A COMPARISON OF APPROACHES TO CLOSING THE
ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THREE URBAN
HIGH SCHOOLS IN OHIO

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A COMPARISON OF APPROACHES TO CLOSING
THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THREE
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By
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This dissertation addresses approaches to closing the achievement gap for urban public high schools. High school graduation rates have been increasing, both nationally and in Ohio; however, this is not the case for all students. The problem addressed in this research is that graduation rates of African-American and Hispanic students in Ohio were not increasing at the same rate as those of White students within the past decade. The literature review indicated that poverty was not always a predictor of lack of academic success. Through qualitative case study methodologies, this research explored how three urban public schools in Ohio made significant gains in improving the graduation rate of African-American and Hispanic students. Eighteen individuals were interviewed during the course of this study and their testimonies show that instructional strategies, academic interventions and building strong relationships with students were important in closing the achievement gap. The findings of this research include specific strategies and approaches that led to increased graduation rates.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to educators who are advocates for all students regardless of their race, gender, or disability status, and ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, or religious backgrounds. I also dedicate this dissertation to all students I have encountered during my twenty-five years as an educator. I hope that I have made a difference in their lives. My students have entrusted me with their dreams and life challenges. My goal is to leave a positive legacy that will inspire others to reach their highest potential and follow their dreams despite adversities. Thank you, students, for trusting me and for inspiring me.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

According to researchers and legislators, the high school graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students have been improving; however it is not happening fast enough and academic disparities still exists (Barton & Coley, 2009; Benson, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In Ohio, there have been significant gaps in the academic achievement of students in poverty and students of color (Ohio Department of Education, 2016) over the past decade from the years 2006 through 2016. In the past, legislation was passed with the purpose of improving the education of African American, Hispanic students and for students with disabilities. For example, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was proposed and authorized by President George W. Bush and enacted by U.S. Congress to significantly improve the education of all students. Notwithstanding NCLB, school districts across the nation continued to struggle with closing the achievement gap. Researchers have addressed disparities between student groups and argued plans to improve education for minority students remain inadequate (Barton & Coley, 2009; Benson, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2015a).

Identification of the Problem

This study explores the reasons why many states with urban public high schools have not been significantly increasing the academic achievement of minority (particularly African-American and Hispanic) students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, 2015b). This dissertation addresses the problem of why the state of Ohio continues to struggle to close the achievement gap for African-American (Black) and Hispanic students. An
achievement gap exists in a school system when one group of students consistently outperforms another group. Additionally, an achievement gap is noted when the difference in average scores between African-American/Hispanic and White students, racially or economically, is significant (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2007: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014).

NCLB served as a blueprint for education reform of America’s low-performing schools. It focused on the following areas: improving teacher and principal effectiveness, parental involvement, college and career readiness standards, and providing intensive support and effective interventions (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In 2004, schools in four states, Nevada, Florida, Ohio, and New York, had the lowest graduation rates in the nation for African-American students attending public high schools: 48% in Nevada, 45% in Florida, 39.6% in Ohio, and 35.1% in New York (Bennet, 2011; Benson, 2012). In general, Hispanic students, including English Language Learners (ELL), were underperforming in reading and mathematics compared to White students both at the elementary and secondary levels (Bennett, 2011). Most recent data highlighted alarming statistics for the nation’s high school graduation as well as high school dropout rates. In 2007, the graduation rate for White students was 76%, and the dropout rate was 5.3%; for African-American students, the graduation rate was 53.7% and the dropout rate was 8.4%; for Hispanic students, the graduation rate was 55.5% and the dropout rate was 21.4% (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). In Ohio, the graduation rate for African-American students in the 2007-2008 school year was reported at 64.5% for Hispanic students and 64.3% of African-American students. Five years later, in the 2011-2012 school year, the graduation rate for Hispanic students increased to 73.6%. The
graduation rate for African-American students was 64.5% (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). Although improvements were made in the graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic public high school students both nationwide and in Ohio during the last decade, disparities still existed in their academic performance compared to White students. Data from 2014 reported that the United States’ graduation rate had reached 82%, which was a significant increase from previous years. However, the graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic students continued to lag behind those of White and Asian students (Education Week, 2016). States such as Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, and Nevada had the lowest graduation rates for Black students, ranging between 59% and 64%. Georgia, New York, and Minnesota were the states with the lowest graduation rates for Hispanic students, ranging between 60% to 64% (Education Week, 2016). The most recent data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (United States Department of Education, 2015b) reports Ohio for the school year 2014-2015 as having an overall graduation rate of 81%. The graduation rate for Asian students was 86%; for African-American students the graduation rate was 60%; for Hispanic students 70%; and for White students 86%.

Minority students, including African-American and Hispanic students, will form at least 50% of the public school population in 2025 (Bennett, 2011; Benson, 2011). Thus, these researchers contend that the United States will not be able to compete or outform other countries academically, if the education of minorities are lagging behind. Globally, the United States fell behind in academic performance compared to a few other countries. China, India, Sweden, and the Netherlands scored higher than the U.S. on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests administered at the 8th grade
level in various core subjects (U.S. Department of Education, 2015c). These substandard NAEP scores confirm the urgency of consistent and steady academic improvement of minority students in the United States. The results of an international test called the Program for International Student Assessments (PISA) administered to 15-year-olds in 65 countries (including the U.S.) and assessing competency in various subjects showed compelling results in 2012. U.S. students scored below average in mathematics literacy compared to other countries. Although U.S. students scored above average in reading literacy compared to other countries, students in 19 other countries, including Finland, China (Shanghai), the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam, scored higher than U.S. students despite economic challenges, such as student poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2015c).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how three urban public schools in Ohio, with significant minority populations including students with disabilities (75% or above) and high poverty rates (40% or above), narrowed the achievement gap. Although there has been improvement, Ohio urban public schools still struggle to significantly improve the academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic students. More investigation was needed in determining what approaches and strategies have shown to significantly increase the academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic students in the state of Ohio. Extensive literature has addressed the root causes and best practices for closing the achievement gap (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2015c). However, this qualitative study, which focuses on
specific, intentional, and “hands-on” strategies to improve the quality of education for minority students, will further enhance the existing literature.

**Significance of the Study**

This qualitative study evaluates three urban public high schools with proven records of narrowing or closing the achievement gap, and is a significant addition to existing literature for several reasons. First, it explores how these particular high schools worked toward closing or narrowing the achievement gap. Thus, this study is focused on specific and unique strategies to increase academic performance on high-stakes tests, such as the 10th grade Ohio Graduation Tests, and evaluates tailored instructional strategies to increase the graduation rate for minority students. Exploring the processes for significantly improving the education of African-American and Hispanic students in Ohio was critical to understanding how these schools worked to close the achievement gap. The findings that resulted from in-depth analyses of these schools contribute to existing literature and will provide valuable information, strategies, and recommendations for Ohio’s public school educators in schools with similar demographics. Second, the findings of this study can provide educational leaders with useful information that will help them analyze the organizational behavior and culture of their schools. These results may aid in adjusting current practices for meeting the needs of all students, including African-American and Hispanic students, in Ohio’s public schools. Third, this study provided participants, including minority students, their parents, community leaders, and educators, an opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns, and make valuable recommendations on how to continue to improve the education of underperforming African-American and Hispanic students.
Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a lens through which a research problem is viewed (Roberts, 2010). The theoretical framework for this study consisted of the constructivist and critical race approaches. In order to find the deeper meaning of events, and to learn more about a phenomenon or case in this dissertation, it was critical to engage fully in the experiences of the participants. The participants, in this case, were stakeholders (administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community partners) of three Ohio high schools. Constructivist theory, similar to the social constructivism theory, promotes the belief that there is no single reality. What is known has meaning only within a given situation or natural setting (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Constructivist researchers seek to understand the world in which they live and work. Thus, there are multiple realities or explanations for a single event. Constructivist researchers focus primarily on the participants in their studies. Furthermore, a constructivist stance assumes that the social world is constructed by people and is better understood through human interactions, experiences, and perspectives. Researchers using a constructivist stance exercise little control over the events they investigate and place great value on the perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). The stakeholders’ perceptions of approaches to closing the achievement gap were essential in this study. The analyses of stakeholders’ perceptions of best practices prescribed for improving education for African-American and Hispanic students were critical to this research.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced in education in 1994 to analyze and critique educational research and practices with the purpose of eradicating inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Critical Race Theory was born as a result of the civil rights
movement of the 1960s and the critical race legal movement of the 1970s. Critical race theorists acknowledged that racism still existed and advocated for the protection of those persons in our society who were marginalized based on gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. The critical race approach in education investigated inequities for disadvantaged students, particularly minority students in public schools. School funding and use of resources for schools with statistically significant minority populations were major areas of concern for CRT researchers (Parker, Dehyle, & Villenas, 1999). A CRT researcher who conducts a case study analyzes the experiences of a marginalized group with an aim toward providing better services and equal treatment for that group (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Mertens, 2009). Thus, stakeholders’ perceptions were critical in determining the root causes of barriers to student success and strategizing for how schools can better serve the needs of minority students.

The Role of the Researcher

I am a minority female educator and have been employed for over 25 years in urban public schools in Ohio and Florida. I have served in various capacities, ranging from teacher to school principal at multiple educational levels. Currently, I am the Chief Diversity Officer for one of the largest school districts in the State of Florida and in the United States. I have a first-hand understanding of struggles with discrimination and obstacles related to equity and adequacy in education for minority students, specifically African-American and Hispanic students. My multicultural background and professional training has equipped me with the necessary skills to conduct research on the sensitive topics of race and ethnicity, and has increased the probability of a positive connection with participants. Cognizant of the bias that I could bring to the study, I made every
effort to ensure accurate reporting of information by using rigorous methods including triangulation and member checking. As a researcher, I understood the importance of building trust with district administrators, parents, students, and community leaders. I followed the professional ethical standards and guidelines prescribed and outlined by Ashland University’s Human Subject Review Board for the protection of participants and minor students (Ashland University, 2014). One limitation of this study was that the experiences of participants were limited to their personal involvement with their respective high schools. Therefore, their personal experiences could not be generalized to represent the experiences of everyone associated with other public schools in Ohio. Rather than making broad generalizations, then, it was my hope that the findings of this study would allow education leaders in other urban communities to learn from the individual experiences of participants and the progress made by the three school communities.

**Research Questions**

This study endeavored to understand why the three selected Ohio urban high schools had positive academic results on state report cards for African-American and Hispanic students. The following three central questions guided the study:

1. What were the approaches that led to the narrowing or closing of the achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic students as compared to their White counterparts?
2. What were parents’/students’/community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among African-American students?
3. What were parents’/students’/community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among Hispanic students?

Stakeholders, including principals, teachers, parents, students, and community leaders, associated with the three schools were the participants selected for this study. These stakeholders’ opinions were critical as they were either providers or recipients of educational services at the individual schools.

The three urban public high schools studied in this dissertation were selected using the criteria set out by the current Ohio Department of Education state report card. Ohio annually identifies what it calls the State Superintendent’s Schools of Promise, and highlights schools that have been successful in narrowing the achievement gap (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). The following state report card criteria were used in the selection of schools for this study:

- A poverty level of at least 40%
- 75% of economically disadvantaged students must score proficient or greater on Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT)
- 75% of a subgroup (African-Americans, Hispanics, students with disabilities) must score proficient or higher on the OGTs
- A letter grade of A or B on Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO)
- A letter grade of A, B, or C showing progress on the ODE State Report Card
- A letter grade of A or B on the graduation rate (Ohio Department of Education, 2013)
The new Ohio state tests aligned with the Common Core Standards, called Ohio’s New Learning Standards, were not included as criteria for school selection in this study. These new learning standards were recently implemented, and the results of state tests associated with these standards were preliminary. Instead, I considered the results of past state report cards with information about the achievement gap within the last decade.

**Delimitations**

This multiple case study involved three Ohio urban public high schools with evidence of closing or narrowing the achievement gap significantly as reported by state records over the past ten years. I excluded public charter high schools from the remit of this study. I purposefully selected a total of 18 participants, between five and six individuals from each high school, to take part in this study, and interviewed participants regarding their perceptions of teaching and learning strategies. African-American and Hispanic students who were seniors, their parents, school principals, teachers and community leaders directly involved with the schools constituted the participants of this study. In addition to interviewing, I employed several other techniques to gather evidence: school/teacher observations, principal observations, school data, and teacher artifacts (such as lesson plans). This study’s findings could not be generalized to every urban public school in Ohio. However, they may provide educators in schools with similar demographics with useful information on how to significantly enhance the education of African-American and Hispanic students.

**Summary**

Chapter I discussed how a qualitative multiple case study was used to investigate, analyze, and compare the findings of three urban high schools in Ohio that had either
closed or narrowed the achievement gap. The problem studied in this dissertation was the struggle that the state of Ohio has continued to have with closing the achievement gap for African-American and Hispanic students. Thus, the focus of the study was to investigate and explore specific strategies that were used to enhance education for these students. The next chapter provides an overview of the literature relevant to this study.
CHAPTER II

The Review of Literature

Research regarding the history of the achievement gap and discrepancies in educational performance dates back to the twentieth century (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). However, the purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of academic improvements, or lack thereof, since the NCLB act of 2001 and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2010. The review of literature in this chapter begins with a brief history of achievement gaps. I then address the root causes of achievement gaps, the federal laws instituted to address achievement gaps, and United States students’ performance on international tests. This literature review includes examples of best practices implemented by schools that have been successful in closing or narrowing the achievement gap for African-American and Hispanic students. Extensive studies have focused on the root causes of why achievement gaps exist in schools with high African-American or Hispanic populations. This chapter incorporates a critique of ineffectual efforts to close the achievement gap and highlights the most common best practices or themes to improve the education of African-American and Hispanic students. I have identified several resounding themes in the literature regarding strategies to the closing of the achievement gap: school leadership, high-impact instructional strategies and effective teaching, positive school culture, and equitable and adequate funding (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2012; Hunt, 2007; Rebell & Wolfe, 2006; Stegmeir, 2013). Additionally, this literature review includes examples of studies of public high schools across the nation and overseas with marked success in closing or narrowing the achievement gap.
Many studies on the topic of closing the achievement gap used primarily quantitative research methodologies to investigate root causes in low-performing schools. Recent literature concerning the achievement gap has lacked qualitative studies regarding the ideas and perceptions of the persons directly involved in, and responsible for, improving the education of African-American and Hispanic students in Ohio public schools. This study of three Ohio urban high schools and the comparisons of best practices from the perspectives of the persons directly involved in these schools is “an important intervention in the existing literature regarding the academic improvement for African-American and Hispanic students” (Ohio Policy Research and Strategic Planning Office, 2011).

The Achievement Gap

One of the major challenges of education in the United States has been the attempt to increase graduation rates nationwide. Worldwide, the U.S. performed poorly in graduation rates for high school students, ranking 22nd of 27 countries in 2010 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014). The graduation rate in the U.S. increased from 70% in 2000 to 77% in 2010. However, more work remained to ensure that students were ready for college and the workforce (Kurtzleben, 2012). As the U.S. population grew in diversity, many school districts were not effectively meeting the needs of disadvantaged and minority students (Benson, 2012). For example, Kurtzleben (2012) reported that Ohio was the sixth worst state to graduate African-American students and the tenth worst state to graduate Hispanic students.

