview questions
- Documents collected

Evidentiary Inadequacies

According to Erickson (1986), prolonged engagement was used to interpret data to significantly limit the possibility of an inadequate amount of evidence. Through triangulation the study was limited from inadequate kinds of evidence. There were multiple sources to warrant key assertions. Any faulty interpretive status of evidence was addressed through peer debriefing and member checks by peers and committee advisors. Ensure that there was no inadequate disconfirming evidence was handled through persistent engagement. Inadequate discrepant case analyses were addressed by the research through refining and adjusting major assertions (Erickson, 1986).

Summary

This research study explored and analyzed perceptions of district personnel, teachers, and parents of a school district as it transformed from two middle schools into four middle schools, describing the process for one middle school. A descriptive qualitative case-study design was used for this study. It was my intention as a researcher to convey the study in a narrative fashion as well as information from the study participants, which made a naturalistic approach more appropriate.

The process of data collection and analysis that occurred during this qualitative research study focused on three sources: interviews, observations, and document collection. Interviews

were the primary method for gathering data with observation and document collection used for triangulation purposes. The data-analysis methods were presented to illustrate the orderly progression of the study. Interviews have a unique purpose, namely, to acquire data not obtainable in any other way (Gay, 1996). Observations of teachers, parents, and administrators allowed invaluable insight into the transition process and the perceptions of the reconfiguration. Documents collected varied and tied directly to the purpose of answering the research question. The strategies used in this research study helped in analyzing the data and extracting findings and conclusions.

In Chapter 4 I provide a description of the findings of this study. Each description and artifact will be included to provide the reader with the answers to the research questions. Additionally, the information in Chapter 4 supports the basic conclusions and recommendations found in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to follow one principal's journey in assisting the district in its reconfiguration goals, and helping the school change through deep examination of district personnel's, teachers', and parents' perceptions of the change process. This was done by acknowledging distinctions and differences between junior high schools, the current middle school, and the new middle school, delineated by current middle school-reform research. This study explored issues regarding the policies, personnel, decision-making strategies, timelines, and organizational structures of the new middle school. This study of the district's reconfiguration will not only add to the body of research in general but will also assist this district and other districts as they look to future transitions and how to better facilitate those changes.

This chapter includes an analysis of the data collected, and an interpretation and discussion of key findings from the study. The chapter will begin with a historical initial conversation with the superintendent and a presentation of the data from the parents, teachers, and administrators. Two tables listing the audit-trail notations are reported and a display of sample open codes and selected axial codes is also provided. Following the data analysis, a summary of the findings is presented.

Interviews were the primary source of data used in this study. The study began with one initial interview with the superintendent and 24 standardized open-ended interviews were conducted. Data were also obtained through observations and document collection. The observations included many district-level leadership meetings and middle school principal meetings with the two middle schools and the two intermediate schools becoming new middle

schools. Document collection and observations were used to provide additional data and to complete triangulation for this study.

Audience

The key audiences included middle school teachers and parents of one middle school, two intermediate principals, one middle school principal, district administrators and the school district superintendent. The overall intention was to select a study relevant to my professional experiences and to do this I selected my own profession. The objective of this qualitative research study was to answer the research question and subquestion, but also provide other school districts experiencing future transitions or new reconfigurations on how to better facilitate those changes. Taking into account my position as a principal of one of the middle schools, the research will influence the future transition and reconfiguration decisions in my own district.

Transcribed Interviews

The interviews for this study were recorded and transcribed. Participants spoke often in casual speech; thus, the wording in the quoted passages is not wording one would choose to use in formal writing. Regularly, during the interviews, participants communicated in run-on and incomplete sentences. As colleagues in the education profession, many participants were relaxed, informal, and comfortable with me in expressing their views about the reconfiguration process for them. This informal setting should be considered when reading the transcribed interviews throughout this study.

The reader should also consider the language used in brackets []. Brackets were used to clarify the meaning of educational expressions often used between educators. I was cautious not to modify what the participants meant to share. In addition, I used parentheses () to protect the

anonymity of participants, and identify landmarks and institutions in the school district, city and county.

Initial interview with the superintendent. After receiving approval to complete this qualitative case study, I contacted and scheduled an interview with the superintendent of the case-study school district of which I am a principal. In January of 2012, I was provided with the opportunity to sit down with the superintendent for an interview. The interview was at our central office building inside of the superintendent's office and lasted approximately an hour. The superintendent was willing to share district information and provide me with insight into the plan for the district.

The initial question of the interview was about change. In almost all of administrative meetings the superintendent would bring up change and always introduced new technology. The superintendent summed up change in this way:

I think this: I think that maybe I've done weakly about this, but during our principals meetings, there are some things that I harp on, and sometimes like this year, we talked about technology a good portion of the year, and we talked about change. If you don't talk about change it doesn't happen. We've talked about some technology and I want us to be better technologically, and buy into this 20th-century thing about technology in the classroom.

I asked the superintendent about being a visionary leader. I wanted to know what the superintendent's vision for the district was. The superintendent responded,

I think there's ... if you sum it up, no, let me step back and clarify first of all. I think the vision either is changed or it modifies itself during a person's career or experience in a place. Your vision for ... next year will be different from what it was 2 years ago. And 5 years from now, wherever you and I are, our visions will be different because of the role we play. So it probably changes a little over time, but at the core of it is, this really is a district on the verge of being world class, in my opinion. It is a fine district. I've worked other places, and I don't know how your experiences in ... compare to this, but I know what bad is; I've seen average. I've seen people who don't care about their school and it's a struggle to find someone to say grace over their school. This is a good place. And I guess that's one reason why I feel a passion to make it as good as it can be, because the potential is there. It's like that kid in your class who has so much potential, and you want to make sure you're doing everything you can. I also don't want to do any harm; don't

mess it up! My vision is for a world class district. Let's break that down. This is an evolving thought in my mind. But perhaps it's so simple, and if I'm so smart I should have thought of it sooner. I talked about it to you in principals' meeting the other day. I just don't think that we can ... I'm proud that we have national merit finalists like we do. We're well above the average. Academics are really, really strong. But we're not graduating all of our kids, and in some ways we are hiding the dirty underbelly of our school district. That's my responsibility to make sure those kids can walk across that stage. If there's some long-term goal, it is that we can truly say every child, every day, whatever it takes. Every child. ... And we can get there. But that's if we can get people past the idea that we're going to sacrifice some kids and just let some kids go; if we can get past that part, we can get our task back on focusing on yea, we're good but we can do better.

The superintendent and I also discussed the professional development and about the superintendent's goal for district administrators. I wanted to know the plan to get administrators where they needed to be to lead in this district. The superintendent explained a belief about leadership and how the district needs to have good professional development on it. The superintendent briefly discussed the Chick-fil-A Leadercast that we attended where great leaders discussed the choices we make to be leaders. The superintendent also explained thoughts about the summer leadership conference with the administrators to help advance leadership and the capacity to lead:

In June, some of those things we'll talk about at the Annex, but they are not broad, sweeping, global issues, but it will be pragmatic. But when you filter through all of that, and do some things you need to, bigger picture, I think it gets down to leadership and my capacity to lead. ... I believe in leadership, I believe in talking about and exercising it and [professional developing] PD'ing it. And whenever you cut to the chase, we are either capable leaders or we're leaders in training. So, there's lots of things that I can do to improve as a leader. And I want to be a better superintendent. And I want you to be a better principal. And part of that is your ability to know and understand instruction. But you can know and understand instruction and not be able to lead. ... The idea is that when you stand in front of those folks that the good Lord has put in front of you, that you can be a leader and you lead them in the direction, and everybody says, that's a good direction and let's follow her. Sometimes that comes naturally and sometimes it doesn't, but it's my responsibility to cultivate that in my leaders.

I inquired why the superintendent enjoys meeting with principals once a month in addition to other meetings we attend. These meetings allow principals to grow professionally,

reflect on our leadership skills, develop as instructional leaders, and constantly find ways to improve student achievement.

I was curious about the superintendent's specific goals for my school for school improvement. I asked about the major challenges associated with school improvement and student achievement and with the reconfiguration taking place, a stigma could still be in the school. The superintendent shared:

I don't like the idea either that all of your kids being out of the building, and having only a portion of your feeders coming in, and a good portion of your teachers being new, I don't like the idea of that description or any similar to that maintaining their school-improvement status, and that doesn't seem right or fair, but they didn't ask me. But if they had asked me, I'm sure they'd have agreed with me. I think the school-improvement part of it whittles itself down to how do we lead, to some degree, and how do we get past the mindset. ... I'm happy to be the one picked on. I think you reject that cloak, if you will. No, we're just as good as anybody else. And the issues that brought some schools to the point that you are as far as school improvement aren't present anymore. The leadership isn't there any more, many teachers aren't there any more, the kids aren't there anymore. And so what can you do to reshape the public persona? That begins with you and every one of your folks. How ... [it] is perceived is, in large part, based on how you perceive it and how you talk about it in the community.

A significant aspect in the case study was to find out what advice would be available for other school districts that would consider reconfiguring in their districts. The interview ended with the considerations other districts should consider in their attempt to reconfigure their middle schools. I asked what advice the superintendent would give those districts when it comes to reconfiguring. The superintendent offered the following:

Go slow. And if it's possible, do a little bit at a time. Our strategy was this domino has to fall, and then this domino has to fall, and this domino. In a short amount of time, all those dominoes had to fall. If we're going to build this building, and if we're going to reconfigure, and if we're going to rezone, and if we're going to repurpose ... and do all the rest of the stuff we have to do, it had to be compacted in a short amount of time. That was because of our facilities issues, because of all the other transitions. If possible, slow it down. We've been talking about this for well over 2 years, and it's not like we went too fast. I don't think you do major things fast. It would be an unusual circumstance if you did something like this fast. You build consensus and work from the ground level. You work with the community and ask questions and let people have the chance to respond.

Let the soup stew, but don't put it on a high boil. Let it simmer and maybe you won't scorch your vegetables.

Conclusion. The conversation with the superintendent provided me with many insights into the superintendent's goals for the district. The superintendent clearly expressed a vision for the next 5 years, the professional development for district administrators, and the plans to improve them. Lastly, the superintendent offered important information on mindset, how it affects school improvement, and advice for other districts in reconfiguring schools.

This initial interview with the superintendent provided me with information that served as background knowledge to move forward with this qualitative study. The superintendent's responses also provided support for me in understanding the district and helped me develop interview questions for the three groups participating in the study.

Audit-Trail Notations

Table 9 is audit-trail notations from interviews and Table 10 consists of a list of audit-trail notations of documents that are used in Chapter 4. The notations identify each of the participant's observations and collected documents used in the study. To guarantee absolute confidentiality, all participants were assigned a code containing letters and numbers. The letters DA were used to identify district administrators; the letter P was used to identify parents; and the letter T as used to identify teachers. These letters are followed by a number that indicates the interviewee. Following the interview number is a slash and a number that identifies the page of the transcript on which the quotation is located. When direct quotations are used, any identifying information is removed from the quotation and replaced by generic labels enclosed in square brackets. This process enabled me to maintain organized data and ensure that none of the participants' identities were acknowledged to anyone.

Table 9

Audit-Trail Notations: Interviews

Notation	Participant
DA1	District Administrator
DA2	District Administrator
DA3	District Administrator
DA4	District Administrator
DA5	District Administrator
DA6	District Administrator
P1	Parent
P2	Parent
P3	Parent
P4	Parent
P5	Parent
P6	Parent
T1	Teacher
T2	Teacher
T3	Teacher
T4	Teacher
T5	Teacher
T6	Teacher
T7	Teacher
T8	Teacher
T9	Teacher
T10	Teacher
T11	Teacher

Table 10

Audit-Trail Notations: Documents

Notation	Type of document
DOC1	Research journal
DOC2	Agendas: principal meetings
DOC3	Agendas: middle school principal meetings
DOC4	Agendas: secondary principal meetings
DOC5	State Department report to superintendent
DOC6	District timeline
DOC7	Master-schedule meeting
DOC8	Southern Regional Education Board mission for middle grades: Preparing Students for a Changing World Commission report
DOC9	Next-step checklist
DOC10	2012 Middle school questionnaire
DOC11	List of teachers moving and staying
DOC12	2012 SPED assignments
DOC13	2012 Secondary coaching assignments
DOC14	2012 Fine art assignments
DOC15	Master schedules
DOC16	Pamphlet
DOC17	Transition plan
DOC18	Communication, transition, and registration plan
DOC19	Letter of intent
DOC20	Minutes of the Board of Education

Data Analysis

The data in this chapter were analyzed through a process of organizing and managing data repeatedly. The notations record each of the participant's responses, observations, and documents used in the study. This process involved coding, which is assigning some sort of shorthand description to assorted aspects of the data so the researcher can easily retrieve specific

pieces of the data (Merriam, 1998). The data analysis was completed by hand. The coding process refers to identifying repeated topics, terms, and subject matter in the interview data. The coding process incorporated a word-by-word and line-by-line analysis of the interview data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that a line-by-line analysis “involves a close examination of the data, phrase by phrase and sometimes word by word” (p. 119).

Transcripts and interviews were searched for common terms and patterns. Taylor and Bogdan (1984, as cited in Merriam, 1998) stated that to analyze is to construct categories or themes that capture some recurring pattern that cuts across “the preponderance” of the data and these categories or themes are concepts indicated by the data (and not the data itself; p. 179). The coding of data was accomplished in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding helped me organize the data while also keeping the analysis grounded in the data. Patterns of recurring words emerged from the data to form the axial codes. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), axial coding is the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding (p. 124). The goal was to develop and relate categories through a system. These axial codes were then compared to other open codes or to axial codes, thereby providing the connection to help provide a framework for understanding the data.

Findings and Major Themes

The findings in this chapter are divided into three subsections: district administrators, parents, and teachers. The data uses triangulation through interviews, observations, and document collection. This qualitative study focused on perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators in one district’s reconfiguration efforts. The data generated three separate categories of major themes.

The axial codes or major themes that emerged from the data collected and analyzed of the six administrators, included (a) benefits of reconfiguration, (b) input and communication, (c) programming, and (d) leadership and support. This section provides data from interviews observations and collected documents to meet triangulation and support the major themes. These axial codes will be identified in Chapter 5.

Presentation of Axial Codes

In axial coding, the goal is to reassemble data found during open coding. Axial codes began to surface from the data of the administrators. The axial codes were analyzed, combined, and narrowed to initiate the development of major themes. Figure 2 identifies a sample of the open codes and the four axial codes in the data from the six district administrators.

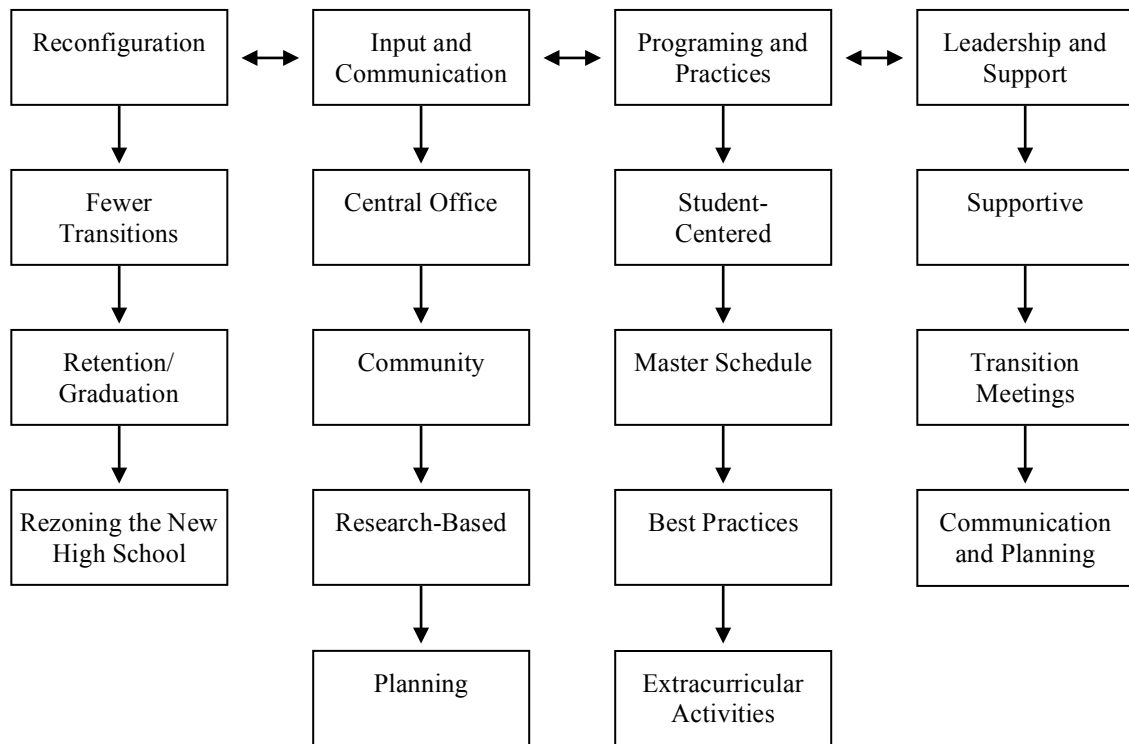


Figure 2. Axial and sample of open codes of district administrators.

Descriptive Matrix

Table 11 is a conceptually clustered matrix that provides a display of the axial codes, or major themes, that emerged from the collected data of the six district administrators. Data displayed in the matrix represents standardized open-ended interviews. Each conceptually clustered matrix is followed by additional data from interviews, observations, and collected documents to support the major themes.

Benefits of the reconfiguration. Through open coding the data and continual review and analysis of axial codes, the first major theme that emerged was benefits of the reconfiguration. All six administrators gave significant input on the benefits of this reconfiguration. I wanted to determine if administrators viewed their position in the school district as part of the process. I learned that five of the six administrators were directly involved in the process from the beginning. The one thing that stood out strongly for all administrators was that there were too many transitions. One administrator stated,

It's something we've been discussing for many, many years that the number of transitions that a student in [the school district] incurred over the course of kindergarten through 12th grade was one of the many things because we had so many transitions. The research is so clear on regression as it relates to the transition. Part of the reason that caused the increased number of transitions was that our district grew so quickly that we had to, because of facilities and financial constraints, we were forced to break those grades apart to handle the massive numbers—the massive influx of kids that we had given the facilities that we had. So it was a lot easier to build on the bottom end. (DA1/1)

Table 11

Descriptive Matrix: Axial Codes (Major Themes) of District Administrators

Participant	Benefits of reconfiguration	Input and communication	Programming and practices	Leadership and support
DA1	<p>I think the successes are going to be moving a middle school type philosophy. The whole turning points model – I think it’s much more developmentally appropriate for 5-6-7 graders to be together. I think that dividing some of these kids by four will increase the sense of community and the sense of connection between teacher and student that in some of these schools we don’t have.</p>	<p>I think that (Superintendent)... .. and we as a Central office team – have tried to be very, very sensitive to giving them input, feedback, communication with them, letting them know what’s going on.</p>	<p>I think it affects programming probably in a district sense in that everyone is forced to realign what they’re doing in the program: whether you’re talking about GT, special education, athletics.</p>	<p>I also know with the transition, and a more global aspect, the transition teams at each building, people from different schools have been involved in setting norms for this, how do we want to handle this? They were definitely involved, and they were definitely given an opportunity to voice their concern. Support?</p>
DA2	<p>The bottom line was that before we added what we thought were too many transitions from kids going from one grade to the next – one building to the next . . . each transition causes each kid to lose connection with the school and fall out of the process. For whatever reason, not be as successful. We wanted to reduce those transitions. By collapsing 5-6-7 and taking 10th grade up to high school, we were able to do that and move from five</p>	<p>I’ve tried my best to over-communicate with teachers. We’ve had meetings with them at the building level, group level, at our back to school meeting. I’ve tried to email things out to them and tried to communicate with them about the process and let them know, understanding that at the end of the process there wouldn’t be a 100% satisfaction</p>	<p>At the middle level, when you move 5th and 6th grade to the middle school, then you’re changing, to some degree, the potential of some of those programs those kids have.</p>	<p>I don’t think you can consider pretty significant changes that are going on right now without serious and intense processing with multiple groups. Talking to your leaders, talking to principals, talking to parents, talking, talking, talking. Over processing. The support comes from a couple of levels. The most support comes from the principal, and you know how I feel about the principalship.</p>

Participant	Benefits of reconfiguration	Input and communication	Programming and practices	Leadership and support
	transitions to four.	with what we are doing.		
DA3	The fewer transitions that a child makes, the longer that they stay in a given school, the more attachment and support and ownership they have in that school. The more they feel supported... The middle schools would be really the focus of this reconfiguration.	I think the district has gone out of its way, gone to extraordinary lengths to help teachers go where they want to be. We've had quite a number of steps to make sure they had notice of what was happening and that they had choices.	In a positive way, if they do apply middle school philosophy to that school. I think you have to be sensitive to the needs of children at that age.	I thought the willingness for the superintendent to move forward something that was a suggestion from the district, a suggestion of consensus building from these committees and taking it on to the school board – I thought that showed remarkable intuitive leadership
DA4	One, I think there is an emphasis in the district that there is a different kind of programming that's needed for the students at the middle level. Two, we went to our public and asked for a millage increase to build a new high school.	I appreciate the fact that we're putting so much time on the front end to think through every possible situation so that we're not blindsided when everything starts happening. I think one of the biggest steps that was taken was that constant and timely communication.	We're going to have to work really hard to make sure that we maintain the integrity of some of those programs because they're going to be different.	The meetings that I mentioned and one thing: it's allowed the four middle schools to get together a lot and I think we've really bonded as a team. And we know each other better and know that we can call on one another if need be.
DA5	8 th grade was more closely associated with 9 th grade. A new high school needed to be built, so with building a new high school came reconfiguring the grades. Also, there was talk about the number of transitions between the . . . really at almost every stage you had	I think teachers were given an opportunity to be a part of it. There were a couple of meetings if they had questions about it. They could email; do all these different things. Talk to their	They do because as certain – take 5-6-7 for example, there are certain things 7 th graders have to take.	Being open – having those meetings, you know? Those meetings we had with the teachers, the surveys that went out.

