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A Program Evaluation of the Comprehensive School Reform Model Making Middle Grades Work

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

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MA, Spring Hill College, 2002

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

There is increasing concern in the United States about the academic challenges that middle grade students face. Middle schools are not meeting accountability standards, and as a result students are not being adequately prepared for high school. In response to these concerns, a state in the southeastern United States adopted a comprehensive school reform model known as Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) in 2006. The purpose of this program evaluation was to explore the effectiveness of the MMGW program and provide recommendations for improvement. Conceptually, this program evaluation drew upon the MMGW model. The research questions focused on exploring teachers and administrators' perceptions of and suggestions for improving the MMGW program. A collective case study design was used. Eight teachers and 4 administrators with experience in Grades 6-8 and training in MMGW were interviewed. School documents were also reviewed. The participants were purposefully invited from 4 middle schools (1 low performing and 3 high performing) in a district in the southeastern United States. Thematic analysis was used to code the data, and identified themes were summarized. Findings suggested that the current implementation of the MMGW model lacked consistency, uniformity, commitment, and opportunities for professional development. A formative report was created that provided recommendations for ongoing program evaluation and training for middle level educators in the district. Implementation of this project within the schools or the district will increase the lifespan of the MMGW reform model. Also, this implementation may improve academic achievement for middle school students and help to improve high school graduation rates.

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Dedication

This project study and all of my efforts are dedicated to my late father, Jimmie Lee Williams, Sr. and my lovely mother, Mary Williams. Even though neither of them had the opportunity to graduate from high school nor college, they understood the true value of hard work, dedication, and education. My parents were my first teachers, and because of that I honor them with this finished product. My father is not here to see my completed work, but I know he would be so proud of his baby girl.

Acknowledgments

I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). All glory goes to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; he gave me the knowledge and the strength to complete this great task. I will be forever grateful.

To my sister Patricia, affectionately known as “Meeka,” thank you so much for your continued support and encouragement. You always called or texted when I seemed to be at a low point. You would always ask, “How much longer you got, baby girl?” That simple question always gave me a little more hope. I will be forever grateful.

To my long-time friend, Dr. Joannee P. Barnes, affectionately known as “Joannee,” thank you so much for encouraging me to “stay the course.” During my journey I hit a roadblock; I was dismissed from the program at Walden University, so I decided to apply at a local school and just settle for an Ed.S. I’m so glad I called you and told you that I would no longer pursue my doctorate, and that I would just settle for my Ed.S. You told me, “No. Don’t do it.” You encouraged me to go back to Walden University and petition to get back in the doctoral program. You told me to finish what I started. I will be forever grateful.

To my chairperson, Dr. Tom Cavanagh, thank you so much for guiding me through the valley and leading me to the mountaintop. I knew that you were an angel sent by God. You had a plan, you believed in me, you pushed me, you encouraged me, and you lead me to the finish line. You are the epitome of a true leader and mentor. I will be forever grateful.

To my sweet mother, Mary Williams, thank you so much for coming to my rescue. Without you, my journey would have ended abruptly, but you were my "ram in the bush." Thank you so much for the financial resources that allowed me to get to the finish line. You are the epitome of a true mother. Thank you for helping your baby girl. I will be forever grateful.

To all of my many brothers, sisters, nieces, nephew, family and friends, I encourage you to "stay the course." If you are passionate about something, don't stop until you have reached your goal. Work hard, have faith, and see it through. The reward is far greater than the struggle.

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Section 1: The Problem

When students reach middle school, this represents a critical time for learning beyond the elementary stage. Many middle schools in the United States are facing challenges that include low achievement, poor attendance, increased discipline problems, insufficient learning environments, and decreased parental involvement (Hough, 2009). At this learning stage, student disengagement and social alienation attributes to low achievement and discipline problems (RAND Education, 2004). In contrast to elementary schools, researchers believe middle schools are not doing enough to involve parents, so parental involvement tends to decrease (RAND Education, 2004). Even though middle schools face many challenges, some organizations suggest standards that may help to promote whole school success.

For example, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) posited that "for middle schools to be successful, their students must be successful; for students to be successful, the school's organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents" (Musoleno & White, 2010, p. 2). Middle school settings are unique environments filled with adolescents who must be guided by purposeful goals that are developmentally appropriate. Additionally, the NMSA characterized successful middle schools as places where educators value working with young adolescents, active learning between students and teachers occurs, and collaborative leadership is present (Greene et al., 2008). Successful middle schools tend to have a great balance between dedicated educators who understand middle school practices and are capable of delivering developmentally appropriate instructional practices to their students (Musoleno & White, 2010).

Nevertheless, most of the nation's middle schools are equipped with irrelevant and mundane curriculum, educators who are unfamiliar with adolescent development, and programs that lack co-curricular activities (Maine Department of Education, 2009). Even though research is available concerning the characteristics of successful middle schools, there remains a gap in practice. Ultimately, middle schools should take a more active role and apply research to practice.

In an effort to address challenges in middle schools and promote academic progress among students, some U.S. school systems have sought out comprehensive school models that will promote positive and consistent academic change in the middle grades (Green & Cypress, 2009). Comprehensive school reform programs are developed from various theories and philosophies (Zhang, Fashola, Shkolnik, & Boyle, 2006); and schools are at liberty to choose a program or change an existing program (Sperandio, 2010). For example, federal funds are typically allocated to schools in an effort to help implement and sustain various comprehensive programs that are available: Different Ways of Knowing, Turning Points Transforming Middle Schools, Middle Start, The Talent Development Middle School Model, Success for All, and AIM at Middle Grades Results (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). Ultimately, schools have the autonomy to select a comprehensive reform program that will be the greatest benefit to the overall school.

In the local school district, a reform program has been adopted and implemented, but some of the middle schools continue to be affected by unwanted issues: low academic performance and low enrollment. Even with the adoption and implementation of a reform program, there seems to be a gap in practice because most of the local middle schools are

categorized as failing schools. Even when schools adopt a comprehensive school reform model, educators have no guarantees that student achievement will improve at their schools because most models are implemented in a piecemeal fashion; therefore, positive results may not occur (Juvonen et al., 2004). In addition, a reform model may not be successful at a school that faces challenges with program implementation (Zhang et al., 2006) or if the school does not synchronize its environment with the primary vision of the reform model (Sperandio, 2010). For middle grade initiatives to meet the developmental and academic needs of adolescents, it is important to know what approaches work and to have adequate evidence to demonstrate they work (Anfara, 2009). Even though educators have stressed the adoption of effective and well-researched programs (Slavin, 2008), there is a lack of well-evaluated programs showcasing their effectiveness in the middle grades (Chamberlain, Daniels, Madden, & Slavin, 2007). This project study will provide an evaluation of a middle grades program in a school district in Alabama.

Local Problem

Educators have implemented strategies to improve school functioning in middle schools across the United States, but they have done so in an inconsistent manner, with full integration of specific strategies usually varying from school to school (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009). Even though schools share a primary goal of educating students, each environment and culture may be strikingly different; therefore, this may cause implementation processes to vary. Huss and Eastep (2011) observed that most of data concerning program implementation for middle school programs is primarily anecdotal evidence which is sometimes limited to one or three incidents that may not qualify as scientific evidence. According to Cook, Faulkner, and Kinne (2009),

researchers have relied heavily on quantitative data from surveys when studying program implementation; therefore, researchers have not gotten in-depth information and perspective because of their use of survey data.

When programs are initially adopted and implemented, there is typically a guiding support system in place to ensure positive results and easy transitions. Researchers are concerned that the positive results shown by school reform programs may not be sustainable once the supports are no longer available (Juvonen et al., 2004; Taylor, 2006). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) suggested that many reform models are potentially effective, but it is unclear as to how many are actually implemented successfully (2010). Research data on the implementation of program strategies could add to the knowledge concerning reform models, and this data would be a valuable resource to school districts that are searching for models.

When students enter high school, everyone is not on the same level academically and economically; this may cause unwanted results to occur for those students and the school. Nevertheless, many school districts in the United States want to ensure that all students exit high school successfully, but the dropout rate among low socio-economic students and minority ethnic groups remains high (Orthner et al., 2010). Consequently, policy makers have turned their attention to high school reform but have not created a unified national reform policy for middle grades (NMSA, 2006). Without mandated uniformity in middle grades, school districts have to be proactive and search for programs that will promote academic success in their local middle grades. Middle school reform efforts call for local school districts to work collaboratively with middle schools by establishing a partnership and ensuring that reform initiatives are successfully

implemented before moving on to others (The Education Alliance, 2008). Some states--Florida, New Jersey, and Washington--created a middle grades task force that provided researched-based recommendations for improving their local middle schools (The Education Alliance, 2008). Ultimately, these states established an additional resource that local middle schools could rely on for current research and appropriate practices.

In hopes of adequately preparing middle school students for high school, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) established the Making Middle Grades Work *(*MMGW*)* initiative in 1997 (The Education Alliance, 2008). The program includes a comprehensive improvement framework with a diverse set of features, goals, elements, and conditions that cater to the academic and social needs of adolescents; these components are essential in the process of making changes to a school's climate, teaching practices, and staff ideology (Juvonen et al., 2004). The MMGW model was adopted in 2006 by my focus school district in Alabama (SREB, 2012b). Initially, only two middle schools in the district implemented MMGW key practices (SREB, 2012b). By 2009-2010, all of the middle grades in the district had joined MMGW (SREB, 2011a). According to the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), the initiative was designed to ensure all middle grade students received a high-quality education that would ensure their success at the high school level (ALSDE, 2012). When I conducted this study, the local school district had not completed an evaluation of the MMGW model at the participating schools.

An academic specialist for the district (personal communication, February 4, 2013) suggested that the district would benefit from a program evaluation of the MMGW model. The specialist suggested that funds be used to promote the MMGW model

program implementation: staff training, materials, and professional development. However, the district had not dedicated resources for the completion of a comprehensive program evaluation of the model's implementation and outcomes. The academic specialist suggested that middle grades principals and teachers in the district might benefit from sharing their understanding and perception of the MMGW model. The specialist also suggested that data from principals and teachers whose schools are implementing the model completely might be of great value to local middle level educators. The academic specialist also referred to the funding and staffing issues faced by low-performing middle schools in the district. She suggested that the continuity and consistency of the model is compromised in low-performing schools that experience a large teacher and administrator turnover. She believed that teacher and administrator turnover caused a lack of motivation to continue with program strategies, especially if newer teacher and administrators were not familiar with the program. The specialist also suggested that funding was another problem at some of the local middle schools; as a result, this problem might jeopardize full implementation of MMGW program.

Politics play a central role in funding public education. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery Reinvestment Act, which was designed to improve the U.S. economy by creating jobs and investing in education. The Act provided $4.5 billion in funding to school districts across the country in order to develop Race to the Top grant programs. States that initiated innovative education reforms which increased student achievement were awarded funds from the Race to The Top program (Alabama Education News, 2010). In other words, school districts and state departments

across the country had the opportunity to receive funds for developing plans to deepen student learning, teacher effectiveness, and prepare students for college and careers.

School districts completed and submitted applications for review in hopes of receiving between $10 million and $40 million in funds. The funds were awarded over a four-year period. For example, in 2012, only 16 school districts across the country were awarded funds. A school district located in Bowling Green, Kentucky received nearly $40 million for a project *titled Kids Focused, Responsible, Imaginative, Engaged, and Determined to Learn* (U. S. Department of Education, 2012c; U. S. Department of Education, 2015). In 2013, only six school districts across the country were awarded funds; a school district in Houston, Texas, received nearly $30 million for a project titled *Houston Independent School District Race to the Top* (U. S. Department of Education, 2015).

The school district which I studied also completed the Race to the Top application in 2012 but did not receive any funds. In commenting on the application's "Prior Record of Success and Conditions for Reform" section, the reviewer stated, "Applicant provides a list of successful programs, systemic initiatives, and data-driven strategies being implemented in the district" but "no evidence of effectiveness or success of implementation of these is presented" (U. S. Department of Education, 2012b, p. 7). This statement from the reviewer clearly shows the importance of collecting evidence to explore the effectiveness of reform programs.

Because the program was not previously evaluated, there was a lack of understanding about the benefits of the MMGW model at district schools, and additional research on the program was needed. The MMGW model is the primary comprehensive

school reform initiative for middle grades in the school district that I studied. It is important to evaluate comprehensive school reform models to ensure the models continue to achieve the goals they were designed to achieve (Green & Cypress, 2009). By monitoring reform models that are being implemented in the school district, local leaders will have the opportunity to accumulate essential information that may assist in decision-making. Therefore, I believed that completing a program evaluation of the MMGW model was timely and necessary for the local school district. This program evaluation can also assist the school district in securing future Race to the Top funding.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

The district that I studied is among the United States' 100 largest public elementary and secondary school districts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). When I conducted my study in 2014, this Southeastern U.S. school system served about 58,226 students in grades Pre-K through 12, and 73% of the student population qualified for free or reduced lunch (ALSDE, 2015). Consequently, all of the district's schools were categorized as Title I with the exception of one school. Title I schools have a large population of students with a low socio-economic status (Baker & Johnston, 2010). Annually, the district operated on a budget of approximately $670 million (Advance Education, 2015), spending approximately $8,884 per pupil in its 90 schools, and employing 7,600 people (ALSDE, 2009b).

Schools that implemented the MMGW model are encouraged to focus on classroom practices and school strategies that have proven most effective in advancing student achievement (SREB, 2010). The successful middle schools in the district that I

studied used SREB's research-based framework and saw results. For instance, Omega Middle School (pseudonym) "has made significant progress in building a framework for continued success for all students" (SREB, 2012a, p. 2) since the time Alabama joined the MMGW initiative in January 2006. In 2011, Omega Middle School was named an MMGW Pacesetter School and was spotlighted on the district's website (SREB, 2012b). MMGW Pacesetter Schools are recommended as models to other schools to demonstrate the MMGW design in action and the effectiveness of the model. According to the accountability reports, the status for Omega Middle School during the 2005-2006 school year was School Improvement Year 1 (ALSDE, 2005). During the 2005-2006 academic year, Omega Middle school failed to meet adequate progress in reading and math. Every year since 2011, this middle school maintained federally mandated requirements by achieving annual yearly progress (AYP) status.