Several studies have addressed the urgent need to narrow the achievement gap in high-poverty and high-minority schools nationwide (Benson, 2012; Carrol, Fulton,
Abercombie, Yoon, 2004). Researchers argued that plans to close the achievement gap were not happening fast enough and that school leaders must accept responsibility for inequitable schooling practices and educational attainment based on race, class, and gender. The Nation’s Report Card (NAEP) published the results of a national assessment administered to students in selected urban schools in the United States. These tests have been in existence since the 1960’s, and are given in the areas of reading, mathematics, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. history. The results showed that, on the 2007 eighth-grade NAEP tests, White students consistently outperformed African-American and Hispanic students in both reading and mathematics (Bennett, 2011; Benson, 2012).

To solve the educational problem of the academic underperformance of African-American and Hispanic students, proponents of closing the achievement gap proposed first analyzing the root causes of the achievement gap (Gandara, 2011). The evidence showed that the gap between scores of White students and minority students was closing. However, state and community leaders were not satisfied with the amount of time it was taking to significantly raise the academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic students (Bennett, 2011; Benson, 2012; Snell, 2003). Rogers Poliakoff (2006) called for deconstructing of the achievement gap because “an achievement gap is a signal, a warning that something has gone gravely wrong with the education of young people” (p. 4). Studies were conducted to determine the factors for the achievement gap.

Many factors have affected the academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic students in poor communities. Factors identified were: unequal school funding, lack of highly qualified teachers and principals, lack of a strong educational foundation
that began in kindergarten, poverty and health issues in young children, chronic mobility problems, cultural attitudes, and poor or negative attitudes (Carrol, Fulton, Abercombie, & Yoon, 2004; Rogers Poliakoff, 2006).

In 2003, The Educational Service Testing Center conducted a quantitative study of the conditions that helped create and reproduce achievement gaps (Barton, 2009). Researchers examined 14 correlates or cases of achievement and analyzed findings from major reputable institutions and researchers. This study assessed specific school and non-school factors that affected the education of minority students in elementary and secondary schools in order to determine whether the correlates affected academic achievement and evaluate the differences between subgroups. The 14 correlates were grouped in the following categories:

- Teaching and learning: 1. The rigor of the curriculum; 2. Teacher education; 3. Teacher experience and attendance; 4. Class size; 5. The availability of appropriate technology-assisted instruction
- The learning environment: 6. School safety
- Child Development: 7. Weight at birth; 8. The effects of lead on children’s health; 9. Hunger and nutrition
- The community: 13. Student mobility
- The home school connection: 14. Parent participation

These results highlighted clear gaps between students who came from low-income families versus those from higher income families. There were also discrepancies in the
implementation of curriculum across schools. The results indicated large disparities in the number of African-American and Hispanic students, compared to White students, enrolled in Advanced Placement classes. The percentage of high school graduates with substantial credits in academic courses was higher for White students than Black or Hispanic students. The number of teachers without credentials in their subject area was significantly higher in high-poverty schools. Teacher absenteeism was also more prevalent in schools with large minority student populations.

Gandara (2011) and Stewart (2013) called for a better understanding of the root causes of the achievement gap that were often overlooked by educators. Gandara (2011) concentrated on the root causes of the lack of achievement for Hispanic (Latino) students in California. First, she refuted myths that immigration and language barriers were the primary causes of the underachievement for Latino students. She argued that second-generation immigrant students performed academically better than the preceding generation, despite language barriers. Factors contributing to the poor academic performance of Hispanic students in California included: the high poverty rate of 24% among Latino students; high mobility and difficulty in finding affordable housing; segregated schools with 90% Hispanic students; and poor health and nutrition resulting in poor school attendance. Furthermore, Gandara (2011) advocated for an equitable academic investment in Latino students that would eventually benefit the economy of the state of California as a whole. Similarly, Stewart, (2013), suggested that understanding the challenges immigrant students faced in coming to the United States and increasing the focus on literacy strategies are crucial factors in ensuring teacher success with literacy development for adolescent English learners. Stewart (2013) also advocated for learning
environments that are caring, acknowledge the culture of immigrant students, and offer courses in both English and Spanish.

**The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**

President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act into effect in 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2010). Both Democrats and Republicans supported this action to ensure that all children, regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic status, would have a quality education (Chen, 2015; Hess & Petrilli, 2004). NCLB rewarded public schools with state funding if they showed improvement in educating students. Schools that did not show progress, or were determined to be failing, as measured by state report cards, suffered consequences such as lack of funds or being taken over by the state (Chen, 2015). Legislators and education experts identified inequities and inadequacies in the provision of education for African-American and Hispanic students. These inequities resulted in the poor performance of minority students on state, national, and international tests (Barton, 2003; Carrol et al., 2004; Gandara, 2011; Rogers Poliakoff, 2006; Stewart, 2013). Researchers identified deficiencies including: unequal funding and the lack of rigorous curricula, lack of community resources, and lack of qualified teachers and principals.

Since the implementation of NCLB, the nation’s graduation rate has improved. In the 2010-2011 school year, the nation’s overall graduation rate was reported as 79%. The graduation rate for White students was 84%, the graduation rate for Hispanic students was 71%, and the graduation rate for African-American students was 67%. The most recent graduation rates for the 2012-2013 school year for White, Hispanic, and African-
American students were reported at 86.6%, 75.2%, and 70.7%, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

**The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act**

The purpose of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a bipartisan political initiative, was to replace the NCLB act and ensure the academic achievement of every child (Brenchley, 2011). The ESEA, promoted by President Barak Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, emphasized the success of every student. The goal was to ensure that every high school student was college- and career-ready after graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2015c). The ESEA also focused on the allocation of financial resources to improve education in areas including: principal and teacher effectiveness, equal opportunity for all students, rewarding successful schools, failing schools, and common learning standards (Brenchley, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2015c).

Many educators agreed that success for every student was the philosophical foundation of public education; however, there were critics who did not agree with all the strategies of either the NCLB act of 2001 or the ESEA of 2010 (Noguera, 2010; Saunders, 2012). These educators critiqued various aspects of the implementation of these education reform laws. Although the focus of the NCLB was to reward schools that were succeeding, a few of the proposed improvement models were weak because they did not apply to every district or demographic breakdown. Teacher performance pay was not an effective strategy to improve education because there were diverse learners with varying abilities. Other criticism of the ESEA of 2010 addressed simplistic approaches to improving education without first examining the root causes of why the NCLB failed in
raising academic achievement, especially in urban school districts. Experts also contended that U.S. tests were not designed to offer the same intellectual challenges as international assessments, which led to unfair comparisons. Thus, U.S. students lacked the necessary skills to participate fairly in such rigorous tests (Noguera, 2010; Saunders, 2012).

**U.S. Student Performance on International Tests**

Although students in the United States were making academic progress and high school graduation rates were improving, improvements to education remained an exigent concern. A variety of agreements and disagreements regarding this issue existed among researchers, educators, economists, and legislators who were equally passionate about the education of minority students. According to some education experts and economists, the primary issue remaining was that the graduation rate was not increasing quickly enough.

Additionally, compared to students abroad, U.S. student scores were not exemplary (Balfanz, 2009). Factors including poor graduation rates and poor academic achievement affected not only education, but also the U.S. economy. Economists Hanushek and Woessmann (2010) conducted an international longitudinal study from 1960 to 2000, and concluded that there was a strong correlation between economic growth and cognitive skills. They contended that strong investments in mathematics and the sciences, coupled with human capital, would improve the education of U.S. students over time (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010). The researchers also argued that external factors, such as poverty, did not prove to be conclusive in determining the lack of success of U.S. students because many international students excelled in spite of similar economic conditions. Nevertheless, the topic of poverty and other socio-economic
barriers remained at the forefront of conversation among advocates of minority students. Advocates promoted targeted social services, improved healthcare, reformed criminal justice, and increased tax revenues to improve the overall education of African-American and Hispanic students. These students were disproportionately affected by poverty compared to White students, by a ratio of 3:1 (Lynch & Oakford, 2014). If the economic gap did not improve, the nation’s economy would suffer because 80% of American workers would soon belong to a minority group. The investment in having well-educated students with the necessary college and career readiness skills would improve the nation’s economy (Lynch & Oakford, 2014).

Proponents of NCLB acknowledged one major benefit: the improved academic achievement of some schools and particular subgroups of students. However, these same proponents blamed the NCLB law for imposing mandates that were unfunded, punitive, and unrealistic (Chen, 2015; Forman Naval; 2013; Saunders; 2012). Funding did not accompany the mandates to implement change, but sanctions followed for schools that were underperforming; this resulted in some school districts relaxing their standards to succeed. Teachers in poor communities did not receive adequate support for learning, and teaching became test driven. Students who were not academically successful were excluded from school. Critics proposed rewards for academic progress or growth rather than test results, because not all students learn at the same pace and at the same time (Chen, 2015; Forman Naval, 2013; Saunders, 2012).

The Academic Progress of African-American Students

The efforts to improve the education of African-American students has remained a challenge despite the education reform initiatives by state and federal governments. In
2008, the graduation rate for African-American males was 47% compared to 78% for their White counterparts. African-American students made gains on state tests in both reading and mathematics. However, in a study of the 65 largest urban school districts in the nation, African-American males were dropping out of school at higher rates than White males. In 2008, the high school dropout percentage rate was reported at 8.7% for Black males and 5.4% for White males (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, 2015b; Schott Foundation, 2015).

In addition to the factor of poor socio-economic backgrounds, African-American students scored lower on standardized tests because they were suspended or expelled more than any other student ethnic group. Consequently, African-Americans students were often ill-prepared for, or excluded from, state tests (Balfanz, 2009; Finkel, 2010). There was a lack of financial investment in urban schools that had a high African-American population compared to the population of White suburban schools. Additionally, researchers equated these schools to “drop-out” factories characterized by high poverty and a major lack of community support for students (Balfanz, 2009; Finkel, 2010). Not all educators agreed that poverty, student behavior, or family conditions were the sole predictors of the poor performance of African-American students. Rather, schools were not sufficiently prepared to educate African-American students (McLauchlin, 2007; Templeton, 2011). Compared to White students, minority students were not as frequently enrolled in specific courses, particularly gifted and special education courses. Moreover, the curriculum did not include or address the cultural heritage of African-American students. Proponents of multicultural education contended that there was and is a lack of sensitivity to the culture of the school, which is mostly
White, and the culture of the home, which is non-White (McLauchlin, 2007). Williams and Bryan (2013) explained that few research studies include the reasons why some African-American students succeed in school despite socio-economic factors. The African-American students who participated in their study reported that having an adult who cared and who monitored their academic progress was crucial to their academic success. Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of the role of teachers in the lives of African-American students. Teachers who set high academic expectations for African-American students by actively including students’ personal interests and lives in the curriculum were successful in ensuring student engagement, which led to student academic success (Williams & Bryan, 2013).

The Academic Progress of Hispanic Students

The overall population of children in the United States has grown by only 3% between 2000 and 2012, compared to a 14% increase between 1990 and 2000 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). However, this data does not tell the entire story of where the increases occurred, especially among certain ethnic or racial groups. One of the most significant increases in child population between the year 2000 and 2010 was among the Hispanic population. There were 4.8 million Hispanic children born between 2000 and 2010, resulting in an increase of 39% (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). This rapid growth resulted in many challenges for the educational system. According to the reports of Schneider, Martinez, and Owens (2006), Hispanic students began their educational careers with many deficiencies. Many Hispanic students were children of immigrants who did not have a formal education and who did not speak English. According to Schneider, Martinez, and Owens (2006), Mexican-Americans had the
lowest academic attainment among the Hispanic population, while Cuban-Americans had the highest educational attainment (earning more bachelor’s degrees than other Hispanic populations).

Another challenge that faced the education of Hispanic students was that it is a highly diverse ethnic group, not only regarding country of origin or level of education, but also in language proficiency. Students whose first language is not English and who lack English proficiency are classified as English Language Learners (ELL). These students are legal or illegal citizens who speak little or no English. These learners are required to take state mandated tests after being in the country for only one year. Consequently, many public high schools have scored poorly on state tests (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). Although there is some evidence that Hispanic students were doing better academically, their academic performance still compared unfavorably to that of White students. The transition from middle school to high school appeared to be difficult for Hispanic students. Factors that contributed to lower graduation rates for the Hispanic population included lack of guidance from adults in schools regarding educational decisions including what courses to take and post-secondary school options. The national high school graduation rate for Hispanic students in 2001 was 64% compared to a graduation rate of 92% for White students (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). Researchers also contended that there was a lack of highly qualified teachers who were well-prepared to teach Hispanic students. In California, the schools with the lowest state mathematics and reading scores employed underprepared or novice teachers as 25% of their teaching staff (Madrid, 2011).
In Ohio, close to 40,000 Limited English Proficient (LEP) students were enrolled in elementary and secondary schools during the 2010-2011 school year. Immigrants settled in the U.S. for many reasons, including to improve their economic situation or to find political asylum. The top five first languages of ELL students in Ohio are Spanish, Somali, Arabic, German/Pennsylvania Dutch, and Chinese. There are a significant number of Spanish-speaking students, from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and other Latin American countries, in Ohio public schools. Recently, there were approximately 2,000 children of migrant agricultural parents in Ohio schools. (Ohio Department of Education, 2012b). Due to the high influx of immigrants, public school systems were faced with many complex problems. The National Council of Teachers of English (2008) highlighted some of the complexities for English Language Learners (ELL) who emerged as the underserved population:

1. ELL students were not part of a homogeneous group and spoke multiple languages and limited or no English. Other ELL students had a deep sense of the U.S. culture, but were stigmatized for the way they spoke English. Additionally, some ELL students spoke English fluently. However, they still needed support to succeed academically.

2. There were disproportionate numbers of ELL students placed in Special Education. Assessments did not differentiate between disabilities and language deficiencies. There must be a systematic approach to assessing ELL students to evaluate the acquisition of language.

3. ELL students had more than just linguistic deficiencies. Acclimating to a new culture was challenging to ELL students, and interfered with their learning.
Creating more ELL-responsive classrooms helped both American and ELL students succeed. Instructional strategies, including cognitive techniques, applied to both groups.

Like all other students in Ohio, ELL students were required to participate in state testing and complete all coursework requirements to graduate from high school. In 2012, it was reported that Ohio was the tenth worst state to graduate Hispanic students (Benson, 2012).