Participant	Benefits of reconfiguration	Input and communication	Programming and practices	Leadership and support
	two-year transitions. So we wanted to reduce the numbers of transitions.	principal.		
DA6	There were too many transitions from school to school. Students every two years were going to a different school.	They had lots of meetings on the process and what would happen. They had teacher input, parent input, administrator input.	Coming from 5-6, I don't see much change in the programming for next year.. Maybe some of the practices.	

Another administrator commented,

The first conclusion that we reached, and the first bit of research that everybody agreed on because of the research, was that the fewer transitions that a child makes, the longer that they stay in a given school, the more attachment and support and ownership they have in that school. The more they feel supported ... so when we considered that, everybody just started throwing out what would be best, you know? To have our students to stay in particular schools for a longer period of time. Whether it would be good to have a school that's K-8 and then a school that's 9-12, so you basically have just two schools that they would stay in. And that is actually a model that we found and it came from Texas I believe, that they had experimented with this. The idea was to try to keep kids in one school for a long period of time. But as we did that, there was also the discussion about what had happened in the district up until that point. Everybody that had been in the district, and I was new to the district, that was my first year, so I think I was pretty objective because I didn't really have a preference except that it made sense to have fewer transitions. After we had lots and lots of suggestions about how we could do it. Some people thought, well, this worked good at one particular time, maybe in the school that I grew up in or that we had in [school district] a few years ago. They seemed to personalize it based on their own experiences, again, with the continuing interest in fewer transitions. (DA3/4)

One less transition seemed to be the most positive outcome of the reconfiguration. In requiring one less school transition, it eliminated the transition from elementary to intermediate school. Instead students transitioned to middle school, then to junior high school and on to high school. The same administrator added:

And so there were a lot of other external issues that played into trying to make that decision, but again, we were trying to—or the recommendation was not to have as many transitions from school to school. Finally, it was recommended that the K–4 would stay intact and that seemed to be something that made people very happy because we weren't going to change one component of our school district. (DA3/4)

The school district placed value in involving its administration into the decision-making process. The five administrators who were involved in the committee decisions have had some contact with middle schools and have a strong opinion about students in that grade level. One district administrator added:

Well, I served on the committee that looked at reorganization, and of course, having been at the middle level for a long time, I really do believe that there's a special need for kids in the middle. Our kids grow up fast, and I don't know if that's a good thing or not. But we want to provide a gradual release of responsibility for the kids when they get to 5th grade. It's time for them to accept some ownership, but they're not ready to be thrown out to the masses to sink or swim. We really wanted to make sure that we had that transition to the upper grades a smooth one. And, too, our town had really gotten where there was a division, there was a lot of east–west rivalry. A lot of our housing was moving toward the west side of town. More of our commercial property—the east side of town. It was almost becoming a have and a have not. That's not healthy for our community. Part of my agenda as a member of that committee was that I wanted that split. One of the easy ways in my mind was to take our kids in the middle and split them into fourths. Then, you'll still have a little more poverty in one fourth than another, but not as much as when it's split down the middle. So that was a consideration for me as well. The interesting thing for me was, I went into the committee thinking I would have to fight for what I believe, but once we got in there and we did our research and we shared our research, we all were looking at the same thing. We all wanted the same thing. I think that was really nice that we could come together in unison and support the plan that we presented. (DA4/3)

Another administrator commented:

The recommendation that came forward was K–4 elementary setting; 5–6–7 middle school setting; 8–9 junior high; and then 10–12. That was the recommendation and we agreed with that recommendation and thought it was a reasonable thing to do; thought it would reduce the transitions from one grade to the other, from what we determined was five to four, and I guess we're counting the transition from home to kindergarten. The bottom line was that before we added what we thought were too many transitions from kids going from one grade to the next—one building to the next—because as they transition they ... each transition causes each kid to lose connection with the school and fall out of the process. For whatever reason, not be as successful. We wanted to reduce those transitions. By collapsing 5–6–7 and taking 10th grade up to high school, we were able to do that and move from five transitions to four. (DA2/1-2)

Another benefit that administrators felt were noteworthy was rezoning the elementary schools, and building a new high school. In most districts there are usually more elementary schools than secondary schools. Consequently, it would be much easier to relieve overcrowding in elementary than secondary schools. One administrator remarked:

Number one: that's where the kids were. You can build an elementary school a lot cheaper than a secondary type school—middle schools and high schools. ... We knew we could handle 5–6–7 grade at the intermediate and middle school buildings. We probably couldn't have put eighth grade back. Plus, it wouldn't have been practical or feasible to have one grade on that campus that was that large. It wouldn't have been an efficient use of facilities. We talked about a freshman academy, but how to you justify having 750 on a campus that's that enormous. You know, you just really can't do that. So we knew that it worked curricularly and instructionally to put eighth and ninth together. That seemed to help the kids transition to the concept of high school a little bit better. (DA1/1)

A second administrator commented:

If we were going to reduce the number of transitions, then those transitions ... then some schools would have more kids, excuse me, more grades in them next year than this year. So the question was, how do you work that out? Part of that was a facilities issue. I'd like to think we were altruistic and we made decisions only based on the kids, and at that course that's true, but then we have facilities issues too. For example, if you were to keep seventh and eighth together, and move them to junior high with 9th graders, then that building doesn't have the capacity to handle all those grades for the next several years. And on top of that, you'd have seventh and ninth graders together. I'd be more comfortable with fifth with seventh. There was also part of the 10-year plan to build a new high school. One of the ideas was to push 10th grade up because it made more sense as far as articulation of credits and coursework and all those sorts of things, to push 10th grade there. It would be more like what would be, at least in Arkansas, a traditional high school with 10–11–12. Those were factors that caused it to go to 5–6–7. Really the logic was this: you look at the elementary, and if we're going to leave that the way it is—K–4—if you leave them the way they are. We're not going to pull 5th grade up or down or fourth grade up, that's K–4. Then if you go the opposite extreme and build a high school, and that's going to be 10–11–12, then how do you take 5–9 and put them together. That's really the—at the end of the day, that's the essence of the conversation. We could have done this: we could have committed to building several more elementary schools, pull the fifth and sixth back into elementary, and then make the junior high be a 7–8 and make this a 9–12 campus. There are any number of ways we could have monkeyed around with it. If we'd done that—K–6—and then 7–8 and then 9–12 we'd have had three transitions instead of five. We felt like all of those things were going to be too expensive and too radical of a difference. The issue of elementary is, that once you take elementary out of the box, or take a fifth grade out of elementary, it's very hard to push them back down there. (DA2/3-4)

A third participant commented:

Now, remember that as an adjunct to all of the reconfiguration was the idea of rezoning the elementary schools, and that was a deal also, as it was a recommendation to make (elementary school) a preschool only, and the idea there was that we had a concentration at the elementary schools that had a high rate of children would be in schools with a lot of economically disadvantaged. And by taking out this [elementary school] in that areas—taking it out as a factor in rezoning—then it caused a more equalized distribution of children who were economically disadvantaged. Or course, in the process, we built another elementary school, but I don't know if the location of that school was actually determined as a way to strengthen that redistribution of children. (DA3/6)

Another benefit that administrators thought was vital to the reconfiguration was the retention and graduation issue that potentially concerns most districts. One administrator summed this by stating,

I'm really, really hopeful that we can make some ... turn some corners for kids at that level. Here's the issue: when you're still not, although we're closing it, the achievement gap, but we still have kids leave before they walk across the stage for graduation, and those are probably tied in to some degree together, although the data does not indicate we have a disproportionate number of Black students who are dropping out, we still have kids who are dropping out. So I think that it's fundamental in getting kids to stay tuned to school through the middle grades. Fourth grade—if we don't get them by fourth grade, sometimes we lose them. We start losing them at that time. I saw it growing up, and I've seen it with kids in any district I've been in. In fourth grade, they start checking out. If they have checked out, then in fifth grade we have to re-engage them some way or the other. We have to get them tied back into school and tell them they can be successful so they can finish 12th grade and perform to the best of their ability. I think the middle school is very personal. (DA2/10)

This district administrator went on to say, “But I'm going to be very interested to see what happens a year from now, 2 years from now, 6 years from now—when those 5th graders coming in next year matriculate all the way through. Are we keeping them? If we're keeping them, then we're doing good.” (DA2/15) The six administrators conceded that the primary reason for this configuration was for the children. This was the number one focus of the district and the central-office administration.

Another administrator later added,

academically that children, by the time—especially in mathematics—by the time they don't get things—if they don't get things by fourth grade, if they aren't on grade level, if they aren't working in the curriculum at the level they are supposed to ideally be to stay on track, then it's very difficult to go back and repair that. So, remediation is problematic after fourth grade, so that was another good reason to keep the in the same building up through fourth grade—to make sure they had plenty of time to get to a certain point. So that was kind of the reason the different middle schools were arrived at. (DA3/4-5)

Input and communication. The second major theme from the data was input and communication. The administrators unanimously agreed that the key to this reconfiguration in their district was the communication put forth by the administration and the input they were able to give and receive from the community and teachers. It was quite apparent through a deep examination of the data that the communication started from the central office and trickled down through the other administrators. One district administrator stated,

Overall, I think it's been very successful. I think that with the [superintendent's] leadership and the fact that he is so organized and he analyzes everything so closely; I think that that's probably the one thing that I can say has led to the success at this point. Now the wheels may fall off this summer; I don't know! I really think that the gravest pitfalls of the whole thing were in the planning, not the execution. Because if you don't get the planning right, then it doesn't matter how smooth the execution is, and I think that's one of the things that's led to it being successful. We've planned an over planned. And we know we'll still miss some things, but I think it's been pretty successful. (DA1/11)

They're not always going to like the answer, but if they're involved in the process and the rationale behind it, it makes it at some level, once the emotions subside, it makes that process easier. . . . I think that goes back to communication. We started talking about this a long time ago. We've had multiple meetings at both the district level—which involved a lot of people—down to these transition meetings. They were definitely involved, and they were definitely given an opportunity to voice their concern. (DA1/5)

One district administrator commented on being personally involved in the process. The administrator stated, the superintendent

had meetings with the different groups and talked to them about the proposed change and allowed them to ask questions and how it would affect them. Since I'm one of the new middle school principals, I've been there from the get-go. They've asked me my thoughts on it and asked us to come up with a plan to help with the transition and to help our teachers and students transition. (DA6/3)

Another administrator added,

But we've done our best to communicate with our folks, hoping as well that our principals are doing that, you know, in the building and communicating with teachers and giving them that hug when necessary, but sometimes saying straighten up, get up and get back to work. So to the essence of your question, I trust we've done what we needed. I'm certain as well that we could have communicated some things better. I'm sure some would say if you'd just done this, I'd be satisfied. This is core to me: I really do believe in taking care of our folks as much as we can. I believe if we take care of them as much as we can, and allowing them a voice, and also giving them communication as much as I can; giving them a pat on the back as often as I can. Even though the decisions we've made will not be the best decision to everybody, I want them to at least have understood the process and they did try to talk to me about it. I don't agree with what they did but they did try to talk to me about it. (DA2/7)

A third district administrator offered the following:

I think the communication from central office and from the building level has been there. I think some just thought it won't be me. I think we did as much as we could have. I think the process we used was as fair as it could be. I kept going over in my mind how will we do that. And there wasn't anything that was going to be completely fair for every person. I think what we ended up doing was as fair as it possibly could have been. Like I said, we've been in meetings since day one. You can tell the process when we're there, the [superintendent] has met with the directors and they have decided on a plan. Then that plan is brought to us. It's been very methodical and very well planned. (DA4/7)

The consensus of the district was to ensure that the reconfiguration process would not have any hidden agendas. The superintendent was adamant in every meeting throughout this course of action that the process would have to be transparent to the community. One district administrator described the collaboration with the community:

We probably could have done more; I always wonder about that. There were community members on each one of those 10-year planning committees; there was someone from the community talking about the parents' side. We certainly involved the community when it came to the millage plan—passed the millage and doing all those things; getting people to believe in what we did. As far as the 10-year plan and the things building up to it, I think we could have done better than what we did. But, that is—the more you involve people who are not directly under your charge, i.e., a community member or parent, the more taxing it becomes. It's more work to say I want 10 people on a committee than five. Or I want 20 instead of 10. Once you have more than two people in a room, you're going to have a conversation that is going to take some time. I think we could have done better; I don't think we did badly, and as we were setting people up for the millage passing and the other parts of the 10-year plan, we brought a bunch of people in. We brought the mayor in, the fire chief, the police chief, the Conway Corp, the city council, the county

judge, everybody we could think of. We brought people in from [The University of Central Arkansas], [Central Baptist College], and Hendrix. We brought parents in. We brought people in just to talk; there was a lot of just talking going on during that process. I always wondered about that. Could we have done more? (DA2/11)

A second district administrator commented:

It's kind of like parent involvement—on any level and any topic, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink. I don't know how we could have communicated any more with the community and tried to involve them. We had PTO groups in, we had parent advisory groups in; we had business people in, chamber people in. But you still run across people that say, my kid is what? You mean they're not going to? There's not going to be an eighth grade at [middle school] next year? We did everything we knew to do, and it's still not enough, and I don't know that it would ever be enough no matter what we came up with, but we tried! (DA1/7)

The same district administrator later added when commenting on the community,

I think once again it goes back to communication. You have to be transparent. You have to explain why you're making the decisions you're making. The reason we're doing this is that we think it will benefit kids. At the end of the day, there'll still be some that are opposed, and there always will be. I think you can try to communicate and listen and validate people's concerns. You may not be able to address or resolve them in the way they want, but you can validate their concerns. (DA1/11)

The fourth district administrator provided the following:

Well, the millage was last September. So we've been talking about this to the community. It was in the newspaper. It was on the television. We've had public meetings. Things have gone in the student newsletters and on the website. It's been there for parents to get if they're paying attention. But a lot of parents were not aware of that. ... There will be some that will try to go to a different school that will lie or have someone lie for them. And I hate to use that word, but basically that will happen—so they can go to the school they want to be at. I tell all my parents that they're going to be happy wherever they are. It's going to be different, but that's going to be happy any way. I think everyone is going to be fine, but it's still a shock to some of them. (DA4/5)

The same administrator added,

I don't know that any decision was made by any single person. I think that there was input. ... I know when I was on the reorganization committee; we had people from the community. We had central office staff. There were classroom teachers, administrators, to a counselor, support staff. It was a good mixture. Looking around, if anyone had an agenda, it was probably me. I was already a middle level ... once people were able to present their findings or their thinking; there was a lot of thought and common sense that went into it. I think that if we ever got to a place where we were at a standstill, or hit a

stumbling block, we would step back and ask what was best for the kids. That brings you to a conclusion pretty quickly when you look at it from that perspective. (DA4/8)

The community involvement and their ability to communicate and provide input about the reconfiguration could not have been explained better than the third district administrator explained. This administrator was in agreement with the other administrators but the explanation explicitly supports the data:

The people on the committees were from the community too. As a matter of fact, that made the meetings very interesting because we were getting parents and community representatives and lots of comments about everything. Also I think it helped them; they asked lots of good questions. We had to all discuss what was going on here and why we were making these ... why we were even having a discussion about it. There was quite a bit of discussion and involvement, and they, of course, everybody on those committees weren't really acting on their own. They were there to represent others; they did ask other people. It was a very democratic process in the way that we got information. I'm not saying they didn't interject their own ideas or preferences, but I can't think of a better way. The process was more of a focus group than just surveys. What do we need to do? What is the impact? What do you think? How is that based on good research and what we want to do? (DA3/11)

The district administration agreed that one crucial piece to reconfiguration was to guarantee the process be a group effort and transparent to all those involved. Everyone has to be given plenty of information about what is going on all along the way. The administration established the concept that the district would continue to improve the quality of education in the district no matter what the reconfiguration the district decided it needed, based on grounded research. This would need to be evident in the beginning of the process. Administrators felt the community needed to be directly involved on every step. The third district administrator stated,

Well, there was great discussion. First of all, the committee had to decide whether or not there was the need—if the need existed to change anything. There was an assumption in the school district by some people—remember the surveys taken were anonymous. There was a prevailing belief that schools could be configured in a better way, and it was mostly related to the idea of economic status. Some people believed, apparently by the surveys, there was a disparity in the way that some schools had lots and lots of schools who were not economically disadvantaged, and some schools had a large portion. I think that was the beginning of the conversation. What would that look like? And looking at the whole idea of why are schools set up in the way that they are, and what will be the

ideal configuration for the district, there were a lot of factors that would spring from that. Of course, what we did, the committee started deciding—well, first of all we looked at the research about the broad heading of school configuration, why our structures are the way they are, how students get assigned to schools, why they're assigned to schools, and generally the whole gamut of what it means—why schools are established or structured how they are. During that conversation ... a lot of research surfaced. I did quite a bit of research and presented it to the committee, and they did the same thing. We went off on our own tangents, trying to get as much information to bear on this as possible. ... There was simply a discussion of different theories of what was best for the constitution of a school as we discussed what those studies were telling us. (DA3/1)

The same district administrator added,

But the idea that we would have an opportunity to have middle schools, and the middle schools would be really the focus of this reconfiguration because we could have four similar middle schools—5 through 7—at a very critical period with a lot of middle school research behind this, that would promise us probably more cohesion and more of a thoughtful arrangement and meet the needs of those kids 5–6–7, and also in smaller schools. (DA3/4)

Considering the study, I was very interested in middle school research, particularly what participants knew about middle school philosophy and the NMSA; one administrator described what he knew as the following:

Now I've been away from this for a little while. ... You want to make sure you have a developmentally appropriate program for your students. We know you need a gradual release of responsibility at middle school. At elementary school that teachers is right there: don't forget this; get this; they're spoon feeding everything. At high school they're here it is; take it or leave it. We're having to bridge that gap. We have to make sure we provide that bridge. We have to provide for their social needs, emotional needs, academic needs. It's a different creature. A lot of people don't like working with kids at this level. I happen to enjoy working with this level the most. No two days are the same, and we have to be sure our people know that. And they must understand that because you're working with a child who may look 16, his body may look that way, but his mind may be that of an 8 or 9 year old. We'll have to work to retrain our teachers. One of the hard things about having three grades is that they won't be the same in sixth as they were in fifth and they won't be the same in seventh as they were in sixth. Sometimes we think they're becoming defiant and having a personality change. And to a degree that's true, but they're supposed to change. We've got to retrain ourselves and remind ourselves that that's normal. We'll be looking at exploratory opportunities for our kids. I hope I can go back and look at our schedule and hopefully implement teaming. I haven't given up on that; it's going to be a little bit harder. I want to be sure we do as many of those effective school correlates as we can as they pertain to the adolescent child. (DA4/13)

Another administrator added,

I am not an authority on that. I lived with this ... it was the middle school—*Breaking Ranks*. ... There are some essential when you are educating young people. First, you need to make sure your instruction is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. There are some things that we know are characteristics of successful schools: the way they arrange their curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Now I'm going to have to heavily rely on the way that we move to the common core because each of those areas will be significantly changed or improved. We have to look at the leadership and organization of the school and the way that it has a shared vision of what's going on. The leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about the age group and educational research and best practices. Leaders have to demonstrate collaboration and ongoing professional development, and we certainly have that. The culture and community of the schools has to be considered. This really goes to what I was describing why we wanted to go to this format with fewer transitions. The school environment has to be inviting and safe and inclusive. The student's personal development is guided by an adult advocate that—these teachers are steeped in middle school philosophy working with that particular age group. They have to have a good guidance and support system. We will have one counselor at each middle school. There has to be a good health and wellness program supported by the curriculum. The school actively involves parents in the education of their children. And the school has support from business partners. (DA3/14)

The third administrator commented,

There were the turning points 2000, and there are turning points back when I was doing it and then turning points 2000. But those ... the principles are smaller learning communities, teachers tied into those communities, collaboration, structured time to talk during the school day about kids and their needs, the ideas of being developmentally appropriate in everything we do. Those are some of the key things. (DA2/15)

The same administrator added,

I think that one difference is going to be the way we have refocused ourselves on what middle schools are to begin with. I say this with respect, but I think the middle school model that has been in place in the district hasn't really been middle schools model. They are middle schools by name, but they are really junior highs to some degree. If we can philosophically we can say this is what a middle schools is about, and it's not just a place between here and a junior high, but it's different because of the way we handle kids and think about kids that would be a good thing. (DA2/16)

The district administration believed one crucial piece to implementing the 2012 Plan, as it has been called, was the planning process. These six district administrators, who were directly involved with the entire process, placed the process of planning and creating a major

project like this one as one of their greatest success. They put the majority of the planning orchestration on the superintendent. One administrator shared,

There was a very well orchestrated media blitz to make sure that our patrons were informed. There were even ... I was hearing if we can get this many people out to vote, we can probably pull it off. There was a lot of community support with the millage, and we had to encourage our staff to get out and vote. Once the millage was passed, the game plan was put into place to actually start with what going to happen. Plans were drawn up; ground was broken; buildings started. We were very lucky to have a mild winter so construction was able to progress as we had hoped. The high school is in the dry for the most part, so if we do have our rains that come this time of year, things are happening, and the administration has been a key factor from Day 1. It would have to be to pull of something of this magnitude. (DA4/11)

The second administrator added,

The beginning of the idea of having a meeting of even considering the subject was in the context of a 10-year plan that we had come up with. We were all given different areas of a 10-year plan to explore. A survey was conducted to decide which issues seemed to be most popular in the district, so committees were formed around those popular issues. One of those popular issues was the notion of reconfiguring schools. (DA3/1)

The same administrator added:

All that we do! All that we have talked about, all that we have worked for during the last 2 years has related to this reconfiguration. Now I can speak to it, you know, I'm the [district position] and I really wanted—I wondered how this was going to impact our testing. Of course, our testing is going to change, too, in 13–14. I would say there's been a significant interested in this topic and we've spent long hours discussing it. This was the locus for the whole planning thing. We were all involved in it. All the directors and everybody who works in this building were in those different committees; we had a chance to ... it was a lot of interaction. (DA3/11)

One district administrator went into great detail to summarize this plan as follows:

The district initiated a 10-year plan several years back and as a result of that plan, there were some recommendations that came forward that related to grade configuration and related to a new high school and related to a lot of different things. Based on those recommendations we developed what we call the 2012 plan which was the plan to try to move forward the things, or a significant number of things that were in that 10-year plan. Part of that process included the establishment of five different committees that reviewed five different aspects of our school and how we should approach that. One of these was the reconfiguration committee. That committee was charged with looking at the grade configurations in the district and to determine if that was appropriate for the long term or if we could look at a different configuration as we move forward. The committee looked at a wide variety of grade configurations; looked at moving the fifth back to elementary;

looked at moving fourth grade up; looked to a 9–10–11–12 high school. Looked at keeping everything the same except for doing a little bit of tweaking. Lots of different things that they looked at. The recommendation that came forward was K–4 elementary setting; 5–6–7 middle school setting; 8–9 junior high; and then 10–12. That was the recommendation and we agreed with that recommendation and thought it was a reasonable thing to do; thought it would reduce the transitions from one grade to the other, from what we determined was five to four, and I guess we’re counting the transition from home to kindergarten. (DA2/1)

Input and communication was clearly an integral part of the district’s reconfiguration.