School districts need guidance when searching for effective initiatives that will prepare middle school students for high school standards. In an effort to help states, districts, and schools across the MMGW network prepare middle grade students for challenging high school curriculum, SREB researched practices and achievement at 20 middle schools. Half of the schools researched made considerable progress in reading, math, and science achievement from 2006-2008 since the implementation of the MMGW program; the other half failed to make significant gains (SREB, 2012c). Based on study findings, SREB developed ten best practices to help states and schools prepare students for college and career goals. These college and career goals are aligned with the college and career standards Alabama adopted in 2012 (ALSDE, 2012b).

Initially, two middle schools piloted the MMGW model in the district that I studied; by 2009-2010, all schools in the district had joined the MMGW network (SREB, 2011b). For the 2014-2015 academic year, both middle schools that piloted the program were categorized as Year 1 and Year 1-Delay for their school improvement status. Schools previously identified for school improvement actions that made AYP the following year were cleared of school improvement status; however, those schools were categorized with a delayed status. According to accountability reports from 2010, 2011, and 2012 (ALSDE, 2010a, 2011a, & 2012a), more than half of the middle schools in the district of study have been unsuccessful in meeting established goals in reading and math. Low academic achievement was a growing concern with the middle schools in the local school district in this county in Alabama. Ten of the 20 middle schools in the district were in School Improvement for the 2011-2012 academic school year, and eight were in School Improvement for the 2012-2013 school year (ALSDE, 2011a).

Securing AYP status is a school-wide effort, which includes the performance of students in subgroups that may have learning deficiencies. These deficiencies in performance can make the AYP goals unattainable for the subgroups; consequently, this may have negative effects on a school's performance. For example, in 2011, special education students in nine of the middle schools were not proficient in reading, and special education students in four of the middle schools were not proficient in math (ALSDE, 2011a). In Spring 2012, 55% of the middle schools in the district did not make AYP (ALSDE, 2012a). The local school district also used a new accountability test, the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test + (ARMT+), in Spring 2012. The ARMT + was a combination of two previous assessments, the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test

and the Alabama Science Assessment (ALSDE, 2012a). I believe that this change may have affected the scores of the subgroups, especially special education students.

According to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was amended by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, students enrolled in Title I schools that received any type of academic infraction were given the opportunity to transfer to schools that are in good academic standing (Payne-Tsourpros, 2010; Shirvani, 2009; U. S. Department of Education, 2009). Based on the *School Choice Data* report for 2011-2012, approximately 10 middle schools in the local school district gave students the option to transfer to five high performing schools. However, students from only five low performing middle schools opted to transfer to one of the choice schools (School Choice Data, 2011-2012). Only 488 (6.9%) students out of 7,053 total middle school students in the district used public school choice for the 2011-2012 school year (School Choice Data, 2011-2012).

For the 2012-2013 school year, 12 middle schools in the local school district were considered low-performing based on accountability reports and had to give their students the option of transferring to high-performing schools. Students from the 12 middle schools only had two choice schools available for selection. For the 2013-2014 school year, four middle schools in the local district were categorized as failing under the accountability mandate of Alabama Accountability Act (AAA) of 2013. The combined enrollment for the four middle schools was approximately 1,160 students; only 140 of those students sought transfers.

Since the 1980's, a reform option called choice schools has been available to parents who want to send their children to safer schools or high performing schools

(Zhang & Cowen, 2009). In conjunction with NCLB mandates and the choice schools reform, school districts are obligated to not only provide parents with alternative schools for their children, but failing schools should offer supplemental services for students that remain enrolled. Therefore, choice schools and failing schools sometimes provide differing academic environments for students (Zhang & Cowan, 2009). A study conducted in South Carolina showed significant differences among schools categorized as failing and choice and their affiliated school districts (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). The failing schools had a large population of minority students and residential areas, a higher poverty rate, a higher teacher turnover rate, and communities with lower socioeconomic statuses than choice schools (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). In comparison with Zhang and Cowen's research findings, two of the schools in my study had a substantial minority population and low enrollment. Table 1 shows how enrollment decreased for more than half of the low performing middle schools in the local school district during a 3-year period.

Table 1

Changes in Enrollment at District Middle Schools Over a 3-Year Period

Middle School	School Improvement Status	Enrollment 2009-2010	Enrollment 2010-2011	Enrollment 2011-2012	Enrollment % Change 2009-2012
A	Year 2	860	817	776	↓10%
B	Year 2	442	427	330	↓25.3%
C	Year 2	998	1,009	998	↓1%
D	Year 2	471	434	434	↓8%
E	Year 2	592	606	570	↓3.6%

F	Year 1	525	497	536	↑2.7
G	Year 2	1,076	998	969	↓10%
H	Year 1	611	565	572	↓6.4%

(ALSDE, 2009, 2010b, & 2011b)

This table gives an illustration of how a student population can easily shift when children begin to under-perform academically. When student enrollment decreases by even the smallest percent, teacher and administrator units are sometimes cut at low-performing schools because as enrollment decreases, funding decreases. Fluctuations in student population can inhibit program implementation, cause changes in faculty requirements, and present challenges for parents and students. The local school district is also concerned with low-performing middle schools that have a very similar, almost identical student population as the high-performing middle schools in the district. Six of the eight middle schools designated as being in school improvement status have a predominantly African American student population (see Table 2). It is necessary for change to occur at these low-performing, predominantly African American, middle grade schools in the school district that use the MMGW model. This factor is important in providing mediation for the achievement gap among African American students and their peers. The results of this project study revealed discrepancies with the implementation of the MMGW model; consequently, these discrepancies have affected middle grade reform in the school district. Table 2 shows enrollment numbers by race and ethnicity of the eight middle schools that were in school improvement status during the 2010-2011 school year.

Table 2

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity in Middle Schools That Were in School Improvement Status

	Student Enrollment				
Middle School	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic	Indian
A	666	33	46	29	0
B	326	0	4	0	0
C	518	16	441	16	2
D	424	4	6	0	0
E	535	3	22	9	0
F	90	0	343	2	99
G	273	25	626	29	9
H	547	1	23	0	0

(ALSDE, 2011b)

During the 2011-2012 school year, three of the middle grades schools in the district of study received professional development and on-site coaching through contracted services from the MMGW initiative (SREB, 2012b). The schools had not conducted an evaluation of the model prior to this study. The rationale for this study was to determine the benefits of the MMGW model at the participating schools by conducting a program evaluation.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The middle grades are filled with adolescent learners who are being prepared and assessed for their high school career. The 2005 statistics from the Education Development Center (EDC), a nonprofit organization that evaluates programs, revealed adolescents or students in fifth through eighth grades represented 57% of the high-stakes test-takers in the nation (NASSP, 2006). They comprise more annual test takers than elementary and high school students combined. Nevertheless, according to the NASSP (2006), adolescents leave middle school underprepared for high school each year. During

the past two decades many reports have emphasized the importance of the middle grades, but research on the connection between best practices, policies, and improved academic achievement is limited (Williams et al., 2010). Research shows that districts rely on comprehensive school reform to implement appropriate curricular (LeFloch, Taylor, & Thomsen, 2006) and educational strategies that will address all aspects of a school's operation to improve performance in an orchestrated fashion (RAND Education, 2006). Future research is needed to provide middle level educators with evidence connecting practice to academic improvement.

There are many school reform models and various levels of program implementation. During the past 15 years, multiple approaches to whole-school reform models have been developed nationwide in an effort to improve entire schools (McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2007). There are many reform models, but a challenge still remains: "we have very little direct observational data to document how schools change from being less to more effective in educating their students" (McDougall et al., 2007, p. 52). Studies on student achievement as it relates to effective reform programs have been inconsistent in their findings mainly because the implementation, design and evaluation of comprehensive school reform programs vary from school to school (Zhang, Shkolnik, & Fashola, 2005). Implementation can depend on teacher training, administration support, local school district support, and funding. Proper implementation and sustainability are critical aspects for the success of school programs. Sustaining comprehensive school reform over a sufficient time frame to achieve desired results can be an overwhelming task for some schools (Taylor, 2006). At the same time, it is difficult to continue models that are not being properly implemented (Friend &

Thompson, 2010). Although there are numerous school reform plans available, the effectiveness of the program implementation is dependent upon several factors inside and outside the school.

The purpose of this program evaluation was to examine the benefits and effectiveness of the MMGW model and to gather the understanding that teachers and administrators have about the model. The data collected from the low-performing and high-performing middle schools will be used to identify ways to increase students' academic performance in the middle grades.

Definitions

Comprehensive School Reform (CSR): A school-wide or whole-school reform which expanded rapidly after the implementation of the *NCLB* Act (Gross, Booker, & Goldhaber, 2009). CSR has 11 components: proven methods, comprehensive design, professional development, measurable goals, support for staff, support from staff, parent and community involvement, external assistance, coordination of resources, and scientifically based research (U. S. Department of Education, 2008).

Developmentally responsive: The appropriate manner in which a school should respond to the needs of its students through specific organizational methods, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessments (NMSA, 2010).

Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW): A reform developed in 1997 by the SREB in an effort to address low-performing, middle-level schools. This initiative is formerly known as Making Middle Grades Matter (The Education Alliance, 2008).

Middle school: A school arranged to provide instruction for Grades 6-8. This became the most prominent grade span for middle schools in the 1970s. Nearly 10,000 public schools have the grade configuration of 6-8 (Barton & Klump, 2012).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): A law which was enacted by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives on January 8, 2002. It was designed to ensure that all states provide a high-quality education to all children through accountability, flexibility, and choice (NCLB, 2002).

School Improvement Year 1: A school or district that fails to make annual yearly progress (AYP) for two consecutive years in any of the following areas: reading, mathematics, graduation rate, attendance rate, or participation rate (ALSDE, 2011a).

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB): A nonprofit organization that was created in 1948. This organization focuses on improving public education from the pre-K to postdoctoral level. The programs and services developed by this organization are based on policy and research (SREB, 2012c).

Significance

My project study consisted of a program evaluation of the middle school reform model, MMGW, at one low-performing and three high-performing local middle schools. There are numerous reform programs in place for middle grades, but the research on the benefits of program sustainability and program implementation is limited. Low-performing schools are poorly funded, have little say in curriculum choices, and have a high teacher turnover. This study will potentially drive positive social change in the educational arena and provide opportunities for improving education for historically low-performing subgroups:

1. The findings provide information for stakeholders seeking an understanding of middle grades reform.
2. The study provides a qualitative evaluation of a nationally accredited comprehensive school reform program.
3. This research provides a voice regarding middle grades reform for middle grades educators in a large school system in Alabama.
4. This study is significant for those striving to develop essential middle grades programs or those accountable for implementing comprehensive school reform programs effectively.

The proper design, sustainability, and implementation of the MMGW program are imperative to ensure the success of middle grades students. This study showed discrepancies in how the program was implemented in the district. Identifying problems in the program implementation may help school officials devise ways to gain additional benefits from the MMGW model.

Research Questions

Since the initial implementation of the MMGW model, the benefits of the program had not been evaluated in a qualitative context. In 2012, one of the local middle schools participated in a Sixth-Grade Student Survey Report conducted by the SREB. Quantitative data retrieved in survey form was representative of most research on program evaluations. This study used a qualitative research approach to acquire a descriptive understanding of the implementation of the MMGW model. This qualitative case study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do teachers' and administrators perceive the MMGW model as implemented by their school districts?

RQ2. In what ways do teachers and administrators perceive their schools are meeting MMGW, and what changes do they suggest should be made to better meet the MMGW goals?

RQ3. What do teachers and administrators identify as being the most effective aspects of the MMGW model, and what suggestions do they have for improving the model?

Review of the Literature

This literature review consists of several sections: conceptual framework, rationale, adolescent characteristics, NCLB, achievement gap, middle grades performance, and middle school philosophy. The main objective in this section is to provide evidence to support the overall idea of this project study. The topics covered in the literature review are significant in understanding the complexity of academic achievement as it relates to student performance in the middle grades.

The compilation of literature review is based on publications and articles retrieved from the Walden University Library's electronic databases, the Alabama State Department of Education, the United States Department of Education, and the Southern Regional Education Board website. The following EBSCOhost databases served as the primary search tools: Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, Education Resources Information Center, Primary Search, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, and Research Starters-Education. The peer-reviewed journals *Middle School Journal*, *Middle Grades Research Journal*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, and *Research in*

Middle Level Education Online were repeatedly accessed and also cited. A large portion of the journal articles are considered current as they were published after 2007. The key search terms included *middle grades*, *middle schools*, *middle school philosophy*, *low-performing*, *high-performing*, *adolescents*, *adolescence*, *achievement*, *performance*, *achievement gap*, *NCLB*, *programs*, *engagement, and comprehensive school reform.*

Conceptual Framework

For its conceptual framework, this program evaluation drew upon the MMGW model. The MMGW model was developed by the SREB in 1997 in an effort to provide a whole-school, researched-base reform for middle schools. The MMGW model has a comprehensive school improvement framework that includes 10 elements and five conditions to assist schools in changing climate, practices, and staffing (Alabama Education News, 2010; Juvonen et al., 2004). According to the MMGW model, the 10 best practices in the middle grades include the following: (a) clear school mission with strong faculty support, (b) strong, collaborative district support for schools, (c) accelerated curriculum that supports high school readiness, (d) cooperative learning opportunities that engage students, (d) cross- curricular strategy to incorporate reading and writing, (e) opportunity to support all students with extra help, (f) extra support and identification of struggling sixth graders, (g) parental involvement for all students, (h) professional development aligned with school's mission, and (i) strong leadership team that works collaboratively (SREB, 2012c).