**Best Practices to Close the Achievement Gap**

Though research suggested that narrowing or closing the achievement gap was not occurring fast enough, schools nationwide were making significant gains in improving academic achievement, particularly for African-American and Hispanic students. “The Race to the Top” fund was one initiative introduced by President Barak Obama to address the urgency of closing the achievement gap by providing funding for low-performing schools. This initiative offered to fund states and school districts that were willing to bring about radical education reform in the areas of leadership, teaching, innovative learning, and equity (U.S. Department of Education, 2015c). Many education reform efforts contributed to educational gains in student achievement for African-American and Hispanic students. These efforts included major changes in the following areas: school leadership, teacher effectiveness, teaching and learning; school culture; student support, and equitable funding (Brandell, 2007; Feist, Joselowsky, Nichols-Solomon, & Raynor, 2007; Freidman, 2012; Madrid, 2011).
School Leadership

Most education experts agree that school leadership was one of the most important factors in school transformation, especially for urban public schools, second only to teacher leadership and instruction (Hattie, 2014; Lytle, 2012). The research considers school leadership as including the roles of the Superintendent, central office personnel, and principals. However, this literature focused primarily on the role of the school principal. Educational leaders were called to be more than just managers. In many of the studies regarding the transformation of urban schools, leaders were called to be transformational; in other literature, school leaders were called to be instructional. In fact, some researchers believed that leaders and managers were two different types of leaders. Transformational leadership was defined as a leader’s ability to influence followers in an exceptional form that resulted in unusual or unexpected outcomes (Northouse, 2013). Downtown (1973) and Burns (1978) introduced the term transformational leadership and identified its four important components: 1. idealized influence; 2. inspirational motivation; 3. Intellectual stimulation; and 4. individualized attention (Transformational Leadership, 2010). The concept of transformational leadership distinguished between a principal who was transformational versus a principal who was an instructional leader. A transformational leader focused on improving and influencing the performance of teachers, while an instructional leader focused on student and academic performance. An Australian study involving school leaders determined that instructional leadership had a more significant impact on learning than transformational leadership (Hattie, 2014). Many states had leadership standards for the performance of superintendents and principals, which affects the school change process.
School leaders must have a strong mission and vision, coupled with a strategic plan to increase the success of each student. Principals were called to advance the education of all students, not only those students who were considered gifted or average.

Leaders may create a safe and nurturing culture by instilling respect for all students regardless of their race and ethnic background (Johnson & Uline, 2005). Public school districts should strive for principal and teacher effectiveness in order to ensure high academic achievement for all students. Federal mandates, as part of improvement models, required the replacement of school leaders, such as principals and superintendents, who were not producing favorable results for low-performing schools. Consequently, some researchers predicted further school instability and a shortage of principals with proven records of significant success in turning schools around (Lytle, 2012).

The Ohio Principals Evaluation System (OPES), which was instituted by the Ohio Department of Education to improve the performance of principals, placed a strong emphasis on the principal’s effectiveness, determined by the academic growth students demonstrated during one academic year. Principals were expected to implement high-quality, standard-based instruction and best practices that ensured the success of all students (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). Eastmoor Academy High School in Columbus Ohio was one school that credited its principal with making a difference in both teacher and student performance. The State of Ohio identified this school as a School of Promise for the 2004-2005 school year to the 2010-2011 school year (Public Agenda, 2012). This school’s daily enrollment was 696, and had a majority African-American population of 92% and a poverty rate of 72%. The principal was responsible
for creating a collaborative school culture involving parents and students in the learning process, instituting intervention teams to support students, and actively involving parents in athletics, performing arts, and other extracurricular activities (Public Agenda, 2012).

The Duval County school district in Jacksonville Florida made great strides in redefining the role of the central office in supporting its principals. The district has a school population of 125,000 students and a majority Black population of 61%. The district ensured that every principal had a supervisor and reduced the ratio of supervisors to principals from 1:40 to 1:20. Supervisors spent 80% of their time in the schools they supervised in order to: coach the principal, help problem solve, and provide support for teaching and learning (Superville, 2015a).

**Effective Teachers and High Impact Instructional Strategies**

In 2009, President Barack Obama premised the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act by saying: “Every child in America deserves a world-class education. Our goal must be to have a great teacher in every classroom and a great principal in every school” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Different researchers found several common themes in teacher effectiveness. Darling-Hammond and Snowden (2005) offered several characteristics of effective teachers:

- High-quality teacher preparation
- Assessed what students know and how they learn
- Adapted the curriculum to meet the needs of the students
- Engaged students in active learning: debating, researching, and writing
- Promoted high and clear expectations for students
- Provided immediate and constant feedback to students
- Created a respectful and supportive classroom environment
- Made connections between home and school
- Collaborated with other teachers and administrators

Teacher effectiveness included proper teacher credentialing and work experience. Stronge (2007) contended that certified teachers had a greater impact on student learning than did uncertified teachers, especially teachers of minority populations and in rural settings. Teachers who received college preparation in non-traditional research-based practices such as hands-on learning had a significant positive impact on learning. On the contrary, teachers who lacked proper certification and training were strong predictors of low student performance in schools. High school teachers who had specialized training in their content areas were associated with higher student academic achievement.

Teacher experience and teacher effectiveness were connected to student achievement. Research showed that teachers with more than three years of teaching experience were more effective than those with three years or fewer. More importantly, the relationship between teachers and their students was an important factor in teacher effectiveness.

Effective teachers cared, knew, and understood their students. Effective teachers demonstrated qualities such as patience, honesty, courage, and overall love for their students. Others, outside of the profession, associated the teaching practice of sympathetic listening (to demonstrate care for students) with effective teaching. Students recognized teachers who demonstrated knowledge of their students’ cultural backgrounds and promoted fairness and respect as important qualities of an effective teacher. The majority of teachers in urban schools were White and had limited contact with students of
other cultures. The lack of cultural competency and color-blind attitudes impeded learning for students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Watson, 2011).

There was a strong association between teacher effectiveness and the teacher’s attitude toward his or her profession. Teachers who had a positive attitude about their professions dedicated extra time to plan and prepare for the academic achievement of their students. Stronge (2007) argued that “Effective teachers do not make excuses for student outcomes; they hold their students responsible while also accepting responsibility themselves” (p. 20). Reformers realized that teachers with specific knowledge and skill play a critical role in meeting the needs of 21st-century learning. Teachers who were effective adapted to the diverse learning styles of their students, especially African-American males (Bell, 2014). Traditional methods of teaching, such as routine, rote memorization, and lecturing, were no longer sufficient in meeting the needs of students. Teachers were required to be sensitive to the needs of diverse learners and to provide students with instruction that allowed to think critically, work collaboratively, create projects, and solve complex problems (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2012).

Consequently, school districts were seeking well-prepared teachers, minority teachers, and high-quality teachers. The recruitment and hiring of high-quality teachers who were effective in the classrooms and who would increase student success were difficult tasks. Unfortunately, according to research, many districts did not have a consistent and systematic plan to recruit teachers. Also, hiring practices were often not aligned with the needs of the specific schools and the vision and mission of the school districts. In the United States, there is a shortage of teachers with specific expertise in fields including mathematics, science, special education, and bilingual education. As a result, districts
hired less-qualified teachers, assigned teachers in areas in which they are less qualified to teach, or made extensive use of substitutes (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006).

Many teachers have limited knowledge of cultures other than their own, and culturally responsive practices have not been sufficiently addressed in education. Ladson-Billings (1995) promoted the incorporation of a culturally relevant pedagogy to meet the needs of African-American students. She argued that “culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ cultures as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). A culturally responsive classroom involves intentional strategies to acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students and incorporates a range of instructional techniques and materials, including technology, to meet the needs of diverse learners. These techniques include: thinking aloud, modeling, reciprocal questioning, shared reading, literacy strategies, discussion, interdisciplinary units, instructional scaffolding, making connections, journal writing, cross-cultural literature, collaborative learning, assessment for and of learning, academic socialization, and acceptable academic behaviors (Bell; 2014). As part of a strategic plan to close the achievement gap in Washington State School district, school leaders acknowledged that teachers must become culturally competent to meet the diverse ethnic, racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds of their students (Bailey & Dziko, 2008).

The lack of proper screening tools to select effective teachers and inconsistent teacher training were critical factors that inhibited effective instructional practices. For school districts to be more successful in recruiting and hiring effective teachers, a cohesive system for selecting teachers needed to be established. Human resources planning, including a strategic plan to acquire competent employees, was needed to
ensure the long-term success of hiring practices (Kleiman, 2009). A recent study posed questions (regarding school district practices for recruiting and selecting effective teachers) to forty human resources directors and superintendents in Ohio’s public schools (Spanner-Morrow, 2013). In questions related to the qualities districts look for in selecting effective teachers, a great majority of the respondents listed content knowledge as being an essential skill. Content knowledge skills were defined as a teacher’s ability to analyze data, the use of varied instructional practices, innovation, use of technology, and preparation of students to pass the state tests. Respondents also cited personality and behavior as significant qualities for an effective teacher, using descriptors including: loves kids, has integrity, is honest, is enthusiastic, is a team player, and is compassionate, caring, and student focused. The third significant quality reported by the respondents was work ethic, including: teachers’ ability to collaborate with others, willingness to learn, flexibility, ability to communicate well with others, dedication, is a self-starter, is a leader, is an out-of-the-box thinker, has good management skills, and has high expectations for students. Respondents were asked questions about their screening tools. Only 20% of the respondents reported that they were using formal screening tools to select teachers, such as Ventures for Excellence, Gallup, and formal lesson demonstrations. Ventures for Excellence was founded in 1978 to train school administrators on how to select the best teachers by utilizing a structured and systematic screening method (Ventures for Excellence, 2013). Similarly, Gallup utilizes an online teacher screening tool, called Gallup TeacherInsight Assessment to assess teacher qualities (Gallup 2002-2012). Eighty percent of the respondents reported having no formal screening tools or only using traditional or informal screening tools, such as
resume screenings and individual or group interviews. In addition to teacher effectiveness in general, the ability of teachers to teach beyond the traditional curriculum was crucial in ensuring the success of African-American male students. Bell (2014) proposed that teachers and schools should focus on academic socialization practices where African-American students learn the social and behavioral norms of society in addition to their regular curriculum. Advocates of African-American students proposed increasing non-academic support for students, which would include counseling services, community services, and multiple interventions. Teaching students how to survive despite economic hardships was crucial in ensuring that students were educationally resilient (Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes, 2014).

**The School Culture and Learning Environment**

A positive atmosphere conducive to learning was an important factor in producing favorable academic results for students. A large study of South Carolina’s public schools was conducted to determine the factors related to school climate in 32 schools and their effect on closing the achievement gap compared to other schools that were not closing the achievement gap (Monrad et al., 2008). The 32 schools had documented evidence of closing the achievement gap on the South Carolina State Report Card for students in kindergarten through sixth grade. There were over 93,000 participants, including teachers, parents, and students. The parents of students in schools that closed the achievement gap reported that they were satisfied with the home-school relations, the teachers of their students had high morale and were interested in their children’s schools, and other parents were reported as being cooperative regarding discipline issues. Harvard University (2009) highlighted Lee High School in Texas as one of fifteen
exemplary schools. Lee High School had a 90% poverty rate, a Hispanic population of 77%, students who spoke 40 different languages, and a student enrollment of 1,928. The school showed a significant reduction in the reading and mathematics proficiency gaps on the 2009 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests for grades 9-11. The school focused on three core approaches to improve instruction: (a) changed relationships; (b) improved teaching and learning; and (c) focused resources. One strategy to improve student teacher relationships was to assign each student an advocate. The analysis of data and the ongoing assessment of student learning to ensure 100% mastery was critical to improving student success. Additionally, the focus of resources, aligned with the first two strategies while eliminating other distractions, was a critical factor in helping the school succeed in narrowing the achievement gap.

**Equity and Adequacy**

Proponents of equity and adequacy offered a working definition of these terms stemming from the U.S. Courts (Rebell & Wolff, 2006). Educational adequacy includes learning that provides:

- A quality basic education that prepares students to function as productive citizens in a democratic society
- Adequate knowledge and skills that will prepare students to read, write, and speak the English language
- Adequate knowledge of mathematics, science, and history
- Sufficient knowledge of the political system to make informed decisions
- Adequate intellectual and social and communication skills
Adequate academic and vocational skills to effectively compete in modern-day society

More than fifty years after the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education, our nation’s schools were still struggling to provide students with an equal and equitable education for all students (Caroll et al., 2004; Rebell & Wolff, 2006). A study involving 3,336 teachers, randomly selected from schools in California, Wisconsin, and New York, reported that the factors that were prevalent in schools with high minority demographics were: high teacher turnover; unqualified teachers; inadequate teaching facilities; and inadequate resources including textbook materials and technology.

In 1990, Ohio formed a coalition to promote equal and adequate funding called the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy consisting of 90 school district representatives. On several occasions, including in De Rolph v. State, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled that Ohio’s school funding systems for public education were unconstitutional (Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy, 2017). Governor Ted Strickland proposed an evidence-based model as a solution to school funding in Ohio. However, it was never implemented. Governor John Kasich introduced the Achievement Everywhere Plan in 2013. This plan included a $2.1 billion budget proposal that offered an equal amount of financial resources to every school district in Ohio. The Achievement Everywhere Plan provided extra dollars for classroom resources for teachers, special education, ELL, early childhood, children in poverty, and gifted and talented (State Impact Ohio, 2013).
Summary

This chapter addressed the state of education for minority students from the NCLB act in 2001 to present. The purpose of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) of 2001 was to “close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child is left behind” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The NCLB Act of 2001 served as a blueprint for education reform and focused on improving: teacher and principal effectiveness, parental involvement, college and career readiness standards, and student learning in America’s low-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Notwithstanding NCLB (2001), school districts across the nation were still struggling with the closing of the achievement gap and plans to improve the education for minority students were not happening fast enough (Benson, 2012; Snell, 2003).

After summarizing NCLB, I discussed several significant statistical findings regarding minority student education. The Nation’s Report Card (NAEP) reported educational inequalities. This report published results of the national assessments administered to students in selected urban schools in the United States since the 1960s in the areas of reading, mathematics, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. History. In 2004, Florida, New York, Nevada, and Ohio were the four states with the lowest graduation rates for Black students. In 2007, eighth-grade White students consistently outperformed African-American and Hispanic students in both reading and mathematics. In general, Hispanic students, including English Language Learners (ELL) were underperforming in reading and mathematics compared to White students both at the elementary and secondary levels (Bennett, 2011). The
Center on Education Policy (2010) acknowledged the gains made on state tests in both reading and mathematics by African-American students. However, in their study of the 65 largest urban school districts in the nation, they reported alarming statistics that African-American/Black males were dropping out of school at higher rates compared to White males. The state of Ohio continued to struggle with the closing of the achievement gap for Black and Hispanic students. In the 2007-2008 school year, the graduation rate was 64.5% for Hispanic students and 64.3% for African-American students. Five years later, during the 2011-2012 school year, the graduation rate for Hispanic students increased to 73.6% and the graduation rate for Black students was reported at 64.5% (Ohio Department of Education, 2012a).