Unmistakably, allowing all those involved having a voice in every aspect of the process is one of the primary focuses of this study. According to the data, district administrators deemed that the center of the initial focus of the reconfiguration rested with the expertise of the central-office leadership and how they dealt with the community in the planning process. The fact that they based their evidence on research and followed the leadership and expert planning of the superintendent speaks clearly and created the difference between a successful implementation and unsuccessful one. One administrator summed,

I really think that the gravest pitfalls of the whole thing were in the planning, not the execution. Because if you don’t get the planning right, then it doesn’t matter how smooth the execution is, and I think that’s one of the things that’s led to it being successful. We’ve planned an over planned. And we know we’ll still miss some things, but I think it’s been pretty successful.” (DA1/12)

Programming and practices. The third major theme from the data was programming and practices. The six district administrators often commented on the programs and practices in the current middle schools (seventh and eighth grade) to those in the new middle schools (fifth, sixth, and seventh grades). This study was not designed to look at the different configurations but rather to collect and analyze objective information about the perceptions of the reconfiguration.

The data indicated that the district administrators believed some programs and practices would be different and some would be the same. They emphasized keeping practices centered on what is best for the student. One administrator commented,

I think grade configuration is the lay out how programs in particular go. Whether it's because we're traditional in nature or because we've always done it that way or just by its nature, in essence, the decision certain things happen. When you take a 10th grader and move them up to high school, that changes the programs that are available for that kid. It causes, in this situation, not to have to transport that kid up and down Prince Street like we have. That's going to change the opportunities that 10th grader has. They will have the ability to take those 11th and 12th grade classes too. At the middle level, when you move fifth and sixth grade to the middle school, then you're changing, to some degree, the potential of some of those programs those kids have. It will have an effect in seventh grade as far as programs are concerned as it relates to band, athletics, music, and things like that. I think it will give them more opportunities. The more opportunities a kid has, the more successful they can be. They can tie into it. They can figure out who they are in seventh grade—do they want to go this direction or that direction. Hopefully the added programs will be a benefit to our kids. (DA2/4)

The second administrator commented,

I think it affects programming probably in a district sense in that everyone is forced to realign what they're doing in the program: whether you're talking about [gifted and talented], special ed, athletics. Everyone is forced to look at that program at that grade level. It definitely alters practice because the seventh grade moving to the middle school will look very different in a 5–6–7 than it did this year in a 7–8. I think it greatly affects the way we do business: how we treat kids how we move kids from class to class; things like double blocking. Levels of intervention. Right now, when you move to an 8–9 setting, it's much more rigid; much more inflexible and more of a secondary setting. And it needs to be because those kids need to be prepared for high school. Middle level, you've got a lot more ebb and flow. You can do a little bit more—you can be a little more creative with your schedule. You've got this whole concept of the wheel; and kids just move en masse—which is very foreign to me—you've got no bell and coming from a high school background this blows my mind. I think it affects everything we do—even procedurally like drop off and pick up and lunch room. You go to a 5–6 lunch and then a 7–8 lunch and then out here to the high school—it's worlds apart! Just things as simple as daily routines are totally different. (DA1/3)

Another district administrator added,

We're seeing that in our reorganization. We're having to try as best we can to keep the programs that we already have in place because that was a promise we made to our patrons—we weren't going to water down programs. Our programs will still be there, but they'll be different, and that's going to take some adjustment. We know that athletics is really big in our community. We know that band and orchestra—the music program is really big in our community. For example, I have probably 60–70% of my kids in band or orchestra. When my student population changes and my numbers decrease, I'm not going to have that large of a band or orchestra, so my program may not be as strong. They'll still have the same instruction and everything, but they just won't have the numbers to produce the same quality. The same thing with athletics. A lot of my really good athletes will be at [another middle school]. It's going to take a year or so before our programs

even out. But one thing that will be good for *my* kids is there will be a lot of opportunities because we won't have as many kids, and we're not—because our schools aren't as big as they have been—we're not going to have cuts at the seventh-grade level. It'll be more of a developmental program, which I think is great. (DA4/4)

My interviews and participation with the district-administrative team made me privy to information about some of the setbacks and barriers associated with the reconfiguration of the middle schools. Each of the administrators discussed the difficulty and challenges involved in adopting and eventually implementing a master schedule. This process was long and demanding. It required patience and a refocus from central office to bring it to actuality. The master schedule is an ongoing project of the building principals (DOC14); DOC15). One district administrator reiterated the process as the following:

I know from the middle grades perspective, the principals—we began our planning wanting the best middle school that we could design. A barrier jumped right out at us and that was money. Ideally we would love to be able to implement the correlates of an effective middle school; we all know what those are: teaming and interdisciplinary planning, and that costs money. When we were asked to put together our model plan, that was going to require 13 additional teachers. We also gave [the superintendent] a heart attack, and we went back to the drawing board and whittled it down to about nine. We've worked on our master schedule for about a year, and we're finally not where we want to be, but we're at a place where we could all live with what we have. So, we're going to make the best of what we can do. We were looking at a significant amount of money, so if there was a barrier, it would be financial. (DA4/9)

Another district administrator added,

Trying to come up with a master schedule that works. We're having to add staff, and in my particular case, I'm short on staff. I'm short a period of music and short a period of art. I think it's art. No, it's math. I'm short one block of math. And no one has still told me how it's going to be staffed. (The principal) and I are supposed to share a person, but all of a sudden, when I need this person all day ... we talked about this all day long, it was "No, we didn't say that." Well, anyway, I've got a need for a period and a block that I have no idea how it's going to get filled. (DA5/3)

A third administrator commented,

Well, when we start scheduling, having less teachers in a building, you start having scheduling problems when you have single teachers. It requires more teachers to cover. You just have parts of teachers. That's been a barrier we've had to overcome ... making

sure we have our master schedule; being able to staff with just one class a lot of times. Single-section classes. I see that as a major problem. (DA6/4-5)

The same district administrator later added the following:

Yes, I go back to the master schedule. It's still, it's still not ... it should be for everyone. There's still too many what-ifs for everyone. Like something like, you're talking about the [English as a Second Language] ESL kids, there's not going to be ESL anymore. Nobody has said how we're going to do that. I can tell you how it's going to happen. At the last minute someone's going to say, you're going to have to have this class here and that class there, and you've already got your master schedule done, and you talk about trying to shift people around and doing things to accommodate that. ... I don't know if it can be accommodated. (DA5/6)

Part of being a good administrator in this district, according to the data, is being able to recognize and implement best practices. A district administrator commented on the importance of district administrators identifying best practices. Administrators also recognized the importance of the middle school administration sharing the same understanding, by stating:

I think because we've spread the poverty around more, and I think not just the reconfiguration, but the district-level curriculum work will make a big difference too. I also think now there are four principals who are pretty much on the same page. I don't know that that's always been the case. I think we have principals who are going to make certain that their staff members do what they're supposed to do in terms of curriculum. I think you have four principals who want their school to be the best. When you've got that mindset at each building, it's going to be a good thing. (DA4/14)

The same administrator commented on what was best for the students and teachers, by continuing with the following statement:

With our extended classes with the 90-minute blocks it helps a lot because they don't change classes as often. It's good because we don't ring a bell and they take off. In most instances they just leave this class and go across the hall to the next class. It's not fruit basket turnover when they go to different classes. The kids love going to art and music. In elementary they go once or twice a week for 20–30 minutes. Here, they go for an extended amount of time. The teacher gets to know those kids and they have some continuity in their curriculum as well. If a teacher wants to teach a piece of music, it's not from Monday to Friday before they hear it again. They get to work on it every single day. They can maybe master that piece in 3 or 4 days. Our extended time encourages hands-on which is good. What I see 5–6–7—you'll gradually release more responsibility to the children. When they go from fifth to sixth and when they go from sixth to seventh. One thing I think we'll really have to watch will be that seventh grade. Before that year ends, we need to do a lot of releasing because when they go to that eighth grade, they'll die on

the vine if they're not ready. For the teachers who have been in the middle level that are teaching seventh grade, that'll be easier. For those who have been teaching fifth or sixth, there will be some retraining on their part because they won't be used to that. And our parents, especially those from [intermediate schools], they may have a hard time separating the fact that we've got a middle school and not an intermediate. The parents may have a hard time with that, and that will be something we'll need to share with them because before long we have to get them ready for eighth grade. Just that making sure they're separated during the day and in the bathrooms and before and after school. There's just an age gap in fifth and seventh, we'll have to watch for that. (DA4/17)

A second administrator commented,

If you're going to have middle school concept, I'd like to see common planning periods. I'd like to see more kids do more things like those programs like karate and different things that make kids want to come to school. You've got to have core, but you've also got to have different things that draw kids to school. Something to keep their attention. (DA5/9)

Another element of programs and practices, according to the district administration, is dealing with extracurricular activities. The challenge is making sure that each middle school offers the same programming. The seventh- and eighth-grade middle schools each had vocational classes such as keyboard and career classes, but the new middle school will only have keyboarding. The parents and teachers lobbied for keyboarding to stay in the middle school. The superintendent and district administrators had to apply for a waiver (DOC5) to make this fit into the master schedule for 2012. One administrator stated,

I think the parents—the only thing that the parents would have been reluctant about as we heard in our discussion about all this, is that they were concerned that their children would not have the same kind of extracurricular opportunities if we moved to this type of system. We've generally settled that issue: we'll have the same extracurricular opportunities as they would have in the other system, and we've made more of a guarantee; we've warranted that resources will be very similar from school to school, so they will not lose any opportunities in any school. This revolved around things like music programs and athletics. And that was one of the things that really seemed to be of most concern to the parents. (DA3/6)

Another administrator added,

I think the increased flexibility is the greatest difference. And the seventh-grade athletics piece, I'm real interested to see how that's going to look. I'm a huge proponent for athletics and for kids participating in athletics, and I think it's going to look very different

at a 5–6–7 instead of a 7–8. Right now, it’s really a step-child, and I’m not talking about athletics for the sake of building a program, but I’m talking about for the sake of for the kids and what it does for the kids and the impact it can have on those kids. It really gets them involved and buying into the school. I’m anxious to see about that too. (DA1/13)

Specifically, for extracurricular activities, administrators in the district believed that electives were a major part of the middle school experience. One administrator commented on electives and how they are dictated by the state:

And electives are a very big part of anything whether it be football, band, art—whatever it is, kids need these other activities other than simply being in the core classes all day. But a lot of this stuff is dictated by the state too. The state says you have to have art, music, [physical education]. (DA5/2)

Leadership and support. The fourth major theme I found in analyzing the data was leadership and support. One administrator commented, The superintendent “has encouraged us, even if we spend all day meeting, if you are driving around thinking about it, and think of something else, let me know” (DA4/5) From the very beginning, district administrators felt supported by the central-office administrative team and viewed the superintendent as supportive and involved. Another district administrator commented, “We did everything we could to go garner support, but at the end of the day, that’s a personal decision.” (DA1/6) The same administrator went on to say,

I think that our role primarily has been that of a time keeper and a task master. It’s our job to keep people focused on what the job is at hand. And it’s our job also to say, okay, here’s where we are in the process. What’s next? It’s our responsibility to keep things moving. It’s very difficult, and I think that’s one of the hardest things about the transition. I heard someone say this, the education is the only profession that tries to service the airplane while it’s in the air. I thought, that’s a really good analogy. We’re still having school and educating kids, and well, in just an ordinary year, we’re still servicing the airplane. But this year, we completely overhauled the airplane. We were doing transition, and rezoning, and facilities, and common core. I mean, we completely overhauled the whole thing, but we still had school. Kids were still there; we were still responsible for teaching kids. At the building level, that had to be enormously taxing because you have to maintain that those kids are being educated to the best of our abilities, but you’ve got all of this other stuff going on. I think that our role as administrators was to make sure that we tried to protect that instructional time but keep the process moving because you can’t stop school. We couldn’t take a year off to transition. (DA1/9)

The third administrator complimented the district in the area of support on two different levels: the principalship or building level and the district office. The district administrator stated,

I do think we've supported our folks. I'm certain that there will be some percent that will say they feel like they were out there on an island, and I'm not sure I could have made that person happy anyway. The support comes from a couple of levels. The most support comes from the principal, and you know how I feel about the principalship. I absolutely—that's the key to our success is quality people like you in the principalship. The building-level keeping, if you will, of more support at the principal level is very important. Now, I can say a few things: I can write an e-mail every once in a while, and I can walk around and pat people on the back, and in some ways, it's symbolic more than it is touchy-feely. You know, the superintendent is here. Or, the superintendent said something. But I don't want to distance myself from the fact that that could be some level of support for some folks. I do want them to feel supported; I don't want them to walk away saying this district is NOT supportive. I do not want them to feel that way especially during a trying time where we're picking people up and moving them all around. (DA2/8-9)

The same district administrator added,

I do believe that at the building level the principals, for the 100th time, the building rises and falls by the principal and the leadership. I think we have four strong folks there doing good work. I applaud the work being done at the building level. I think all four of you do an excellent job of utilizing your assistants in the process. And, our role at the central office has been to provide support for what happens in the building, and I know [central office administrator] has been a big part of that for you guys, and helping you through those issues, and [another central office administrator] as you've had positions open. I would trust and believe that we're farther along because of a strong administrative team. (DA2/13)

One of the reasons that the community got behind the 2012 plan (DOC20) was the fact that the district conducted many transition meetings (DOC17; DOC16) across the district. Each transition point for a student, the district held meetings. I was a part of the middle school transition meetings along with the other middle school administrators. The central-office administrators, along with the superintendent, also were in attendance. One administrator commented,

The district did have parents coming in. They had some that dealt with the reconfiguration. Some dealt with rezoning. You're talking about a limited amount of people dealing with the hands-on and involved in it. I was on the rezoning committee, and there were only probably four parents on there. They went out and had these

meetings, trying to have a direct impact on what's going on. ... You're talking a district with 9,000 people in it. ... We did have those meetings where parents could have input and say-so, but I don't think they had as much input as they felt like they needed or could have had. (DA5/5)

The same administrator later added,

We got good information at those meetings. ... You're going to do 5–6–7, you don't have to keep proving that; you've already said that. That's what going to happen. You don't have to keep saying that like that. Being on the part of the reconfiguration committee—the three maps and putting out each one and letting the public look at it. Meetings at each individual school. Looking at rezoning—this school's going here and this school's going there. (DA5/5-6)

The district administrators agreed that communication and planning had to be considered a major part of this reconfiguration. The priority across the district has been to communicate with everyone. There should be no deal breakers, but we won't know for a couple of years if it was a true success. One district administrator explained,

And clearly the proof is in the pudding here. Whether this is the best thing for kids we'll find out in a couple of years. It seems to be; it feels like it and tastes like it. Until we've done it for a couple of years, we won't know for sure. I don't know that there's been a problem to the degree that we've thought we need to reassess. We need to consider going down a different road. Part of it, I would hope because we tried to do as much thinking on the front end as we could on this. We tried to do as much planning and think about the implications about all these decisions on the front end. Clearly we didn't cover all the problems that could be out there, but I believe in looking at things on the front end and work through the issues on the front end before you roll things out. There was a lot of talk before there was the public talk. A lot of processing, a lot of what do you think about this; what's good and bad about this. Let's work through our plusses and minuses on all the issues. Does it still smell good, then let's start putting some legs on it and talking about it publicly. Even though the reconfiguration committee was working, they were not working independently. None of the committees were working independently of the central office or each other. I would hope that in any situation like that where you've got a bunch of people working on committees that are going to line up as a 10-year plan, that's there's constant communication. The chairs of those committees would come back to our Monday morning meetings and tell us what they'd talked about. It would get hashed out on Monday mornings and then go to principals' meetings. There were continual conversations. I don't think you can consider pretty significant changes that are going on right now without serious and intense processing with multiple groups. Talking to your leaders, talking to principals, talking to parents, talking, talking, talking. Over processing. I don't know that there's anything right now that I can say, that was the day we should have turned around and gone a different direction. There's always going to be problems and things that pop up, but no deal breakers. (DA2/6)

The same administrator described the importance of good communication and the secret behind the success:

Good communication. Good communication. Good communication. Now, if we have success it will be because of good communication. There's always communication, and it may be on the undercurrent like we talked about prior—that gossip circle. There's always communication, but it's whether or not you craft it and are intentional about it. We've tried our very best to be intentional about our communication, and hopefully that's the reason. (DA2/14)

Part of the data collected for this study included my participation/observation and document collection of all principal meetings. The principal meetings I participated in supported the data collected from the interviews. For 2 years I have been collecting all principal meetings, including middle school principal meetings and secondary principal meetings. During these meetings approximately 22 district and building administrators, directors, and coordinators met once a month. The topics discussed at these meetings included the board agendas, instructional issues, noninstructional issues, technology, the change process, any pressing issues in the district, and always a 2012 update. The superintendent always led the meetings with an agenda and participants always left the meetings knowing exactly where the district was headed (DOC1; DOC2; DOC3; DOC4).

Summary. From my analysis of interviews with district administrators, observations, and document collection, data indicate that district administrators were focused on communicating with the community and receiving input, which provided positive benefits for the reconfiguration. The district administrators used research-based best practices to provide the best programming and practices while using adequate leadership and support from the central office. The four major themes from the data provide insight into the role of district administrators and how they perceived the reconfiguration.

Teachers

The second group of participants for my qualitative study included 11 teachers. Data collected for this section included standardized open-ended interviews, observations, and document collection to meet triangulation. As indicated in Chapter 3, the interviews were conducted with 11 teachers, seven, who were staying in the test middle school, and four teachers going to other schools in the district.

The observations were conducted in faculty meetings and meetings that included all teachers from the district along with meetings with parents. I observed all of these meetings at different times of the day but most meetings with teachers and parents were conducted after school hours. These observations focused on new information that needed to be addressed or a dissemination of clarifying information about the reconfiguration. Data were analyzed and axial codes emerged. The axial codes, or major themes, representing the data collected from the structured, open-ended interviews, observations, and document collection, included (a) communication with district administrators, (b) district reconfiguration, (c) involvement.

Presentation of Axial Codes

Through the process of open coding, axial codes began to emerge from the data of the teachers. The open codes were analyzed, combined, and narrowed to initiate the development of the three major themes. Figure 3 identifies a sample of the open codes and the three major axial codes found in the data from the 11 teachers.

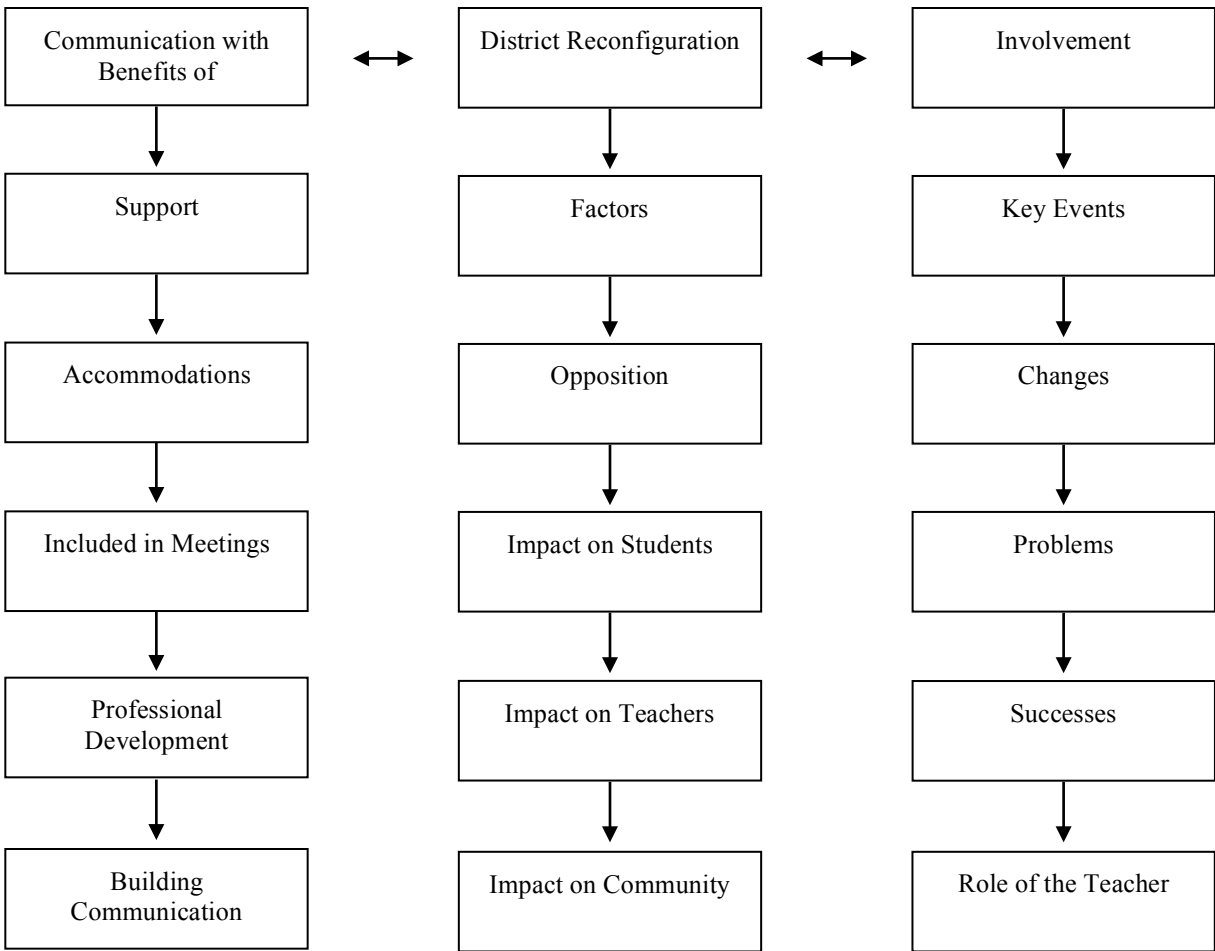


Figure 3. Axial codes and sample of open codes of teachers.