There are also five conditions associated with the MMGW model. The five conditions of the model are based on the MMGW belief that teachers and all education leaders must work collaboratively when adopting and implementing a comprehensive

school improvement design to support middle grades schools (SREB, 2010). The five conditions to guide the implementation of the MMGW framework are: (a) commitment to full implementation, (b) arrangement for consistent improvement, (c) support curriculum with state, national, and international standards, (d) leadership and financial support for professional development, and (e) teacher preparation through learning experiences (SREB, 2010). Essentially, this comprehensive reform model is guided by the 10 best practices and the five conditions that are used to assist middle schools in establishing and achieving annual goals.

Rationale for MMGW Framework

The SREB is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that was created in 1948 by governors and legislators in an effort to improve public education from pre-K to postdoctoral study (SREB, 2012a). This nonprofit organization received annual appropriations from 16 member states including Alabama, but the operating budget of more than $47 million came from federal sources and foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation (SREB, 2012b). A diverse set of programs, technology resources, and cooperatives have been initiated by the SREB.

Accountability systems are in place throughout the nation's schools with the purpose of improving upon teaching practices and learning outcomes. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), all MMGW schools are expected to be consistent in students' reading, math, and science progress until the comprehensive improvement framework has been fully implemented (ALSDE, 2007). Every 2 years a Middle Grades Assessment is administered in an effort to select schools for evaluation of their progress toward the comprehensive improvement framework (Juvonen et al., 2004).

This assessment consists of surveys for the principal and teachers, achievement tests, and data concerning the school's demographics and establishment (Juvonen et al., 2004). The principal survey covers school climate, processes, and policies. The teacher survey gathers information on the school improvement process; data obtained is designed to assist with planning professional development workshops for teacher and student needs (SREB, 2001). The data from the middle grades assessment, principal survey, and teacher survey are used to assess the implementation of the MMGW model at participating schools. Eighth-grade students are given the middle grades assessment in the form of a survey and reading, math, and science assessments based on items produced by the NAEP (Alabama Education News, 2010; SREB, 2001; ALSDE, 2007). The survey approach is used to collect quantitative data from eighth-graders at the MMGW schools. This quantitative approach does not involve personal experiences or interactions with the principals, teachers, nor students.

States and school districts that adopt the MMGW framework are expected to comply with guidelines that promote proactive participation. By joining the MMGW network, each state agrees to create a network of middle grade schools, support schools through technical assistance visits, identify professional development experiences, and identify outstanding practices in schools statewide (SREB, 2001). Districts are also expected to develop a 3 to 5-year improvement plan and administer the biennial Middle Grades Assessment (SREB, 2001). The MMGW model also encourages school board leaders to hire highly qualified teachers that are degreed in the subjects they teach (Juvonen, et al., 2004). School districts in the MMGW network have multiple research-

based guidelines set forth by the SREB that are intended to enhance student and school success at the middle level.

Schools in the MMGW network are encouraged to implement the comprehensive model as it relates to their individual school. Middle schools do not have identical needs, nor do they have the same strengths. An education specialist with the Alabama Department of Education emphasized that MMGW is a "framework, not a prescription. Schools have the flexibility to begin embedding the 10 key practices according to the school's needs. MMGW is not a 'one size fits all' philosophy because every school is unique" (Alabama Education News, 2010, p. 4). The SREB acknowledges that there is no quick fix for raising student achievement; however, sustained effort and support are encouraged for implementing the comprehensive improvement model (SREB, 2001). During the 2011-2012 school year, more than 450 MMGW schools in 23 states were provided professional development, technical assistance, coaching, and surveys; however, direct services through special contracts were provided to more than 100 schools in 15 states, including 19 schools in Alabama (SREB, 2012d). In 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, the local school district spent approximately $584,873 on the MMGW model. During the 2006-2007 academic year, ALSDE also provided approximately $331,000 to help implement the SREB/MMGW program (ALSDE, 2007). MMGW is a comprehensive school improvement program that was being used throughout the local school district; its components were applied to guide the program evaluation.

Adolescent Characteristics

The adolescent years can be challenging for adolescents, parents, teachers, and administrators. When attempting to educate adolescents, it is imperative for educators

and school districts to understand their developmental stage. This stage of life between 10 to 15 years old is typically called early adolescence or simply adolescence (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; NMSA, 2010). During this developmental stage, adolescents enter middle school while simultaneously experiencing several developmental changes: transitional, biological, cognitive, social, and emotional (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008; Pridham & Deed, 2012). Most adolescents experience what has been called a turning point (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Langenkamp, 2009) when they leave elementary school, enroll in middle school, and reach the developmental stage of puberty (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009). The challenges adolescents face can have a lasting effect on their education career: negative or positive.

Adolescents experience a number of physical and social changes that occur internally and externally. Physically, adolescents endure a release of hormones that signals the development of sexual characteristics along with increased growth spurts, appetite, restlessness, and adrenaline (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). This physical growth also involves increased height and weight gain. From a social perspective, Juvonen (2007) suggested that adolescents begin to exhibit a sense of belonging; the initiates the need for stability and connectivity with peers and adults. Adolescents experience an increase in knowledge, skill, and competence (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008), which increases their desire for autonomy (Li, Lynch, Kalvin, Liu, & Lerner, 2011). Although middle school students have limited control over what happens during their school day (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008), some researchers have connected adolescences' sense of autonomy with increased motivation (Daniels & Steres, 2011). Understanding the

developmental characteristics of adolescents is an essential part of educating them in the middle grades and establishing programs that are developmentally appropriate for this age group.

Adolescents deal with a diverse set of emotional and psychological transformations, but they also show an increase in intellectual development. From an emotional perspective, Maday (2008) explained that middle level learners typically doubt their academic ability more often than elementary and high school students; they are reluctant to engage in tasks perceived beyond their capabilities. Young adolescents put forth more effort in school if they anticipate success but will refuse to try if they suspect failure (Daniels & Steres, 2011). Caskey and Anfara (2007) concluded that from a psychological perspective, adolescents experience a range of behaviors that include being moody, erratic, highly sensitive, and self-conscious. These developmental characteristics make "adolescent learning" a complex process and distinctive from the elementary and high school stages (Howell, Thomas, & Ardasheva, 2011). From an intellectual perspective, Caskey and Anafara (2007) suggested that middle grade learners become extremely curious, develop interests, build on prior knowledge, and prefer active learning versus passive learning. The intellectual development of adolescents also marks the age of questioning adult authority, observing adult behavior, and arguing a position. With multiple changes occurring at once, adolescence is sometimes identified as a precarious stage (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually, adolescents display a range of emotions and behaviors that must be considered by middle level educators in an effort to effectively reach these learners.

School reform models are plenteous, but schools are encouraged to adopt models that are specific to the developmental stage of their adolescent learners. Styron and Nyman (2008) suggested this age group is more successful with education programs that promote active participation and multisensory approaches in learning instead of programs being saturated with information. Walsh (2006) declared it is difficult to engage adolescents in learning when they lose interest and respond to situations with "I don't care" and "you can't make me" (p. 6). Students who are not involved in learning become bored, angry, passive, and give up easily (Fredrick et al., 2011). Alexander and Williams (1965), reviewed several studies conducted in eighth-grade classrooms across the country; they discovered that middle school learning environments were not stimulating and the programs lacked diversity. Almost half a century later, middle school students reported the highest rate of boredom in social studies, mathematics, and science classes, largely because of passive activities like lectures (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Li et al. (2011) suggest the past few decades have been marked by declines in adolescent motivation and increased boredom and alienation. The U.S. Department of Education revealed that frustration with school is more prominent during adolescent years, yet schools are overlooking contextual issues like socio-emotional needs since academic achievement is the primary focus (Elmore & Huebner, 2010). Elmore and Heubner (2010) conducted a year-long, two-fold longitudinal study that consisted of 587 children from five middle schools in a southeastern U. S. city. Students in the study showed declines in satisfaction with school across each grade level with eighth-graders showing the lowest level of satisfaction. When adolescents are actively involved in the learning environment their motivation to learn increases.

Organizations comprised of individuals who understand the importance and uniqueness of adolescent development and learning, spend time educating school districts, stakeholders, and educators. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National Middle School Association (NMSA), and other professional organizations have articulated position statements, recommendations, and practices about educational models designed to address the unique stages and essential developmental requirements of adolescents (Andrews, Caskey, & Anfara, 2007; Caskey & Anfara, 2007). The NASSP *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* report is a call to action for middle grade principals to break away from current practices that are ineffective and perhaps create high-performing middle grades schools for adolescents (Andrews et al., 2007; NASSP, 2010). NMSA's position statement, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, is a compilation of essential elements for effective middle schools (Haselhuhn, Al-Mabuk, Gabriele, Groen, & Galloway, 2007). NMSA understands that middle level education is a vital connection in the preK-16 scope and proposes that educational programs for young adolescents reflect research and best practices for 10 to 15 year olds (NMSA, 2010). According to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), middle schools should include educational programs that are developmentally appropriate for young adolescents; the programs should respond to their needs, challenge their intelligence, empower their awareness, and promote equality (Barton & Klump, 2012). The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform suggested that all middle level schools be academically challenging, increasingly responsive, and socially unbiased (Hackmann et al., 2002; NASSP, 2010). Organizations like Carnegie Council on Adolescent

Development, The National Forum, and the NMSA have concentrated on middle level instruction and their standards to develop rigorous academic programs for middle level students (Cook et al., 2009). Many professional organizations have researched the best educational practices for adolescents in the middle grades, but these practices are not being effectively implemented and properly evaluated in a large amount of middle schools (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). District leaders, educators, and other stakeholders must begin implementing appropriate research-based practices if middle schools are expected to make gains academically.

No Child Left Behind

The NCLB Act was signed into law by President George Bush on January 8, 2002. This was done in an effort to level the educational platform between minority students and their cohorts. The intent was to ensure that students of every race, ethnicity, and disability were proficient in two core areas: math and reading. The goal was to have all students competent in reading and math by 2014 on state accountability tests (Forte, 2010; Jackson & Lunenburg, 2010; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Payne-Tsoupros, 2010). Hewitt (2011) revealed that an increased number of schools were failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) when new annual measurable objectives (AMO's) were implemented, thus some states sought waivers from NCLB's accountability provisions. The state of Alabama was among those states that requested a 1-year waiver of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) to use the same annual measurable objectives (AMO's) for 2010-2011 school year to make AYP determinations (U. S. Department of Education, 2012a). With the NCLB mandates no longer necessary, the State Superintendent of Education signed the AAA on March 14, 2013. Under this

new law, any public K-12 school that did not exclusively serve a special population of students that was listed in the bottom 6% on standardized assessments from 2008-2013 was categorized as a failing school. This process continues each year; schools' standardized assessments in reading and math will be reviewed from the most recent six years in order to determine if schools are making consistent progress, or to determine if they are persistently failing. Five of the local middle schools were placed on the list for January 2014, and these schools remained on the list for January 2015.

Various states have implemented Common Core State Standards in English and reading with an integration of college and career goals throughout the curriculum. This adoption has been done to improve the nation's graduation rate and to prepare students for postsecondary options. To improve accountability measures, Alabama is among the 45 states that recently adopted national common core standards in English and mathematics (Jennings, 2012). With the adoption of the common core curriculum, it is imperative for the local school district to use effective resources to "examine practices that will raise and sustain student achievement within one to three years" because it is necessary for all students in every subgroup at every school to show consistent academic progress (Institution of Education Sciences, 2008, p. 4). Implementing common core standards and college and career goals is essential to the middle school curriculum if high school graduation is projected for improvement. Even though NCLB mandates have been waived, school districts remain accountable for their students' academic performance.

Achievement Gap

An achievement gap indicates the academic disparity between minority students and their peers. This achievement gap has also been detected between middle level

learners in high-poverty areas and their peers in more affluent areas. In the United States, it is estimated that 20 million students attend middle schools annually (NMSA, 2006) and face challenges of increased behavior problems, social alienation, academic failure, and school disengagement (RAND Education, 2004). Many studies have investigated factors affecting academic performance at the middle level (Casilla et al., 2012; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007) conducted a longitudinal study following 13,000 middle grade students from sixth grade to high school in a high-poverty urban Philadelphia school district from 1996 to 2004 (Balfanz et al., 2007). The study was an extension of a *Talent Development Middle Grades* study. The findings revealed that middle grade students fall off the graduation path as early as sixth grade. Researchers and theorists suggest many students' academic motivation and performance shows a decline during the sensitive developmental period in middle school (Dotterer et al., 2009; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; McGill, Hughes, Alicea, & Way, 2012). This decline is especially prevalent in high-poverty middle schools with predominantly minority student populations (Balfanz et al., 2007; Slavin, Daniels, Madden, 2005). This social injustice places middle level learners at a disadvantage academically and reduces their chances of entering high school and graduating.

Even with education reforms in the past attempting to increase academic improvement for all students, the achievement gap remains an issue among African American students, Latino students, and their White peers. Balfanz and Byrnes (2006) revealed on a national and international comparison, minority and high-poverty students between fourth and eighth grades in the United States fall rapidly behind their White peers in achievement. An achievement gap continues to exist among minority students

(Jackson, 2009) even with efforts to level the playing field for all students under NCLB (Rowley & Wright, 2011; Templeton, 2011) and the expectation emerging from Brown v. Board of Education (1954*)* that students would receive equal education opportunities regardless of their ethnic groups (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012; Rowley & Wright, 2011). Madyum (2011) suggested achievement gaps between ethnic groups have remained about the same since the 1950's partly because researchers fail to identify essential factors when studying populations of color and other issues they face. For instance, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, Latino adolescents in California public schools lagged behind White adolescents in 1973 with a gap of 33 points in mathematics and continued to show a gap in 2008 with a 21 point achievement gap (Madrid, 2011). Many years of educational reform have not been successful at eliminating the achievement gap among students.