Consequently, the problem that these statistics posed and that this study addressed was that Ohio would not improve its overall graduation rate if minority students in high poverty schools were underachieving. School and community perceptions about the quality of education that minority students received would be valuable to the field of education in understanding on how to best meet their needs Urban high schools across the country that were considered exemplary had many of the same characteristics. Mainly, researchers have argued that strong district and school leaders, fully committed to the learning and success of all students and not just some students, were essential. Exemplary schools placed intensive focus on high impact instructional strategies that were intentional and specific to the diverse racial, ethnic, socio-economic needs of their student population. The recruiting and hiring of effective teachers who were also culturally competent coupled with the equitable and fair allocation of both fiscal and
human resources, were best practices that have resulted in significantly closing or narrowing the achievement gaps in many urban public schools.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

In this dissertation, I used a qualitative multiple case study methodology to collect information and data from participants associated with three urban high schools located in Ohio. The three high schools were similar in size and student demographics, and were selected from a list published on the Ohio Department of Education website. Statistics about the schools’ graduation rate and the schools’ academic achievements were retrieved from the previous Ohio’s State Report Card, rather than the A-F Report Card that was fully implemented in the 2015-2016 school year based on the New Learning Standards (Ohio Department of Education, 2014). I sought approval to conduct a qualitative study in three public high schools from Ashland University’s Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) and my dissertation committee. HSRB approval can be found in Appendix A. Upon approval from the appropriate entities, I recruited school/district personnel to participate in this study.

Research Questions

The participants’ opinions were critical to this dissertation, as they were either providers or recipients of services at the individual schools. The students, parents, and community members had unique perspectives of what approaches worked to improve the education of minority students and what approaches could be improved upon or were lacking. The research questions sought to understand the what, the why, and the how of instructional approaches.
In this study, I endeavored to answer the following three central questions:

1. What were the approaches that led to the narrowing or closing of the achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic students as compared to their White counterparts?

2. What were parents, students, and community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among African-American students?

3. What were parents, students, and community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among Hispanic students?

Other questions emerged based on the answers to these three main research questions. I then analyzed the results in order to determine central themes prevalent in the schools, both individually and collectively.

**Setting**

The criteria used by the state report card provided by the Ohio Department of Education enabled the selection of the urban public high schools addressed in this study. Ohio annually identifies what it calls the State Superintendent’s Schools of Promise, and highlights schools that were successful in narrowing the achievement gap (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). A few of the criteria for being selected as a School of Promise were: schools with high poverty, increased academic achievement on state tests, a significant increase in graduating students who belong to a specific subgroup (including special education, African-American, or Hispanic).
Sample

I selected the three urban public high schools for this study using the criteria that they were identified by the state of Ohio as having: high poverty rates, significant numbers of African-American and or Hispanic students in addition to significantly improving their graduation rates. I chose at least five participants from each school to take part in this study. The participants from each school included: one school leader, one student (African-American or Hispanic), one parent of the student attending the school, and one community leader who was a formal partner with the school. A combined total of eighteen participants participated in this study. Participants who were directly associated with the three public high schools were interviewed and observed on the school campus or at activities associated with the selected school. School administrators assisted in the selection of teachers who had documented records of increasing academic achievement, African-American or Hispanic senior students, their parents or guardians, and community partners. Initially, school administrators contacted the participants either in person, by phone, or via email. I then contacted individuals who verbally agreed to take part in this study to formalize their participation by obtaining written consent.

Data Collection

I selected schools/districts based on report card data provided by the Ohio Department of Education’s website. Upon approval from the districts and schools, I simultaneously collected data from individuals who volunteered to participate in this study. The data collected included interviews, direct observations, and artifacts. I spent a combined total of 40 hours, over a period of three months, at the three schools to conduct
the research, which included 21 hours of interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. I conducted a second interview if additional time was needed, or made a follow-up phone call if clarification was needed. All initial interviews were face-to-face. I secured permission from the school districts and its participants to use resources to collect data using methods including voice recording and photos of artifacts. Participants were allowed to decline to be recorded if they were uncomfortable with this method. However, all participants agreed to be recorded. A professional transcriptionist with no knowledge of the participants or the study, transcribed all interviews. I employed the following five criteria to select participants for this study:

1. Principals: leaders who led the process of closing the achievement gap
2. Teachers: leaders who were identified as having improved student performance on the Ohio Graduation Tests or increasing the graduation rate
3. Students: seniors (African-American or Hispanic students) who passed all state tests and were on target to graduate on time and were enrolled at the school for at least two consecutive years
4. Parents: guardians of graduating seniors (African-American or Hispanic students) who were enrolled at the school for at least two years, who passed the state tests, and were on target to graduate on time
5. Community: leaders or volunteers who were involved in formal relationships with the schools for at least two years

I sought written permission and consent from district representatives, principals, employees, parents, and students from the participating high schools. Examples of written consent letters are located in Appendix B. Participants included teachers, parents,
students, principal, administrators, and community leaders associated with these high schools, who were either employed by the schools, parents of minority students, minority students in high school, or community leaders who resided within the public school district’s city limits. I selected these participants because their opinions and perceptions were valuable to understanding the academic and socio-economic needs of minority students. Gaining access to the participants was a challenge because school district administrators had to agree to the participation of their employees, students, and parents of students. The selected high schools were part of a major school district that had strict protocols for conducting research on their campuses. Teachers were cooperative and granted permission for me to observe their classrooms, whenever possible, and to review lesson plans. Additionally, parents agreed to the participation of their minor children in this study. I selected students who were seniors, were enrolled at their high schools for at least two years, and were 16 years of age or above for this study because they had the maturity to recount and analyze their personal experiences at the high schools without fear of repercussions and were thus placed at minimal risk. I have kept the names of all participants and the names of the schools anonymous. Pseudonyms were used instead of participants’ real names. I selected the three urban high schools based on their similar ethnic demographics and statistical data regarding their progress in narrowing the achievement gap as reported on the state report card. I analyzed approaches used in closing the achievement gap for all students (and African-American and Hispanic students in particular) in order to determine similarities and differences of their academic experiences. I selected participants purposefully, with the cooperation of the school principals and other district administrators. To the extent that it was possible, I ensured
that each group of participants was similar in composition. I selected at least five participants from each school, including one teacher, one parent, one student, one school administrator and one community leader. One of the schools was much larger in size than the others, so I selected three student participants in order to better understand students’ perceptions at that school.

I employed qualitative approaches including, but not limited to: face-to-face interviews using guided questions, observation of participants in their natural settings (schools), classroom observations, review of relevant documents and artifacts, and narratives of the participants’ experiences with the schools. I asked guided questions about approaches that, according to the participants (stakeholders), worked to improve the education of African-American and Hispanic students and their personal experiences with the school. The participants received these guided questions at least one week before the actual face-to-face interviews. Guided questions and consent forms were translated into Spanish for Spanish-speaking parents. I employed other emergent methods during the face-to-face interviews to clarify answers or to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences with their schools. In interview, I asked each stakeholder the following guided questions: (see Appendix C for a complete list of questions)

- Principals: In your opinion, what strategies have been most effective in narrowing the achievement gap and why?
- Teachers: In your opinion, what strategies have been most effective in narrowing the achievement gap and why?
- Parents: In your opinion, what school approaches have been most effective in ensuring the academic success of your child and why?
- Students: In your opinion, what school approaches have been most effective in helping you become a successful student and why?
- Community Leaders: In your opinion, what school approaches have been most effective in ensuring academic success for the students and why?

Other questions emerged based on the answers to these main questions. I then analyzed the answers in order to determine central themes prevalent in the schools, both individually and collectively.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed data from observations, interviews, and documents to interpret and interrelate emerging themes. I used a personal computer database, including Microsoft Excel, Note, and Word, to aid in the coding process for interpreting data. A combination of research-based qualitative methodologies used by experts in the field and appropriate for case studies helped ensure a rigorous process (Creswell, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2009; Yin, 2003). These methodologies include reading and reviewing all collected data including documents, transcriptions, artifacts, and photos, thoroughly and carefully. I maintained logs and documentation of research hours, personal observations, and experiences. I converted descriptive codes into analytical codes and asked reflective questions including: What is going on here? What is happening? What are common themes within and across case studies? I observed the identification of power dynamics to ensure all participants’ voices were heard. I conducted a primary analysis to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation of themes and
conducted member checking to ensure the accuracy of the content of the interviews and subsequent analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

Throughout this dissertation, I employed rigorous methodologies for ensuring the trustworthiness of a qualitative study using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability proposed by experts in the field (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Roberts, 2010; Shelton, 2004). I implemented the following strategies to ensure the practices of trustworthiness for each criterion:

- **Credibility:** The guided questions were similar for all participants, which allowed me to analyze common or opposing themes. The samplings of participants, whenever possible, were similar in size and demographics. I employed the triangulation method, whereby findings between interviews, observations, and documents are compared and analyzed. The use of peer debriefing ensured the accurate reporting of information. I also asked colleagues with expertise in qualitative research to read and analyze data to confirm themes, offer different perspectives, and ensure that ethical procedures were followed. Member checking included receiving “real-time” feedback from the participants who conferred or denied the accurate content of the conversations immediately following the interview.

- **Transferability:** I selected three urban public schools with similar school demographics and with similar successful academic results as identified by the state for this study. In-depth, thick, and vivid descriptions of findings for each school and academic approaches will give other educators with similar school
demographics the opportunity to apply them to various situations. Merriam (2009) argued that “each instance of a classroom is seen as its own unique system, which nonetheless displays universal properties of teaching” (p. 226).

- **Dependability:** Similar to the credibility criteria, dependability methods ensured that the same research strategies were applied to each situation, including but not limited to the guided questions, the demographics of the participants, and details of data gathered. Internal auditors, university professors in the field of education, analyzed the accurate reporting of the data collected.

- **Confirmability:** To significantly reduce researcher bias and ensure accurate reporting, I asked external auditors who were knowledgeable about the topic to analyze the collected data to confirm, deny, or add themes and concepts. These external auditors were: a licensed retired school principal, a veteran language arts high school teacher, and a procurement manager in the business field, each with a master’s degree in their respective field. The external auditors who were educators analyzed answers from the administrators, students, parents, and teachers. The business professional analyzed the answers from the community leaders and partners.

Ethical procedures were followed by keeping names of the participants, and the names of all participating schools, anonymous. Participants’ names were changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of responses. School names were identified with numerical codes when reporting results.
Summary

This multiple case study involving three urban public high schools included a number of qualitative research methodologies. These schools were identified by the Ohio Department of Education as schools that made a significant improvement in closing the achievement gap and raising the graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic students.

I sought approval from Ashland University’s HSRB and school personnel to conduct the study and to select participants. The goal was to obtain a combined total of at least fifteen participants from the three schools. I selected at least five participants from each school, including school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community leaders directly associated with the schools. I spent a minimum of 15 hours, over a period of one to two months, on each school’s campus to conduct the research, which included at least five hours of interviews. Research questions focused on the participants’ perceptions about approaches that were successful in raising the academic achievement of all students, particularly African-American and Hispanic students. I analyzed interviews, observations, and other pertinent documents to determine common themes and implemented rigorous methodologies to ensure trustworthiness and establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. The involvement of other experts in the field minimized researcher bias and ensured the accurate analysis of information. Ethical procedures were followed by keeping names of the participants, and the names of all participating schools, anonymous. Chapter IV presents in-depth descriptions of findings related to the central research questions.
CHAPTER IV

Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the approaches that were used in narrowing or closing the gap in three urban public high schools in the state of Ohio. This chapter reports the findings of this multiple case study for each school, and addresses the predominant themes found through the exploratory methods used in this qualitative research. During this study, I analyzed and discussed emerging themes across all three schools. Stakeholders who participated in this study answered questions about their perceptions of their schools and recommendations for improving the education of African-American and Hispanic students. The following three questions guided the study:

1. What were the approaches that led to the narrowing or closing of the achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic students as compared to their White counterparts?
2. What were parents, students, and community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among African-American students?
3. What were parents, students, and community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among Hispanic students?

I obtained findings by conducting in-depth analysis of the following data sources: semi-structured interviews, on-site observations, school documents (such as lesson plans), state report results, and demographic information about the schools. A total of
eighteen individuals were interviewed. Table 1 illustrates demographic information of each participant by school:

Table 4.1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Student</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior/H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Doctorate</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>MS</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Parent of #12</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior/H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior/H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Student</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior/H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>BA</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>MA</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior/H.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Community Leader</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Background**

I selected three urban public high schools for this study. A total of 18 participants took part in this study, including administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders or partners associated with each school. The names of the participants and the schools were changed to protect their privacy. The schools selected are urban schools located in Ohio with similar demographics; at the time of this study, all three schools had at least a 40% poverty rate, at least 40% of students belonging to a minority group, and had been identified as a School of Promise within the last five academic years as reported by the Ohio Department of Education. The average
graduation rate for each school ranged between 95% and 100% for at least five consecutive academic school years. The student population of each school varied. School 1 had a smaller student population of 250 students; school 2 was a larger school with 1,100 students; and school 3 had approximately 400 students. One of the schools is a traditional high school and the two others are early-college high schools. School 1 is an early-college high school located in a medium to large urban public school district; school 2 is a traditional high school located in a large urban public school district; school 3 is an early-college high school located in a large urban public school district. School 2 and school 3 belong to the same school district.

This study did not include results of the New Ohio State Test aligned to the Common Core exams which were introduced during the 2014-2015 school year. The results of these tests were and still are, too preliminary to make conclusions or recommendations regarding academic achievements of African-American and Hispanic students. Schools of Promise were schools that were identified by the state as being able to close the academic achievement gap for students belonging to a subgroup such as: students with disabilities, African-American students, Hispanic students, and economically disadvantaged students.

School administrators selected the teachers who helped prepare the students for the Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT) and were either 9th grade or 10th grade teachers at the time the tests were administered. Principals also selected students who were seniors and had attended the school for at least two years to participate in this study. At least one parent of each of the students was selected to be interviewed. I also selected school community leaders or partners who were involved with the schools for at least two years
to participate in this study. The findings, the participants’ responses and opinions, were reported in narrative form, and edited quotes were incorporated to tell their stories.

The following table shows information about the demographics of each school:

Table 4.2

*School Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th>School 1</th>
<th>School 2</th>
<th>School 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of School</strong></td>
<td>Early College</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Early College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enrollment size</strong></td>
<td>250</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Teachers</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Rate</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poverty Rate</strong></td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ethnic Information | 78% African-American | 48% African-American | 40% African-American |
|                    | 9% Hispanic | 39% White | 40% White |
|                    | 7% White | 7% Two or more races | 6% Two or more races |
|                    | 4% Hispanic | 3% Hispanic | |

**Case Study: School 1**

This section includes findings from school 1, and are reported by the major themes found in the data collected and participants’ responses. Effective teaching, academic interventions, and strong relationships were the major themes related to attempts to narrow or close the achievement gap at school 1. School 1 is an early-college high school noted by the state and local and national news as a school of distinction. It is part of a large urban high school and, at the time of this study, had approximately 250 students, over 90% belonging to a minority group. African-American students were the
majority in this school, and the school's poverty rate was 80%. The graduation rate for this high school was 100%. The participants in this study from school 1 included the school principal/dean, a math teacher, two Hispanic parents, and their son.

**Effective Teaching**

School 1 is located on a college campus in the heart of an inner city. As I entered the school, Ms. Davis, the dean and principal, greeted me enthusiastically in the school lobby. Ms. Davis was eager to share her story of why school 1 was one of the best schools in the state of Ohio. I interviewed her in her office, which had a large white Smart Board mounted on the wall with her educational goals for the week. Ms. Davis, who was African-American, did not hesitate to share that she was first an instructional leader, specifically a high school English teacher, for many years. She did not plan on becoming the principal of her school. Her supervisors, she explained, saw potential in her and she was selected as the leader of a school where economically disadvantaged, primarily African-American students had the opportunity to be first generation college graduates. She vividly described her first year as dean of the high school: “It was like baptism by fire, an intense on-the-job training.”