Descriptive Matrix

Table 12 is a conceptually clustered matrix that displays axial codes, or major themes that emerged from the collected data of the 11 teachers. Data displayed in the matrix are followed by additional data from interviews, observations, and collected documents to support the major themes and meet triangulation.

Communication with district administration. The first axial code, or major theme, that emerged from the data representing the teachers was communication with district administration. This major theme contained five components teachers shared that were vital to the district’s

reconfiguration plans: (a) support, (b) accommodations, (c) included in meetings, (d) professional development, and (e) building communication. This section provides data from interviews, observations and collected documents to support the major themes and meet triangulation.

It was a consensus of the teachers participating in this study that communication was central to this reconfiguration. The district's central office and building principals communicating with the teachers on a regular basis about the plans to reconfigure the middle schools helped them to understand the need to make such a change. The majority of the teachers interviewed believed that the district was effective in supporting them from its inception. They also believed by getting the information they were provided helped them better understand what was going on and have a better idea as to how to support it. One teacher described feelings about the process:

It wasn't something that was just flung out there; I remember maybe 2 or 3 years ago when talks were held, and I'm sure they started before then, even when the idea was in its infancy as far as us knowing about things. I felt the teachers were kept in the loop all of the way. There was never a point like "What's going to happen? I never ... who was ... this memo." I never felt that way. So I do feel the support of us was kept in the heart of the matter, the fact that we would be supported. (T1/3)

Table 12

Descriptive Matrix: Axial Codes (Major Themes) of Teachers

Participant	Communication with district administration	District reconfiguration	Involvement
T1	I can answer that in 2 words: teachers' input. The welcoming of teachers' input.	One of the ideas is with a true middle school concept, the whole child is taken into consideration.	To be honest, when the opportunity came to teach 7th grade ... getting out of your comfort zone can be a good thing. ... It only promotes future growth.
T2	Yes, I feel like they gave us a voice and they had to make ultimate decisions, but we had a voice.	The 8th works better with the 9th-graders or have more commonalities with 9th-graders.	I think that just trusted that the right thing happened. That was just my reaction. I didn't have a big reaction or wasn't opposed to anything.
T3	What's been really good for me, our administrator in our faculty meetings has gone through each step.	The studies in the United States and saw how that the general population is going back to this middle school.	We were included especially through the ACSIP. I think that was the Number 1 best feedback for me. We were meeting with each other.
T4	We had a couple of get togethers ... talked about the changes.	Maybe parental dissatisfaction with the current set up of two middle schools where it wasn't equal.	I am not too many years from retiring so I can roll with the punches pretty good. This is what the school system needs.
T5	Input was asked of teachers to talk about some things. ... There were several meetings.	There will be some extracurricular programs that will be lost because of the configuration.	I welcome it. I don't mind change. Whatever is needed for the students is what we need to do.
T6	Most of it came from the principals, with the principals being the leaders of the school—they pretty much set the tone for the building	The need for the new elementary school to be built and also the renovation of the high school.	Teachers should remain positive and supportive and speak openly in the proper setting about the transition.
T7	As soon as it was discussed, we knew about it. I felt like the minute I walked in here	I think that some people in the town were worried about their child being moved from	We've had ACSIP meetings that addressed any concerns teachers had and those questions have been

Participant	Communication with district administration	District reconfiguration	Involvement
	I knew where the school was headed.	one school when they went to a different school for a while, but I think most of that has been alleviated.	answered in faculty meetings. We've had many opportunities to present questions that we've had to the school board.
T8	They've kept them pretty well informed. I know from central office, they've done a lot to inform everybody and keep everybody up to date on what's going on.	The test scores were the biggest instigator in that discussion. But I think it's been a long time coming.	I think a lot of things that we went to with the state department and over at the co-op, they've given us a lot of information about Common Core.
T9	I think we've been kept well-informed about how things are going to happen. We had a meeting and we talked about how we were moving and what we were moving and how to label our boxes and questions that could be answered and things.	Other than growth and then too many transitions between grades.	Just the information that was put on the website; the informational meetings that we've had; conversations that I've been able to have with administration.
T10	We've been told all along, what's going to happen, and when it's going to happen, and it has. Like the day they said we'd get that e-mail, we got our e-mail	People are very concerned with 5th graders being in the same school with 7th graders and about whether ... its equality.	I feel bad because groups are going to be split. ... I hope it is not like in church when you split a Sunday school class ... then both stop growing because the dynamics changed.
T11	Teachers given opportunities to come and talk, there were meetings held within the different elementary schools.	There was some talk about how we wanted students not to change schools every 2 years.	It's just part of it. Get up and come to work everyday.

Note. ACSIP = Arkansas Comprehensive School Improvement Plan.

A second teacher described how extraordinary the support was:

I think the support has been phenomenal. We've provided the PD. There's been lots of conversations. They've asked at faculty meetings, "What questions do you have?" They've taken them back, then brought them back to the next faculty meeting to assist them in that. We even went through a whole list of things about what you'll do with your materials in your classroom, computers, you know, everything has been accounted for as far as giving them those answers and that support. (T8/5)

Teachers believed they were given every opportunity to give their input and ask questions before the superintendent, faculty, and school board and get their questions answered. Therefore, they felt like the support was there. One teacher stated,

Input was asked from teachers to talk about some things—well, yes because there were several meetings that we had where the superintendent met with all the schools who were involved in the transition. And so to ask questions and the questions they asked got answered, and anything they didn't know they would get back with you. So yes, there were several opportunities for that. Yes. (T5/3)

Another teacher added,

I think that the district from the get-go has been asking teachers and having informational meetings to get input from the teachers. The meetings at the beginning of the year, when they didn't know all of the answers but could give us what they knew at that point—those were helpful. Coming back to school a lot of teachers were confused and had a lot of questions, and even thought they couldn't answer everything then, it was beneficial to be able to hear them and see them in a smaller group and get those answers. (T2/2)

A third teacher described feeling so supported, enabling the teacher to address people in the community who didn't have accurate information:

I think that every step that I can imagine and more were taken. ... I found it beneficial when people would come up to me in a restaurant and say, "Well, blah-blah-blah," and I could say, "No, we had a meeting yesterday and that's not the case." It would have been really easy to stir the pot if we'd not been informed. (T10/3)

One teacher commented that the superintendent met with teachers more than once and explained the plan to them before explaining it to the community:

I think that goes back to ... the teachers were given opportunities. [The superintendent] met with them on more than one occasion—opportunities for them to come and ask questions and he explained probably to the teachers first before explaining to the community what it would look like. I think that was beneficial. (T11/3)

A second factor in communication was the importance of teachers being accommodated during the transition. I learned teachers wanted to be taken care of in every way. They did not want to be stressed about the minor factors such as moving their things or where they would teach the following year. The data regarding teachers' perception of the district accommodating them in the move process was a major part of transitioning from one campus to another. The teachers referred to The Next Step Checklist (DOC10), and 2012 Middle School Questionnaire (DOC10) as communication they used to discuss with their building principal anything they thought they would need or anything that we had not thought about. When the teacher interviews were conducted the move had not occurred; one teacher noted that and went on to say, "The move hasn't yet occurred, but as far as informing teachers of what they'll need to prepare themselves for, for the move it has happened." (T5/2)

One teacher went on to summarize it this way:

I think they've been doing real well. First of all, you can't accommodate everybody. I think they were asked. The teachers responded. There's always going to be someone disappointed. I think for the most part, after the shock, they've gotten ready for something. (T4/2)

The same teacher went on to add, "Were the things that I've learned to continued to do in the school system accommodated, yes. I wanted to teach [subject] and [subject] and it was accommodated" (T4/3). A second teacher added very confidently,

That's a question I feel very confident in answering. I know meetings have been held and I know that the teachers' input on a district level has been sought through meetings that were set up and held, even down on the building level. You know, even here as far as the change process that will take place, our personal opinions about needs and desires have been taken into account. I think so on all levels. (T1/2)

A third teacher added that the district had to make tough decisions by stating,

I don't feel like they had to in any way even consider the survey—our first school and our second school. I know there are teachers who are unhappy because they didn't get their first school. But, if there's one spot and four teachers wanting it, you've got to make decisions. But as far as I was concerned, I felt like they did all they could. (T10/2-3)

Another teacher added,

The teachers were asked where they wanted to go. They were given the first choice of where they wanted to go in the move. And then, as far as I know, those were taken into consideration when teachers were moved from building to building. I also think the district had to take into account certification where people were teaching certain subject areas and that sort of thing. (T11/2-3)

This support in accommodations came at a time when some teachers had mixed feelings.

One teacher I interviewed didn't believe enough was done or that more could be done. A teacher commented,

that hasn't been made known. There has been talk about it but nothing definitive. There has been talk about having the summer workers/custodians move items if they are properly packed and labeled, but teachers will have to move personal items on their own. (T6/2)

Throughout this process of reconfiguration the majority of teachers felt supported and one teacher described, "I feel like they gave us a voice and they had to make ultimate decisions, but we had a voice" (T2/2). Another teacher went on to say, "we've talked about it how to pack and how to move and the procedures it will take and the time line for it—that's all been discussed already" (T7/2).

Finally, one teacher summed up the entire process by commenting:

I think we've been kept well-informed about how things are going to happen. We had a meeting and we talked about how we were moving and what we were moving and how to label our boxes and questions that could be answered and things. (T9/2)

The data indicated that teachers did a lot of communicating and collaborating with district administrators, building administrators, and other teachers through many meetings held in various places throughout the district. All teachers continued to feel included in the process. One teacher stated, "They've kept them very well informed. I know from central office, they've done a lot to inform everybody and keep everybody up to date on what's going on" (T8/4).

Another teacher commented,

We were included and given an opportunity to take part in the poll, the survey, giving us an opportunity to voice our opinion on where we would like to be if we were going to certain level or what subject areas we would prefer to teach depending on what our certifications were. All throughout the process I feel that we were included, that I was included. (T1/3-4)

Although there was an understanding that teachers would be placed at different schools and might not receive their top pick of schools, one teacher commented on how the two middle school principals made this teacher feel reassured and it helped:

I was informed about the different schedules and about how the facilities were going to be handled, about how the move's going to be handled. I felt very reassured that both principals at the two schools where if I currently teach seemed to be fine if I wanted to go there. That was nice that they didn't say, "No, go to the other school." That helped me! (T10/3)

Another teacher commented on the process as well:

Last year, at least, they sent out e-mails asking teachers where they'd like to be placed for placement opportunities—giving them options for buildings, subject level, and grade levels. Then we were asked again this fall the same type of survey. Then principals brought us in and let us know where we'd be and what we'd be doing well in advance. (T7/3)

A part of being a teacher in this district and this state, according to the ADE, is to have Arkansas Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (ACSIP) meetings for teachers. All teachers at every school must be included in the decisions and activities based on the school's greatest needs. One teacher commented on involvement in this required meeting:

We were included especially through the ACSIP. I think that was the Number 1 best feedback for me. We were meeting with each other and we've gotten questions, feedback, ... like what do you think will be beneficial for the teachers, the kids. On our last ACSIP meeting what was most beneficial was that we had a student sit in on it. She gave feedback from a student perspective. (T3/3)

A fourth factor in communication was the importance of teachers having professional-development opportunities in the school district. Teachers today are consistently under pressure to perform. But most teachers feel they are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of their students. The teachers interviewed for this study believed they needed and received adequate

preparation on the new Common Core State Standards as well as any new content. One commented:

They are doing curriculum meetings. They've been hiring subs all year long working on these common-core standards. I know the fifth and sixth-grade literacy teachers have met. The seventh and eighth-grade literacy teachers have met. We've also done departmental meetings. Science and social studies, content teachers, in fifth and sixth grade have done work on their common-core standards. And so has the seventh and eighth. They've hired subs and had professional development for them. So, we are really, I think, ahead of the game as far as that type of embedded professional development. They've had a lot of say in what this would look like. Also, in getting instructional strategies that they may not have thought about to help them implement it. And I've been involved in a lot of that, and what I've noticed is that a lot of the teachers have said, "This isn't going to be as hard as we thought it was going to be. We're already doing some really good things." Then you take into account the things that we've added, the things that we can do, that we can give them the support on, they seem to be really excited about it. (T8/4)

The teachers specifically believed the collaboration and professional development they participated in between the grade levels was a much-needed addition to their vertical alignment.

One teacher stated,

For instance, we're moving to fifth, sixth, seventh, so we've been ... we've already worked four days on that curriculum for 5, 6, 7. And planning those units for those age levels—we've planned both linear, and what do you call that, from kindergarten to 12th—the vertical alignment. We've had professional development on that and common core coming in and the timeline for that. We've had ethics training. We've done the families before they move—a lot of professional development. (T7/2)

A second teacher stated, "The common core, we've had meetings once a month to go over strategies we can use in the classroom. And before school started we had professional development dealing with common core and common-core strategies" (T2/2).

A third teacher added,

Yes, we had several ... as soon as information was available; our administration shared that information, almost to the point of, if I have to have a faculty so that you hear it from me so you don't hear it on the streets, I think that were handled very well. We've had different professional development. I think we need more, especially with the new 5, 6, 7, but we've gotten common core, and that's going to be implemented, so I think we've had some professional development. (T3/2)

Another teacher commented on the district's ability to help teachers think about the next steps in difficulty levels and lexile levels, which allowed them to have rich conversation between the departments. One teacher described common-core literacy-department meetings and what went on in them:

I know that in our common-core meetings that we've had pertaining to our literacy department, we've really in those meetings had to think about what topics, what books, what particular curricular materials were going to be suitable for each of the grade levels that were going to be within that school building. How are books and materials going to be shared? Were we going to get class copies of one thing versus a student copy of different things? When a student leaves fifth grade, what's the next step up in terms of difficulty level of the text, the lexile levels, those rich conversations really came at the right time. And I think people were a little, I won't say "bugged" but felt overwhelmed is the right word—wow! Common core and reconfiguration at one time, but we're not really probably thinking about it with an open mind. It's probably the best marriage of two things because change is already happening with reconfiguration; common core is coming. I think that's a good marriage at a good time to go ahead and take all that change all at once, and just start and hit the ground running. (T1/5)

Teacher interview data indicated teachers valued the meetings and information they received from building administration. The principal's ability to communicate enough information to teachers helped them feel comfortable with the changes. One teacher matter of factly stated, "My principal has asked me for input and I've been able to speak with her about anything" (T2/2). A second teacher added,

I could answer that in two words: teachers' input. The welcoming of teachers' input. You've been wonderful about welcoming ideas and being open to ideas and having your voice heard as a teacher is invaluable. And I know some teachers are more outspoken than others, but just knowing, even if you're a less outspoken person, kind of like I am, just knowing that you've got that sounding board with somebody willing to listen to you, and not just willing to listen to you but *soliciting* your ideas through faculty meetings, that's always very supportive. (T1/6)

Another teacher added:

Our administrators in the building have done the same thing and have already promised [teachers] they will help them get everything moved. Anything that they can answer, they have answered. If they haven't answered their questions yet, it's because they don't know the answer yet. (T8/4)

An additional teacher believed the principal and the way the principal handled the information made a huge difference in helping teachers with the implementation phase, through providing feedback and ACSIP meetings:

First, the ACSIP meeting, our principal going to the auditorium, we all got together, all the middle school teachers, and we heard from our superintendent. Our principals were there, all the teachers. They gave feedback. It helped too that our faculty got to go on a bus ride, and that gave us a feel, especially if you're going to stay at [one of the middle schools], you know the feel of the community. You may not have gotten a chance to see where they live—the students. So we got to go on a bus ride and were able to see their communities. And again, like I said, ACSIP has been wonderful to me, and the other things to top it off was that student input in our ACSIP. (T3/4)

District reconfiguration. Upon open coding the data and further reviewing and analyzing the axial codes, the second major theme that emerged was district reconfiguration. All 11 teachers believed the reconfiguration was the most important thing that has happened in this district. No one believed this reconfiguration was not warranted. However, the data indicated teachers had different views on what factors led to this reconfiguration. They all knew of a factor or multiple factors but not the same factor. Although the teachers believed the communication in the district was positive, they could not agree on the reasoning behind the configuration. One teacher commented,

I think there were probably a lot of factors. I think the test scores was the biggest instigator in that discussion. But I think it's been a long time coming and things that people worried about in terms of balancing the schools with poverty students, African-American students, especially with the demographics, I think that's been a concern for a long time. Then when you factor into that that we've been in school improvement in those buildings where those demographics are really high, that caused them to start to think about that and started the conversation about maybe reconfiguring the district. (T8/1)

A second teacher commented on the benchmark scores: “My perception is that it was in response to our benchmark test score that we were trying to ... the state gave different options, and if we reconfigured and reset, that would help us get out of school improvement” (T/10/1).

Yet, a third teacher believed this:

I think, this is my opinion, I think they looked at the studies in the United States and saw how that the general population is going back to this middle school, plus the ages, because we're grouping them 5, 6, and 7—a more compatible age in my opinion. (T3/1)

A fourth participant commented on the new elementary and high school being built:

The factors that led to the implementation was the need for the new elementary to be built and also the renovation of the HS. With the new HS needing to be renovated, reconfiguration had to take place in order to meet the needs of all the members of the community. (T6/1)

A final participant explained, they didn't know specifics other than population growth and too many transitions:

I think it had to do with the fact that we're building the new high school, and then populations, as far as moving kids into the new high school because it held a higher number of students. So everything just kind of shifted. So, I think there was, as I recall, there was some talk about how we wanted students not to change schools every 2 years. We were in a cycle where students changed schools every 2 years. They just barely got there and there wasn't that cohesiveness that they wanted for the students. (T11/1)

As indicated in earlier data, all teachers knew the reconfiguration was important and had to be implemented. They also knew that some people opposed it. Some teachers described why they thought there was opposition:

I think there probably will continue to be some, but after about a year people will get used to it. Every time there's change, people will be a little afraid of it. I know people are selling their houses to move to another district and all that kind of stuff. I think there will continue to be a little bit until they realize it's going to be all right, and I think it is. (T4/1)

I think there's always opposition from someone somewhere. I think as much as there might have been opposition to it, there were people in favor of it because the new high school needed to be built. But I think there more people in favor of it than against it. (T11/1)

A third teacher commented on the pairing of the grades:

Well, it's from what I heard, a lot of people are (1) resistant to change, and (2) it's going to affect other things. It's going to affect athletic programs and the music program. ... And it's going to affect the people that you work with, the collaborations you've worked with—the relationships you've established. And then there are also just concerns because there are people that don't agree that fifth, sixth, seventh graders don't belong together. (T10/1)

Another teacher added,

A lot of my coworkers and in listening to other people did not think this was going to work because of the pairing of the grades. Some thought that 5, 6, 7 was not appropriate. The seventh graders would not be equal with the fifth grade, and they thought eighth and ninth were not compatible. There was a lot of opposition until they heard about the studies and things that had happened in other states. (T3/1)

A fourth teacher also described the opposition to the reconfiguration:

I'm not so sure that the reconfiguration had as much opposition. I didn't hear about that as much. I think there were maybe a few places where there was a little bit, but I'm not sure what that was concerned about. But when you start talking about moving the boundaries and moving the lines where the zones would fall, I think *that* caused a lot of negative feelings from different parents because they didn't want their kids going to certain schools. As far as the reconfiguration which encompasses a lot of things, I think everybody was glad to move some of the grade levels and things like that. I don't think it was negative toward the whole reconfiguration as much as it was to the changing the zoning boundaries. That was the biggest, and that's been in this district since I've been here. (T8/1)

Teacher interview data indicated teachers have a different view on the impact the reconfiguration had on students. Most teachers felt the impact on the students were either positive or there was no impact at all. One teacher commented,

I don't think students really realize what's happening to them yet at all. I don't think it will hit them until next year, and I'm not sure it will bother. They'll just be in different places and different buildings and what have you, and I don't think it's going to impact the students as much as helping them in the long run as far as instruction in the classroom. (T8/2)

Another teacher stated,

I have kind of seen a mix of ideas, I've heard a mix of ideas. One of the ideas I've heard is that with a true middle school concept, the whole child is taken into consideration. So, if we bring fifth and sixth graders into the fold of the middle school level, that welcoming, nurturing environment should be beneficial to those students who are entering that very important phase of their lives. (T1/1)

A third teacher added, "I think it will be better for the students because they will be able to be in one building longer. They'll be able to have a better relationship not only with their peers but also their teachers" (T11/1).

Teachers perceived the impact on their fellow teachers is yet to be seen, but that it is perceived to be positive in nature and better for the faculty. One teacher commented on the mixed feelings of the faculty:

I think there are mixed feelings about that, naturally. Many of the teachers are getting to stay where they wanted to stay or go where they wanted to go, and some aren't. Overall the ones that I've talked with that are having to move and make a change, they've already adjusted. It's like they've had enough time. I think the district did a good job in preparing everybody, and using a process rather than just all of a sudden change is happening. They allowed them to have time to really think about it and have their anxiety about it and now they're ready to move on. What I hear now is nothing but positive. (T8/2)

The major disgruntled feelings among the teachers had to do with the 2012 Middle School Questionnaire (DOC10); List of Teachers Moving and Staying (DOC11); Special Education Assignments (DOC12); 2012 Secondary Coaching Assignment (DOC13); and Fine Arts Assignments (DOC14). These documents played a tremendous role in this reconfiguration. The majority of the middle school principals' meetings were related to these documents. An analysis of the documents provided me with an insight into how teachers felt about the moving process. DOC11 shows each teacher in the middle school building, what school they came from, which school preference they chose, their three grade preferences and the subjects they preferred to teach. Then it showed their final placements. Once the teachers received this information on December 9 through e-mail (DOC3), they calmed down and accepted their positions before the holiday break, which was a strategic plan in itself.