If the scope is narrowed to eighth grade students in Alabama, there still remains a noticeable achievement gap. According to the Nation's Report Card, eighth grade students in Alabama averaged 258 in reading, which was lower than the nation's average of 264 for public school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b). Based on the same report, there was a performance gap among Black students, Hispanic students, and White students. In Alabama, Black students averaged 25 points below White students in reading and Hispanic students averaged 21 points below White students in reading. According to the Nation's Report Card for Mathematics, eighth-grade students in Alabama scored an average of 269, which was lower than the nation's average of 283 for public school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a). In Alabama, Black students averaged 30 points below White students in mathematics and

Hispanic students averaged 25 points below White students in mathematics. The connection between state testing pressures and student improvement was considered through a series of correlation analyses of 25 states, including Alabama, by using the fourth- and eighth-grade NAEP data during the period of 2000-2009 in reading and math (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). The state-level NAEP information was used to disaggregate all students by socioeconomic status and ethnicity. The study concluded that Black and Hispanic students consistently scored below their White peers, in addition, richer students outperformed poorer students.

School districts continue to search for the best scientific-based comprehensive reform programs in an effort to improve student academic achievement. The concern is that current studies on the effects of reform programs have not always resulted in positive findings, nor have they contradicted the positive findings. In general, these programs have been specifically developed, designed, and implemented in an effort to equip high-poverty middle grades schools with adequate tools to improve student achievement (MacIver et al., 2007). In 1994, MacIver et al. (2007) worked collaboratively with middle school educators, researchers, academic coaches, education specialists, and curriculum writers to develop and refine the Johns Hopkins University's *Talent Development Middle Grades (TDMG) Program*. The Mid-South Middle Start comprehensive school reform program was established in an effort to promote the advancement of adolescents, academic excellence, and equality in high-poverty schools in the Mid-South Delta region (Rose, 2006). This initiative was based on the guidelines of a program commonly referred to as Middle Start.

Success for All is a comprehensive reform model that can be replicated at many of the middle schools serving at risk adolescents. This popular comprehensive school reform model has been implemented in schools across the nation since the early 1990's (Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & De Martini, 2006). The main priority for this design is to serve pre-K through eighth-grade students who are considered at-risk and disadvantaged (Gross, Booker, & Goldhaber, 2009). This model was also designed to assist middle level educators with implementing important elements of *Turning Points* by offering well engineered student materials, manuals, and extensive professional development (Slavin et al., 2005). This model primarily focuses on increasing literacy skills, cooperative learning groups, and adult interaction. The Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago collected and compared state reading data from seven *Success for All* schools and seven comparison middle schools from 2001 to 2004. The students at the seven *Success for All* schools made considerably more gains on the state reading assessment than did the comparison schools.

CareerStart is a fairly new school-based program that is being tested in middle schools in North Carolina. The primary focus of the program is to counter school disengagement among adolescents and promote a strong connection to school. It was designed to help at-risk middle school students by incorporating career relevance into the core curriculum (Orthner et al., 2010). The *CareerStart* program was developed after a long-term study was conducted in North Carolina by collecting data on 44,297 high-poverty children from 1991 to 2004. Orthner et al. (2010) found students in poverty had a difficult time transitioning to middle school, standardized reading and math scores declined between fifth and sixth grades, and academic performance and engagement

predicted the potential for dropping out of high school. The *CareerStart* program decreases those negative side effects by helping middle learners connect academics to career opportunities.

School districts are heeding the plea to incorporate college and career goals throughout the secondary curriculum. Recently, American College Testing argued that career development and college readiness programs are critical to the middle grades (American College Testing, 2008; Schaefer, Rivera, & Ophals, 2010). American College Testing (2008) considered college and career readiness to be especially significant for eighth grade achievement in an effort to make a positive impact on high school curriculum opportunities (Schaefer et al., 2010). The U.S. Department of Education is pushing for the integration of college and career readiness programs in middle grade curriculum, especially in low-performing schools (Curry, Belser, & Binns, 2013). Schaefer and Rivera (2012) suggested with the recent emphasis on the Common Core State Standards, college and career readiness programs are gaining momentum in the middle grades. When a comprehensive program is selected by a school district, it is important to allow models a sustained period of 3 to 5 years for implementation in order to evaluate expected outcomes. Sometimes schools discontinue use of a comprehensive model before substantial effects are noticeable.

Middle Grades Performance

Even though middle school students underperform elementary students, researchers continue to evaluate and document some successful, high-performing middle schools. Low-performing and high-performing middle schools have drastically different performance indicators as observed by researchers: school curriculum, student behavior,

teacher instruction, administrator involvement, and overall school climate. Holas and Huston (2012) concluded that low performance in middle school is influenced by interest in school, lower instructional quality, school size, school transition, teacher relationship, developmental needs, and grade configurations. According to Wilcox and Angelis (2012), high-performing schools demonstrated four vital attributes: (a) a supportive culture that promotes high achievement, (b) a respectful climate that incorporated the school and district vision, (c) a coherent program that reinforced collaborative instruction, and (d) a culture that encouraged teacher leadership and initiatives. Educators in this investigation indicated that a trustworthy relationship proved to be the fundamental basis for their school's achievement.

One major aspect of high-performing schools is continuous student achievement that can be measured by accountability systems. This aspect is threefold because it takes skilled teachers and knowledgeable administrators to ensure students achieve. Styron and Nyman (2008) examined student performance in schools categorized as high-performing middle schools and low-performing middle schools. Their findings indicated that administrators at high-performing middle schools provided continuous professional learning opportunities for teachers in hopes of increasing their expertise and proficiency in teaching adolescents (Styron & Nyman, 2008). These middle schools had high expectations for students, improved individual attention, and effective teacher involvement; this also included strategic daily instruction and parent participation (Styron & Nyman, 2008). Many of these indicators are included throughout the framework of the MMGW program as well.

Similar studies comparing the overall characteristics of low-performing and high-performing middle schools were carried out in California. A large-scale study of middle grade practices and outcomes was conducted to examine schools with similar student populations but a disparity in student performance (Williams et al., 2010). This study included 303 middle grade schools, 303 principals, 3,752 teachers, and 152 district superintendents. In the state of California, nearly 1.5 million students are in sixth through eighth grades, one in five middle grade students are English learners (ELs), and more than 40% of middle grade students live in poverty. In the near future, the majority of public school students in California will be Latinos (Madrid, 2011), and nationally, the population of Caucasian and African American students in public schools is expected to decrease (Kober, Usher, Rentner, & Jennings, 2012). Although it is usually accepted that student background is directly related to student outcome, this study revealed that student background was not a significant factor; however, school and district practices had a major impact on students' outcome (Williams et al., 2010). The primary outcome of this study showed students can perform to high standards when the school and school district have practices that have a positive educational influence on students.

Middle School Philosophy

Many researchers, authors, and professors are devoted to addressing issues involving adolescents in the education system. Musoleno and White (2010) posited since the implementation of state tests associated with NCLB, developmentally appropriate practices in middle schools have been changed to provide additional time for test preparation. The challenge to improve test results is an essential element of the learning process; many middle grade teachers are left with limited assistance and inspiration to

continue within the structure of the middle school philosophy (Musoleno & White, 2010). The philosophy for middle schools was designed to encourage educators to edify the whole child intellectually, emotionally, socially, morally, and physically (Musoleno & White, 2010). The middle school educational philosophy in the early 1960's focused on adolescent growth and development; it had many unique characteristics: (a) assisting students with decision-making in learning opportunities, (b) offering a balanced program of personal development, skills, and knowledge, (c) providing various curricular options with individualized instruction, (d) providing interdisciplinary teams for teacher collaboration, and (e) offering exploratory activities (Gatewood, 1973). Some of the comprehensive school reform models have successfully incorporated the middle school philosophy into their programs, but the principles and best practices have not been fully implemented.

The search for model middle schools has been a concern for practitioners and stakeholders for years. The undergraduate middle level programs for teachers at universities in California, Missouri, North Carolina, and Texas have designed their programs around developing ideal middle schools (Allen, Ruebel, Greene, McDaniel, & Spencer, 2009). Alexander (regarded as the "Father of the American Middle School") and Williams characterized a model middle school as being created to effectively serve the essential developmental need of all adolescents (Alexander & Williams, 1965). Alexander and Williams (1965) suggested a model middle school should provide a rich exploratory experience, individualized instruction, and emphasize skills of continued learning. Over time, the middle school concept has not been implemented successfully (Huss & Eastep, 2011; Lounsbury, 2000) and schools that attempt to implement the

concept find it difficult because of other established school procedures (Lounsbury, 2009). In hopes of improving scores on mandated assessments, middle schools primarily focus on recalling facts, drills, increased direct instruction, less independence, and decreased electives (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003). Teaching beliefs and practices like worksheets, drills, more discipline, restricted student decision-making, and structural characteristics of the middle school environment threaten student engagement (Raphael, Pressley, & Mohan, 2008). Lounsbury (2009) posited, "The middle school concept is a philosophy of education" that recommends principles and practices to focus on the "nature and needs of young adolescents in the learning environment" (p. 32). The aforementioned researchers, Lounsbury, Alexander, and Williams, were significant education leaders involved with the middle school movement in the early 1960's and helped to develop the main principles for the middle school concept (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Many researchers have suggested the characteristics of an ideal middle school for adolescent learners; however, adverse practices remain prevalent in middle grade settings.

Even though the middle school concept and best practices have been discussed since the 1960's and have been developed into comprehensive school reform programs, the obstacle of properly educating middle learners continues to be a concern. *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, generated by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1989, revealed the inadequacies of middle schools and the educational experiences for adolescents that lacked quality (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Approximately 11 years later, *Turning Points 2000* revealed middle schools in America had not shown much improvement

(Cook et al., 2009; Jackson, 2009). In an effort to emphasize concerns over the lack of improvement in the middle grades and to show the urgent requirement for successful middle schools, "The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform launched the national Schools to Watch (STW) program to recognize middle schools that are on a trajectory toward academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity" (Cook et al., 2009, p. 2). The National Forum developed performance criteria in an effort to showcase high-performing, middle level schools that are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and structurally effective (Jackson & Lunenburg, 2010). The adoption of a program by a large number of schools in different localities that are interlinked by common practice is believed to help successful program choice and implementation (Sperandio, 2010). Schools that are cognizant of the characteristics of high-performing middle schools will be more prone to adopt programs and implement practices that will enhance those characteristics. Adopting the appropriate program is the first step, but the proper implementation of the practices is a key component.

The full adoption, effective implementation, continuous maintenance, and proper sustainability of a program are essential contributing factors to any program. Four national surveys providing longitudinal information on the level of implementation of central middle grade programs and practices were performed in 1968, 1988, 1993, and 2001 by researchers Alexander, McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (McEwin & Greene, 2010). In 2009, McEwin and Greene carried out a fifth study in this series to investigate high-achieving middle schools (McEwin & Greene, 2010). In an effort to identify trends, the information from the four previous surveys was compared with the data from the 186

middle schools in the fifth study. The study revealed the middle school theory and viewpoint were well-founded; consequently, the researchers suggested middle level educators and stakeholders strive to implement and maintain developmentally responsive programs and practices; this can pose a challenge for middle schools that qualify for federal funds, as only about 20% of the funds are allocated for middle level programs (NMSA, 2006). The majority of Title I funds are allocated to elementary schools and high schools across the country (American College Testing, 2008; NMSA, 2006). Consequently, a lack of funds can effect program development and program implementation.

Anfara and Mertens (2012) suggested that middle grade practitioners and advocates have become very familiar with the middle school philosophy or concept based on a wealth of empirical, historical, and theoretical information on school reforms and initiatives that are suitable for educating young adolescents. In respect to effectively educating young adolescents, Anfara and Mertens (2012) posited practitioners know what to do and why they need to do it, but they do not know how to accomplish the goals (Anfara & Mertens, 2012). Having knowledge of the middle school philosophy and understanding its value are not sufficient strategies in the quest to educate middle level learners; the philosophy has to be applied to programs that work.

Implications

This program evaluation was necessary to help bring positive social change to the local district and spotlight the perceptions that teachers and administrators have about the middle grade initiative. This program evaluation may serve as a catalyst to help bridge the gap between the low-performing and high-performing middle schools in an effort to

increase the successful implementation of the MMGW model to improve middle schools in the local gulf coast school district. The goal was to supply the school district, educators, and stakeholders with information to decide if the MMGW model is effectively meeting the needs of the middle grades. The information will be presented to the school district in the form of an evaluation report that discusses the findings from the study. This program evaluation may also lead the school district on a path to examining the effectiveness of other programs that have been adopted and funded in the district. The final program evaluation report is located in Appendix A.

Summary

School districts have the opportunity to select from many comprehensive school reform models in an effort to combat low achievement in the middle grades. Some of these models have not been evaluated for effectiveness since their initial implementation; therefore, a program evaluation is necessary to determine the effectiveness of implementation and sustainability. The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the MMGW model as implemented in one low-performing and three high-performing middle schools in the local school district. This study focused on a program evaluation, teachers' perceptions, and administrators' perceptions as they relate to student outcomes. The program evaluation of the MMGW model provided a mechanism for the district to identify and examine effective resources for promoting the best student outcome. This program evaluation could potentially prepare the middle grades in the local school district for the new accountability measures. Section 2 describes the methodology of the study, the steps used to conduct the study, and the essential components of qualitative design.

Section 2: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative program evaluation was to examine teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the MMGW model and recommendations for improving it. This section will provide a description of the design and procedures that I followed in conducting my investigation. This section will also address participant selection, ethical protection measures, and procedures for data collection and analysis. I will also present my findings.