At school 1, students attend all of their high school courses in the building, but also take a variety of courses in other buildings across the college campus. At the end of the four years of high school, students graduate with not only with a high school diploma, but also an associate degree from the university. When asked about approaches to closing the achievement gap for African-American and Hispanic students, Ms. Davis credited her teachers with the students’ academic success. Ms. Davis ensured her teachers participated in relevant professional development opportunities to develop their
leadership skills. She had high expectations for all teachers, and expected them to work as part of a team: “Everybody has to have skin in the game, and everyone has to be accountable. In this game, we are helping and excelling kids, and everybody needs to be a part of that process.” In her first year as dean, Ms. Davis did not have the luxury of selecting her teaching staff. She admitted that seniority and other contractual and union mandates prevented her from choosing the best teachers for her school. However, due to teacher retirement and new district leadership, more recently she has been able to choose teachers who genuinely want to work at school 1 and who believed that regardless of the students’ race or background that they are able to succeed. Ms. Davis identified Mrs. Patel as being one of the teachers who consistently had a 90% passage rate or above on the 10th grade Ohio Graduation Tests in math. Mrs. Patel, who is originally from India, stated that each student was equally important and that she customized her teaching according to her students’ abilities and academic levels. She was adamant her students’ race does not matter, but that teachers’ expectations are critical to student success:

I think we should challenge each student equally. We should not accept lower quality work. If we expect higher, then students will produce higher. It’s when we hand stuff to them that we do a disservice. I do not accept no for an answer. You have to show me work; you have to persevere.

**Academic Interventions**

Both Ms. Davis and Mrs. Patel emphasized the importance of academic interventions and supports for students who were struggling academically. Mrs. Patel’s described her teaching and learning strategies as intentional, methodological and targeted. According to Mrs. Patel and other participants interviewed explained that the staff and
the principal ensure that there is an after school program from Monday through Thursday. Teachers know through data and test results; which students are academically at risk. These students are targeted and approached by their teachers to participate in the after school program. Students have the opportunity to get the specific academic assistance that they need. For example, Mrs. Patel offered to stay after school for students who did not understand some of the rigorous math content. Parents were called as soon as Mrs. Patel discovered students were struggling. A commitment would be sought from the parents to keep the students after school for help. Mrs. Patel ensured that she reviewed and selected the critical math standards for Algebra or Geometry that needed to be taught ahead of time before the school year started. The selected standards were taught in the first six months of school and the months before the administration of the OGT tests would be dedicated to repetition and review of the content and learning standards. When asked if the formal education she received in India influenced the way she taught, she emphatically confirmed that it did. She believed that the learning of Math, must be made relevant to students and to allow them to problem solve on their own and in different ways. In her opinion, the processes of allowing students to ask questions, to find answers and to solve problems on their own, were equally important to getting the answers correctly. She explained that allowing students to think critically, to collaborate, to explain, and deduce were necessary for preparing them to solve mathematical problems they may not have previously encountered, such as on state tests.

If you just give them worksheets and say go ahead and do it, I don’t think that works. If the math classes are run like that, that’s where the downfall is in my opinion. You give them (students) worksheets to work independently; it does not
work. Students need to get the opportunity to collaborate with other students to solve problems using previous knowledge.

Mrs. Patel understood that having a positive relationship with her students was key to keeping them motivated. “I know my students get frustrated with math and I also get frustrated, but we talk a lot in class. I allow my students to express their frustrations.”

Mrs. Patel believed that one way that a teacher showed that he or she cared about his or her students was by offering academic interventions. She attributed school-wide academic interventions as critical in closing the achievement gap and getting an over 90% passage rate on the OGT. Ms. Davis, the dean, explained how important interventions were for her students who came from families who did not have a high school or college diploma. However, Mrs. Davis also emphasized that students’ backgrounds were not used as an excuse for poor performance.

We understand where they come from, but we don’t use that as an excuse. They check it at the door because one of the other premiere things about our school is that everyone understands that when you walk through this school, you’re here because you want to get a college degree. You’re here because you want to attain as many college credits as possible, so that means that there are certain things that are gonna be required of you to be successful.

To ensure a 100% graduation rate, which the school maintained for a few consecutive years, academic interventions and the consistent monitoring of student progress were essential. There was a broad range of academic interventions to keep students on track to graduate. One-on-one conferences with parents outside of the yearly parent-teacher conferences were important to prevent students from failing. Students who were having
academic or non-academic challenges had the opportunity to meet with an adult during study halls. Having instructional coaches on the staff in addition to teacher support was also critical to the success of the students. Mrs. Davis had the autonomy to hire instructional coaches who were assigned to a small group of students. These coaches monitored student attendance, consulted with the students weekly, and were the liaisons between the school and the parents.

**Strong Relationships**

Mrs. Patel understood that having a positive relationship with her students was key to keeping them motivated: “I know my students get frustrated with math, and I also get frustrated, but we talk a lot in class. I allow my students to express their frustrations.” Mrs. Patel noted that one way a teacher can demonstrate care for his or her students is by offering academic interventions. Student advisories, as part of academic interventions, were frequently held to discuss credits earned and academic struggles with either the high school or college courses taken. However, student advisories were also enjoyable occasions which promoted social and competitive activities to keep students motivated.

Mr. and Mrs. Lopes, parents of school 1 student Mateo, described it as being a different kind of school for their son. Mateo’s parents, who were both born in Puerto Rico and recently moved to Ohio for work and a better life, were pleased with the school's small learning environment. They were not surprised that the school was rated as one of the best high schools in closing the achievement gap for African-American as well as Hispanic students. There were less than 20 students in each class each day. Teachers not only called parents on the phone when students were struggling, but also when they were doing well. The Lopes family stated that they valued these non-
traditional methods of communication the most. Emails and text messages were sent to parents periodically, and newsletters were translated in Spanish. The Lopes family appreciated that when they entered the school on various occasions, teachers remembered their names and knew they were Mateo’s parents. Mateo enjoyed his school; he stated that “my experiences as a student are great. I’m learning lots of new skills, I’m interacting with college students, and my teachers say that that’s very good because in the future when I get a job and stuff, it’ll help me associate with people more.” Mateo commended his teachers for preparing him for the future and for helping him solve problems. He described school 1 teachers as being part of his family who challenged him to do his best: “This school was implemented as a family. We all have to respect one another, treat each other equally, and not push someone out because they’re like an outcast.” Mateo proudly praised his teachers for standing behind the students 100%. Teachers would stay after school almost every day to help students who were struggling with either their high school or college courses. However, the help students received went beyond their subjects. Mateo appreciated that his teachers took the time to listen to students’ concerns and any other conflicts students were having in their lives.

The school community member study participant, Pastor Wilson, was proud to be an advocate for school 1. He explained: “It would only take me a few minutes to just pick up the phone and call school board members to complain about something that I thought was not in the best interest of the school and the students.” He had been involved with the school since its inception, and was instrumental in, as he described, fighting for the creation and designing of the school, which would provide inner city students with the opportunity to graduate from high school with an associate degree. Pastor Wilson
explained that many in the community, including the university itself, did not believe that the school would be successful. Pastor Wilson, a school community partner, wore many hats. He was a former board member, a father of two students who attended school 1, and a health and wellness activities coordinator for the African-American male parents in the school and in the community. Professionally, he was a social worker. He reiterated many of the same sentiments as the other participants who were interviewed regarding the culture of the school and the academic supports provided to the students. He was pleased with most of the teachers who applied to work at school 1 because they believed in the students and wanted to be there for them. He spoke highly of the principal and the relationship she developed with the parents. Pastor Wilson said of the principal that “she is accessible to the parents.” Pastor Wilson gave an example of how the principal was actively involved in resolving a conflict he had with one of the teachers who told his daughter that a letter grade of C in art was acceptable because, after all, “it’s just an art class.” According to Pastor Wilson, Ms. Davis, the Principal, acted as the mediator and listened to both their concerns as parents and the views of the teacher. Pastor Wilson explained that he and his wife knew that their daughter was capable of better performance in that class and wanted to ensure that the teacher and the principal understood their expectations and that a “C” was not acceptable for their daughter.

Participants’ Recommendations

School 1 participants had many recommendations for the improvement of African-American and Hispanic students’ education. The Lopes family emphasized the importance of the school communicating with Hispanic parents in Spanish. They said: “We like getting newsletters in Spanish and English.” They also suggested that the
school should provide resources for younger parents. “Nowadays many of the parents of some of these students are young themselves and they are much younger than parents in the past. These parents need to get support from the school on how to help their children.” Further, the Lopes family also thought that parents needed to take more responsibility for the success of their students and not expect the school to “do it all.” Mateo wanted to ensure that teachers and the principal stayed in tune in terms of what was happening with students. Both the principal and the community partner had strong opinions about the importance of teachers knowing the needs of African-American students and students in poverty. In their opinions, many teachers had great intentions. However, a few still had low expectations for their students because of preconceived notions about students’ backgrounds. According to Pastor Wilson, poverty, drug use, and teen pregnancy are not necessarily new phenomena, but have always existed in society. For the current generation, teacher expectations and the relationships teachers build with their students are critical to academic success. Pastor Wilson noted that teachers are not able to teach students if they are unable to catch the students’ attention: “You can’t impart knowledge; you have to capture the students before you can start to teach them. Better yet, before you can clean a fish, you got to catch it.”

**Case Study: School 2**

Instructional strategies, academic interventions, and student/family race and culture were important themes in the findings for school 2. As I entered the large high school, situated in the modest, low-income urban neighborhood, the wall decorations displayed pride and good news. Pictures of male and female scholar athletes were displayed across one wall, while another wall featured a big blue banner with white
letters that read School of Promise. A school resource officer greeted me at the door and led me to the principal’s office where, over several weeks, I would interview most of the participants. Mr. Romano, community partner and pizza restaurant owner, described school 2 thus: “It was a huge school, but the staff and students were always friendly and seemed as if they wanted to be there.” While school 2 looked like a traditional school, its curriculum included several unique programs, including an international baccalaureate program and a school of visual and performing arts. At the time of this study, the school had approximately 1,100 students. Over 40% of those students belonged to a minority group, primarily African-American, and the poverty rate was 46%. The graduation rate for this school was 95%. Because of this school’s size, and to obtain a better understanding of student experiences, I chose to interview three African-American students from school 2. A language arts teacher, the head principal, and a parent also took part in this study.

**Instructional Strategies**

Arabia, the first student I interviewed, was enthusiastic and proud of her school, and even sounded like a spokesperson for the school. She explained, comfortably and in detail, what her school was able to offer her both academically and athletically. Arabia and her mom chose school 2 because of its band program. Arabia remembered how nervous she was about preparing for and taking the Ohio Graduation Tests. In her opinion, her teachers did an excellent job of preparing her for the tests. She attributed her success in the tests to lots of practice, review, and after school tutoring. She stated that she loved her school and her diverse friends, and was happy that a good number of her teachers recognized students’ diverse cultures, races, and backgrounds (many African-
American, Hispanic, and White students attended school 2 during the course of this study), and planned lessons that took these into account. Arabia explained: “We have students from all over the city who come here for academics, sports, or the arts.”

However, Arabia felt that not all teachers appreciated student diversity enough. She was adamant that a student’s culture and race was important and must be acknowledged by all teachers and school personnel, and that this acknowledgement serves to motivate students. When asked if she had any negative experiences as an African-American student, she explained that one time she witnessed a school counselor discourage a Black male student from taking an advanced class, though he had a good GPA and grades.

Arabia recalled the story:

I’ll never forget this one time. I was in my Honors English II class, and we were picking our classes out for the next year. An African-American boy, he wanted to take financial literacy class. He had a good GPA and passed all his OGT’s and everything, and our counselor was like, ‘Oh well, you know, you shouldn’t take that class because certain people only take that class.’ And, she was talking about African-American kids that go here with low GPAs or didn’t pass all their OGTs. And, I just think we shouldn’t limit kids with low GPAs or kids that didn’t pass OGTs to certain classes. I mean, if we want everyone to persevere and actually graduate from a class, then everyone deserves the same opportunities.

Arabia did not report this incident to anyone. She was afraid and was certain that no one in the school would do anything about the situation. At the time of this study, that school counselor was no longer employed by school 2, which was a relief to Arabia. She also stated that she looked forward to the future and planned to attend a university in Ohio to
study journalism. Lashawnda, the second student I interviewed, was also looking forward to attending college not too far from home. She spent all four years at school 2 and fell in love with the visual and performing arts program. Lashawnda noted that the special attention her teachers gave her in advanced classes was very helpful, and felt that the teachers in these classes gave more hands-on help and were more attentive to the needs of the students. Lashawnda did not like the large number of worksheets assigned in many of the regular classrooms, and felt that she was not being challenged enough in the regular classes. Lashawnda also noted that her school was very diverse and that the students got along well. Like Arabia, Lashawnda thought her teachers could do a better job in acknowledging students’ backgrounds. She frowned, looked down, and painfully recalled that one of her teachers had publicly used a racist remark on social media. “A music theory teacher had spoken badly about these children who did some vulgar stuff in his yard. He posted it on Facebook, social media, and apparently he said the N-word. So, that happened in my sophomore year.” Lashawnda explained that the music teacher was fired after this incident. She stated that she disliked teachers showing favoritism to some students versus others, such as the students in the International Baccalaureate programs. Lashawnda also thought that it was important to have Black teachers and role models in the school, who, in her opinion, would instill confidence in the other students of color. She explained that “it is nice to see someone of your color or race being comfortable in what they do and are good at what they do.” When asked what specifically an African-American teacher would give to African-American students, she answered: “Hope.”

Quintin, a senior, did not yet know what he was going to do after he graduated from high school; he considered attending a small Christian college to study sports
medicine at the time of our interview. Quintin is a muscular African-American student and approximately six feet tall. He was both an athlete and a member of the school band during his time at school 2. He smiled as he boasted about playing both the saxophone and sometimes the trumpet. During the first two years of high school, he did much better as a student than during his last two years. He was proud to pass all of his state tests (OGT) the first time he took them, and scored advanced or accelerated in all of the subjects. Quintin liked the way his science teachers taught, commenting that his courses were fun and engaging. He also enjoyed his English classes and credited his teachers with teaching him how to think on his own. Quintin stated that he believed review and repetition of various concepts helped him pass the OGT, and enjoyed note-taking strategies to help him remember the important information for the more challenging concepts on the tests. Quintin also appreciated school 2’s diversity. He remembered that there were teachers in the school who acknowledged the race and culture of the students. Lessons about race were important to him. His dad was Black, and his mother was multi-racial. Quintin particularly liked learning about the civil rights movement in his American Government class. When asked if there was something he would have liked to change about his school, he answered in frustration: “the whole tardy thing where you have to go to suspension or in-school suspension seemed a little bit harsh. You don’t know a lot of people’s situations and teachers should be a little bit more forgiving about the whole tardiness issues in the morning.”