One teacher stated, "I think it will be better for the faculty because they can spend more time with one group of students before they move on to another building" (T11/1-2). Another teacher added, "Right now there's an ease, and it seems like everybody has joined the bandwagon and accepted it" (T3/1). A fourth teacher described teachers feelings: "I think it's positive; the people who I've talked to think it's a positive change, even if they're afraid of it, and I'm afraid of it!" (T9/1).

One teacher stated the following:

Most of what I've heard has been from faculty members. Now as far as impact *on* the faculty, I think it's only going to make us stronger faculty and stronger educators, because we're going to be really forced to consider different ways to work with children, different ages of children. We may not teach, you know, like if I've always been teaching seventh I'm still going in some way, in some aspect of my job, interacting with fifth graders, which I've never done. So, it's still going to behoove us to become better trained and become better able to deal with kids of a more diverse age range. (T1/2)

The consensus among teachers was that they supported the reconfiguration and that its impact on them was minimal. But when asked specifically about the interaction between teachers in their building and how it affected them, the comments were different. All teachers were conflicted, depending on who you spoke with. One teacher commented on the emotional shift:

As far as interaction, I wouldn't say so because we've had such a cohesive unit as far as in my particular department, it hasn't really affected our interaction. But when it comes to just like, how should I put it, I hate to say morale, but in terms of people's feelings about having to separate after teaching together so long, there has been an emotional shift. But as far as our interactions, not so much. But our conversations about having to separate, that has been affected. (T1/4)

A second teacher stated,

I do believe it has affected the interaction. I do believe some of the people who aren't going to be here are kind of have their mind set on that, so maybe they act differently towards faculty and maybe even some students. Some people who are to be at the eighth-ninth campus have interacted a lot with the seventh-grade students, knowing they're going to be with those students next year to offer help there—offer help with that transition. I think the people who are here are trying to foster that sense of community among the faculty who will be here. (T7/3)

A third teacher added,

We have some people who are upset because they are not going where they want to go. It's one of those things where to me, if you look at the whole big picture, instead of "why me" I've always thought "why not me?" Why shouldn't I be the one that has to go somewhere different? Why should I be the lucky one who gets what I want? But some people, some are upset because they aren't getting what they want. I'd also say that in the realm of my discipline, the transition has really been positive because suddenly () who is coming over here to help us and making time to be over here because she's going to have these students next year. Now she's concerned they are prepared for next year because she's going to have them next year. (T10/4)

Another teacher added,

Definitely! In any building, you have certain cliques. And you have teachers who want to go to a school and they may not get a chance to go, and that causes division. It causes chaos because we were told in December where the placement was. So now you have people around who have to carry that around for an entire semester, and it makes it difficult if you wanted to go to the next level and you can't. You may not be as kind and giving and supportive of your peers. It causes division in the schools. It really does. (T6/4)

And finally,

I think it has affected it in a positive way. They're talking more. They're helping each other. They're being very considerate of the people who will not be staying. I've just noticed it's almost like they're really sad to see them go, and it's hard for some of them. They're being really, really considerate of each other's feelings. I think that's real good. (T8/6)

Another factor that emerged from the data was the impact of the reconfiguration on the community. Some teachers believed the community was not as involved as it could have been. They thought the community was given the opportunity to voice their concerns or ask questions, but not make decisions. Because of the time constraints, they did agree that the administration went about it the right way. One teacher commented,

I think efforts were made but unsuccessful. There were town hall meetings held, but a lot of them were when people were still at work. They may have been in places where some of the members of the community didn't feel comfortable attending. In that sense, I don't think the effort was collaborative. They put things in the newspaper, saying if you want to have input, come here or call this number, things like that. But I don't think a big effort was made to reach people where they are to get people to sit at the table. I think it was just for show. (T6/4)

Another teacher commented,

I think the word got out quickly and I think it was well received. ... I think the fear will die on some people after a while. I think it was well received. I think the administration went about it the right way by putting it in the paper, having the forums, pictures of the new schools, kind of getting people thinking about what's down the pike rather than what we've been doing all these years. (T4/3)

A third teacher added,

Well, the perception that I have, or that I seem to be hearing, is that people are very concerned with fifth graders being in the same school with seventh graders and about whether ... I don't know how to say this (anyway, there's no correct way.). I don't think it's educationally. I think it's equality and whether it's possible to make it equal with four middle schools. There's going to be a lot of ... right now there's a little of rivalry between [the middle schools]. How much we try to not have that, it's still there. That's going to be really intensified when there are four. (T10/1)

I learned that the majority of the teachers believed that the district's involvement in the community was collaborative and the district did present many opportunities for parents, teachers, and other community members to get involved and to give input. One teacher commented,

I know they've had some district meetings at each of the campuses. They were where all the parents could attend. They gave them information and they were allowed to ask questions. They were even encouraged if you have suggestions, let us know. I think they're even planning more things in the future to help with this. (T8/5)

A second teacher added,

I do know that the school board has been open to anybody who wants to come in and express concerns. There've been a lot of meetings. I've noticed e-mails going out about parents for a chance to come and see for parents whose kids are going to the high school, those who have special needs, they can come to a meeting. They've had meetings for the community. My principal [name] has even gone to speak to the communities, and I think that's been very beneficial to parents. (T7/3)

The same teacher made an additional comment by stating, "Parents and community seem to be pretty excited about it now that they've been orientated to what school and know what school their student goes to. They know that by now" (T7/3).

A third teacher provided the following,

I know that the district was open to the community's opinions on the transition. I know when it comes to the, like the zoning of the schools—I know that was a big issue. I don't know all the ins and outs of it, I do know that maybe some parents were happy about the rezoning and while some families/parents were not so happy about it, but yet and still their voices were able to be heard in those meetings. And I do believe it was collaborative because I think that it was two-way communication. It wasn't, from my point of view, "this is the way it's going to be. That's it." That wasn't the district's standpoint, from everything I heard and saw about it. It was kind of a two-way conversation and pros and cons were considered as far as the zoning and such. (T1/3)

Another teacher added, “I think the community will be impacted by it because it will just be better overall for the students’ education. I think we’ll see the students be better developed educationally and behaviorally” (T11/2).

Involvement. The final major theme from the data of the teachers was involvement. All five areas in this subsection were believed by the teachers to be major influences on the success and/ or failure of the district’s efforts to reconfigure the middle schools. The five areas include (a) key events, (b) changes, (c) problems, (d) successes, and (e) role of the teacher.

The district’s involvement with the teachers over this past year has been crucial in the success of the reconfiguration. According to the teachers, there have been key events that helped them with the implementation phase of this transition period. These teachers indicated the information, informal meetings, and conversations helped them tremendously. All 11 teachers believed the building principal was the key to their understanding. They trusted the information being given to them by their building principal. One teacher stated,

As soon as it was discussed, we knew about it. I felt like the minute ... because I just started here last year, so I felt like the minute I walked in here I knew where the school was headed so there was no secrets about it. Having the survey sent out about where you wanted to work and what level, I felt like I had some input. The training on common core started at the beginning of last year, so 2 years’ worth of common-core training in order to get ready for the common-core transition. There was a lot of PD on children who were coming in younger, a lot of questions that were asked and addressed—we’ve talked about it every month at every faculty meeting, so there’s been a lot of discussion about it. (T7/4)

A second teacher stated,

Key events were PD held at my school. My principal talked to us about common core, made it very plain. Had books available, websites available. Didn’t give it to us all at one time. We were given it in chunks—a little bit at a time. We made sure we had a clear understanding of it. There was one other event that I thought was a nice gesture on behalf of the district. That was this semester, they let us go to the new schools they would be going to, to at least meet the staff of the school we would be going to. The biggest event was the PD held at the schools. (T6/5)

Another teacher commented about having a lot of questions and not understanding it all but having faith in those people in charge:

Faculty meetings. We had a couple of get-togethers with different disciplines that talked about how the changes would affect ... an idea of how it was going to be. There's a lot of work to do yet! And of course, the survey we filled out. I think that was one of the key things. That was a hands-on thing about what you want to do. And of course, receiving the information was probably second most. We still have a lot of questions. People don't understand how it's all going to take place. But we have faith in those people above. (T4/4)

An additional teacher commented,

First, the ACSIP meeting, our principal going to the auditorium, we all got together, all the middle school teachers, and we heard from our superintendent. Our principals were there, all the teachers. They gave feedback. It helped too that our faculty got to go on a bus ride, and that gave us a feel, especially if you're going to stay at [middle school], you know the feel of the community. You may not have gotten a chance to see where they live—the students. So we got to go on a bus ride and were able to see their communities. And again, like I said, ACSIP has been wonderful to me, and the other things to top it off was that student input in our ACSIP. (T3/4)

One teacher felt that the most important event for her was her knowing where she would be next year. Most teachers had forgotten about this day. This was the day that an e-mail went out to each teacher letting them know what building, subject, and grade level they would be teaching in the next year. It was on December 9, 2011 and called “D-day” because of the emotional strain it had placed on the teachers. The anticipation of not knowing weighed heavily, but once it was over and everyone found out their results, they dealt with it and moved on. One teacher commented,

I guess that the most key event to me was when I got that e-mail telling me where I would be. I think if I were still waiting right now, I'd be very agitated and frustrated because I'm a planner. We're having to figure out right now where the ... is going to go. We're having to break down libraries. Break down equipment. It's going to be a lot, a lot of work to get it all set up the way it's going to be. So, the main event for me was getting that e-mail and knowing where I would be. (T10/5)

One teacher offered the following:

I guess maybe the informational meetings, just starting us out slow like I said before with the administration and superintendent coming to the different schools and having the different meetings. Our principal, along with ,, any time she knew something, she told us about it in faculty meetings. And I think just keeping people informed was beneficial. (T2/3-4)

The second factor that emerged from the data was change. Some teachers had been in their current positions for years, probably thinking they would retire from those positions. They had the most difficulty with the changes in the district. One teacher commented,

If I were an administrator? I think I would inform the teachers who are making changes. ... I think I would give them more of an idea of what to expect at the next school. Like when we have a faculty meeting, why don't I go to their faculty meeting? I think when something is decided, since there are ... like the fear of changes is happening to a lot of teachers, if we would just let them know and take a little bit of that fear away. Every time a decision is made, let them know how that will affect them in that next school that they're going to go to. Again, it may not be possible to do that because you may not know. But if you do, I think it would be good just to let them know ... maybe just e-mail them something. This was decided or this or this. I don't know the length of the school day, how long the classes are, has any of that been decided. Any of that information that could help you prepare. They don't want to wait until next August, and hopefully some decisions are made before next August. And I know it's not easy. I think someone coming to this school next year, they would have gotten something out of that faculty meeting. (T4/7)

Another teacher added,

But for big change like this, I mean, any change that you would make, you're not going to please everyone. So, the way it was done was perfectly fine with me. But, like I said, there are always improvements that could be made. But once again, you make those improvements—you could satisfy a few and irritate others. So I think the job that they did was good. (T5/6)

A third teacher commented,

When you restructure anything, there are going to be changes. Everybody has to set back and look at, alright, what we are going to have to have in order to do this. And what are we no longer going to need. That's just the way it is. That's just how it is and that's what we're going to do. I've been doing this 30 years, and things change about every 10 years, so everyone needs to get used to it! (T8/10)

A fourth teacher embraced the changes:

Change and stagnation don't go together. We can't have change on the district or school level, but yet have stagnation on the personal level. If you don't jump on the bus when

the bus is coming by, you're going to get left in the dust. It behooves us as educators to remind ourselves of those things, those frameworks, and become refamiliarized with those things that brought us into this profession in the first place. Because if we don't do that, I can imagine how many educators will get disgruntled, become complacent. That transition, if not handled correctly on the personal level, because I think the district level and the school level has been handled correctly, but people in their spiritual/personal level don't open up and welcome it, and not just welcoming it, but welcoming things also involves taking the proper steps so that you're mentally prepared for it. So it makes sense to me to review some of those things about the middle school association to fully embrace the change that is coming. (T1/8)

This teacher went on to say,

I honestly, if this is a change, that the district ... even do more of reaching out to the teachers in terms of soliciting their input. I think more of the same would be a good thing. I think the district has done that, but I think people are hesitant or reticent about reaching out unless they are given a welcome mat—some people are that way. Some people are going to voice their opinion whether there's a welcome mat or not! I think the district should do more of the same. Remain positive, not get bogged down in the quagmire of the bickering, if that's taking place. Remain on the high plain of positivity and do more of the same about welcoming teachers' idea and input. That's why I've always felt blessed to be a part of this district for all these years, because I have always felt like I'm an integral part of the system and not that I'm on the outside of the system looking for the next change and I have to catch up with it. I've always felt like I was included in it. (T1/10)

A third factor under teacher involvement was problems. The teachers viewed the changes associated with the reconfiguration as necessary, but they noticed that there were problems.

Teachers supported the districts transition initiative but recognized that with any major reform, problems will always arise. All teachers provided insight as to what they felt were the problems in the district. Although several teachers believed the problems were not major enough to be a barrier, they did think problems could hinder the success of the reconfiguration in the future. One teacher commented on the large numbers of students on one campus and doing too much in one year:

The large number of people who are going to be at [junior high] campus. That's going to be a big, big, big school. I think that's going to present some problems. Possibly—I don't think it'll be a big problem—but the fifth mixing with seventh. But when I started here, we had sixth, seventh, and eighth. We didn't have a problem with sixth and eighth. And that's a big difference between sixth and eighth graders. We had that for 3, 4 years. I'm

sure that's probably what everybody thinks. I'm sure parents are worried about fifth graders mixing with seventh graders. I think maybe the curriculum, common-core curriculum—I think ... well, don't get me started on that. I think the reconfiguration and doing something new like common core ... that sure is hard. That's way too much. But I know it won't take the other school systems as much because they're not reconfiguring like we are. I think it will put more pressure on the teachers and make their jobs harder. I don't know. I think the other thing is just going through it 1 year and seeing how this works and that doesn't work. The administrators making necessary changes. (T4/5)

A second teacher commented on the problems with the day-to-day operations at the middle schools:

Well, I think there's going to be ... it's not going to be problems in the classroom, it's going to be problems with traffic flow and problems with lunch. Those are just things ... because you're not going to know what's going to happen until it happens, and then you just have to monitor and adjust. You just have to make it work. ... And the way we avoided that was having the same teacher. They know what they're getting. I was their beginner teacher. ... We tried to play to our strengths completely, and that didn't work because there's a student-teacher relationship that keeps them involved. ... But I'm concerned because going from seventh grade to eighth grade, different buildings, different teachers—it's not going to be tracked. It can't be tracked because of the way the schedule is. (T10/7)

Another teacher added,

I think that the only problem that I would see is that, especially for our grade levels that you have some teachers who are coming in who have already taught the common core, and some teachers who will be staying in this building who will be with those teachers but will not have taught the common-core state standards. So I think there's going to be a little bit of a learning curve that one group will have over another. And, too, just having taught for over 23 years, any time you bring two separate groups together, especially when one group has been with one building and one building principal, and they understand what that building principal expects, and sometimes you move them to another building, sometimes it's hard for them to remember what it was like to move under that former principal. There was still that time where you had to learn what they would expect from you or wouldn't expect from you. If I see any problems at all, it would be that just having to ... any time when you're bringing two separate families and you're putting two families together, it kind of ... you're going to have some things. But I don't think it's anything we can't overcome. (T11/5-6)

Another teacher added a concern with diversity across the district:

I really don't see any major problems with it. My mind goes back to the rezoning, and I don't know all the ins and outs of the rezoning. I guess one of the concerns, I don't know that it's a problem, but one of the concerns would be that there's equity across the board when it comes to diversity, in terms of the pockets of the community that the students are

bussing in from. You know, I'm not saying that there won't be that diversity at each of the middle schools around the district, but it would be a concern of mine. I would hope that there is a balance, as much as possible in the picture of the student in terms of where they're coming from so that when it comes to achievement and all of that, you know we're looking at the testing and all that, that it's as equitable as possible in those rezoning plans that were made. (T1/7)

One teacher spoke for the parents with a different configuration when she suggested:

The problems I see are having fifth graders with seventh graders. Speaking as a parent and a teacher I think the age gap and the maturity level is too different. You have 10-year old kids in school with 12-year old kids and some seventh graders are 13. Some may have been held back or may have started later. I think that age gap is a big problem. Fifth and sixth can go together, but I cannot see seventh graders being with that group. I think fifth grade is still very elementary. It should be, in my opinion K-5, 6-8, and 9-12. (T6/7)

Another teacher added,

I think the only worries and concerns maybe are the developmental gaps between the fifth and seventh grade. That's been addressed through our school set up into separate hallways and keeping the students with their separate hallways. That may be a concern—I have a question about the amount of students that will be in the school; we're adding a grade level but there will be four schools. Mostly just a question of the developmental—what's expected of a student in a fifth-grade classroom and what's expected in a seventh-grade classroom. (T7/5)

Another teacher agreed by stating,

The only problem I see is the one I mentioned earlier about the common core. It is designed K-5 and 6-8. The way the standards are, it would be ideal if we had that right now. So in this building, we'll have two sets of standards, fifth and sixth grade and then seventh grade. Every time we do a PD or something, we'll have to remember that there's a difference in how they're organized and how they're implemented. The goal is still the same, but it's different. (T8/8-9)

Upon my review and analysis of the data, I viewed success as a significant component.

The teachers viewed the entire process as a success. Each teacher commented on a particular success with which they were involved or going to be involved that made them feel the process was beneficial to the reconfiguration. One teacher commented,

What I'm loving about the whole thing is that we're going to be doing block scheduling, and the teachers are going to have more time to really integrate the curriculum. We've been talking that talk the whole 30 years I've been teaching, and [the school district] has

been slow to do that. Fifth and sixth grade finally got it, but we've never had it in seventh and eighth grade, and they need it as badly as anybody. They don't see things in isolated bits, and the common core is forcing us to look into that. That plus the technology. I don't think we've had enough money put into technology, and having the technology available to them is going to force us to do that. So, this configuration is going to help us do that. (T8/9)

This same teacher went on to add,

I think the communication has been the key factor. And, again, having lain out a process. I think ... I do appreciate about [the superintendent], he will lay out a plan, an implementation plan with a timeline. And it's not just "it's going to happen in a month or 2 weeks." It's over years. And he works the plan. He doesn't just devise a plan. He holds everyone accountable to that timeline, and that's just a sign of good leadership, and then when you get to the building level, they do the same thing. They make sure everyone understands the plan—keeps them posted. And they help to implement that plan. That's just the way it works, and that's been the key to the plan. (T8/7-8)

A second teacher commented,

I think it's going to be great for the kids. I think it's a great new start for a lot of the teachers. Sometimes, if you've always taught in one building for one district doing one thing, you're really jaded in how you feel or experience or what you think you know. If you haven't had the opportunity to move to another grade level or another subject area or work for another principal in another building, you don't really have the experience of knowing what that's like. And then being able to learn from that, you become one-sided in how you view things. (T11/6)

Another teacher added,

I think it's going to be a benefit for the children. What I see the best is going to be for the children. To me I still say 5, 6, 7 is a better age as far as child development. I think eighth and ninth are better, and 10th, 11th, and 12th. I think the other thing, the best thing, is that the new high school has real labs. My children went through this school and they were saying, "What? They'll have labs?" Real science labs, and they're going to get current with the new technology. The students may even be able to use their own iPads or laptops, and we've got to keep up with the current. (T3/5)

A fourth teacher offered the following,

The main success I can see is less transitioning. Right now students transition every 2 years and that's a lot. By the time they get used to one staff or one culture of a school, then it's time to move on and adapt to a new building and a new way of doing things. That's the biggest success I see.

A few teachers felt as if the district wouldn't see any major successes until after this year.

These two teachers felt like the proof is in the pudding. One teacher commented,

I think it's going to be a while before we figure out what the successes are. I think it's what the school system needs, so that's a success there. I think people will get used to the idea of fifth going to school with seventh. I don't know if they'll ever get it figured out at the eighth- and ninth-grade school. That would not be a fun place to be. I think that would be easier to answer about half way through next year—about semester that question could be answered a little easier. The first semester is going to be pretty tough. (T4/5)

Another teacher offered this statement,

I would say that the major success is that the proof is in the pudding. Teachers, overall from what I've seen, seem happy and open and welcoming to this new change. Like I said earlier, we have common core coming along with this, so that fact that this is changing overall the morale is high in my point of view. So, to me that's the major success. (T1/8)

The fifth and final factor that emerged from the data on teachers was the role of the teacher. Data indicate the role of the teachers as being the most astronomical and pivotal participant in the success of the reconfiguration. Teachers viewed their roles as one of being positive. One teacher stated, "I think as a teacher if we embrace it and support it publically, then the public will as well. But if we talk negatively, they will see it as a negative because they go on what they hear." (T9/3) Another teacher offered the following:

Well, I think whether it would be our personal choice or not, I can't get in front of my class and say, "This is going to be terrible ... blah, blah, blah." I can't get in front of my class and be negative about this because it affects them and it affects their parents. The perception of [the district] schools is that [the district] has good schools, and that's a perception that we've got to keep. And perception is 90% of it. If you get the parents to think this is a bad thing and the school's going down—well, we've got a private school, we've got a Catholic school, we've got kids home schooled, I think the role of the teacher is paramount. If we don't ... if we're not positive about this, it's probably doomed for failure. If we'll be positive ... it's all about that classroom. If a kid comes in *my* classroom and they're learning and they're engaged, then they're going to like school, and I've got to do the same thing next year. I've got to bloom where I'm planted. Wherever I am, I've got to do what I'm doing now. (T10/5)

A third teacher added,

I think just being positive about what is happening. Know that the decisions are being made to help students. It's not about them. And I think they've come to realize that. I think it was hard for some of them in the beginning, but they've become more reflective about it. I talked to one just the other day who is teaching over at [another campus], and she's going to be teaching here next year, and her son will be here the next year too. So she said, "The more I thought about it, the more God was probably making a way for me to be there where my son was going to be when he's in middle school." So she's thought about it. "It's really not about me. It's about the kids and my own kids." I thought that was kind of cool. (T8/7)

Teachers supported the role of being positive leaders in the district transition. The data indicated that the teachers stood out in their role because they were the voice in the classroom. What the teacher commented on in school, church, grocery stores, or ballgames went home to parents whether it was positive or negative. One teacher commented,

The role of the teacher should be to remain positive and be supportive and speak openly in the proper setting about the transition. . . . The role that is played is that of peacekeeper: say the right things to the right people in the right settings. But as far as deciding what to do or when to do or how to do—that was not our role. Our role was to support and encourage. (T6/6)

Another teacher added,

I think that the teacher has to have a positive outlook on it. I think they have to have a positive attitude on it for it to be successful. Their negativity could end up in the classroom and with the kids, so I think that could lead to failure. But as long as they have a positive attitude, it can be very successful. (T2/3)

Another teacher offered this statement:

I think attitude is the biggest thing. If a teacher has a bad attitude about anything, everybody else is going to feel that. Kids are going to feel that. Everything kind of grinds to a halt. But when the teachers are open to change, they see it as that a part of life. We've been through harder things in this district before when we had to go through a really tough process of teachers losing their jobs because of budget cuts. And this has nothing to compare, I think, with that. As long as teachers kind of kept perspective and kept their mind on what they're supposed to be doing, which is get up and teach every day. Keep your mind on the students, that role decided the success or failure of the transition. (T11/4)

Summary. From my analysis of interviews with the teachers, observations, and the collection of documents, data indicate teachers are aware of their roles in the reconfiguration of

the middle schools. The data indicate teachers realize this is what is best for the district and the students it serves. Teachers also indicated that their building principal played a major role in their understanding and the process that took place. They trusted their administrator on their campuses to give them accurate and timely information.