Research Design and Approach

Before research can take place, researchers must decide which approach will capture the essence of their study. Research is a multi-layered operation that involves collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data. To accomplish the task of reliable research, researchers may select between two common approaches: quantitative or qualitative (Williams, 2007). Quantitative research typically involves randomly selected participants, numbers as evidence, surveys as statistical data, and experimentation to create meaning (Williams, 2007). Quantitative research is also categorized as an objective approach that attempts to answer relational questions (Williams, 2007). This approach seeks to find the relationship between two or more variables.

I chose a qualitative research approach because I had to rely on human perception and understanding as the basis for collecting and analyzing data (Stake, 2010). This qualitative case study initiated a program evaluation that encompassed gathering detailed perceptions of middle level teachers and administrators who implemented a comprehension reform program. Creswell (2007) recommends using a qualitative research design when a researcher wishes to explore a problem or issue or gain detailed

understanding of an issue or a setting. Qualitative research is also used when the measures of quantitative research do not fit the problem (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the selection of a qualitative research design allowed me to conduct a better examination of the teachers' and administrators' perceptions and understandings of the MMGW model.

A second justification for choosing a qualitative approach is because it is more useful when very little is known about a particular issue (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). For example, the MMGW model has a component that implements teacher, student, and principal surveys and assessments (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003). These items are used to determine the impact that the MMGW framework has on academic achievement. Even though surveys and assessments are presented on a large scale in quantitative studies, these instruments usually identify and investigate a limited scope that does not involve discovery based on human engagement (Williams, 2007). By using a qualitative research design, I was able to explore various factors that involved situations influenced by human behavior (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). A qualitative approach gave me the best avenue to gain knowledge of the human experiences and perceptions concerning the MMGW model.

The third rationale for selecting a qualitative approach was based on three special characteristics described by Stake: interpretive, situational, and personalistic (2010). Qualitative studies search for answers on how things work and why things work; consequently, the researcher's perception of the world can influence the interpretation of data (Chorba, 2011). My project study was interpretive as it was necessary for teachers, administrators, and me to interact during the study to gather findings. The study was situational as the low-performing and high-performing schools were viewed collectively

and also considered as unique entities. The study was personalistic as it sought to elicit the individual perceptions of teachers and administrators. By using the qualitative approach, I had the opportunity to interact with participants and gain knowledge about the topic.

Case studies are used to explore the experiences of real people in real settings; this study took shape as a case study that explored the experiences of principals and teachers that work in middle school settings (Hatch, 2002). The case being studied involved individual principals and teachers shared their understandings and experiences about the MMGW program. The phenomenon in this qualitative study was the MMGW model at four local middle schools. Several schools were selected for the study rather than just one, as each school played an instrumental role in providing first-hand knowledge about the effects of the MMGW model. For this reason, a collective case study (Stake, 1995), or multiple case study (Stake, 2006) design, was used. In a collective case study design, several single case narratives share several common characteristics presented collectively with some comparisons, but each single case narrative portrayed uniquely with its own features and context (Shekedi, 2005). By using the collective case study method, data from each case could stand alone and be compared for further analysis.

When seeking to understand the operations of a program, it is beneficial to study persons at several locations. This program evaluation was used to examine the benefits of a single program that was implemented at several middle schools. Through this study, I attempted to obtain a thorough understanding of the primary conditions for the participants involved with the MMGW model. By gaining knowledge through the

experiences and perspective of the participants, I was able to capture the essence of my study.

Program Evaluation

Even though programs are usually prevalent in school settings, they are also seen in multiple areas of our lives. A program is a group of specific activities that can occur anytime and anywhere and consists of a defined purpose, quantifiable goals, and objectives (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006). Owen (2007) described a program as having two essential components: a documented plan and a plan of action. Owen (2007) suggested that programs be planned and presented at three main levels, which can be a determining factor for the evaluation approach. These levels are mega level, macro level, and micro level. Mega level is sometimes described as the corporate level. This level involves government department offices and private companies, and planning deals with economic and social impact. Macro level involves divisions, regions, or groups within organizations are responsible for planning programs at this level. Micro level involves work units and individuals that are responsible for planning programs at this level.

Each level has a target audience with different needs, interests, and characteristics; therefore, the evaluation design should reflect those aspects (Owen, 2007). The program evaluation functioned on the macro-level because the findings from the study will potentially influence the division of middle level educators at the local school district. A macro-level program evaluation would go beyond the MMGW model that involved all of the middle level schools in the local school district.

Sometimes programs can be described as supplemental resources used to make conditions better or sustainable. Government agencies and not-for-profit agencies provide

programs, or *social interventions*, to communities in areas such as welfare, health, and education (Owen, 2007). Educational programs are classified as a type of social intervention. An educational program can take place in various locations, cover an array of disciplines, and provide for any population size. Because educational programs are broad in nature, location, discipline, and population must be considered when selecting the approach and design of an evaluation (Lodico et al., 2006). Owen (2007) posited that educational programs are usually provided through formal learning settings by institutions such as schools and colleges with an emphasis on information, skills, and attitudes. Overall, educational programs are used to potentially improve all learning environments.

Research studies are purpose-driven, implicit forms of investigations that researches use design in an effort to gather information. It is essential in all research studies to clarify the purpose and signify the primary audience; this can be done by selecting one of five purposes: "(a) basic research to contribute to fundamental knowledge and theory, (b) applied research to illuminate a societal concern, (c) summative evaluation to determine program effectiveness, (d) formative evaluation to improve a program, and (e) action research to solve a specific problem" (Patton, 1990, p. 150). The purpose of this study is clearly identified as a program evaluation based on a case study design to help with improvement, which is also termed *formative evaluation* (Patton, 2015).

Program evaluations are used to conclude the level of success or failure of educational programs that have been designed to improve instruction and student outcomes (Lodico et al., 2006). Consequently, the formative evaluation aspect of this

project study supported the goal by allowing decisions to be made about improving the ongoing implementation of the program based on the data collected. A formative evaluation is used continuously during the life of a program; this type of evaluation is used as a gauge so stakeholders can recognize when improvements are needed. The audience for this type of evaluation is usually professional peers and local decision-makers.

Findings in program evaluations are used for ongoing or short-term decision-making purposes to determine if changes or improvement of a program is necessary (Lodico et al., 2006). The overall intent of a program evaluation is significantly different from applied research. Applied research expands knowledge about a certain topic and ultimately informs practice. A program evaluation has the potential to elicit rapid change by identifying recommendations to the appropriate audience that change should occur (Lodico et al., 2006). Thus, my evaluation of the MMGW model will enable the schools to benefit with ideas for improving middle school education.

The study used a responsive evaluation approach. This concept was originally developed in 1975 by Robert Stake; he wanted to broaden the level of program evaluations to include stakeholders' issues (Abma, 2006). When using the responsive approach, evaluators strive to respond to the critical needs of various audiences or stakeholders. The ultimate goal of the evaluator, when using summative evaluation, is to determine what a program looks like to different people (Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2005). The stakeholders have their interest at stake in a study and are encouraged to share their opinions and experiences in a responsive evaluation. Abma (2006) suggested that this is not a means of empowering the participants, but it is the opportunity to understand what

has been learned in practice. Abma also explained that various stakeholders can use the same reform program and still develop conflicting views and meaning that can gradually emerge in conversation.

Abma (2006) further explained that responsive evaluation is not designed exclusively to assess the program's effectiveness but to also gain meaning and quality of practice. Dialogue through in-depth, conversational interviews and stories about the program reveal meaning and ambiguity of everyday experiences with the program. This was a critical part of responsive evaluation because it allowed participants to illuminate what really matters. Stake (2011) suggested that responsive evaluation is a natural way of absorbing and understanding information. Personal experiences can be a resourceful method for creating understanding. Stake (2011) posited that a responsive approach may prepare stakeholders to act on issues or protect the program. A responsive approach is useful in a formative evaluation to provide insight on a program, its potential, and shortcomings.

A responsive approach was used in this study instead of an experimental method that would overlook the process and program implications. This process was designed to make sure a varied group of participants have the opportunity to voice their perceptions (Abma, 2005). Part of the evaluation process was being aware of how power is divided and making sure those who were less powerful have the opportunity to express their viewpoints (Abma, 2005). The goal of the study was to enhance the understanding of the MMGW program based on the perspective of insiders and was not aimed at predictions and control (Abma, 2006). The thick descriptions revealed factual information and

meanings of experiences, but the transferability of the results to other situations will be decided by the reader (Abma, 2005).

The responsive evaluation approach and design was used to capture teachers' and administrators' personal experience with the MMGW program. This formal approach provided an opportunity to search and document the program's quality and perceived worth by drawing attention to the program's activities and unique attributes. By using the responsive evaluation approach, the MMGW program was thoroughly described, examined, and analyzed (Stake & Abma, 2005). This approach was justified with the use of teacher and administrator interviews and document analyses. The overall goals of the responsive evaluation were guided by the MMGW Ten Key Practices (Appendix F). These key practices were essential to the comprehensive framework of the MMGW program that was used by the middle schools in the local district. Table 3 indicates a brief list of the MMGW goals by which middle schools are measured. This program evaluation was measured by the same goals.

Table 3

Program Evaluation Goals taken from MMGW Model

Item	Program Evaluation Goals
1	Have a **clear mission**, with strong faculty support, to ensure that more students leave the eighth grade.
2	Have strong, collaborative **district support** for the school's mission.
3	Enroll more students in an **accelerated curriculum** that is benchmarked with ninth-grade college-preparatory standards and emphasizes teachers working together.
4	**Engage student in learning**--intellectually, emotionally, socially and behaviorally.

5	Focus on improving students' **reading and writing** skills by giving reading and writing assignments that engage students.
6	Strive to achieve **success for every student** by maintaining high expectations for all students and supporting them through re-teaching, tutoring, and extra time.
7	**Identify at-risk students** as early as grade six and provide them with additional instruction and support.
8	Ensure students receive high-quality **guidance and advisement** by providing students with a personal connection with an adult in the building.
9	Provide extensive **professional development** to staff, aligned with the school's mission and improvement plan.
10	Have a strong **principal and school leadership team** that work collaboratively with the school community to keep them focused on the school's mission.

Note: Taken from *Improved middle grades schools for improved high school readiness: Ten best practices in the middle grades* (SREB, 2012c, p. 5)

Participants

There were 20 middle schools in the district of study, and based on the accountability status report for 2012-2013, eight were in school improvement status; four were in *delay* school improvement status; and eight were clear. Based on the AAA of 2013, one low-performing and three high-performing middle schools located in the local school district participated. In the study, two of the high-performing schools were selected based on the *Title I Schools That Made AYP for Two Consecutive Years* report for the 2012-2013 school year (ALSDE, 2012), and they were also listed in good standing according to the AAA. The third high-performing school was selected because it was also listed in good standing according to the AAA. Based on the AAA, the low-performing middle school selected for this study has been placed on the failing school list for 2013, 2014, and 2015. These schools helped convey the best understanding of the research

problem and questions (Creswell, 2003). All of the selected middle schools were categorized as public middle schools. The data obtained from the State Department of Education indicated the current student enrollment of each school according to race and ethnicity in the local school district from 2014-2015.

Table 4

Selected Schools and Current Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

Population Profile	Omega Middle School	Kappa Middle School	Alpha Middle School	Delta Middle School
African American	39	516	395	288
Asian	84	0	0	0
Caucasian	369	0	0	1,169
Other	50	33	22	69
Total Enrollment	542	549	417	1,526

(ALSDE, 2014)

All of the middle schools on the chart are listed under a pseudonym and serve students sixth through eighth grades; all of the schools are classified as regular middle schools. The targeted sample for this study was eight middle school teachers and four middle school administrators. These teachers and administrators were situated in the same school system that implemented the MMGW model. The primary purpose for selecting teachers and school administrators for this study was to gather their perspective on the MMGW model. These selected participants had firsthand knowledge about the program, and the majority of information was learned from them (Merriam, 2002). These participants were interviewed and had knowledge and some experience about the program of study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). For purposeful selection, I established a

predetermined set of criteria for participants to be included in the study (Patton, 2015). The selection criteria for including participants are listed below:

- The teacher must currently teach in grades six, seven, or eight.
- The teacher must have at least 4 years of experience in the middle grades.
- The teacher must be currently employed in the local school district.
- The teacher must have had some professional development training on the MMGW model.
- The administrator must be currently employed in the local school district.
- The administrator must have had at least 4 years of experience in the middle grades.

It was important for participants to meet the established qualifications because they were expected to have insight on the issue being studied.

To gain access to the participants, I contacted the research department at the local school district. The executive director of the research department advised me to complete an application to conduct research in the school district and to attach a letter of approval from the university. Walden IRB would only issue a conditional letter of approval to conduct the study. Full approval from the university was contingent upon the school district's approval. I was contacted by the executive director of the research department via email, and I was granted permission to conduct research in the local school district. After permission was granted by Walden University, I contacted administrators at three high-performing and one low-performing middle school in an effort to obtain their voluntary participation in the study. I met briefly with the administrators who agreed to participate in the study. I explained the study details and discussed consent and confidentiality. I provided each administrator a consent form that briefly described the

nature of the study and listed the criteria for participation. Invitations to participate in individual interviews were given to teachers who taught core subjects at each of the schools. The approval letter to conduct research from the local school district was presented to administrators and potential teacher participants. Some of the interview invitations were signed in person and others were sent back via email. After reviewing the returned interview invitations, two teachers from each school were selected to participate in the individual interviews. The final selection was made based on the teachers satisfying the following criteria: employed by the local school district, taught 4 or more years in Grades 6-8, had some MMGW training, and were currently teaching Grades 6-8. The eight selected teachers were contacted to discuss and sign consent forms and confidentiality agreements. All of the participants were advised to make contact if any questions or concerns arose.