A week later, when I interviewed Quintin’s mom, Ms. Jackson, at her home approximately ten miles from the school, she confessed that Quintin’s tardiness was her fault. Ms. Jackson requested that I interviewed her at her home because she had health
issues. She warned me that she lived in one of the worst neighborhoods in her city, due to poverty, gang activity, and crime. A deteriorating illness and a sudden divorce had left her permanently disabled and with a limited family income, which forced Ms. Jackson and her family to live in that neighborhood. She revealed that Quintin was getting into trouble at school for tardiness because he was helping her get his two much younger siblings ready for school in the morning. Quintin was a major support for Ms. Jackson, a single mother. Ms. Jackson felt guilty and blamed herself for Quintin’s lack of academic success during his senior year. Quintin had developed health problems, including chronic asthma, and missed his father, who lived in another state. Quintin was also taking a major leadership role in his home, while juggling learning while at school. Fortunately, Quintin was on track to graduate in May 2017. Ms. Jackson was happy that she had chosen school 2 for Quintin. She felt that the diverse school environment with many academic choices helped Quintin with his self-esteem as an African-American male student. Ms. Jackson thought the teachers cared about the students, but wanted teachers to be more culturally proficient: “I do believe these teachers care about these kids at school 2. I just believe they need to be a little bit more educated about the cultural differences.” Quintin thrived academically, taking an AP art class, and was a star athlete in football, basketball, and track. According to Ms. Jackson, Quintin’s language arts teacher, Ms. Green, was flexible with Quintin, who did not enjoy reading. Ms. Green allowed Quintin to choose the books and reading materials he enjoyed.

**Academic Interventions**

I also had the opportunity to interview, Ms. Green, a White, middle-aged veteran teacher. Ms. Green had been a teacher for 20 years, and had been employed by school 2
for six years at the time of this study. In addition to being a language arts teacher, Ms. Green also has a special education license. Before working at school 2, she worked at a vocational high school. For years, she wanted to work at school 2, but due to teacher seniority, she was not able to teach there. Finally, after six years, she was excited to be offered a job. Ms. Green was instrumental in preparing students to pass the OGT in reading. She stated that she believes in using a variety of instructional strategies coupled with academic interventions to engage academically at-risk students. Ms. Green also stated that she favors cooperative learning, which allows students to engage in hands-on learning and to solve problems both together and on their own, as a primary instructional strategy. Ms. Green and her colleagues have participated in book studies around topics of intervention strategies; she found this method of teachers teaching teachers to be essential in finding ways to help failing students. When asked if she looked specifically at data on the performance of African-American and Hispanic students, she categorically answered “yes.” Asked again if she felt uncomfortable with looking at student data by race, she answered: “no.” Ms. Green explained that part of her training as an intervention specialist involved getting to the root causes of her students’ academic and behavioral performances: “You have to get to all the data, and you got to bring it [race] to the table.” She acknowledged that some of her colleagues were uncomfortable with looking at data by race. In a voice just above a whisper, Ms. Green commended her principal for talking about “the elephant in the room,” the topic of race and students’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
Student and Family Background

I finally had the opportunity to interview Mr. Smith, the head principal of school 2, who was extremely busy and had to cancel our interview meetings twice. Mr. Smith was rarely in his office, and was a highly visible principal in this large high school. He is African-American, in his forties, and has a quiet yet assertive demeanor. He instantly emphasized that ongoing and frequent communication with his teachers were major priorities for him. He expected his teachers to discuss the specific academic performances and behavioral needs of African-American and Hispanic students and to brainstorm intervention strategies for their success. Mr. Smith believed that intervention strategies had to be specific to the individual students. Exposing students to non-traditional strategies both inside and outside the classroom, Mr. Smith suggested, are important to maintaining student motivation. Mr. Smith praised creative teachers, commending one particular math teacher who was able to engage students in Math lessons and help them appreciate the subject.

She said to the students when I was observing her class: Kids, explain to Mr. Smith what the sprinkler is.” And, somehow they connected the sprinkler system to the math lesson. Also, whenever they did certain things, she had to do this dance to get students to retain whatever they were learning. I was like, “Wow, that’s creative,” and she was so energetic and just fun, and I’m sitting there, and I’m watching all these kids enjoying math.

School 2 employs several other academic intervention strategies, including: hands-on learning, differentiated instruction, exposure to college and career opportunities, and non-academic supports. Student volunteering, job shadowing, and
post-secondary options also serve to prepare students for a future beyond high school. School 2 offers both before- and after-school opportunities such as tutoring for struggling students. Enrichment opportunities for students in the Advanced Placement courses and the International Baccalaureate are also necessary to “stretch” their learning. The technique of specifically targeting students who struggled with the Ohio Graduation Tests by subject also proved helpful in ensuring student success. Mr. Smith encouraged co-teaching to promote collegiality but most importantly to help students understand the connections between disciplines. I also asked Mr. Smith about specific strategies that were helpful to African-American and Hispanic students. He explained his concerns about these students:

They were coming in with skill deficits, so we had to, first communicate with the students and the parents, share with them what we found, and then create a plan that addressed their specific needs. It was a lot of work.

Mr. Smith and his assistant principals are responsible for specific grade levels, and each principal would identify struggling students by subject, regardless of race. Each principal would then meet regularly with the department heads of each subject and make specific plans for each struggling student’s individual needs. African-American males who had major academic deficits were provided more intense assistance. Examples of intense assistance varied from a student sitting closer to the teacher, biweekly meetings with a guidance counselor, credit recovery classes, and technology-based instruction. Mr. Smith emphasized that monitoring intervention strategies was critical in determining whether or not they were effective. If they were not effective, adjustments were made to ensure students were succeeding and on track to graduate. Mr. Smith allowed local churches
and behavioral agencies to come into the school, along with his guidance counselors, to offer counseling services for his students.

Mr. Smith agreed that most of his teachers, who were White, were uncomfortable with the topic of race. However, he believed that the school demographics had changed rapidly during the past decade, a fact that could not be ignored. He lamented that a few of his teachers were having a difficult time with minority students, students of poverty, and LGBTQ students. However, he was optimistic and hopeful that the controversial conversations about change would eventually help his teachers make a shift in their thinking and help them better relate to their students. He happily retold a couple of the stories he shared with his staff. For example, he clearly remembered that, when he was a high school student, most of his teachers were White. The teachers who took a special interest and cared about him regardless of his race were instrumental in ensuring his success. When Mr. Smith became a teacher, he wore a tie to school almost every day because of the advice of one of his mentors and supervisors, Mr. Palmer, who emphasized the importance of wearing a tie. Mr. Palmer brought Mr. Smith to his office one day and said: “These young Black boys are looking at you and they’re trying to gain insight into who you are, and they look up to you, and they respect you.” Mr. Smith stated that he expects his teachers to give all students, including students of color, a high level of education. He advises teachers to reflect on their demeanors, and that they should be mindful of the verbal and non-verbal messages they send to their students. Mr. Smith admitted that the topic of race was difficult but necessary and that, eventually, he had positive feedback from most of his teachers who acknowledged the importance of honoring and respecting the race and backgrounds of students. Mr. Smith explained that
the school district was working on becoming a culturally competent organization in hopes to equip teachers with the necessary skills to help the diverse student population. Mr. Smith also thought that the hiring of minority teachers was important for urban public schools with high minority populations. He described how Black teachers in particular would help with other African-American (Black) students. He explained:

I think minority students look at other minorities and think, ‘Oh, if he could do or she could do it, maybe I can do it.’ It may get them to change their mindset on things. But what I’ve said to our white counterparts: ‘Just because that’s the potential, that doesn’t mean you stop, or you feel a certain way. You continue to do what you’re doing because if you’re doing your job the best you can and you’re appropriate, and you’re building those relationships, that kid is gonna gravitate towards you too because they understand you genuinely care about.’

Participants’ Recommendations

The overall recommendations among school 2 participants regarding approaches to closing or narrowing the gap for African-American and Hispanic students centered around knowing who the students were, recognizing the students’ individual needs, and, most importantly, acknowledging their racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. All five participants explained the importance of making learning relevant by introducing topics in the classroom that students found important. Ms. Green advised that teachers look at individual and collective academic performance when analyzing data on an ongoing basis. Mr. Smith, the principal, stated that teachers need to be passionate about their professions and make a conscious effort to get to know and be able to relate to all students, especially those who look different than them. Furthermore, Mr. Smith
reiterated that teachers must work collaboratively to find solutions for academically at-risk students and make necessary instructional adjustments when students are not meeting or exceeding standards.

**Case Study: School 3**

Instructional strategies, academic interventions, and relationships with students were the major priorities and themes that emerged from findings of school 3, a small early-college high school situated in the midst of a large inner city on a large state university campus. At the time of this study, school 3, which was founded approximately eight years ago, had around 400 students and a total minority population of 57%. The total economically disadvantaged population was 40%, and the school served students in grades 9 through 12. The average graduation rate for this school was 95%.

**Instructional Strategies**

I entered school 3 through the first floor of the university’s lobby, where college students were casually sitting on couches or at tables eating, reading a book, or just conversing with their friends. The distant corner of the room had a gift shop with university apparel and souvenirs. Campus security gave me directions to school 3’s location on the third floor. As I exited the elevator on the third floor, I saw many students eating lunch in the cafeteria. At first glance, I was not able to tell the difference between the high school students and the college students. However, as I continued to observe, I realized that the high school students were sitting in one area of the cafeteria, monitored by staff wearing bright yellow shirts. One of the staff members asked if he could help me and escorted me to the main office. The main office secretary was friendly and welcoming and asked me to wait for Ms. Wengerd, who was on her way from
observing a class. Ms. Wengerd greeted me and invited me to her office, where we sat for more than an hour discussing school 3. Having taught English language arts since the school’s opening (and playing an instrumental role in designing the school’s curriculum) Ms. Wengerd had only been the principal of school 3 for a couple of years. According to her, she had gained the respect of her peers, who now respected her as their supervisor. Ms. Wengerd and her staff chose differentiated instruction as one of their central instructional models, recognizing the importance of knowing the academic strengths and weaknesses of each student. Ms. Wengerd was emphatic about this strategy’s importance in closing the achievement gap at her school. “I mean, we’re differentiation across the board. Teachers use different differentiation strategies which I think help us with the achievement gap. We use it consistently across disciplines.” When asked if she looked at the school test data by race, she seemed hesitant and became silent for a few seconds. Unsure whether she was uncomfortable with the question of race, I asked more probing questions, including: “Do you think that looking at data by school demographics is important?” Ms. Wengerd suggested that her staff looked at general data, and specific data for struggling students regardless of race. She said: “I think strategies are strategies across the board, and kids are gonna pick which strategy they like the best, you know?” Ms. Wengerd asserted that the staff was responsible for providing students with choices and interventions.
Academic Interventions

School 3 students had the opportunity to choose which interventions or strategies worked best for them: individual tutoring, small group instruction, study skills class, and after school programs, for example. The students choose the interventions they felt would most effectively help them to be successful. Thus, the type of intervention was not mandated. Ms. Wengerd did stress the importance of teachers being involved in ongoing professional development and learning about academic and behavior strategies that worked well with diverse learners. Ms. Wengerd mentioned that her school district was moving towards engaging teachers in diversity training.

Mrs. Thompson, an African-American language arts teacher, was instrumental in helping her students pass the OGT tests in reading. She was animated, friendly, and walked at a fast pace through the halls as we spoke on the way to her class. There were approximately 20 students present, mostly African-American students. Lunch had just ended, and I observed five students who entered the classroom with sandwiches and drinks, which they placed on their desks. The classroom had a casual atmosphere. Goals were posted on the whiteboard: “To be able to analyze poetry and determine the narrator’s tone and influence.” For the most part, students were engaged with the lesson and were looking at the teacher or reading their books as they tried to answer Mrs. Thompson’s questions about hyperbole, narrator’s intent, and author’s tone. One student was periodically looking at her cell phone and texting; however, she was also still looking at the chalkboard. As a researcher and observer, I quickly realized that the English language arts high school class was being conducted similarly to a college course on a college campus. Mrs. Thompson later confirmed that she did not prohibit her
students from eating or using cell phones in her classroom. When I asked Mrs. Thompson if food and cell phones are distractions she responded, in a thoughtful manner with her head tilted sideways: “Aren’t we preparing students for the future?” Mrs. Thompson contended that because the students were actually on a college campus, they needed to have freedom, within reason, to be relaxed and casual in the classroom. Mrs. Thompson was one of the few Black teachers on the staff, but admitted that, in the last few years, the administration has made a concerted effort to hire more minority teachers. Although difficult, the administration hired Black teachers from African countries. One of the African-American male teachers began a boys group to build positive relationships with the students and to help guide them academically and behaviorally. Mrs. Thompson agreed that it was important to have Black teachers in urban schools. Mrs. Thompson thought it was also critical to hire teachers who, regardless of race, were trained to teach in inner city schools with diverse student populations. She blamed universities and colleges for not doing a better job at preparing teachers to work with diverse students. She recalled taking one course in multicultural education when she was in college. However, she believed that universities should do more to equip teachers with skills they can use with diverse students.

With the new resident educator program, it would behoove the universities to have some professional development on meeting the needs of diverse learners before teacher licenses are given. This is so that college students who want to be teachers can be sure this is something that they’re willing to do for the next 35 years. Don’t throw ‘em into the pit after four years of education and three-year resident educator program, and then say, ‘Now what are you gonna do with the
Black kids? What are you gonna do with the Hispanics?’ This preparation needs to be something that you give them [prospective teachers] from day one.

Mrs. Thompson stated that she strongly believes in using literacy strategies to equip students with necessary reading skills across content areas. Additionally, she stated that test taking strategies are important in helping students prepare for state tests as well as ACT tests. Mrs. Thompson asserted that she was in favor of introducing the Common Core Standards, and believes that it is important to teach students, especially minority students how to think critically. In Mrs. Thompson’s opinion, this type of education must begin in kindergarten or earlier. Mrs. Thompson considers literacy important especially for Black and Hispanic students who may not have a strong educational foundation in their early years. When asked if students were hand-picked to be part of the early college program, she responded that students who were selected did have to have a certain level of reading skill, preferably an 8th-grade level or above. However, she contended that not all students were prepared to handle the rigorous curriculum and a lot of coaching and academic and interventions were required to support students who were first generation future college graduates.

**Relationships with Students**

Mrs. Anthony, the parent of a student named Cutrece, was pleased with the school for giving African-American students an opportunity to obtain an associate degree upon graduating from high school. After her daughter enrolled in school 3, Mrs. Anthony was inspired to finish her own college degree. Mrs. Anthony praised the school and the principal for being engaged with the school’s parents and for building positive relationships with the students:
Normally this type of school would only be available for certain types of people. So, I’m really glad that this program is open to so many of our minority and poor children. It puts them around other college students, and getting them comfortable with this environment versus just taking college level classes in a high school.

Cutrece was happy with her school and was looking forward to graduating with an associate degree and planned to pursue a bachelor’s degree in criminology. Her only complaint about her school was that she did not get to see her high school friends as much while on the university campus.