Parents

The major themes that emerged from the data collected and analyzed of the seven parents, included (a) communication with administrators and teachers, (b) transitioning, and (c) middle school concept. This section provides data from interviews, observations, and collected documents to meet triangulation and support the major themes.

Presentation of Axial Codes

Through the process of open coding, axial codes began to surface from the parent data. The axial codes were analyzed, combined, and narrowed to initiate the development of the major themes. Figure 4 identifies a sample of open codes and the three axial codes in the data from the seven parents.

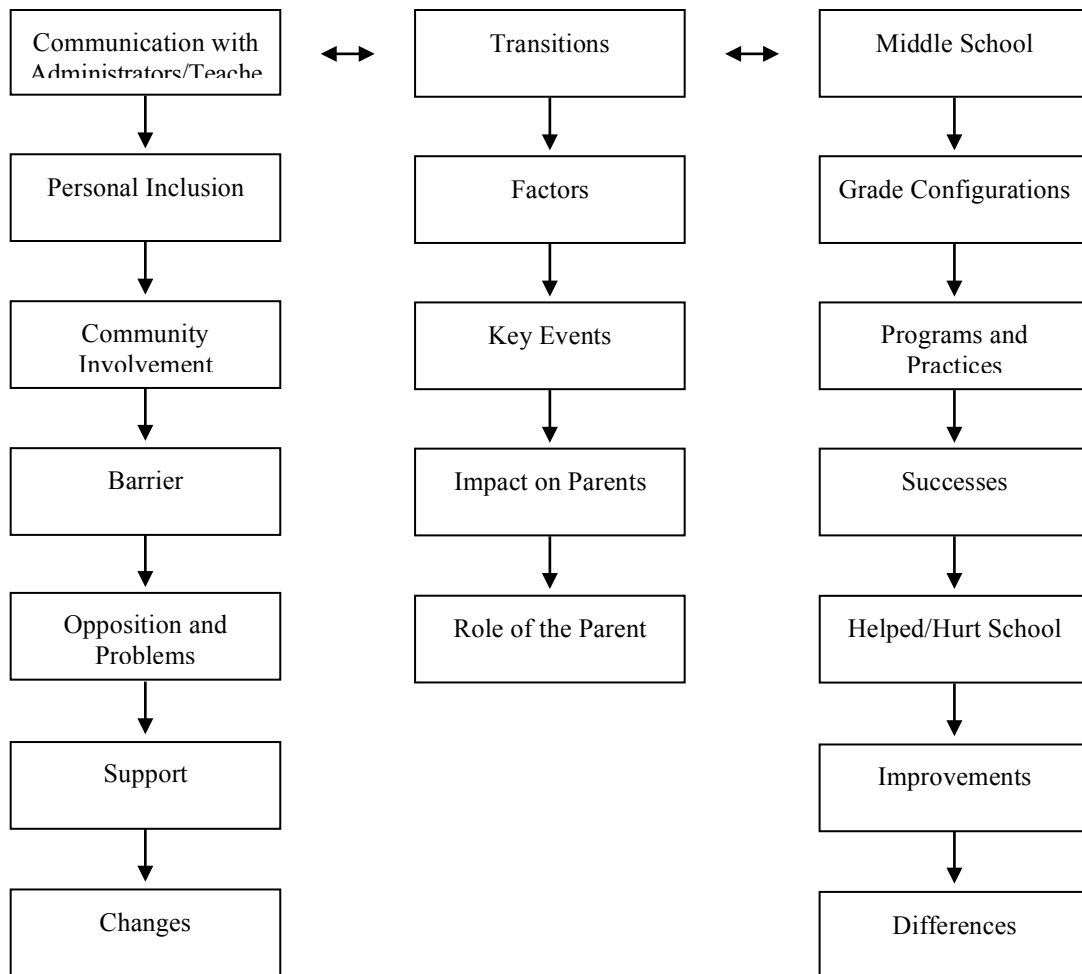


Figure 4. Axial codes and sample of open codes of parents.

Descriptive Matrix

Table 13 is a conceptual clustered matrix that provides a display of the axial codes, or major themes that emerged from the collected data of the seven parents. Data displayed in the matrix represents standardized open-ended interviews. Each conceptually clustered matrix is followed by additional data from interviews, observations, and collected documents to support the major themes.

Table 13

Descriptive Matrix: Axial Codes (Major Themes) of parents

Participant	Communication with administrators and teachers	Transition	Middle school programs and practices
P1	The district has been very communicative with the teachers about what's going to happen and have tried to be very transparent about what the plan is. I think what's been most helpful is just communication.	I know there was a 10 year committee that got together and one of the subcommittees focused on the number of transitions that students have between buildings, and so that sparked the idea of reconfiguring so that there were fewer transitions for students and parents.	I think the configuration was mainly determined by the fact that the new high school was going to house three grade levels. They didn't want to reconfigure the elementary schools, so the most logical choice was to go from the two intermediate schools and two middle schools to four just middle schools and just absorb those grade levels.
P2	Just informed about it from the very beginning. And I think that's key in - which lens to my opinion that this has been handled in the proper way because from the very beginning the effort to communicate this was there. It was present. And you didn't have to go and seek out what was going on. Like it was being done behind closed doors.	The perceived impact – from the first day that I heard about this, it made nothing but good sense to me. One thing that I was encouraged by this is that we had enough sense to really look down the road as to how things needed to be or should be in (district) and that the knee-jerk reaction to creating another high school didn't occur.	It's always been what I feel like is the level of student engagement that needed to occur. I do believe that that is one of the most important things that our schools can provide for us – that level of student engagement. Where the student actually understands what they're doing here and they're involved in the process and they care about it. I think that's one of the key things that important at that age, well, at any age.

Participant	Communication with administrators and teachers	Transition	Middle school programs and practices
P3	I am actually a part of the 2012 from the very beginning, but I'm not going to say how instrumental I was in my role, but I've been on board from the start when it was introduced with (superintendent), but that was how I was included in the process.	I think that they've kept us informed. There has been a lot – when the groundbreaking came about, there was a lot of media attention.	I am hoping that in this, we think about the balance – racially, economically, and everything. I'm hoping with the reconfiguration, you don't have a heavy population of kids over here . . . I think it should bring balance.
P4	Just by looking at some of the information that I've read, I'm sure there was some, but I don't think it was major opposition. I think it may have been more concern than opposition.	Key events would have been the letter, the internet posts, things like that. That, for me, that helped me.	Academically, I think it's going to help. Once those kids figure out they aren't trying to compete and measure up to kids who are older than them, I think they will be focused and will do better in the classroom
P5	I think the biggest barrier, and I may be the only one with this opinion, is just the fear of is it going to work. Who's it going to effect and is it going to affect them and is this really what's going to be best for the kids. But there's going to be a little bit of that when you take a risk or have to make change. So, I don't know of anything huge but the rezoning – the rezoning issues – that's all I'm aware of.	You know, I wish we had a larger percentage of parents who were willing to commit to serve on committees to get their voices out there. Because so many times they wait until there's something they <i>don't</i> like to complain rather than take the opportunity to come in and say, "Have you thought about this? What's going to happen in this phase? What do I need to do, or how can I advocate for what I need?"	Everybody's biggest complaint is not having time, so it will be nice if we could find a way to have more time, to find a way to work together as teams and things like that.

Participant	Communication with administrators and teachers	Transition	Middle school programs and practices
P6	I wouldn't change a thing. We've been given time and we already knew it was coming, and it's not like it was a surprise.	I think they gave the parents time to express what they feel about the rezoning and the reconfiguration of the schools. And once everything was brought out on the table, the parents better understood and they were all for it.	With the 5-7 middle school, you're going to have younger kids, they're going to be a little younger and we'll get an extra grade over here. For the teachers, it's going to be a little different; we'll make them grow up a little quicker than what they should.
P7	You know, in the community I think the big opposition that I heard was that some of the parents thought they were going to have to travel too far to get to events and stuff. I think during the transition time, they announced they were going to close one of the elementary schools, and I think that upset some of the people that have been in the community for a while. Overall, once things were said and done, everything settled down, everything was pretty good.	I think, in my house anyway, if I have a positive light about something going on, and I'm okay with it, then my kids are going to be okay with it. Throughout the district, if the parents are going to fuss about it, then the kids are going to fuss about it. If the parents are positive about it and have a good attitude about it, then the kids are going to be positive about it. Once it's all said and done, it's my job to be positive for my kids.	Smaller classroom sizes. More teachers for my kids. And actually to have growth. To know that if we have 50 new kids come into (district) next year. Or 100. Or 200 or whatever the number is, we can welcome them with open arms.

Communication with administrators and teachers. Upon open coding the data and further reviewing and analyzing the axial codes, the first major theme that emerged was communication with administrators and teachers. All seven parents have the same opinion that communicating with the district's teachers, district administrators, principals, or board members was vital in their understanding of the necessity to reconfigure the schools. The parents agreed

that the basic need of being kept informed and being very communicative with them about what's going to happen has made all the difference. All seven parents were in agreement that the information was available and continually being communicated. One parent stated,

I wasn't on the 10-year committee that talked about the reconfiguration, but I knew people who were. And once that transpired, as a parent, I was invited to parent meetings. There has been communication by e-mail. There's been communication by the website. There were maps up for availability. [The superintendent] indicated you could e-mail him with questions you had. There's been a lot on the website about it. And even at my son's school, the people there have been informative about what the process is going to be like. (P1/3)

Another parent added,

Just informed about it from the very beginning. And I think that's key in—which lens to my opinion that this has been handled in the proper way because from the very beginning the effort to communicate this was there. It was present. And you didn't have to go and seek out what was going on. Like it was being done behind closed doors. It was always out there and always being communicated and that—in anything like this that you do, the communication that you do on the front end is going to drive how it is received. Even if you're against it, if you communicating it and letting everybody know what's going on, it's received better. This was handled that way. (P2/4-5)

A third parent explained a personal situation with a daughter and how the parent perceived the reconfiguration would affect the child. The reasoning behind the decisions that the district made was explained in a letter and at personal meetings with district office administrators. This parent explained,

You could attend any of the meetings. The superintendent, the teachers, and the principals were always willing to answer questions. I was okay with it because my baby girl in seventh grade, and she'll be moving to eighth grade, and it was sort of a struggle thinking she'd be in high school, but they explained that would be junior high now, so it's back to the format when I was in school. I'm okay with 8 and 9 being together. (P7/3)

Another parent commented,

Two ways. First, as a parent I received a survey and filled that out to return to my child's school. The other way as a ... and just knowing how things were handled on that end in terms of us getting information as it's received, and getting the opportunity to ask questions and give input at least to be presented by ... a representative in the process. (P4/5)

A third parent stated,

We were given notification. I remember seeing a letter coming home. When I received the letter, I started doing my own research. I started going on the Internet to the [district] schools website looking at the reconfiguration and rezoning and all that stuff they were doing. Reading school-board minutes and agendas, even though I didn't attend the meetings to try to get abreast of what was going on. (P4/2)

Parents were forthcoming about their inclusiveness in the process with the district, communicating with them from the initial stages of the reconfiguration. However, the data indicated that the personal reaction of the parents throughout the process has been remarkably positive. All seven parents were elated that this has come to actuality. One parent had mixed feelings but understood why the grade configuration was going to happen:

I can see both sides. I understand the need for fewer transitions for students and for them to be in one building maybe longer than another. And I do think that the new high school was absolutely necessary; I don't think there was any way not to have it. But I'm not sure that this much change will benefit the students to the amount of work that has been required to do this. I don't know that *one* less transition is worth all the trouble that it's taken to do this. But I'm not sure there was a way not to do it in order to build a new high school and move the tenth grade up to that. So I think grade configuration was just going to happen no matter what. (P1/4)

Another parent added,

I kind of like the process, really. It reminds me of when I was going through school. So it's like, "Oh, they're going back to what worked!" It didn't really give me that big of an impact. I really do like going to 10-11-12 because that's what I remember senior high as being, rather than it being 9-10. I think it's a win-win situation. As long as the teachers are taken care of and everyone got reassigned and everyone has a job, I'm good with the reconfiguration. (P4/3)

A third parent commented,

I'm glad it wasn't me having to do it. I'm glad I'm on the receiving end, to tell the truth. It's a lot of planning; a lot of keeping people happy. Always something political coming in to it in some degree. It's real hard for us to lose focus that this is for the children and not for every adult in the system, but for the kids. I think that they've handled it the best way they can and involved as many as they can. Thousands of people can't make a decision. You just can't include *everybody*. (P5/3)

A fourth parent gave this input,

I could see the reasoning behind it. We are getting crowded at the elementary schools. It's getting to the point that some schools had to be closed down because of numbers that they couldn't take any more kids. Even if you lived in that zone, you couldn't go. In some schools there was a definite problem as far as overcrowding. It's always better if you can keep your numbers lower, especially at the elementary level. My perception was good. I felt like it was a good thing. (P7/4)

Parents play a major role in every community. The data indicated that parents felt the district was collaborative with the community by making it possible for parents to attend not only school board meetings, but additional meetings throughout the community. One parent stated:

Absolutely. [The superintendent] was adamant at several meetings I attended that he wanted the community's input. There were questions they could ask. There were public meetings at a variety of venues. There was a central meeting over at the auditorium; they had local meetings that were at the schools. They asked for input; they put those things up on the website. They took feedback; they had board meetings, and the parents could be involved. I think the district was as collaborative as I've ever seen one be with a community. (P1/4)

Another parent added,

I think the district did everything positive they could to get it out. Of course you're not going to make all people happy with all things. There was a little bit of fussing going on and little bit of blogging going on, but overall, once it was said and done—everybody loves the new high school, loves the way it's looking. We've got a sense of pride back in [the district], something that looks like a college institution over there! (P7/4)

A third parent commented on the efforts of the district:

I think efforts were made to reach out to the public and post things to the website or on Facebook or in the paper or on a news broadcast to give somebody a heads-up on here's what we're doing next or ... I think some of it had to do with how much the parents or teachers *want* to know about what's going on because I think they have provided the information. (P5/3)

According to the data, parents did not see major barriers surface during the restructuring process. One parent thought they were the only parent to have felt fearful, stating,

I think the biggest barrier, and I may be the only one with this opinion, is just the fear of is it going to work. Who's it going to affect and is it going to affect them and is this really what's going to be best for the kids. But there's going to be a little bit of that when you

take a risk or have to make change. So, I don't know of anything huge but the rezoning—the rezoning issues—that's all I'm aware of. (P5/4)

Another parent commented,

I would say that there hasn't been a major barrier. If there were barriers presented in some form or fashion, they would stem from not understanding what's going on. I believe that anyone that has a problem that's going on, when they see the reasons to do it, then I think that those can be answered. (P2/5)

A third parent agreed:

I think that at this point there's not been a major barrier. I think that so far things have gone pretty smoothly in terms of getting ready for reconfiguration. There's still more to go, but at this point there are the expected concerns, like from parents who are being rezoned, but otherwise, it's gone pretty well. (P1/4)

A third factor in communication with parents was opposition and problems. All parents believed there was opposition in the early stages for a number of reasons. A few reasons were lack of information, a school closing, and rezoning. One parent commented,

I know there was a lot of discussion in regard to part of the reconfiguration which included closing one of the schools, and I think that caused some angst among some of the students and parents. And I know that I attended one of the parent meetings, and there were some concerns of a certain zone who were being rezoned as part of the reconfiguration, and they were not very happy about some of those choices, but that was early in the process. (P1/1)

The same parent later added,

The only problems I've been made aware of where those voiced at a parent meeting by those who were not happy in regard to where they had bought their houses. They had bought their houses specifically to go to a certain school—to be in that school's zone. So they were very vocal about being unhappy about going to a new school because they didn't want to live in a place where they would go to another school or that's where they'd have bought their house in the first place. So, to me that's been the only major issue that I've heard voiced. (P1/3)

Another parent commented,

I believe there was, especially with the millage. Every time there's a need to build, there's a need to increase funding. I think that would be the only opposition. I think every parent who has a kid in (the district) felt that there was a need for, and I'm still going to the high school, for us to have more room, better facilities for the high school. I think that in the beginning, the word was you guys get the word out. [The superintendent] did an

excellent job of pulling together a team and getting everybody on board—filtering down to the parents from the administrators and the school system—using social media. I think he did everything in his power to make it known to the community what was happening. So if there was any barrier, it would have been the millage. We passed with flying colors, that I'm aware of. So, no I don't think there's been anything significant. (P3/1)

A third parent offered the following:

You know, in the community I think the big opposition that I heard was that some of the parents thought they were going to have to travel too far to get to events and stuff. I think during the transition time, they announced they were going to close one of the elementary schools, and I think that upset some of the people that have been in the community for awhile. Overall, once things were said and done, everything settled down, everything was pretty good. (P7/1)

The same parent later added,

Any time you have change, you have problems. I think that's the big deal, you know, here in [the district], we have things pretty easy. You know, having to drive an extra mile or two to a kid's school is something that's a major problem. But if you look at the big picture, it's not. If you have to get in the car and go an extra minute or two, that's not going to hurt you. But, I think there's not any major problem that I see. (P7/3)

Parents felt supported by the district's initiative to reconfigure the middle schools. The parents also felt as if the teachers received adequate support. The data indicated that the parents thought that those in power would garner commitment and show the faculty how this would be beneficial for everybody involved. One parent commented,

I think teachers have received a lot of support from what I understand. They're very ... the district has been very communicative with the teachers about what's going to happen and have tried to be very transparent about what the plan is. I think what's been most helpful is just communication. The more information people have, they feel more comfortable; they feel more like they know what's coming and not in the dark about it. People may not like the change, but they know what's coming and they have known for a long time, so it's something they can kind of get their minds wrapped around and be prepared for. (P1/3)

Another parent added,

Because I think everybody needs to be on board. I remember when you first came and you first told your testimony when [my son] was going to seventh grade—I think it was 2010—and that was so important to me to hear that because you've been in other states; you have seen other things. I think from the teacher's standpoint, if there's a question from the parent, they're going to go to the teacher instead of the administrators or board;

they'll go to their direct contact. So I think that was important. And it was beneficial that you knew. And it probably just helped to get the word out and put the parents' minds at ease. (P3/3)

A third parent commented,

I did attend a meeting at one of the middle schools, and the teachers were there. They seemed very supportive of it. The superintendent, the associate superintendent, they were there. Some of the board members were there. I think that getting in the community and letting people know what they were doing and everything seemed to the people who were apprehensive about it, that seemed to help. (P7/3)

The final factor under communication is changes. The parents were adamant that communication from the district was positive and they felt supported. When asked about the process and how they would have done things differently most parents said that they agreed with everything the district did and wouldn't change a thing. They majority were very well satisfied and pleased with the changes that had gone forth. Some parents mentioned a few changes they would make if they had a magic wand. One parent commented,

I mean if I had a magic wand, I'd make everybody happy with the change they're going to have. I wouldn't want parents to say, "I don't want my kid to go to that school. That's not why I bought the house where I live." Because I think when you're in a district like [this district], it doesn't matter what building your student is actually in; they're all excellent. So, I wish there was a way for parents to see that, for there to be a way for them to experience what it's like on a daily basis that they *think* they don't want their child to go to. (P1/8)

A second parent added,

I don't think there would be any change. I've been very pleased and well satisfied. And those schools have been in this district: from ... and again, they'll go ... now I feel like we're right where we need to be; in the beginning there were many changes that I hated. The middle school. I hated the junior high. I thought kids were going to die from asbestos. I'm just being totally honest with you! I think that we've moved in the right direction. If I had my choice, it would probably be two high schools. There are no dynamics for that, but in that high school we're overpopulated. But I think we've created space and it may not be that problem anymore. But I used to rant and rave years ago when my daughter was in school, but I don't anymore. She hated it. She said kids were on top of kids. She was ready to get out. I don't think that will be the case with my son. So I'm very satisfied with where we stand now. (P3/7)

A third parent suggested,

Well, I think if I could change one thing, it would be to what I mentioned earlier, and that would be the attitudes of the parents in the district that are—that feel the need to dictate where their students are going to attend school. And just not trust the process. Because, it's the process not the people that has to be trusted. I believe the process has been set up in a way that it's going to have a positive impact, and it's a process that we can trust. (P2/8)

Another parent added a second suggestion:

If I could move the middle schools—we've got two middle schools that are less than a mile apart. Then on the other side of town, they're probably two miles apart. If we could make them in the four corners of the city so it was the same drive for each kid or each parent, according to that, then that'd be great. But that's not going to change. But if we build a new middle school in the future, we'll know where to put it to alleviate that travel time for those kids. There's been mention that there's been some land bought out that way for if they do need to build another school, that's what the plans are. So I think that would make the parents happier in that area. (P7/8)

Transitions. Upon open coding the data and further reviewing and analyzing the axial codes, the second major theme that emerged from the data was transitions. All seven parents discussed with me the importance of this reconfiguration and the transitions that are associated with it. Part of the importance of this study was to follow one principal's journey to reconfigure the middle grades. The parents played a major role in this journey. When parents considered the factors involved in the reconfiguration, the data showed that there was not a definitive answer as to why the district was reconfigured. One parent commented,

I would have to say that the primary driver in the reconfiguration had to do with what was happening at the high school level. We had to find the best way to find with where our population is to configure the high school and utilize the facilities that we have with that to configure a true sophomore through senior configuration. And that's what I consider to be the primary driver of the reconfiguration. That was just the best possible situation we could arrange based on the need to do something at the senior level. (P2/1)

A second parent added,

I know there was a 10-year committee that got together and one of the subcommittees focused on the number of transitions that students have between buildings, and so that sparked the idea of reconfiguring so that there were fewer transitions for students and parents. (P1/1)

Another parent suggested,

I think there have been several things that have contributed to it. I think the growth of [the district] is one of the reasons. We were outgrowing one of the buildings that we're in, and they needed to expand for the kids. I think to make the district more balanced in terms of socioeconomic had something to do with it. And mainly just to give an update for the district to get us to best practices is what did it. (P7/1)

The fourth parent commented,

From what I understand, it had to do with the growth in [the city], classroom sizes, and how we're going to best meet the needs of the kids in terms of equitability and demographics and all of that stuff. So some of the zones had to be looked at and the age groups were looked at. The community was able to give input about what age groups would perform best together. (P5/1)

There were certain events that happened during the process of transitioning that caused parents to reflect on the process and make an informed decision to support the transition.