Ethical Issues

Merriam (2002) suggested a good qualitative study is performed with clear ethical values in place. Proper consideration of research ethics that safeguard participants' rights is very important when deciding to conduct any type of study (Lodico et al., 2006). The researcher is obligated to obtain informed consent from participants in an effort to protect them from harm and ensure confidentiality. Creswell (2007) suggested the researcher mask participants' names in data. As shown in Table 4, the middle schools selected were assigned pseudonyms in an effort to mask their names. The final report on the program evaluation masks participants' names and any information that could be used for identification purposes (Patton, 2015). Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggested a contract promising confidentiality: "No one will ever see individual data, and

all reports will consist only of aggregated information in which individual identities are undetectable" (p. 276). The participating teachers and administrators were informed about the overall purpose of the study and the nature of the study to eliminate deception (Creswell, 2007). Participation in the program evaluation was voluntary; therefore, if the selected schools, teachers, and administrators did not agree to be in the study, this would have caused changes to the selection.

The proposal for this research study was reviewed and examined by members of the Walden University IRB to ensure all ethical issues were addressed and participants were provided with adequate details of potential actions (Lodico et al., 2006). The IRB gauged potential risk factors such as physical or emotional harm to participants in the study (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative studies involve interaction between the researcher and participants; therefore, minimal interferences were imperative to ensure an uneventful process (Creswell, 2003).

Role of the Researcher

I was designated as an external evaluator, as opposed to internal, because I was not familiar with the research settings outside the context of the study. I was not employed by the same school district in which the middle schools operated during the program evaluation, and I have never been on staff at any of the schools. I functioned as the primary instrument of data collection (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

It was my responsibility to work well with the participants because they were the ultimate gatekeepers (Hatch, 2002). Establishing and continuing a productive relationship with participants helped to substantiate the data collection process. The participants were able to contact me at any time during the program evaluation.

Data Collection

For this study, I was the main instrument for collecting and analyzing qualitative data (Merriam, 2002). When data collection does not involve observations, researchers obtain details about the study by "interviewing people who did see it or by finding documents recording it" (Stake, 2006, p. 29). Consequently, the chief foundation of data collection for this study was individual interviews with teachers, individual interviews with principals, and written or electronic documents. The final product of the inquiry was richly descriptive because of the use of these three methods as the primary source of data collection (Merriam, 2002).

Interviews

One-on-one interviews occur in many qualitative studies as an attempt to "determine the participant's feelings, interpretations, or reaction" to events, circumstances, or experiences (Lodico et al., 2006, p. 121). For this project study, I used the semi-structured interview process. Semi-structured interviews contain a mixture of structured and not-so-structured questions designed to gain specific information from participants (Merriam, 2002). Semi-structured interviews have a predetermined list of questions that are flexibly worded and follow-up questions are also asked to probe more deeply into the interviewees' perspective (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). The principal and two teachers from each of the four participating schools were interviewed individually. The eight teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the study, and the four administrators were interviewed toward the conclusion of the study. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted for approximately 35 minutes at a private location that was convenient for the participants. The list of questions to be covered was often referred

to as an interview guide. The interview guide was significant in the individual interviews; it provided me with a framework for discussion that allowed flexibility and open-ended responses (Merriam, 2002). By using the semi-structured interview method, all informants were presented with the same questions; therefore, the task of comparing answers about the MMGW model was more effective (Training and Education Center for Health, 2008).

Interview questions for teachers (Appendix B) and interview questions for administrators (Appendix C) were developed from the MMGW Ten Key Practices framework (SREB, 2012c). By using the MMGW Ten Key Practices framework (Appendix D) to develop interview protocols, it was less tempting to impose my own preconceptions and understanding of the research problem (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). When developing the main questions, it was important to ask broad questions that were easy to answer, avoid questions that required yes or no answers, and avoid using academic jargon (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The main questions were used to get the conversation moving on the overall subject; probes were used to gain more depth by encouraging the conversation; and follow-ups were used to get the participants to expand or clarify a response (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Hatch (2002) stressed the importance of developing guiding questions that will encourage interviewees to elaborate and share their perspective and experiences. The main questions, probes, and follow-up questions created a flow (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Hatch, 2002) that appeared more like a conversation than an interview with basic questions and answers (Lodico et al., 2006). Stake (2010) suggested the researcher should not rely heavily on the interviewees' feelings but should probe enough to find out how

things happen and how things work. Moreover, the interview process should not feel like an interrogation; the interview should be enjoyable and feel like an everyday conversation (Patton, 2002). As shown in Table 5, the interview process was limited to four weeks.

Table 5

Interview Schedule

Weeks	Interviews
Week 1	3 interviews collected and transcribed from teachers at high performing schools
Week 2	3 interviews collected and transcribed from teachers at low performing schools
Week 3	2 interviews collected and transcribed from teachers at low performing and high performing schools
Week 4	4 interviews collected and transcribed from administrators from low performing and high performing schools

Document Analysis

Document analysis is usually combined with other methods as a means of triangulation in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009). Documents can be printed or electronic and can range from brochures, letters, maps, agendas, photo album, or newspaper clippings. Lodico et al. (2006) noted educational settings are overflowing with paper and computer files. For this study, the following documents were evaluated to provide a confluence of evidence necessary to support credibility (Bowen, 2009): (a) schools' websites, (b) bulletin, (c) newsletter(s), (d) flyer, (e) calendar(s), (f) behavior plans/policies, (g) parent handbooks, and (h) student handbooks. Gathering these documents helped to "provide a rich source of information with which to augment data

collected" from teachers' interviews, administrators' interviews; the documents were used to answer developing questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 57). According to Hatch (2002), this type of data collection poses a disadvantage and should not be used as the primary source of data because interpretation of objects is mainly inferential.

Evaluating various documents proved to be advantageous for this study. Merriam and Associates (2002) proposed "entire studies can be built around documents" (p. 13). Stake (1995) suggested documents serve as a record of activities that the researcher did not observe in the setting. The documents tell a story about the things that occurred and things that will occur in the setting. Document analyses can potentially improve a study because they will not influence the setting (Hatch, 2002) because they already exist; the documents are not dependent on participants' cooperation (Merriam, 2002). I used a document analysis worksheet (Appendix E) to effectively evaluate each document for its connection and relevance to the study.

Data Analysis

The basis of data analysis for this study was typological and inductive. Qualitative data is based on meaning from words, which are conceptualized and require placement into categories. Typological analysis is a method by which analysis begins with separating the overall data into groups based on the predestined theory or research objectives (Hatch, 2002). From the recordings, I transcribed the interviews on summary sheets and all data were sorted into categories. Through typological analysis, information from the administrators' interviews and teachers' interviews provided the opportunity to look for patterns, relationships, and themes in the data. Hatch (2002) presented basic steps in the typological analysis:

1. Identify typologies to be analyzed.
2. Read the data, marking entries related to your typologies.
3. Read entries by typology, recording the main ideas in entries on a summary sheet.
4. Look for patterns, relationships, themes within typologies
5. Read data, coding entries according to patterns identified and keeping a record of what entries go with which elements of your patterns.
6. Decide if your patterns are supported by the data, and search the data for non-examples of your patterns.
7. Look for relationships among the patterns identified.
8. Write your patterns as one-sentence generalizations.
9. Select data excerpts that support your generalizations. (p. 153)

The goal was to uncover emerging themes, patterns, and understandings that were linked in the analytical framework (Patton, 2002). The patterns, relationships, and themes were highlighted in different colors or color-coded. All data were reviewed to gain a general sense of the information that was gathered. Hatch (2002) suggested that data from interviews should yield ample evidence if the study has been well designed and implemented. Table 6 indicates the typology categories that were predetermined as relevant for the interviews. These typologies were based on the MMGW comprehensive framework that consists of ten elements and five conditions.

Table 6

Typological Analysis Codes

Typology categories	Description
Accelerated Curriculum	Prepares students for college-preparatory courses
Professional Development	Extensive, ongoing research-based learning support
Student Engagement	Hands-on and real-world application
Collaborative Planning	Teachers plan and coordinate activities for students
Strong Leadership	Active participant in school improvement strategies
District Support	Assist in the successful implementation of framework
Guidance and Advisement	Each student has a personal relationship with an adult
Intervention Programs	Identify and implement strategies for at-risk students
Clear Mission	A measurable mission statement

Inductive analysis begins with a thorough sense of the overall data and then a unique theory based on the qualitative data can be developed. The document data from the schools were placed in frames of analysis in which the data were examined and placed into domains. This data focused on the overall culture of each school. The data were analyzed and coded for specific relationships and themes on domain sheets. Data from interviews and school documents were used to identify major themes: reoccurring themes that administrators and teachers shared.

Case-by-Case Analysis

This project study was designed as a collective case study or a multiple case study. Each one of the four schools constituted a case. The multiple cases involved

Grades 6-8, and a number of employees were interviewed, including an administrator and two teachers from each of the four participating school. Results from the participants' interviews were then combined to represent each school's results in the study. Also, interview results were compared to each school's artifacts to check reliability. Each case was represented by a typology table based on the MMGW comprehensive improvement framework.

Omega Middle School

Omega Middle School represented a single case in this project study. This middle school was classified as a high-performing school. I conducted individual interviews with the principal and two teachers, and I was given several artifacts to review. At the time of the study, Teacher 1 taught reading intervention; Teacher 2 taught math. Table 7 gives a summary of the typology information that was discovered after the interviews and artifacts were analyzed.

Table 7

Omega Middle School-Interviews and Artifacts Information

Typology categories	Principal	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
Accelerated Curriculum	√	No	No
Professional Development	Yes-	Yes-	Yes-
Student Engagement	√	No	No
Collaborative Planning	Yes+	No	No
Strong Leadership	Yes+√	Yes+	Yes+
District Support	Yes-	Yes-	Yes-

Guidance and Advisement	No	No	No
Intervention Programs	Yes+√	Yes-	No
Clear Mission	Yes+√	Yes-	Yes-

Note: Yes, means the typology was mentioned in the interview. No, means the typology was not mentioned in the interview. The + symbol means the participant expressed satisfaction. The – symbol means the participant expressed concerns. The √ symbol means the typology was covered in the artifacts or on the website.

Delta Middle School

Delta Middle School represented a single case in this project study. This middle school was classified as a high-performing school. I conducted individual interviews with the principal and two teachers, and I was given several artifacts to review. At the time of the study, Teacher 1 taught science; Teacher 2 taught social studies. Table 8 gives a summary of the typology information that was discovered after the interviews and artifacts were analyzed.

Table 8

Delta Middle School-Interviews and Artifacts Information

Typology categories	Principal	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
Accelerated Curriculum	Yes+√	No	Yes+
Professional Development	Yes-	Yes-	Yes-
Student Engagement	Yes+√	Yes+	Yes-
Collaborative Planning	Yes+	Yes-	No
Strong Leadership	Yes	Yes-	Yes+
District Support	Yes-	Yes-	Yes-
Guidance and Advisement	√	No	No

Intervention Programs	Yes+√	Yes-	Yes+
Clear Mission	Yes+√	Yes+	No

Note: Yes, means the typology was mentioned in the interview. No, means the typology was not mentioned in the interview. The + symbol means the participant expressed satisfaction. The – symbol means the participant expressed concerns. The √ symbol means the typology was covered in the artifacts or on the website.

Kappa Middle School

Kappa Middle School represented a single case in this project study. This middle school was classified as a high-performing school. I conducted individual interviews with the principal and two teachers, and I was given several artifacts to review. At the time of the study, Teacher 1 taught geography; Teacher 2 taught social studies. Table 9 gives a summary of the typology information that was discovered after the interviews and artifacts were analyzed.

Table 9

Kappa Middle School-Interviews and Artifacts Information

Typology categories	Principal	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
Accelerated Curriculum	Yes-	No	No
Professional Development	Yes-	Yes-	Yes-
Student Engagement	Yes-√	No	No
Collaborative Planning	Yes+	No	Yes+
Strong Leadership	Yes+√	Yes-	Yes+
District Support	Yes+	Yes-	Yes-
Guidance and Advisement	Yes+√	No	Yes
Intervention Programs	√	No	Yes+

Clear Mission	Yes+√	Yes-	Yes-

Note: Yes, means the typology was mentioned in the interview. No, means the typology was not mentioned in the interview. The + symbol means the participant expressed satisfaction. The – symbol means the participant expressed concerns. The √ symbol means the typology was covered in the artifacts or on the website.

Alpha Middle School

Alpha Middle School represented a single case in this project study. This middle school was classified as a low-performing school. I conducted individual interviews with the principal and two teachers, and I reviewed the school's website. I tried to get artifacts for 2 months after the interviews, but the school was not able to provide any. At the time of the project study, Teacher 1 taught math; Teacher 2 taught social studies and science. Table 10 gives a summary of the typology information that was discovered after the interviews and website were analyzed.

Table 10

Alpha Middle School-Interviews and Artifacts Information

Typology categories	Principal	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
Accelerated Curriculum	No	No	No
Professional Development	Yes-	Yes-	Yes-
Student Engagement	No	Yes-	Yes+
Collaborative Planning	No	No	No
Strong Leadership	Yes-	Yes-	Yes-
District Support	Yes+	No	No
Guidance and Advisement	No	Yes-	Yes-
Intervention Programs	No	Yes-	Yes-

Clear Mission	Yes+	Yes-	Yes-

Note: Yes, means the typology was mentioned in the interview. No, means the typology was not mentioned in the interview. The + symbol means the participant expressed satisfaction. The – symbol means the participant expressed concerns. The √ means the typology was covered in the artifacts or on the website.

Findings

The findings for this case study were from the data analysis of the personal interviews from administrators and teachers; artifacts from each school were also analyzed. The interviews were used to examine administrators' and teachers' perception and understanding of the MMGW program as implemented at their middle school. The goals of the program were: (a) clear school mission with strong faculty support, (b) strong, collaborative district support for schools, (c) accelerated curriculum that supports high school readiness, (d) cooperative learning opportunities that engage students, (d) cross- curricular strategy to incorporate reading and writing, (e) opportunity to support all students with extra help, (f) extra support and identification of struggling sixth graders, (g) parental involvement for all students, (h) professional development aligned with school's mission, and (i) strong leadership team that works collaboratively (SREB, 2012). The artifacts were used to examine the ongoing activities that promote the MMGW key practices. The findings of this investigation are reported in five sections: (a) demographics, (b) a comprehensive and detailed description of the personal interviews, (c) school artifacts, (d) summary of themes, and (e) a summary of the findings.