The community partner interviewed, Mrs. Goyette, is the academic advisor for the school students. An employee of the university, her role is to work closely with the high school counselor in providing academic advising to students. Building positive relationships with students is a critical aspect Mrs. Goyette’s responsibilities. She meets with each high school student several times during the school year to discuss their schedules, their future college plans, and any other problems they have had. She was impressed with the academic interventions that the early-college high school had in place for the students. She noted that tutoring, which was offered to students before, during, and after school was critical to keeping students on track to graduate. As the university partner, she was impressed with how available the high school teachers were for both the students and the parents. She described the teachers as well as the university as being passionate about early-college high school and student success. Ms. Goyette contended: “I think we all are very passionate about this program. And, we’ve all had a part in forming and helping with the success of the program. Since we all have the same goals,
we can put aside our differences of opinions because we want what is best for the students.” Mrs. Goyette stated that she was looking forward to the double graduations of the high school students at school 3.

**Participants’ Recommendations**

Building positive relationships with students was critical to school 3’s success. In interview, the principal emphasized the importance for her staff to understand different learning styles and academic needs of her students. Academic interventions were also very important to student success, and allowing students to choose which interventions or enrichment opportunities were important to them was a positive addition to this methodology. This strategy, according to the principal, was effective because it gave students choice and ownership of their learning. One teacher stated that, although it is important to hire African-American and minority teachers, the teacher preparation that occurs at the universities and colleges is also integral. In her opinion, many of the new teachers were not well-prepared for teaching diverse urban students. Thus, she proposed that teacher colleges expose students to experiences in urban school and equip them with the necessary skills to teach students who are academically deficient. This teacher also favored Common Core strategies, which allowed for the teaching of critical thinking skills. Critical skills must be taught at an early age by exposing students to solving problems on their own. The community partner, who in this case was a university partner, emphasized the importance of monitoring student progress. Ongoing communications with students about their present academic performance, discussions about career paths, and plans after high school graduation were critical in keeping students motivated and on track.
Emerging Themes

Over the course of interviews with several of the participants at all three schools, several interrelated themes emerged (Cresswell, 2014). Several participants alluded to diversity training, opportunities, and non-academic supports as important strategies for raising the academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic students. The majority of the students felt that having a Black teacher on the school staff was important, because it allowed them access to a relatable figure who could motivate them. One parent in particular was adamant about how important it was for teachers to be able to understand and relate to diverse students in inner-city schools. Two of the three principals indicated the importance of having teachers of color on their staff and other teachers who were sensitive to the specific needs of the students. Two schools, as part of their district professional development plan, required diversity training for principals. This professional development plan also includes providing teachers cultural competence or cultural proficiency training. When parents were asked why they chose to have their children attend the schools in this study, all responded that academic opportunities were major factors in their decision. The African-American parents, in particular, were pleased that their children had the opportunity for a better future and the possibility of a college degree and a promising career upon graduation. One parent was specifically proud of the school because of the visual/performing arts and athletic programs. All parents appeared to be satisfied with the curricular options of the schools and the academic interventions or opportunities available for their children. As part of their academic interventions, two of the three schools also provided non-academic supports for their students, including counseling services available on campus. In addition to
guidance counselors or psychologists, social and behavior agencies and church-affiliated organizations were allowed to visit with students during the school day either to mentor them or to provide direct services. Teachers and principals emphasized the importance of these non-academic support services in promoting academic success as well as emotional and behavioral health for some of their students. These students were often affected by problems including poverty, mental and physical health problems, and other familial challenges.

Summary

Three public urban high schools and 18 persons directly associated with these schools participated in this qualitative study. The participants in this research were principals, teachers, parents, community partners, and students. The three schools addressed in this case study were labeled school 1, school 2, and school 3 to ensure anonymity. I also changed the names of all participants to protect their privacy. In interview, I asked central questions to gather information on what strategies or approaches were utilized to narrow or the closing of the achievement gap and increase the graduation rate for African-American and Hispanic students. These urban schools were identified by the Ohio Department of Education as Schools of Promise, which included recognition for having a graduation rate of over 95% and for significantly closing the achievement gap for minority students. The poverty rate of the three schools ranged from 40% to 80%. I employed several methods of data collection in this study, including interviews, school or class observations, and the review of artifacts such as teacher lesson plans.
Several prevalent central themes emerged in these case studies. Each school identified strategies that were critical in raising academic achievement and graduation rates for all students, including African-American and Hispanic students. For example, school 1 participants identified effective teaching, academic interventions, and building strong relationships as central themes. School 2 participants identified instructional strategies, academic interventions, and student and family culture as important approaches to narrowing the achievement gap. School 3 also emphasized instructional strategies, student relationships, and academic interventions as critical strategies for raising student achievement. Diversity opportunities and non-academic supports for students were secondary themes that emerged from the data collected as growing patterns among the schools. The following chapter discusses and analyzes this study’s findings and presents conclusions and recommendations about the research topic.
CHAPTER V

Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the study entitled “A Comparison of Approaches to Closing the Achievement Gap in Three Urban High Schools in Ohio.” Additionally, this chapter includes findings, reflections, implications for education, and concludes with recommendations for future research.

Overview of the Research

Throughout this multiple case study, I investigated how three urban public high schools in Ohio closed or narrowed the achievement gap. According to the data recorded by the Ohio Department of Education, these schools significantly and consistently increased the academic achievement of minority students and students with disabilities, and were identified as Schools of Promise. Furthermore, this study examined the problem of why many states with urban public high schools were not significantly increasing the graduation rate for African-American and Hispanic students. Although graduation rates improved nationally after 2001, states including Ohio have continued to struggle, with African-American and Hispanic students still significantly underperforming as compared to White students. Most recent data at the national level still showed the overall graduation rate reaching 82%. However, Ohio had the lowest graduation rate in the nation for Black and Hispanic students, ranging between 59% to 64% (Education Week, 2016). The purpose of the study was to explore how the three Ohio urban high schools, with significant minority populations and high poverty rates, narrowed the achievement gap. I employed qualitative exploratory methods—conducting case studies using constructivist and critical race lenses—to examine the unique
strategies and approaches implemented by the three schools. The schools, according to the State of Ohio report cards, significantly raised the graduation rate for African-American and Hispanic students. I selected three Ohio high schools, located in medium to large urban school districts, for the case studies, which included an overall total of 18 participants. Five participants (administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community partners directly associated with the school) were selected from each school. Exploratory methods to gather data included one-on-one interviews, school and class observations, and the examination of artifacts such as teachers’ lesson plans. These observations occurred over a period of 3 months. The names of the schools and participants were kept anonymous. The findings resulting from this study will contribute to the existing literature and offer recommendations for Ohio public school educators or other educators in the nation in schools with similar demographics.

**Research Questions**

Three central questions guided the study:

1. What were the approaches that led to the narrowing or closing of the achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic students as compared to their White counterparts?

2. What were parents, students, and community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among African-American students?

3. What were parents, students, and community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among Hispanic students?
The participants’ opinions and voices were critical because participants were either providers or recipients of services at the schools.

Methodology

As a researcher, I employed several qualitative multiple case methodologies to collect information and data from the three schools and the 18 participants. The three schools had similar student demographics and had high minority populations, including African-American and Hispanic students; because of these similarities, I used the same research strategies to collect information from all participants. Exploratory methods, encompassing constructivist and critical race lenses, were appropriate strategies to analyze the data collected. I sought approval from Ashland University’s Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) and my dissertation committee and obtained written approval from the district representatives of the three urban high schools to participate in the study. All 18 participants volunteered to participate in the study. The school principal selected the student and teacher participants. Parents and guardians of the high school students gave written permission for their children to participate in this research. Participants were required to have had direct involvement with the school for at least two consecutive years. I redacted the names of all participants and the three schools, and addressed them using pseudonyms throughout this study, to ensure anonymity. Data collected resulted from face-to-face interviews, school and classroom observations, informal walkthroughs, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson plans. The study was conducted over a period of three months and resulted in a combined total of 40 hours of research. All interviews were voice recorded and professionally transcribed, and each participant answered similar guided questions. I used peer debriefing to ensure accurate reporting of the data.
collected and asked external auditors; two college professors, one business administrator, one retired school administrator, and one high school teacher, to review the data and to confirm, add, or deny themes or concepts. I identified themes in the data and reported the findings in narrative form, including vivid descriptions of interviews.

Discussion

I identified nine central themes in the data collected from the three urban high schools in Ohio. The following are the themes by school:

- School 1: effective teaching; strong relationships; and academic interventions;
- School 2: instructional strategies, student relationships, and academic interventions;
- School 3: instructional strategies, student relationships, and academic interventions.

Participants across the three schools highlighted instructional strategies, student relationships, and academic interventions as especially important in raising the academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic students: Figure 1 illustrates the major themes in the data by school and the common themes for the three schools combined:
Dissertation Topic: A COMPARISON OF APPROACHES TO CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THREE URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS IN OHIO

Figure 5.1 Research findings and central themes
The answers to this dissertation’s three central research questions were derived from themes that emerged from the interviews conducted with the eighteen participants, as reported in Chapter IV. The following are the answers corresponding to each question:

1. What were the approaches that led to the narrowing or closing of the achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic students as compared to their White counterparts?

Qualitative approaches such as the constructivist and exploratory methods used were appropriate for this study because it allowed participants to freely express their opinions about what approaches they thought had an impact on closing the achievement gap for African-American and Hispanic students. The semi structured interviews as opposed to structured interviews allowed me to ask specific probing questions regarding a variety of topics such as instructional strategies, academic interventions, and school/student relationships. Most participants gave vivid and detailed descriptions of their experiences with the schools. Participants from all three schools noted the importance of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students. Instructional strategies should be intentional and targeted to individual students’ needs, and exhibit a deep understanding of the root causes of student failure. Instructional strategies that are hands-on, engaging, and relevant are critical in keeping students academically motivated. According to the educators, the processes of having students think critically and solve problems on their own are more important than the teaching of content. In addition to the constructivist lens, I also used the Critical Race Theory (CRT). The Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens allowed me to analyze how the school administrators and the faculty, addressed racial inequities in curriculum, academic performances, and practices. Two of
the three schools reported that they gave special attention to African-American and Hispanic students who needed more academic assistance due to low reading levels or English language limitations. These schools reviewed data by race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, or disability status to ensure that the academic and behavioral needs of all students were met. Students and parents appreciated the types of innovative curricula offered. The opportunity to earn college credits while in high school or graduate from high school with an associate degree were particularly attractive and beneficial to the African-American and Hispanic families in this study. One administrator seemed uncomfortable with the topic of race when analyzing student data. In her opinion, if you analyzed individual student data and consistently monitored each student’s academic performance, then this strategy would ensure the academic success of all students. She did however acknowledge that because of the growing diversity of the student population, her school district was implementing diversity training.

At least 50% of the participants of the three schools acknowledged the importance of including culturally relevant teaching to students of color. Two of the schools had plans to include diversity training in their professional development plans. Four students, three educators, and two parents thought that having a deeper understanding of who their students were by learning more about their cultures, their learning styles, and the communities they lived in would help teachers relate better to their students. Two administrators agreed that most teachers were competent in knowing the content. However, for urban schools, teachers need to become more culturally proficient and reduce their biases and prejudices. According to several participants, teachers who stereotyped students because of their racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds
were not as successful with African-American and Hispanic students. One teacher blamed universities for not better equipping their student teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in urban schools and with diverse students.

Administrators and teachers alike argued that proper planning, high expectations, and the fostering of healthy and appropriate relationships with students are keys to keeping them engaged and interested in school. Academic interventions are critical in assisting students before they fail. These academic interventions can take many forms: before, during, and after school. Principals and teachers emphasized the importance of early identification of academic difficulties coupled with parent/guardian support. Enrichment and post-secondary options for advanced or gifted students are also important in keeping these students motivated. Non-academic supports in the form of mentoring, counseling, support groups, and student-led clubs are equally important to the success of all students, but particularly for students of color and students of poverty.

2. What were parents’/students’/community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among African-American students?

The African-American parents and students emphasized the importance of having African-American teachers in the classroom. Students explained that it was important to them to have African-American teachers who may be better able to understand their personal struggles. The presence of successful African-American teachers on the staff was cited as a motivating factor by all four African-American students who participated in this study. Two principals made a conscious effort to hire African-American teachers who were role models for all students, particularly for African-American students. One
parent and one teacher thought it was important for teachers to get the proper college training that would better prepare them to teach African-American students and diverse students in general. Being in tune with the needs of African-American students, by taking a personal interest in their backgrounds, their history, and their interests in and outside the classroom, is therefore critical in building positive relationships.

One community leader expressed his concerns about a few teachers who had low expectations for learning. Low expectations were evident in the low-level work assigned to his daughter and other African-American students. The community leader commended the principal for setting high expectations for all the students and the teachers. Many participants in this study echoed that a student’s race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status must not be reasons why students cannot exceed. The presence of African-American community leaders or community-based agencies in the school was acknowledged as important in giving non-academic supports to African-American students. Overall, parents were pleased with the variety of academic opportunities, which met different learning styles, provided to their children. More importantly, parents were pleased with high schools that offer opportunities for dual credit, including graduating with a high school and associate degree diploma for students of color and students of poverty.

3. What were parents’/students’/community leaders’ opinions about the approaches that led to an increased graduation rate and improved academic achievement among Hispanic students?

Two Hispanic parents and one Hispanic student participated in this study. This family expressed that the relationship the school developed with families was very important. They valued the ongoing communication via letters, emails, and text
messages especially when they were translated into Spanish. Although this family was proficient in English, they felt that having interpreters in the school was valuable. The parents especially liked that the school principal and teachers recognized them by name and knew who their child was. The student appreciated having a personal relationship with his teachers. The teachers sought him out when he experienced academic and personal problems. He was confident that his teachers were 100% committed to ensuring that he was successful. The parents also felt that many parents, including Hispanic families, were young themselves. The school had many programs that included parent education, which the parents appreciated. The parents were adamant that parents, of all races, must take ownership of their children’s learning and take an active role in educating their children.

Overall the three major themes for all schools combined were: instructional strategies, academic interventions, and relationships with students and families. The secondary themes were: diversity training, academic opportunities, and non-academic supports for students.

Reflection

As a seasoned educator with 25 years of experience in urban public schools, I have had the privilege and honor to educate many students from all walks of life at various educational levels. I have experienced first-hand the benefits and ramifications of the introduction of several federal laws, such as No Child Left Behind and school improvement initiatives associated with the Race to the Top. Many of the benefits of these initiatives included funds for professional development for teachers and staff and instructional support for students. Unfortunately, some of the ramifications of these laws
were punitive, asking school districts to change staff, including principals. Principals, in my experience, did not always have the autonomy to select teachers who were qualified to teach in urban schools. On the contrary, teachers who were not as effective were assigned to high-needs schools. Furthermore, I found that the allocation of funds for high-needs schools was not equitable. School districts that were granted school improvement grants were not allocating these funds to the schools in most need. As a life-long learner and a passionate advocate for fair and equitable education for all students, I was on a mission to learn more about why many urban schools especially in Ohio, were struggling with increasing the graduation rate of African-American and Hispanic students. In my experience, poverty, lack of family support, and lack of education are commonly cited as the central reasons for student failure, especially among students of color. Although I agree that these external factors play a vital role in determining the academic success of our students, I suspected that there might be other overlooked factors. Therefore, I decided to conduct a study to research urban public high schools with high poverty and minority populations that have made significant gains in closing or narrowing the achievement gap. The specific approaches, strategies, or processes to significantly improve the academic achievement of African-American and Hispanic students were of particular interest to me. Additionally, I intended that the findings and results of this study would augment the current literature and be beneficial to other principals and teachers of urban schools with similar demographics in other states, but particularly in the state of Ohio.