According to the data, all seven parents believed they were knowledgeable because of the notifications that came home and the meetings they attended. One parent commented on the meetings being well perceived:

I attended the meeting. It was well-perceived by the parents. In the meeting I attended, there were some parents who were kind of fussing. There is a middle school that is closer to their elementary. But because of the demographics in [the city] that didn't work, there'd be too many kids at that middle school. So if we could uproot that middle school, it'd be great. But that can't happen, so be it. Someone will have to drive a little bit further. (P7/4)

A second parent added,

I think that they've kept us informed. There has been a lot—when the groundbreaking came about, there was a lot of media attention. Of course, living in [the city], you can see that things are taking place with the high school. I know on the ... net there is a virtual tour of the new school. So they're keeping us well informed. I think as events continue, they're keeping us well informed. (P3/4)

Another parent commented:

As a parent, I knew just through information that was sent home or notification through the school, that this was going to happen. As a community member, I was aware just through community stuff. ... and the administration had a key role in giving us a heads-up. Here's what we're looking at. Here's the overall plan. We had some meetings; attend some meetings to figure out where we think we're going to do best with the transition

itself. I think just the meetings and just having the contact, the ability to have someone to talk to about it has been the main thing. (P5/5)

An additional parent added,

I would say the parent meetings have probably been the key events. The big one early on where [the superintendent] was explaining the overall process, and the smaller ones that have happened at the local school level where the new parents coming to a school could come visit, I think that's probably been the key events that have helped parents prepare for this transition. (P1/5)

The data indicated that the parents were focused on the impact the reconfiguration had on the entire community. One parent commented:

The perceived impact—from the first day that I heard about this, it made nothing but good sense to me. One thing that I was encouraged by this is that we had enough sense to really look down the road as to how things needed to be or should be in [the city] and that the knee-jerk reaction to creating another high school didn't occur. I believe some of the studies we did that perhaps be another need for another high school for at least 10 years down the road, and even then it wasn't a definite. I think there was some wisdom gained from looking at what other districts had done in creating this type of system. There were some negative aspects to that. I'm glad that we were able to learn from that and perhaps prevent any of that from happening. You know, the new school and the old school and that kind of thing. From that standpoint—and from that point of view, from the community aspects, you know graduates from [the district] were happy about the fact that there wasn't going to be another school in town or a need for another mascot or that kind of thing. I believe that that perception of this reconfiguration is a positive one. It is well thought out and based on data and true look at how it is going to impact our students and the community for the good. (P2/3)

Another parent added,

Well, as a parent, I think the biggest impact will be the lack of ... a decrease of transitions for the students. So instead of so many between buildings, after elementary school, they will not change every 2 years. I think that's going to be a big difference. I think for parents, especially if they are the kind of parents who transport their students, they're going to see ... it's going to be a little easier on transportation because they won't have so many kids in different buildings. I think their kids will end up being in fewer buildings together. Although, there will be some parents who will be driving farther now for their kid's school than they had been, but I think that's going to be the biggest impact, that, in addition to the rezoning, which has been a part of the reconfiguration. (P1/2)

A third parent commented,

That it will help make things better, Number 1. The city is growing, and I think that we're trying to position ourselves because [the city] is a growing town and growing community.

And I think that it's just to make things a lot better. I think we grew so fast that we really didn't set back and study how things were changing when we were developing these intermediate schools and all of these elementary schools. This is the first time I've actually seen a study and some deep involvement and some deep thought in the whole picture. And really giving everybody—basically what you're doing—to look and learn. I know that as [the city] has grown in the past 15 years, all I know is that one day they put up an elementary school and all these kids are here. This is the first time we've had some lengthy looking at and everybody involved and even asking our opinion with the 2012 committee. (P3/2)

One other parent offered the following:

As a parent, I feel like they're trying to meet the needs of the majority of the needs of the students in our community. It's not going to be great for everybody. Some people are really going to have to get used to doing things a little differently. Maybe going to a different school, but I feel like they're trying to do what's in the best interested of the individual students, and be make we're able to serve them when they get to the high school level, rather than just, you know, cram them into classes and we're busting at the seams. We've got to try to funnel some of that so that we can stay on top of the growth. (P5/2)

The final factor in the transition was the role of the parent. The parents viewed their role in the configuration as one of high importance. The benefits and the downsides of being a parent with a child going through such a tremendous change have been positive. Most parents interviewed believed that other parents in the community have not all had such a positive attitude. One parent commented,

Well, some of the things that have caused me to not like it, which don't really have anything to do with any of the decisions made by the district, but more so by the attitudes of the parents that I know of in the district, whereas parents become so consumed with which elementary school is going to feed into the next level school that that becomes the goal instead of really understanding what's going on. Now, in that respect I have had some problems with how other parents react to what I consider to be some of the least significant parts of the reconfiguration. I believe that one of the things that a public school education provides and I do believe that a public school provides the best education—it provides a student with what the real world is going to be like. The people that they're going to be with throughout their lives and how to socialize and develop critical-thinking skills and how to work in teams. I believe those opportunities are best provided through a public school education. Whereas I don't believe in shielding or setting up contrived environments for students which I felt like some of the other parents were wanting to do. I had a problem with that, and I appreciated the district's firm stand on these things. I think this is going to be critical throughout this—that there is a firm stand. And with a firm stand, the parents that are having problems will eventually see the

benefits of it. Or if they don't, they remove their children from the district, then they were not going to be fulfilled in the first place. I don't know if that makes sense, but it makes sense in my mind! (P2/6)

Another parent commented on the importance of parents in the school district:

Well, part of that is the parents are the most important part of a school district because it's their kids who we have in the schools. So, if they don't buy-in to what you're doing as a district, it's going to backfire. I think initially, the parents' role was that they had to pass a mileage. And that was what sparked even being able to do some of what we did as a district. And in terms of the process, there's nothing more powerful than word of mouth. And if parents aren't on board with something a district is trying to do, then they can derail it. I think that parents in our district—you know, at first not happy with the change, but as time goes by they see that it's going to work out. (P1/5)

Data indicated that all seven parents interviewed had an opportunity to voice their concerns and if they didn't it was their fault. One parent added,

From the beginning, we were asked, we were invited to voice our opinions. If you took advantage of that, good. If you didn't, that was your fault. But I think it was [the superintendent's] desire that everybody have a buy-in and that everybody was on board. Everything has opposition; you can't please us all, but I think that was important to him. I know we were all invited on more than one occasion to be a part of this groundbreaking process. (P3/4-5)

One parent wished a larger percent of parents would have gotten involved to voice their concern instead of waiting to complain. One parent suggested,

You know, I wish we had a larger percentage of parents who were willing to commit to serve on committees to get their voices out there. Because so many times they wait until there's something they *don't* like to complain rather than take the opportunity to come in and say, "Have you thought about this? What's going to happen in this phase? What do I need to do, or how can I advocate for what I need?" I think some of them have been proactive, and usually they are active in schools anyway. They serve on PTO or in the office or volunteer at the school. I think it helps the child and I think it helps the administration and the parents when they work with the school instead of just bringing complaints when things happen that they don't like. I wish we had more who felt like they should participate, and it's really about their children. (P5/4-5)

One parent summed it up this way:

I think, in my house anyway, if I have a positive light about something going on, and I'm okay with it, then my kids are going to be okay with it. Throughout the district, if the parents are going to fuss about it, then the kids are going to fuss about it. If the parents

are positive about it and have a good attitude about it, then the kids are going to be positive about it. Once it's all said and done, it's my job to be positive for my kids.

Middle school. This was a study of the perceptions of a middle school reconfiguration, focusing on the descriptions that parents, teachers, and administrators used to describe their feelings and beliefs as they go through the reconfiguration process. A significant component of the reconfiguration was the middle schools themselves and the factors that affect the middle schools. One such factor was grade configuration. It was important to analyze how grade configuration was determined and if parents believed it effected the programs and practices in their student's school. The data showed that parents agreed that configuration had a lot to do with the developmental needs of the students. One parent stated the following:

I think they looked at the developmental needs of the children and which age groups would perform better together in terms of what would lend to a better education for them and what kind of teachers were qualified in those areas. I'm not sure what other factors were used to determine that, but I know this was a question for the community to respond to as well. (P5/1)

A second parent added,

I want to say back in the day, let me go back to when I was in school because fifth was always part of elementary. Sixth and seventh—let me just put it like this: I really don't know, but if you were to ask me as a parent, from my perspective, and having volunteered in the school systems, and in [another] district, putting the seventh graders with fifth and sixth is so much better than with eighth graders. I think it keeps them a little bit more innocent for a little longer. I remember when my daughter came here, sixth grade it was paired with seventh and eighth, and it was, oh gosh, it was a huge transition. And when my son came, fifth and sixth—he didn't have that hard transition at the sixth-grade level. And in seventh grade, he was a little more prepared, thankfully, because boys, from what I understand, mature a little more slowly than girls do. But I know when she came here in middle school sixth grade, it was petrifying. Grades dropped, everything. It was a huge transition for us. So, if you're asking me from a parent standpoint if I like the fact that you can keep them innocent a little longer and pull back that seventh grader with that sixth grader, I think it benefits them, as opposed to jumping in with the eighth graders. That's the biggest transition in their lives, I believe. (P3/1)

Another parent commented on the needs of the district:

I think that's the new best practice, but I also think that's just what fit the form or our needs as a district. With us building a new high school, we had plenty of room for us to

bump the tenth grade up to the new high school. A large group, the seventh and eighth graders, I knew would fit into the old East campus. And where our major growth in the community seems to be is in the elementary and in the middle. So, by losing a grade level from elementary and moving them to the middle, that would alleviate some of their pressure. Then having four middle schools, that would make their populations a little smaller for each middle school. (P7/2)

When asked about how the new configuration will affect programs and practices in schools, parents agreed that it does affect them, but mostly in a positive way. One parent described the experience:

The little disruption there can be the better off it will be for the students. ... I know that the experience that I've had with my children that I've been involved with—it's always been a positive experience. It's always been what I feel like is the level of student engagement that needed to occur. I do believe that, that is one of the most important things that our schools can provide for us—that level of student engagement. Where the student actually understands what they're doing here and they're involved in the process and they care about it. I think that's one of the key things that important at that age, well, at any age. You name it, so I believe that to be true in [the District]. I also believe that along with that the student has a responsibility as well. It's not totally on the teachers and the administrators to make them successful. They play a role in this too. I think we get too wrapped up in, oh what are the teachers and administrators doing to help them graduate, and well, some of that responsibility lies on the student's shoulders as well. And I believe that a student who is engaged, the student engagement aspect of it, when they are engaged, that is part of it, that they understand that it is on them. In our society today, we have to be responsible for our own success. (P2/2)

Another parent added,

Any time you have change, you have problems. I think that's the big deal, you know, here in [the school district] we have things pretty easy. You know, having to drive an extra mile or two to a kid's school is something that's a major problem. But if you look at the big picture, it's not. If you have to get in the car and go an extra minute or 2, that's not going to hurt you. But, I think there's not any major problem that I see. (P7/2)

A third parent commented on the transportation:

I think the biggest impact will be the lack of ... a decrease of transitions for the students. So instead of so many between buildings, after elementary school, they will not change every 2 years. I think that's going to be a big difference. I think for parents, especially if they are the kind of parents who transport their students; they're going to see ... it's going to be a little easier on transportation because they won't have so many kids in different buildings. I think their kids will end up being in fewer buildings together. Although, there will be some parents who will be driving farther now for their kid's

school than they had been, but I think that's going to be the biggest impact, that, in addition to the rezoning, which has been a part of the reconfiguration. (P1/2)

Another factor in the middle school is success and how parents perceive this reconfiguration. Some parents felt the successes where in the transitions, others in middle school and having a balance. One parent commented,

I'm excited to see the students at the middle level being in the building for 3 years instead of 2. So, instead of jumping from building to building, students—especially those who have certain needs, that can get lost in those transitions—the schools will be more in tune with that. They'll know their students better because they'll have them longer as opposed to being in this building for 2 years and then this building for 2 years. There will be more of those students who are kept from falling through the cracks. (P1/6)

Another parent commented on the age appropriateness:

I think just making sure some of the material is developmentally appropriate for the age of the child. The socializing and the aspects of whatever events or whatever things that happen at school are relevant to the students and are geared toward their age so that it's meaningful for them when you do have things going on at school. (P5/6)

A third parent commented on class sizes:

Smaller classroom sizes. More teachers for my kids. And actually to have growth. To know that if we have 50 new kids come into [the district] next year. Or 100. Or 200 or whatever the number is, we can welcome them with open arms. With the new businesses going in town, that's important. It's good for the community that the schools have room for your kids and that they'll be treated as individuals. The school that's going to make not only them successful but the community successful too. (P7/6)

Another parent added,

I am hoping that in this, we think about the balance—racially, economically, and everything. I'm hoping with the reconfiguration, you don't have a heavy population of kids over here. ... I think it should bring balance. Again, going back to the fifth, sixth, seventh—I really like that idea. Again, when I was in school, middle school was sixth and seventh, they were by themselves. That was a good thing. Eighth and ninth were together, which makes a little bit more sense. And 10th, 11th, and 12th—I know kids are being bused, and it's just crazy right now. I think that once it's all settled out, it'll work out better. I like that new configuration; I really do. (P3/5-6)

Supporting earlier data from the administrators and teachers, data indicated parents were extremely satisfied with the district’s decision to reconfigure the middle schools and they believed this would help their middle schools academically. One parent commented,

I would have to say that, yes, it has been a positive impact because we’re going to the fifth, sixth, seventh, and to me, like I mentioned earlier, I believe that being able to be in one place for those 3 years is going to provide a more stable environment, create—you know, less transition, and that ultimately impacts the student in a more positive way. (P2/7)

Another parent added,

I always say the proof is in the pudding, and we’ll see over the next couple of years, as this comes down the line—how it turns out. I think we’re moving in the right direction for the sheer basis of the number of kids in a classroom. But as far as test scores and stuff—hoping they’ll come up. I know schools do all they can. Hopefully we’ll come out a win-win situation. (P7/7)

The same parent went on to add,

Where my kids are, I think it’s balancing out. It’s hard to say. I don’t know if the school is doing much, if the teachers are doing that much better of a job to get the kids in [school] to the level that they are being proficient. It boils back down to family, and how your kids are raised. Any time you bring low socioeconomic and parents working two jobs, struggling to make ends meet, it’s hard to spend 2 or 3 hours a night with the kids when you’re holding down two jobs. I think that it’ll hurt some and help some. I think being equitable about it and balancing out amongst the district, that’s going to help some. It’s going to be a coin toss whether it hurts or helps. It’s going to hurt some schools and help others. (P7/7)

Another parent commented,

I think it will ultimately. Part of the process was for the four middle schools to be more economically balanced. So, right now, the district has the perception of being one that has “haves” and “have nots” and I think that with the new configuration, there will be much less of that especially true at the middle level. That’s not the case at East and West, or junior high and high school because they have all of our students all together. But especially at the middle school level, it’s going to more evenly distribute those students from certain socioeconomic groups. (P1/6)

The same parent added,

Where my child goes to school it is my understanding that it will help our school. We currently have one of the schools with a higher level of poverty. And the rezoning or

redistricting will cause that number to be a little bit different. So I think the school will have a little bit better shot at making adequately yearly progress. (P1/6-7)

A third parent commented,

I think it's going to help. ... I think it makes a lot of sense to put the older kids together and have the 5, 6, 7. I think it will be a positive improvement in terms of their social development and in terms of their maturity and how we can lead them educationally. I'm hoping it's going to help. If I didn't believe it would, I wouldn't have signed on to have the 5, 6, 7 reconfiguration, which is what I think will be a good idea. I've not done it before, but I think it's going to work. (P5/6-7)

Another parent added,

Well, we'll know after 2012. ... Academically, I think it's going to help. Once those kids figure out they aren't trying to compete and measure up to kids who are older than them, I think they will be focused and will do better in the classroom. Outside behavior—what happens on the school campus, a lot of that dictates what happens in the classroom. So if a kid don't feel like he has to do anything because his eighth-grade friend isn't doing anything, then I think it will help them do better in the classroom. (P4/5)

Every endeavor has room for improvements and this reform effort was no different from the others. Most parents gave a suggestion for future improvements to the middle school. But it is important to note that all parents were satisfied with the schools in general. One parent commented on what had been perceived in this district as the best opportunity for his kids:

Well, that goes back to, you know, having had two children who have gone through this district and this particular middle school, I believe that all the opportunities for academic achievement and student engagement were provided. Sure, there's always room for improvement in any situation, but I would say overall that nothing comes to mind. (P2/7)

Another parent added,

I'm satisfied with schools. I guess I'm really one of those parents who is really hands-on and I know what my kid is doing. And my kid knows what's expected from home and at school. I'm really happy with the [school district] and have been ever since my first daughter went through school. I'm really good. (P4/5)

One parent proceeded to discuss the uniqueness in schools and how students should feel when they walk into a particular building:

I think middle school should have its own unique culture, and students should really want to go to that school. They should be envious of being at a school. And each of our schools

should be that way—not one of our schools over the other. But they should really feel differently when you walk in them, and not because one is good or bad, but because they have a different culture. Maybe a different mascot or traditions or chants, something that is very unique to that school—something that makes those students feel more like they’re a part of a culture and not just passing through. (P1/7)

Another parent suggested technology needs to be improved:

I think that the middle schools are still a little behind on technology. They’re catching up. When they started out, seems like the computer in the classroom was a big deal, but now in this day and time, I feel like you almost need a one-to-one computer in the classroom. When the kid walks in the classroom, the time for writing everything down is pretty much over. Maybe in the future we’ll see a computer at every desk. That’ll not only help them in school, but it will prepare them for the workforce. (P7/7)

An additional parent added,

My kids have had much success, thankfully, and I know that’s not with everybody. I know not everybody can say that. The administration and the teachers have worked well. I can only speak from my standpoint, but I’ve never had a problem. I’ve always felt like my kids were treated fairly and got a well-balanced and good education. (P3/6)

The parents viewed the decision to reconfigure the middle school as positive. They supported the district and trusted the district was making a great decision about the education of their children. The data showed the parents knew nothing about the middle school concept and what the NMSA had to say about the education of their children. Some parents who were involved did comment about the difference they knew about the new middle school and old middle school. One parent commented:

[Gifted and talented] may be done differently, courses may be scheduled differently. Seventh graders are really going to be the ones who will see the biggest difference. There won’t be those “big kids” there—the eighth graders. It may change the way that seventh graders act because now they’ll be around fifth- and sixth-grade students more. I think that each school will have a little bit different demographics, a little bit of difference in terms of population, so that’s going to make some changes for the old 7–8 version versus the 5–7. (P1/7)

Another parent added,

The physical difference is adding on that third grade level instead of just having just two. It’s going to change the schedule somewhat, going to change the routine, the length of the class periods, whether or not we block schedule. I think if we’re able to do some of that,

because we're focusing on literacy and math so much right now and trying to get everybody to achieve their very best on the benchmark and things of that nature, that it can be a positive thing if we develop a program where we are all on the same page and we can reinforce that from fifth to sixth to seventh grade. I think that middle foundation is going to be a good thing. (P5/7)

A third parent commented,

Again, I like the 5–7 because it just keeps that seventh grade—I've had one. They're 12 years old, and they're just about to go through puberty, and you can kind of delay that process if you keep them with those that are younger. And I felt like it was kind of throwing them to the wolves, especially the sixth grader. I'm thinking most about the sixth grader. I like it; I really do. Everybody wants to keep their child a child as long as they can, and I may be looking at it totally different from anyone else. And seventh and eighth graders may fare well together, but for my son, eighth grade is a bigger transition for him. And for my daughter, when she came here in sixth grade, it came too soon—way too soon. (P3/7)

Summary. From my analysis of the interviews and document collection of the seven parents, data indicated parents were very pleased with the reconfiguration of the middle schools and primarily focused on communication, transitioning, and the middle school as a whole. The data support parents' perspectives on their middle school. Parents spoke of their own experiences but also represented the other parents in the district.

Summary of Chapter 4

To meet triangulation, I used interviews, observation, and documents to collect data for this study. The data were open coded and analyzed to find axial codes, or major themes, which broadened through my analysis. The initial interview with the superintendent provided me with the opportunity to understand the background and historical perspectives involved with this reconfiguration. It also allowed me to gain entry and permission to conduct this study. Standardized, open-ended interviews were conducted with six district administrators, 11 teachers, and seven parents. I observed and participated in monthly district-level administrator meetings including secondary principal meetings, and middle school meetings. Documents were collected throughout this study.

The axial codes were identified and displayed, and additional data were presented to support the major themes. Four major themes developed from the district administrators, three from the teachers, and three from the parents. The 10 axial codes or major themes included (a) benefits of reconfiguration, (b) input and communication, (c) programming and practices, (d) leadership and support, (e) communication with district administration, (f) district reconfiguration, (g) involvement, (h) communication with district administration and teachers, (i) transitions, and (j) middle schools.