Demographics

The participants of this study were four local school administrators and two teachers from each of their schools. There were a total of eight teacher participants. All of

the participants worked at either a low-performing or high-performing middle school in the local district for more than 5 years.

Administrators' Interviews

Three administrators were interviewed face-to-face, and one administrator was interviewed via teleconference. To protect their identity, the principals are referred to by the pseudonym of their middle school as listed in Table 4. The principals of Delta Middle School, Omega Middle School, and Kappa Middle School represented the high-performing middle schools. The principal of Alpha Middle School represented the low-performing middle school. The principals shared their perceptions and understandings of the MMGW program.

Research Question 1: Administrators' Perceptions and Understandings

Research question 1 stated, "How do teachers' and administrators' perceive the MMGW model as implemented in the school district?" Data gathered from principal interviews were used to address this question. A summary of the findings for each school are included below.

Delta Principal. The principal explained that Delta Middle School has been part of the MMGW program for more than 5 years. The principal and some of the faculty have participated in many of the out-of-state conferences presented by the SREB. Delta Principal explained that the faculty is encouraged to pick strategies and practices that meet the needs of their school and use them to fidelity. Delta Principal believed that the faculty benefitted from the training. The principal explained that some of the teachers recently attended a training workshop called Language Design Collaborative (LDC). This is a new feature of the MMGW program that trains and encourages teachers to integrate

literacy and writing skills across other content areas. The faculty also uses another component of the MMGW program called the Math Design Collaborative (MDC). Teachers use this component for group learning, partner learning, and real-life learning. The school uses another component of the MMGW called the advisor/advisee that meets every three weeks to review student progress. The focus for the 2014-15 school year at Delta Middle School was student engagement.

The principal explained that the support received from the MMGW team is always phenomenal. The team supports the professional development offered, and "anytime we need support or assistance, the MMGW team is right there to help us out. If they can't come immediately, then they will set up a plan via telephone or even email."

Omega Principal. The principal believed that the MMGW program gave the students high expectations to achieve. Using a program with high expectations makes every child a successful learner. The principal at Omega Middle School also believed that some of the programs offered by MMGW gave teachers the tools to help students become successful.

The principal liked the program and perceived it to be a good program. The principal explained that, "some of my teachers recently went to the (LDC) workshop, and the presenters said you have to do it this way." The principal reminded the teachers to "go learn what you can, and we will use what works for us." The principal explained that some presenters have not been in a school setting for a while, and their perception of how things work is not realistic. The principal believed programs have to be tweaked in order to make them work for your school.

Kappa Principal. The principal at Kappa Middle School explained, "When we were using the program about 3 years ago, it was very beneficial because we had teachers that had been teaching at least 15 to 35 years." The principal believed the seasoned teachers were being introduced to new strategies like group work, student-centered objectives, and more hands-on activities. Towards the end of the school's initial year of implementing MMGW strategies, "I could see some academic growth with students being able to relate to the various strategies that the school adopted."

Alpha Principal. The principal at Alpha Middle School believed that getting administrative coaching from the SREB was very important for Alpha Middle School at the time. Whenever necessary, the team would provide teacher walkthroughs and give feedback. The principal believed that professional development and the out-of-state conferences provided great information for administrators and faculty. The principal was able to bring this vital information back to the school and share it with teachers and assistant administrators.

Research Question 2: Perceptions of Goals Being Met and Suggestions to Meet Goals

Research question 2 stated, "In what ways do teachers and administrators perceive their schools are meeting the MMGW goals, and what changes are suggested to better the MMGW goals?" Data gathered from principal interviews were used to address this question. A summary of the findings for each school are included below.

Delta Principal. The principal explained that the school's successful academic and behavioral achievement came from using research-based strategies and best practices. Students also achieved because data were consistently reviewed in small

meetings to determine which assessments had been previously successful. The principal believed working in those small meetings gave teachers the opportunity to share strategies with their colleagues. The principal said, “MMGW has not driven everything that I do for academics and behavioral achievement. It may have some contributing factors, but we may try Marzano strategies or Daggett strategies. They’re basically the same strategies renamed by many people, many times.”

The principal explained the goal for Delta Middle School during the 2015-16 school year was to improve writing across the curriculum. The principal stressed that even the science and physical education teachers would implement writing activities that were graded. The principal stated, “Other than that, we probably won’t change anything that we are currently using from the MMGW model.”

Delta Principal shared a dislike concerning the district’s policy that only allows one out-of-state conference for administrators. The principal explained, “That’s too limited. Different conferences address different types of needs. It should be addressed on a case-by-case basis.” The principal expressed that most of the students knew the school’s mission because it is posted in every classroom, and students hear it over the announcement sometimes. The principal explained, “Students do the announcements sometimes, and they will say the school’s mission or the school’s motto. We recently started doing the student-lead live video feed announcements.” The principal believed that having students share information would encourage the students to actually listen.

When asked if Delta Middle School’s performance would increase, decrease, or stay the same without implementing the MMGW model, the principal felt like the school would be fine without it because it would find other strategies if necessary.

Omega Principal. The principal explained that student academic achievements were monitored through collaborative planning meetings where student data were reviewed and analyzed. The principal explained, "Students that are struggling academically are assigned to an online program called Odyssey. This program assists students in all subject areas." Struggling students are provided with a second delivery on an assignment during their elective or during after school tutoring. The principal explained that paraprofessionals work with special education classes and are aware of students' academic achievements. The principal mentioned that behavioral achievement was promoted through motivational posters that have been placed throughout the school's campus, and the teachers were encouraged to teach school rules at the start of the school year. The principal also explained that positive behavior was promoted through the implementation of a program called Champs. This was a positive behavior support system where teachers implemented the same rules throughout the campus, and they gave incentives for positive behavior.

The principal revealed that the school would not do anything differently for the 2015-16 school year, but they would continue to improve writing across the curriculum. In regard to professional development, the principal would prefer professional development to take place on the school's campus instead of sending a group of teachers away from the campus. The principal indicated that more professional development should take place at the local schools; it takes away too much instructional time when teachers have to leave for workshops.

In regard to the school's mission, the principal explained that students took a Scholastic survey to measure their knowledge of the school's mission. Based on the

survey results, 62% of the students understood the mission and agreed with the mission. The principal believed that students learned the mission whenever teachers taught classroom rules and school rules. When asked if the school's performance would decrease, increase, or stay the same without the MMGW model, Omega Principal indicated that the school would thrive with or without MMGW because the faculty already had a mindset to achieve.

Kappa Principal. The principal explained, "When we were using the MMGW model, I saw academic gains to a degree." The principal perceived that academic gains were based on the individual teacher's ability to implement the program strategies effectively. The principal explained,

> If a teacher has a "go get-it-ness" then the strategies will make an overwhelming difference in academics and behavior. On the other hand, if you take the same strategies and a different teacher that has some teaching deficiencies, then the strategies will not be fully implemented.

The principal noted that each teacher's ability to carry out the program's strategies would determine the amount of academic and behavioral success of the students.

For the 2015-16 school year, the Kappa Principal wanted to focus more on student engagement, group work, and colearning. The intention was to limit lectures and become more student-centered. The principal believed that this would help students become problem solvers and teachers would be more like a coach. The principal stated, "MMGW has some of those strategies, but they are mostly teacher-lead versus being student-lead. In this building, we want to move away from so much of the teacher-lead instruction."

The principal believed doing so would allow students to problem solve in groups, with partners, or individually.

The principal explained that improving writing across the curriculum was another goal. The principal wanted to see more open-ended questions instead of multiple choice questions on assignments. The principal explained, "I want the students to respond in a statement format, so they can at least get a percentage of their answers correct instead of being deterred when it's just a right or wrong answer."

Kappa Principal expressed that the school district has done a great job with allowing administrators the opportunity to seek additional assistance for their students and faculty. The principal explained,

> The district gives you the autonomy to select your professional development that works for your school. That means if MMGW model were ideal for our school, then our budget would be centered toward that type of professional development.

When asked about the school's mission, the principal stated, "We have a mission and a vision." The principal revealed that these two items were read every morning by student announcers. The principal explained that the mission was posted in every classroom. Kappa Principal explained, "When teachers do their advisor/advisee, they get the opportunity to breakdown what our mission and vision is. I would have to say at least about 60-75% of the students know the mission." The principal believed that number would have been higher if knowing the mission constituted understanding it rather than being able to actually recite it.

When asked if the school's performance would improve, decline, or remain the same with or without the MMGW model, the principal stated, "That's an iffy question for

an administrator because the implementation is not through me." The principal believed the use of various strategies contributed to success. The principal explained, "I don't think I would say that we would crash and burn without the MMGW program, and I can't say that it has taken us over the top. I can't say we would be stagnant either."

Kappa Principal believed that the teachers were finding success and were growing professionally by implementing strategies through various programs like Daggett and Scholastic. The principal explained that the teachers were building student relationships and student engagement. The principal explained, "My goal is to have teacher leaders learn various models and find the one that actually works for them. There's no true success if you are trying to put teachers into one model and they can't follow through with the strategies." The principal believed that being able to use rigorous strategies that worked from multiple programs like Daggett, MMGW, and Scholastic, would allow teachers and students to achieve.

Alpha Principal. The principal explained that coaching and learning new information played a major part in student learning. The principal stated, "When teachers receive coaching and are provided with numerous strategies, then they'll be able to determine what is effective for students." The principal indicated activities that increase student engagement also helped to increase positive behavior across the campus. The principal explained, "Behavior problems that may exist can be eliminated when teachers use MMGW strategies that promote student engagement."

The principal revealed that the school had not received coaching from MMGW in a few years. The principal explained that the school and the district were focusing on rigor, relevance, and engagement right now. The principal believed the school district had

supported administrators with professional development. The principal stated, “They’ve always tried to support administrators and teachers by providing professional development. I think they’ve done a pretty good job.”

When asked if students knew the school’s mission, the principal stated, “A student announcer says the school’s mission over the intercom each morning.” When asked if the school’s performance would improve, decline, or stay the same, with or without the MMGW model, the principal stated, “I don’t know if I can say if we would do better or worse. We will always strive to improve.”

Research Question 3: Most Effective Aspects and Suggestions to Improve the Model

Research question 3 stated, “What do teachers and administrators identify as being the most effective aspects of the model, and what do they suggest as improvement to be made to the model?” Data gathered from principal interviews were used to address this question. A summary of the finding for each school are included below.

Delta Principal. The principal did not have any complaints about the implementation of the MMGW program and revealed that the school had not faced any challenges while implementing it. The principal also believed that all of the professional development had been meaningful. The principal stated, “When we go, we always take a team of teachers.”

When asked what would be an ideal MMGW professional development for administrators, the principal explained:

> We’ve had themes for reading and every year it changes. This has been successful for us by increasing student reading, and this has been measured by STAR

Reading and Accelerated Reader. Having reading themes and having a celebration for it each quarter has made participation sky rocket.

The principal did not have any suggestions on how the MMGW program could improve. The principal stated, “They are always making strides; they’re working to improve themselves all the time.”

Omega Principal. When asked if any challenges arose, Omega Principal believed student accountability was challenging. The principal explained that it was difficult to make students feel responsible for their grades when they were never allowed to receive a zero and were constantly given opportunities to retake tests. The principal said, “I don’t want to see zeros, but I want the students to know that we expect them to do the work.”

When asked about beneficial professional development from the MMGW program, the principal mentioned a *close the gap* literacy workshop, but it only targeted a certain group of teachers instead of the entire school. The principal stated, “I think the LDC and MDC workshops are focusing on writing. If my teachers can go and get the information and bring it back to the other teachers, then I think it will be something great.”

The principal believed that an ideal professional development would deal with an overview of the MMGW model. The principal believed that principals and teachers would benefit from a program overview because this would help to eliminate some of the negative reactions to the program. The principal explained, “Administrators need to understand when teachers go to professional development, it is not going to give you a cookie cutter plan. It has to work for them.” The principal believed that teachers from different schools came and criticized because the step-by-step plan did not work for their

school, but they have to pick out what works for their school. The principal stated, “If students are learning and I’m only using part of what they told me then it’s better than nothing. People need to get more on the same page.”

The principal believed the MMGW conferences always provided good ideas, but at the local workshops, presenters make teachers feel like the strategies should be implemented to fidelity. Locally, the idea is that teachers have to do it exactly the way it’s being presented; everyone is expected to teach the same way. The principal stated, “You have to find strategies that work for you, and you’ll get results. MMGW offers the big conferences, but I think they should offer smaller regional conferences.”

Kappa Principal. The principal at Kappa Middle School revealed several issues that were perceived as challenges for implementing the MMGW program: funding, teacher attrition, and teacher ability. The principal believed that funding for continued teacher training had to be written into the school’s budget. Teacher attrition challenged the implementation of the program because each year a school would possibly lose a trained teacher and get a replacement the following year that had no training in the program. The principal explained, “When you don’t have a consistent building, teacher placement becomes challenging.” Another challenge was that teachers needed the ability to implement the program strategies.

The principal explained that some teachers would continue to use their old strategies if students were moving forward; these teachers would not buy into the new program. If the student failure rate was low, if teacher observations were good, and if they were meeting all other requirements; the teacher would hesitate before trying something new.