The constructivist and critical race theories allowed me to deeply analyze and reflect on the participants’ perspectives, perceptions, and experiences. I specifically
wanted to explore how the issues of diversity, race/ethnicity and culture, if any, played a role in the academic success of these schools. The critical race lens that was employed helped me determine whether students’ racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds were considered relevant in increasing the graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic students. I wanted to hear first-hand from the African-American and Hispanic students what was important to them and why they were academically successful. At two of the schools, diversity training was a new initiative, which included components of culturally relevant pedagogy as highlighted in recent research. The two schools and the district leadership valued diversity, equity and inclusion. These districts had comprehensive plans to close the achievement gap with specific strategies to meet the needs of all students. Most of the participants of these two schools seemed comfortable with the topics of race and culture. The faculty emphasized building a positive relationship with their students and their families and having a deep understanding of their personal, social, economic and racial/ethnic needs. One school did not have a specific plan to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and inclusion. However, the school leadership emphasized the importance of having high expectations for all students and not using race, poverty, and family background as excuses for poor performance.

In my observations of the schools and interviews with students, I looked for specific strategies that led to increased graduation rates for students. Instructional strategies that included relevant topics, acknowledged learning styles, and emphasized critical thinking components were important in keeping students engaged. Academic interventions that occurred before students failed were cited as significant by participants from all three schools. The close monitoring of implemented strategies was important to
determine their effectiveness. Prompt actions on the part of the principals and teachers were critical. These actions included the adjustment of strategies when they were not producing favorable results for students. Principals and teachers actively sought the students who lacked parental support to give them the assistance and resources they needed to succeed and graduate. Academic interventions were not limited to struggling students, but also included increasing academic rigor for gifted and advanced students. All three principals in this study reported that they felt fully supported by their school districts and had the resources they needed, including human capital, to enhance education for students.

The voices of all the participants, especially all students were compelling as they openly explained the importance of the acknowledgement of their race and culture by their teachers. Five of these students were African-American and one student was Hispanic. Students expressed their disappointment with teachers who showed favoritism toward other students based on ability or race. This research has allowed me to continue to refine my leadership skills and enhance my personal and professional growth especially in the provision of academic and non-academic supports for students in urban public schools.

**Significant Implications**

**Policies**

Research has shown that there is a growing trend nationwide of school districts adopting policies that acknowledge the growing diverse populations in urban public schools, such as racial equity policies. These racial policies are similar but go beyond discrimination laws. Hillsborough County Public School Board in Tampa, Florida
adopted such policies. This school board recognized the significant number of suspensions for minority students and the lower graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students. These policies were introduced to ensure equitable practices that would afford equitable opportunities for all students. (Stover, 2017). Many researchers and advocates for students contend that poverty can no longer be the only factor that is considered a root cause for the poor academic performance of African-American and Hispanic students. These advocates call for courageous leadership to ensure equity for all students (Blankenstein & Noguera, 2016). Other educational leaders contend that school districts begin to have courageous conversations about race and introduce a systemic structure to promote equity for all students (Singleton, 2015). Many of these policies address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The adoption of these policies is critical to ensure equitable educational services and outcomes for each student and to close or narrow the achievement gap. School districts that adopt these policies hope that they will affect beliefs and instructional practices that lead to the academic success of students who traditionally and historically belonged to marginalized groups.

**Non-Academic Support**

Non-academic support for students has also been a growing trend in many high-needs schools. Many schools are establishing formal school/community partnerships to address the issues of poverty, behavior, and the emotional/psychological needs of students. Some of these partnerships provide services such as: mentoring, internships, counseling, group therapy, and psychological services. At least two of the schools in this study, had non-academic services on their campuses. Thus in addition to the guidance counselors or school psychologists, social workers or family therapist from local agencies
provided services to the students and their families. Two of the African-American principals who participated in this study, emphasized the importance of having African-American mentors in the building to support the academic and non-academic needs of the students. A rigorous system of support for students (school based teams) consisting of principals, teachers and counselors who consistently and closely monitored academic progress were instrumental in providing timely intervention for students who were at risk of failing or were already failing. These school based teams investigated the root causes of the students’ challenges and brainstormed interventions to help support the students academically, emotionally, psychologically and economically.

**Teacher Preparation**

Principal and teacher preparation and training have been found to be critical in preparing educators to serve the academic and behavioral needs of students who attend urban schools. Most of the school faculty who were interviewed in this study thought that teacher and principal colleges and universities public and private alike, were not equipping future teachers with the necessary skills to teach diverse students. Furthermore, these participants believed that new teachers and principals did not receive adequate supports and mentoring from their supervisors and colleagues. This lack of support and challenging academic environments coupled with lower salaries result in teacher and principal shortages. The integration of culture sensitivity training, extensive teaching practicum in urban schools, the teaching of academic interventions and best practices specifically for students of color, were a few of the participants’ recommendations to enhance the current principal and teacher programs at colleges and universities.
Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on researching the approaches to closing the achievement gap for African-American and Hispanic students while Common Core Standards were being implemented in many states, including Ohio. Additional research will be needed regarding the perceptions of stakeholders, such as administrators, teachers, parents, and students, about the academic progress of African-American and Hispanic students since the implementation of the Common Core Standards.

Further studies are needed to determine why there is a growing teacher shortage and why African-Americans are not going into the education field. Additionally, the effective recruitment and retention practices of African-American and Hispanic administrators and teachers may be helpful to school districts that are struggling with attracting these educators.

An in-depth analysis of the teacher/principal preparation programs at both public and private colleges and universities may further help educators in the higher education field understand how these programs can be improved to meet the academic and behavioral needs of diverse students in public schools. The effectiveness of collaboration between urban school districts and area universities, in preparing teachers and principals in the education of African-American and Hispanic students, would be a valuable study.

Finally, the high school graduation rate for Asian students is remarkable nationwide, and in most instances significantly surpasses the graduation rate of both African-American and Hispanic students. A qualitative study exploring the reasons for the success of Asian-American students in public schools may add to the current
literature about the cultural beliefs, educational attitudes, and approaches of these students and their families.

Conclusions

This dissertation addressed the approaches to closing the achievement gap for urban public high schools and explored, through qualitative case study methodologies, how three urban public schools in Ohio made significant gains in improving the graduation rate of African-American and Hispanic students as reported by the Ohio Department of Education on the Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT). The constructivist theory and the Critical Race Theory (CRT) were the lenses used to explore education practices that led to the academic success of African-American and Hispanic students who attended the three high schools in this study. Findings of this research, data collected from 18 participants, included specific strategies and approaches that led to increased graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic students. The overall central themes for all three schools combined were: instructional strategies; academic interventions, and relationships. Poverty was not the only indicator of student poor performance. Two of the three schools in this study incorporated instructional strategies, academic interventions, and build positive relationships with the students according to their specific needs. Being sensitive to the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic needs of students, helped at least two of the schools narrow the achievement gap for African-American and Hispanic students. Several topics for future research that would be helpful to educators are: the results of the Common Core Standards and the achievement gap; the teacher/principal shortage in urban public schools, and the high graduation rate results of Asian-American
students. It is my hope that through the findings of this and other studies, educators will continue to enhance the education of all students.
References


National Council of Teachers of English. (2008). *English Language Learners.* Retrieved from:


Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding (2017). *School Funding Facts and Principles.* Columbus, OH: Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding. Retrieved from:


APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECT REVIEW APPROVAL
The Human Subjects Review Board has approved your research study. You may proceed with the study as you have outlined in your proposal. The approval is granted for one calendar year. Research participant interaction and/or data collection is to cease at this time, unless application for extension has been submitted and approval for continuance is obtained.

The primary role of the HSRB is to ensure the protection of human research participants. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you adhere to the ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence. We would also like to remind you of your responsibility to report any violation to participant protections immediately upon discovery. Likewise, we would like to remind you that any alteration to the research proposal as it was approved cannot move forward. Any amendment to the application must be submitted for approval before the project can resume.

We wish you success in your discoveries,

Carol S. Reece DNP, APRN, CPNP
Ashland University
Chair Human Subjects Review Board
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear School Administrator:

The Department of Education at Ashland University supports the practice of informed consent and protection for human subjects participating in research. This project is part of a requirement of a Qualitative Inquiry course. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you will give your consent to voluntarily participate in this study. Even if you give your consent, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time. The title of this doctoral study is, A Comparison of Approaches to Closing the Achievement Gap in Three Urban Public Schools in Ohio. We assure you that your name and the name of your institution will remain anonymous and will not be associated with the research findings.

The results of this study will be presented in written and/or oral dissertation reports at Ashland University and will be published. Data and results from this study will be filed in a locked office for at least 36 months at the investigator’s personal residence. After 36 months all data and results from this study will be destroyed by a professional shredding company in my presence. Any data collected on the internet, via video tape recording or voice recording will be password protected, stored on a flash drive, and stored in a locked cabinet. Electronic devices may be used upon mutual agreement and will only be used for the purposes of reviewing participants’ responses and activities for accuracy in reporting findings. Recordings of any kind and of any of the participants will not be publicized. Participants will be identified by a number, gender, and race and not by name. Thus, participants’ responses cannot be traced to individual persons. Parents of underage students must give written permission for their children to participate in this study. There are no financial benefits resulting from this study for the investigator, the schools, or the participants.

If you would like additional information about this study before, during or after its completion, please feel free to contact us at your earliest convenience. We appreciate your cooperation and participation. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely

Name of investigator:  
Doctoral Student: Minerva Spanner-Morrow  
Phone No.: 330-284-8024  
Email: mspanner@ashland.edu  
Address: 2985 Olympia Drive NW  
City, State, Zip: Canton, Ohio 44708

Name of Faculty Member:  
Dr. Harold E. Wilson, Advisor  
Phone No.: 419-289-5339  
Email: hwilson@ashland.edu  
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City, State, Zip: Ashland, Ohio 44805

Name of Contact Person for Ashland University Human Subject Review Board (HSRB):
Chairperson: Dr. Carol Reece  
Phone no.: 419-521-6877  
Email: creece1@ashland.edu  
Address: 401 College Avenue, 100 Founders Hall  
City, State, Zip: Ashland, Ohio 44805

I have read and understand the information about this study. I give my consent to participate in this study. I understand that this consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn without penalty at any time.

Name of School Administrator (Printed)  
Signature of School Administrator  
Date
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear Teacher:

The Department of Education at Ashland University supports the practice of informed consent and protection for human subjects participating in research. This project is part of a requirement of a Qualitative Inquiry course. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you will give your consent to voluntarily participate in this study. Even if you give your consent, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time. The title of this doctoral study is, A Comparison of Approaches to Closing the Achievement Gap in Three Urban Public Schools in Ohio. We assure you that your name and the name of your institution will remain anonymous and will not be associated with the research findings.

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I have read and understand the information about this study. I give my consent to participate in this study. I understand that this consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn without penalty at any time

___________________________________
Name of Teacher (Printed)

____________________________________
Signature of Teacher

____________________________________
Date
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear Student:

The Department of Education at Ashland University supports the practice of informed consent and protection for human subjects participating in research. This project is part of a requirement of a Qualitative Inquiry course. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you will give your consent to voluntarily participate in this study. Even if you give your consent, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time. The title of this doctoral study is, A Comparison of Approaches to Closing the Achievement Gap in Three Urban Public Schools in Ohio. We assure you that your name and the name of your institution will remain anonymous and will not be associated with the research findings.

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I have read and understand the information about his study. I give consent for my child to participate in this study. I understand that this consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn without penalty at any time.

________________________________________________________________________
Name of Minor Student (Printed)  Signature of Minor Student

________________________________________________________________________
Name of Parent/Guardian (Printed)  Signature of Parent/Guardian
Students 18 years of age or older do not require parent/guardian signature:

Name of Student (Printed)  Signature of Student

Date
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Dear Community Leader/Partner:

The Department of Education at Ashland University supports the practice of informed consent and protection for human subjects participating in research. This project is part of a requirement of a Qualitative Inquiry course. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you will give your consent to voluntarily participate in this study. Even if you give your consent, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time. The title of this doctoral study is, A Comparison of Approaches to Closing the Achievement Gap in Three Urban Public Schools in Ohio. We assure you that your name and the name of your institution will remain anonymous and will not be associated with the research findings.

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I have read and understand the information about this study. I give my consent to participate in this study. I understand that this consent is voluntary and can be withdrawn without penalty at any time.

Name of Community Leader/Partner (Printed)

Signature of Community Leader/Partner

Date
APPENDIX C

GUIDED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS
Guiding questions for the interviews of principals and teachers

1. How long have you been a principal/teacher at this school?

2. What is your highest level of education?

3. Were you the principal/teacher when the school was identified as the School of Promise? Please explain.

4. In your opinion, what strategies have been most effective in narrowing the achievement gap and why?

5. Were these approaches different for the students belonging to the schools’ subgroups as identified by the state, compared to the approaches for other students? Please explain.

6. In your opinion, what can be changed or improved to better serve minority students?

7. What supports exist for principals and teachers at this school?

8. What are your plans for closing the achievement gap with the introduction of the New Common Core standards?

9. Are there any other comments, suggestions or information that you think will be valuable in helping schools and other educators with the closing of the achievement gap?
Guiding questions for the interviews of parents/guardians:

1. How long has your child been enrolled at this school?

2. What is your highest level of education? What is your child’s grade level?

3. Are you aware that your child’s school has been identified by the state as a School of Promise and do you know what this means? Please explain.

4. Why did you choose this school for your child?

5. In your opinion, what school approaches have been the most effective in ensuring the academic success of your child and why?

6. What are your personal experiences as a parent with this school?

7. If you had to change one thing about the school what would it be?


9. Are there any other comments, suggestions or information that you think will be valuable in helping schools and other educators understand students and parents belonging to a minority group?
Guiding questions for the interview of students:

1. How long have you been a student at this school and what is your current grade level?

2. Are you on track to graduate? Please explain.

3. How would you describe your experiences as a student at this school?

4. How has your school help you personally and academically? Please explain.
   
   In your opinion, what school approaches have been most effective in helping you become a successful student and why?

5. What are the benefits of going to this school?

6. If you have to change one thing about the school what would it be?

7. What are your plans after high school?

8. Are there any other comments, suggestions or information that you think will be valuable in helping schools and other educators understand minority students?
Guiding questions for the interviews of community leaders:

1. How long have you been involved with this school?
2. What type of agency or businesses do you represent?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. What is your role at this school?
5. How would you describe your experiences with this school? In your opinion, what are the school approaches have been most effective in ensuring academic success for the students and why?
6. If you had to change one thing about the school what would it be?
8. Are there any other comments, suggestions or information that you think will be valuable in helping schools and other educators better understand the involvement of community leaders with the schools?