Selective codes, or major trends in the data, have been developed using these 10 axial codes. The selective codes, attached to literature from the field, are used to demonstrate grounded theory and answer the research question and subquestions. In addition, I make recommendations to the field and for further research in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to follow one principal's journey to assisted the district in its reconfiguration goals and simultaneously help the school change through deep examination of district personnel's, teachers', and parents' perceptions of the change process. This was done by acknowledging distinctions and differences between junior high schools, the current middle school, and the new middle school, delineated by current middle school-reform research. This study explored issues regarding the policies, personnel, decision-making strategies, timelines, and organizational structures of the new middle school.

An initial interview was conducted with the superintendent. Standardized, open-ended interviews were conducted with six district administrators, 11 teachers, and seven parents. I observed and participated in monthly district-level administrator meetings including secondary principal meetings, and middle school meetings. Documents were collected throughout this study. Three key groups of participants were a major part of this qualitative case study: district administrators, teachers, and parents. Data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding. Chapter Five illustrates the grounded theory produced from this study, explains the findings and the relationship to the literature in the field, and answers the research question and subquestion. In addition, recommendations to the field of education for future studies are presented.

Grounded Theory

As the qualitative case-study researcher, I derived theory from the data, known as grounded theory. Merriam (1998) wrote,

the investigator as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data. The end result of this type

of qualitative research is a theory that emerges from, or is “grounded” in, the data—hence, grounded theory. (p. 17)

Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Patton, 2002), “emphasizes becoming immersed in the data—being grounded—so that embedded meanings and relationships can emerge” (p. 454).

The type of theory developed was derived through the analysis of an in-depth understanding of the data through the investigation of interviews, observations, and the collection of documents. Ten major themes or axial codes gradually evolved from the data into a core of three selective codes. These selective codes surfaced from the major themes and I used them to answer the research question and subquestion: (a) communication, (b) leadership, and (c) the plan.

In qualitative research one cannot make generalizations. One must be able to transfer or make an inference. The reader makes a judgment. The purpose is to demonstrate the relevance of one set of findings to another context and it must rest with the reader and not the researcher. This is why researchers engage in trustworthiness. Researchers must assure they are coherent in their writing; that their writing/research make sense; that they have supplied instrumental utility and insight, which refers to the reader asking the questions; that they can use this information rather than the research telling them something they already know. The data must speak for itself. This qualitative descriptive case study will not answer all of the questions surrounding reconfiguration issues in school districts, but I am confident that it will give districts and administrators a basis of what teachers, parents, and other administrators’ perceptions were as they went through a district reconfiguration of their middle schools.

In Chapter 4, the grounded theory began to emerge as a result of analysis of triangulation of data, including standardized open-ended interviews, observations, and document collection.

Three selective codes emerged as a result of step-by-step analysis of data, which helped the researcher answer the research question and subquestion.

Discussion: Theory 1

The first selective code to emerge from the data was communication. Communication was supported by three axial codes, or major themes: (a) input and communication, (b) communication with district administration, and (c) communication with district administration and teachers.

Data indicate the communication that the district provided to stakeholders' was clear about the purpose and they communicated the purpose to everyone involved in the process; teachers, parents, and administrators. The participants viewed the communication provided by the district superintendent as an open and democratic dialogue. The superintendent used communication as an essential tool to meet the reconfiguration goals. The superintendent envisioned a plan 4 years ago and managed to execute the plan through a communication system. This required the superintendent to establish specific forums or committees, such as the 2012 committee, and the 10-year planning committee, to allow all stakeholders to voice their thoughts and reservations pertaining to the reconfiguration. The communication from the superintendent, the central-office team, and building administrators was perceived as genuine and the process entirely transparent.

Teachers' communications with district administrators was perceived as probably the single most important facet of the reconfiguration. The communication centered on the superintendent, other district-office administrators, and the building principals in district and building meetings, which allowed teachers to provide input and receive adequate feedback. Because most of the direct communication with teachers came from the building principals, it set

the tone for the building. The teachers trusted their principals to be truthful and make the right decisions on their behalf. Teachers believed they were given a voice, even though the administrators made the ultimate decision. The teachers believed that most of the vital information and communication was delivered by the building principals by design. The teachers valued the time they spent gathering new and accurate information in monthly staff meetings even to how they were moving, and how to label their boxes for moving. The administration took the teachers step by step, which helped them understand the reasoning behind the change. The perceptions of the teachers were that the reconfiguration's success rested with their building principal. The meaningful communication with teachers came from the building principals, and it set the tone for the building.

Parents acknowledged that communication was the key to the reconfiguration. The communication with the district administration, school board, and with the teachers was paramount in the reconfiguration. Parents felt that the administration was open and honest from the beginning and they didn't have to go and seek out the information. It was always there for them and it was available publicly. The communication was vital to parents' understanding of why there was a necessity to reconfigure the middle schools.

The district administration acknowledged that there could have been more communication, but once the process had begun, communication started in the form of e-mail, websites, surveys, newspaper advertisements, letters, focus meetings, rezoning maps, and personal communication with the superintendent, principals, and teachers on a regular basis. Parents believed that the communication that was done initially drove how it was received and the perceptions that developed.

Discussion: Theory 2

The second selective code to emerge from the data was leadership. Leadership was supported by three axial codes, or major themes. The axial codes included (a) leadership and support (b) involvement, and (c) transitions. As a school leader I felt strongly that leadership was about empowering others to actualize a vision and mission. Data indicated from district administrators, teachers, and parents that leadership was critical to the reconfiguration. The superintendent provided the district with a vision. The directors helped the superintendent develop a plan, and that plan was carried to the building-leadership team. Once lead innovators and their teams had crafted a change vision, they disseminated their message consistently through multiple channels of communication and through their actions (Kotter, 1996).

The leadership role at the central-office level was perceived as those of taskmaster and timekeeper. Their responsibility was to keep everyone focused on the reconfiguration. It is a difficult job to keep things moving. The participants believed that trust was the biggest factor in implementing the reconfiguration. Where there is trust, people are more likely to follow because they feel less defenseless and alone. They believe in their leader and trust that they will make the best decisions on their behalf. According to the data, leadership at the building level made the biggest difference in the success of the reconfiguration. From the data, the building succeeds and experiences challenges by the principal's ability to lead.

The role at central office has been to provide support for what happened in the building. The district central-office team played a major part in helping building principals through many issues. The four building principals used their assistants to help support the reconfiguration by attending building meetings and parent meetings. Their charge was to help incorporate a shared sense of trust and promote a shared responsibility for the results of the district. Because of this, it

is believed by the superintendent that the district is farther along as a strong administrative team. The data indicated that support comes from different levels of leadership, but the most support comes from the leadership of the building principal. Fullan (2001) wrote that the litmus test of all leadership is whether it mobilizes people's commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things.

The leadership movement continued when it came to the district's involvement with the teachers in the transition. According to the data, the involvement over the past year has been crucial in the success of the reconfiguration. There were key events that took place with the administration such as informal meetings, staff meetings, and conversations that helped markedly. Further, all 11 teachers believed the building principal was the key to their understanding. They trusted the information being related to them by their building principal. There was no hesitation from the very beginning of the process. It was made available in a timely, consistent, and transparent manner. The turning point for the teachers was the day the e-mail went out to the staff. The way it was handled by the administration kept teachers from feeling frustrated from anticipation.

The data also indicated that parents felt they trusted the principal to disseminate the correct information to them through meetings and through the teachers in the classroom. The parents believed they were the leaders in their household. The way they perceived the information and the way they discussed it with their family determined the attitudes of their children. This placed them in a leadership role also. The parents trusted the teachers and the principal to continue to provide a quality education for their children; the principal trusted the district administrators; parents and teachers to continue to have school as usual and support the decisions at the building level; and the district administrators trusted parents and teachers to stay

positive and continue to support the decisions of the district while they live in the community. This created three levels of leadership to be discussed in answering the research question and subquestion.

Discussion: Theory 3

The third selective code to emerge from the data was the plan. The plan was supported by three axial codes, or major themes. The axial codes included (a) benefits of the reconfiguration (b) district reconfiguration, and (c) middle schools. The superintendent, along with the district administrators, teachers, and parents, mentioned a 10-year plan or 10-year committee, which developed into the 2012 plan or 2012 committee. The data indicated that the district initiated a 10-year plan in 2008. There was much discussion, because the committee had to decide if there was a need to change. The data revealed that the long-range plan should focus on six topics: staffing model; school facilities; program review; technology; reconfiguration; and curriculum, instruction, and assessment. My analysis of the documents included information pertaining to the committees consisting of the directors in the district serving as the committee chairs on each of the six steering committees. The superintendent indicated that the process for developing the plan began at the building level with the staff determining the areas around each of the six topics that needed improvement, and develop questions based on their needs. Thus, the steering committees were charged with finding solutions to the questions and plugging that information into the 10-year plan. The plan was discussed at board meetings and was put into place by July 2009. The district administrators developed an extensive plan as a result; there were many recommendations that developed from the plan. The district administrators, teachers, and parents mentioned some form of the plan, but the data indicated the district came up with the Five Rs: (a)

Rezoning attendance zones, (b) Reconfiguration of grades, (c) Repurposing an elementary school, (d) Reconstruction of the high school, and (e) Raising of a new elementary school.

Collins (2001) talked about getting the right people into the right seats on the bus. Equally important is that the superintendent had a vision of a 10-year plan and had to ensure that the district had the right bus in the first place, and the right structure for getting the job done. As data indicated, the committee charged with reconfiguration recommended that the district look at the grade configurations in the district to determine if they were appropriate for the long term or if we should try a different configuration as we moved forward. According to the data, the committee looked at a wide variety of grade configurations. The recommendation that came forward was a K–4 elementary setting; 5–7 middle school setting, 8–9 junior high, and the 10–12 high school. It was agreed as a reasonable course of action and would reduce the number of transitions from one grade and one building to the other.

The middle school reconfiguration remained the focus of this case study, but more important were the perceptions of the district administrators, teachers, and parents on the implementation of the reconfiguration. The parents and teachers revealed through interviews that they were well pleased with the district administrator's plan and how it was executed. The data continued to indicate all the district had done, and had illustrated all of the work during the last 2 years on the reconfiguration. This was the focus for the 2-year long planning proceedings.

The district administrator's role in the committees and the planning process was to keep the committees operating in an efficient way so they could make well-informed recommendations. As indicated in the data, parents and teachers believed the configuration that was adopted was a good choice. The majority of participants believed it was developmentally the right decision to put fifth grade with seventh grade instead of putting seventh grade with eighth.

According to Anfara and Buehler (2005) in their study on grade configuration, “No sequence of grades is perfect or, in itself guarantees student achievement and healthy social and emotional development ... sound educational practices are more important than grade span” (p. 57). The middle school configuration was also considered to be the best fit for the district; it answered the needs of the district at the time.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this research study was to follow one principal’s journey to assist the district in its reconfiguration goals and help the school change through deep examination of district personnel’s, teachers’, and parents’ perceptions of the change process. Data indicate the influences that affected the perceptions are found in three primary trends: (a) communication, (b) leadership, and (c) the plan. Each of these trends were supported with axial codes and open codes from the triangulation of data including standardized open-ending interviews, observations, and document collection.

Interpretation of the Data

Through open, axial, and selective coding, a thorough analysis developed 10 major themes which enabled me to identify three selective codes or major trends that answered the research question and subquestion. To provide a more sound response, the conclusions to this study are presented by answering the subquestion, followed by the answering the research question. The subquestion is, What was the impact of leadership through the reorganization?

Data indicate there were three levels of leadership. The leadership consisted of the district administration including the superintendent and building administrators, teachers, and parents. The administrators, teachers, and parents each play a very important role in the leadership of the district. Traditional leaders are those placed in leadership roles in the district, such as the central-

office administrators and building principals. The nontraditional leaders in an educational setting are the teachers and parents.

The district leaders provided a vision, direction, and support for all stakeholders in a district. The district administrators had a plan, they knew best practices, they wanted every child to be successful, and they were worried about the retention and graduation of students. These were district problems that should concern all administrators in any district. During the reconfiguration their role was spelled out as being the taskmasters and for keeping the vision moving in an effective direction. The superintendent gave the charge to the administration to be transparent and have no hidden agendas. The principals were the facilitators in the reconfiguration and were the leaders in the individual buildings to help the teachers, parents, and students find their way through the process in order to arrive at the targeted date in 2012. This transition was incredibly smooth because of leadership.

The teachers provided a calmness and ease in the classroom and in the community. Their charge was to be leaders of true and accurate information when confronted in the community. The teachers trusted the information that came from their principals to be true. Some teachers served in leadership roles in the building and community, but they were all leaders in the classroom. Their students and parents are looking to them every day for information. Most teachers had the respect of parents in the community because they communicated with them in the grocery stores, churches, and ballparks. But most importantly they have gained their respect because they guided their students to success. They were taking their students through a movement that will leave a positive mark on their lives.

The parents were leaders in the home; they were the first defense. The most crucial leadership was the parent, because leadership starts in the home. The parent was the first person

the student had learned to trust. The students carefully listened and weighed their parents' thoughts. The parents trusted the district administration by communicating with them about the 10-year plan. The parents saw leaders in the district were willing to communicate with them. There needed to be a certain way to communicate with parents that was different from the way districts communicated with administration and teachers. Parents had to be the leaders for their kids. The leadership that the parents saw was the district administrators and the teachers and this helped the parents lead their students and others in a positive direction. Ultimately this leadership started in the home. Since the parents were committed to the plan, then it is because the district administrators and teachers were successful as leaders, and that helps parents be successful leaders in the community. If a parent has been negative and the leadership helped them, then we have shown others that leaders have the leadership ability to persuade others to do the right things for kids. If principals don't take the time to help negative parents then they are laying the groundwork for issues with other parents and students. The job of parents as leaders was to help other parents change negative attitudes, because it was far better for the child to trust leaders they see every day: their parents and teachers.

The strategies and techniques the district used in this reconfiguration of the middle schools was brilliant. It included three levels of leadership, the leader as a parent, teacher, and administrator. With the leadership being threefold, it was critical that everyone be on board with the plan; if one group of leaders was not committed a breakdown would have occurred in the system. This would have been a major barrier to this reconfiguration. As a result of the strategic planning of the reconfiguration committee, all stakeholders remained on board throughout the process and maintained their leadership role.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of parents, teachers and administrators about the facilitating and inhibiting factors of middle school reconfiguration?

Data indicated the perceptions of parents about the inhibiting factors were as follows:

1. Parents felt they would have to drive too far from their neighborhood to their new school because of the rezoning of the elementary schools. They did not want to drive across town when there was a middle school closer to their house,
2. Parents feared that the reconfiguration would not happen. They didn't trust the process, and
3. Parents felt in the beginning that educationally and developmentally placing fifth-grade students in schools with seventh-grade students was a bad idea.

The facilitating factors of parents follow:

1. They loved the communication they received from the administration,
2. They believed the 10-year study was an effective way to research the district and the needs of its constituents,
3. They trusted the leadership in the district, and
4. the new high school was a landmark to be proud of for years to come.

Data indicated the perceptions of teachers about the inhibiting factors were as follows:

1. Teachers wanted to have a voice in their placement in the district,
2. Teachers thought the district was doing too much too fast, with common core, the new teacher evaluation, rezoning attendance zones, reconstructing the new high school, raising the new elementary school, repurposing the old elementary, and reconfiguring the grades,

3. Teachers didn't want information to disseminate to them slowly, and
4. If they were changing grades and schools, they wanted to know when and how would they get professional development.

The facilitating factors for teachers were as follows:

1. Trusting the administration with critical information,
2. They felt a connection with other teachers, parents, and the administration,
3. They wanted to be fully accommodated in the moving process,
4. Their professional development was timely and relevant to their new positions, because it occurred before the year ended.

Data indicated the perceptions of administrators about the inhibiting factors were as follows:

1. They wanted the district to move at a slower pace with the initiatives,
2. The master schedule was the greatest concern,
3. Personnel issues in each building as far as certification, and
4. Two schools in one at the middle level; a school with in a school with fifth, sixth, and seventh grades in one building.

The administrators facilitating factors were the following:

1. Having fewer transitions is what's best for kids,
2. The plan was orchestrated by the administration perfectly,
3. Communication played the biggest role in the reconfigurations success,
4. The whole idea was student centered and best practices were used. The district took into consideration the whole child from K-12, and
5. A vision carried out to fruition.

Recommendations to the Field

The purpose of this research study was to follow one principal's journey to assist the district in its reconfiguration goals and simultaneously help the school change through deep examination of district personnel's, teachers', and parents' perceptions of the change process. The study occurred in a school district preparing for many district initiatives. Reconfiguration of the middle grades impacted every middle school student and their parents, the workplace of every faculty member, and the four principals.

This research study was not a challenge to the district's decision to reconfigure the existing middle grades. This study was intended solely as an effort to understand how administrators, parents, and teachers perceived the change process. The participants answered interview questions honestly and directly, and I attempted to report the findings in the same spirit. This research is relevant to four groups of potential readers: policymakers, parents, teachers, and district administrators, which include superintendents, principals, and assistant principals. This section includes recommendations that have the potential to serve as a guideline for future research.

Recommendations to Policymakers

Policymakers should consider, when making policy, that some schools will go through reforms of their own and will need waivers or some form of additional help to fulfill all of the requirements from the state and federal levels without penalty. School districts are ultimately responsible for keeping compliant with state and federal policies, but a timeline of implementation would be beneficial. This would allow districts to plan around major initiatives. Policy should be written that requires schools to use guidelines from the Association of Middle Level Education if they are going to call their school a middle school. Middle schools should

have to implement middle school guidelines. All policymakers should encourage school districts to hire specific middle-grades certified teachers with specific licensures designed for the middle schools and middle grades. Also, they must ensure that colleges and universities establish teacher-preparation programs to ensure quality teachers, who have been educated specifically for the middle grades, are entering the education field.

Recommendations to Parents

Although we recognize that the student is ultimately the person with whom schools are concerned, we cannot underestimate the power of the parent. We need to continue to recognize the need for parents to be involved in transition activities for their children as they move into the middle schools. MacIver (1990) found that schools that actively involve parents in transition articulation activities are more likely to keep parents more actively involved in the education of their child throughout the middle school years.

I recommend providing parents with as much information about parents' intentions as possible: Communicate, communicate, and communicate! This study indicated that parents were generally very satisfied with their schools, but wanted to know that the school holds paramount their child's best interest.

Recommendations to Teachers

I recommend that teachers continue to do what they are trained to do and that is being the leader in the classroom. This study showed that teachers can determine the attitudes of their students. The teacher's attitudes are contagious and carry over from classroom to classroom and to the student's home. I also recommend that teachers continue to trust their building principals. The principals are placed in the building to lead in a positive way.

Recommendations for District Administrators, Including Superintendents, Principals, and Assistant Principals

My first recommendation to districts is to ensure they follow all of the middle school-concept philosophies. This would help to ensure they are in the process of creating an exemplary middle school and not just a middle school in name only. This will also include recommending the appropriate resources be allocated to accommodate middle school needs. I recommend that districts ensure that the right people are in place before starting a reconfiguration. This includes teachers wanting to teach in the middle school setting. I also recommend that teachers hired or transferred to middle schools should have middle-level certification. This will help eliminate the problems associated with developing the master schedule and assure that these teachers are trained in the developmental needs of students at this level. I also recommend that the resources needed to ensure that novice and experienced teachers in the middle grades receive the ongoing professional development they need to teach effectively and achieve high academic levels with their students.

Recommendations for Further Research

Introduction. The results of this qualitative case study suggest that further research is warranted to adequately understand the perceptions of district administrators, teachers and parents in the reconfiguration of middle schools.

1. I recommend this study be replicated to include all middle schools in the district instead of just one school in order to compare and contrast the results. The administrators were included in the study, but the parents and teachers from the other middle schools were not.

2. I recommend that more research be done in the State of Arkansas on all middle schools to find out which middle schools actually follow the NMSA model.
3. I recommend a study on the academic achievement of students in the 5–7 configurations be compared to students in other configurations, with the understanding and realization that a simple reconfiguration of middle-grade programs may not result in immediate or sustained improvements in academic achievement.
4. Considering this study took place over a period of 1 year, when the reconfiguration was already in progress and ongoing, I recommend a study to consider the follow-up to the reconfiguration to see what the stakeholders think, now that the transitions have taken place.
5. The scope of this research project did not include students. Future research should explore more deeply the perceptions of the students. The students played a major role in the transition, but because of their age and influences of the parent they were not considered for this study. As I look back, the seventh- and eighth-grade students could have given valuable insight into the research study.

Conclusion. The purpose of the descriptive case study was to follow one principal’s journey to assist the district in its reconfiguration goals and simultaneously help the school change through deep examination of district personnel’s, teachers’, and parents’ perceptions of the change process. The study occurred in a school district preparing for many district initiatives including a reconfiguration of the middle grades. The reconfiguration impacted every middle school student and their parents, the workplace of every faculty member, and the four principals. The research consisted of 24 interviews with district administrators, teachers, and parents; the analysis of documents related to the reconfiguration; and my observations. I attempted to identify

inhibiting and facilitating perceptions that were presented by administrators, teachers, and parents.

Through careful analysis of the data three trends emerged (a) communication, (b) leadership, and (c) the plan. The data indicated that these three themes were connected and interrelated throughout the study. They are connected to the three levels of leadership (a) parents as leaders, (b) teachers as leaders, and (c) district leaders. An outstanding group of people in this district helped conduct a successful reconfiguration of four middle schools. This is a shift of more than 2,000 students and their parents, and every faculty member in the four schools.

The focus in the case study was not on the decision to reconfigure the schools, but what the administrators, teachers, and parents thought about the transition. The district created an atmosphere of respect and an environment of competent leadership and quality communication as their top priorities. Through extensive planning and the superb execution of the plan, the reconfiguration has successfully taken place. It is still in the early stages of implementation but it did happen. It is too early to evaluate the implementation process at this point.

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Appendix: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS

February 23, 2012

MEMORANDUM

TO: Karen Lasker
Carleton Holt

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 12-02-465

Protocol Title: *Perceptions of a Middle School Reconfiguration: A Case Study*

Review Type: EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 02/21/2012 Expiration Date: 02/20/2013

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 20 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.