When asked if any of the professional development was beneficial, the principal recalled one of the conferences being in Nashville, TN that focused on strategies to help move low-performing students. Kappa Principal gained awareness about the MMGW program about 4 years ago at the conference. The principal explained that the conference provided administrators with various tools that assisted in teacher observation and student monitoring. “This gave me some ‘look fors’ when I was doing my walkthroughs. It helped me to see what type of enrichment teachers needed, and that made me a resource for them.” The principal indicated, “When I attended the MMGW conferences, I was able to walk away with resources to help teachers with those low-performing students.”

When asked about an ideal professional development for administrators, the principal explained that rigor, relevance, and student engagement would be very beneficial. The principal believed that focus would be ideal to coincide with strategies that were already being implemented. The principal would like to give the teachers various strategies they could use since one particular strategy may not fit everybody. The principal stated, “Teachers know their students, gain a relationship with them, and then teachers will be able to find the strategy that works for them.” The principal would like to share the rigor, relevance, and student engagement strategies with parents and teachers.

Kappa Principal did not believe that the MMGW program had any improvements to make. The improvement had to be with schools dedicating a certain length of time for strategies to be implemented to fidelity. The principal stated, “You would need a complete teacher buy-in and 3 to 5 years of guaranteed commitment.”

The principal explained that schools had to be committed to a program for longer than a year. The principal explained further, “I’m just looking at the time that I’ve been

here, and it took me a year to get things going in a certain direction. It probably takes 5 to 7 years to get things going in a certain direction."

Alpha Principal. The principal did not have any specific problems with the program implementation except trying to implement it to fidelity. The principal noted that the conferences were beneficial because a lot of administrators attended and shared ideas. The principal stated, "Administrators from different schools and demographics shared what worked and what didn't work at the MMGW conferences."

The principal would like to see a professional development that would assist with the new initiatives adopted by the school district. The principal stated, "These would be a mixture of great strategies that administrators can bring back to their teachers."

When asked if the MMGW program could use some improvements, the principal could not think of any improvements needed. The principal explained, "Anything providing professional development and strategies to my teachers will have great potential. Like I said, we haven't used it in a couple of years, but I think it has the potential to be effective for academic achievement."

Teachers' Interviews

A total of eight middle school teachers were interviewed in this project study. During the individual interviews, the teachers gave clear responses concerning the MMGW program. Delta Teacher 1, Delta Teacher 2, Omega Teacher 1, Omega Teacher 2, Kappa Teacher 1, and Kappa Teacher 2 represented three high-performing middle schools in the district. Alpha Teacher 1 and Alpha Teacher 2 represented a low-performing middle school in the district. The individual interviews followed the Teacher Interview Protocol. I audio-recorded each interview and later transcribed them myself.

Teacher participants were first asked: What are the positive aspects of the program?

Delta Teacher 1 stated, “One of the things I do enjoy is our students are grouped to rotate their schedule through the same teachers. The same 30 kids stay in a class all day and rotate teachers. It helps us break them into small groups and tells us where students should be.” Delta Teacher 2 stated, “If implemented correctly, the MMGW is very positive. It has a lot of interactive things for students like ABC type charts for reading shares and pairing.” Omega Teacher 1 stated, “It taught teachers how to implement an educational plan that included discipline techniques and interactive learning.” Omega Teacher 2 stated, “I think positive things would be that every member of the faculty is on the same page, and students will see that consistency throughout all of their classrooms.” Kappa Teacher 1 stated, “You can do certain assessments to assess the students. The graphic organizers allow me to see which students have comprehended the material.” Kappa Teacher 2 stated, “Many of the strategies we use in the program have been beneficial. Whenever I get the opportunity, I like to group my students so they can interact with each other.”

Alpha Teacher 1 stated, “The note taking skills like the Frail Model are positive aspects.” Alpha Teacher 2 stated, “Truthfully, I was not a hundred percent trained in MMGW when I got to this school. Our lead teachers typically attend the workshops and then share the strategies with us.

Teachers were asked a second question: What do you like or dislike about the program or implementation of the program?

Delta Teacher 1 mentioned a dislike for a strategy called re-teach/re-test because the strategy puts more pressure on the teachers and less accountability on the students. Delta Teacher 2 stated, “No, I don’t have any dislikes. I thought it was presented well and we were given all the help we could take.” Omega Teacher 1 believed that the original plan for MMGW had been revised and reworked too many times when No Child Left Behind came along. Omega Teacher 2 was interested in more training and more professional development. Kappa Teacher 1 stated, “I’m neutral on this matter. It is not mandatory to use.” Kappa Teacher 2 stated, “I think some of it can be redundant. It’s mostly things we’ve already been doing with a different name.” Alpha Teacher 1 believed the program was good for smaller classes and felt like it was hard to implement with large classes. Alpha Teacher 2 stated, “I feel like we have done so many programs, and we don’t stress MMGW enough. I like the interactive group work and partner sharing. The students need to interact.”

Teachers were asked a third question: What challenges do you face as you attempt to implement the program?

Delta Teacher 1 wanted more time during the day to actually implement the program. The teacher felt like higher-order thinking skills were not being applied with students. The teacher added, “I get a lot of students that are pushed into these upper grades without being able to read well enough or even synthesize information properly. I spend a lot of my time teaching students how to learn.” The biggest challenge for this teacher was the principal would change teachers to a different grade level year after year. Delta Teacher 2 believed that administrators were not well trained; this caused negative feedback for teachers. The teacher explained that the program was like reinventing the

wheel because some of the strategies were already being used by teachers. Omega Teacher 1 explained, “I teach reading intervention. We have lots of reading programs that bring in technology such as Odyssey, STAR testing, and Renaissance Reading. This reading technology is providing me with way more student data than I can analyze.” Omega Teacher 2 believed time was a factor when trying to implement the program in addition to other things during the class period. Kappa Teacher 1 stated, “I can’t say if it is ineffective or not because it is not mandatory.” Kappa Teacher 2 stated, “The only challenges I see are the expectations of the people that put it in place. We don’t use this program a lot. Our focus is Common Core. All of the meetings and data can be challenging.” Alpha Teacher 1 believed classroom management, time management, and the lack of in-class support were challenges. Alpha Teacher 2 stated, “The challenge is making sure teachers actually use the program; we need consistency.”

Teachers were asked a fourth question: Have you noticed strategies being implemented to improve reading and writing across the curriculum?

Delta Teacher 1 explained:

> We have been asked to implement strategies. I will say that on my team I have a language arts teacher who helps me incorporate reading into my classroom. I do it when I can. I feel like our school has implemented the program to its fullest ability.

Delta Teacher 2 stated, “Yes, at every level at our school. Every subject at our school uses reading and writing.” Omega Teacher 2 stated, “I’m sure there are strategies being used but not so much in my classroom. I am a math teacher so it’s hard to incorporate those concepts. It doesn’t say how to incorporate it into my curriculum.”

Kappa Teacher 1 stated, “Yes, in seventh grade most students are above average. Every teacher has the same literacy strategy in every classroom, which makes it easier for the students to grasp. Kappa Teacher 2 stated, “I think the strategies can be used to improve reading and writing. I use some of the language arts strategies in my own classroom. I can’t testify for others outside my class.” Alpha Teacher 1 stated, “Not really. It’s rare that I see a MMGW strategy used. I haven’t seen reading and writing across the curriculum.” Alpha Teacher 2 stated, “We are required to have a writing component for our end-of-quarter exam. For social studies and science, students are required to read nonfiction articles and take an Accelerated Reader test on it.”

Teachers were asked a fifth question: What best practices have administrators implemented to ensure success for every student including those in subgroups?

Delta Teacher 1 expressed disappointment about the special education services at the school. The teacher stated, “Our paperwork says we have special education help, but that’s not reflected in the classrooms. Having sports teams and electives have made the minority students feel integrated and included.” Delta Teacher 2 explained, “At our school we have a lot of extracurricular activities students can participate in if they complete assignments. We also have tutoring and an enrichment period during the class periods.” Omega Teacher 1 explained, “My administrator brings in a lot of help for us. She brings in professionals to teach us how to help our students with reading skills; however, they have shortened the time to teach reading.” Omega Teacher 2 explained, “Well, I really like that they give a lot of rewards. When students take placement tests like the STAR, they are rewarded for maintaining or improving.” The teacher couldn’t think of any specific practices for students in subgroups. Kappa Teacher 1 explained,

"They send us to professional development to try to increase student success. We do need improvement with special education students." The teacher believed that better cooperation was needed between the classroom teachers and special education teachers.

Kappa Teacher 2 explained:

> We do a lot of small group exercises. We have many faculty meetings and professional development. Last year each teacher presented a strategy to the faculty; that keeps us up to date on the latest techniques. I try to pair special education students with a peer. Sometimes they understand better from peers. They are also pulled into groups to work on reading and vocabulary skills.

Alpha Teacher 1 stated, "Intervention periods were created, and that helps reinforce concepts. That's really all they have done along with purchasing computer software for intervention. Student success is limited by class sizes."

Alpha Teacher 2 explained, "I don't think our special education students are getting what they need. They have a paraprofessional, but she needs more assistance."

The teachers were asked a two-part sixth question: How has the program implementation influenced the administrator's ability to promote academic and behavioral achievement? What do you think can be done to improve academic and behavioral achievement?

Delta Teacher 1 expressed disappointment in her school's discipline and with the school district's policies. The teacher explained, "We do a lot of rewards for things. We have really great labs for our students. We have everything we need to teach effectively, but we need the principal's support. We need to motivate parents and students."

Delta Teacher 2 explained, “We have AB honor roll and an improvement group.” The teacher explained that the school was divided into different learning initiatives, and this helped the students focus. The teacher stated, “The learning initiatives throughout the school helps to keep poor behavior down because each hallway has different levels of behavior tolerance.” Omega Teacher 1 believed discipline and academics had to begin at home. The teacher did not believe the school had effective discipline procedures in place.

Omega Teacher 2 believed administrators were doing a great job with communicating positive behavior to students. The teacher stated, “They’re very involved in our classes; they provide good communication with students and reward them with encouragement.” The teacher felt like positive reinforcement was needed for middle school students in order for positive behavior to continue, but administrators also needed to find new ways to acknowledge what students do best. Kappa Teacher 1 explained, “They have incentives for students in academics such as AB honor roll, and they get a good news card for behavior and academic success.” Kappa Teacher 2 explained, “I can’t say I know how the behavior management works in this program. I’m not sure if it is related to the Behavior 360 program. We also use Positive Behavior Interventions Support (PBIS). The principal likes to reward for STAR Reading and Math.”

Alpha Teacher 1 felt like discipline strategies were rarely used or implemented at the school. Alpha Teacher 2 explained, “We have AB honor roll, but some students have other skills I think should be showcased as well. I’m sure there is a discipline plan, but it is not followed.”

Teachers were asked a seventh question: Based on the program model, what do you think is needed in the form of support for teachers from the school district?

Delta Teacher 1 stated, “I want to see 1st, 2nd, and 3rd graders master skills in that grade before they move on. These are the skills many students are lacking in middle school.” Delta Teacher 2 believed the district needed to provide teachers with fewer students, so teachers could interact with students. Omega Teacher 1 felt like parents should be supporting the school’s efforts. Omega Teacher 2 and Kappa Teacher 1 believed the school district should provide teachers with adequate professional development and information. Kappa Teacher 2 explained, “We need to get better resources for all the programs they are trying to implement. The district seems to lose the reality of what we can actually do.”

Alpha Teacher 1 felt like the district should assign more teachers to schools, schools should provide students various types of instruction, and schools should reinforce core skills through electives. Alpha Teacher 2 stated, “I would like to see them come into a classroom. I want them to see how students really are. It would be great if our principal could see what really goes on. We need a greater presence from them.”

The teachers were asked an eighth question: Which MMGW professional development for teachers has been most beneficial to help you improve student achievement?

Delta Teacher 1 stated, “We go through so many I can’t remember.” Delta Teacher 2 stated, “The first summer I went to a professional development was a very positive experience. I was immediately impressed with the strategies.”

Omega Teacher 1 explained:

> The first one I went to was a 3-day in-service. The intent of the workshop was purely to make middle grades work. They talked a lot about team teaching, but

there isn't much time for that now. Also, PST is actually wonderful. The collection of pooled data helps identify struggling students. Omega Teacher 2 stated, "We haven't had any professional development for this program." Kappa Teacher 1 stated, "When the strategies were presented, it was wonderful; however, like I said before, we need more hands-on training. Although the examples are good, it doesn't always work out in the classroom."

Kappa Teacher 2 stated, "I went to a MMGW conference in Atlanta, and I got a lot of information there. I still use some of the strategies."

Alpha Teacher 1 explained:

The best professional development was the differentiated instruction conference. It focused on digital schools and different ways to learn. I saw that those strategies could work in the classroom, but we need more teachers and smaller class sizes.

Alpha Teacher 2 said, "Truthfully, I don't really remember."

Teachers were asked a ninth question: What would be an ideal MMGW professional development for teachers?

Delta Teacher 1 stated, "It would be good if they focused on activities that implemented higher learning techniques. I have the will to implement the strategies; I just need the time."

Delta Teacher 2 explained:

Maybe they could be more realistic to how many kids are in the classroom. They should show us how to work with up to 30 kids. Teachers have not been involved

> in the MMGW. The department heads were involved, but I think everyday teachers have not been involved enough.

Omega Teacher 1 stated, “I honestly think the new agendas for technology would be great. Teachers need to get in touch with technology. Also, we need better classroom management. I need to know how to get my kids motivated.”

Omega Teacher 2 explained:

> I want to go into an ideal classroom at another school site and see it in action. I don’t want to just talk about it or read about it. I want to be in a school that uses it consistently and see it happening with actual students.

Kappa Teacher 1 stated, “I would like to see presenters come into the classroom with the kids and model the strategies.” Kappa Teacher 2 stated, “Integrating technology in the classroom. We could learn how to better incorporate our inclusion students into our lessons.” Alpha Teacher 1stated, “Teachers need to see a team of people come out and model the strategies with large class sizes. They should also show us how to manage time with the short 45-minute class periods.” Alpha Teacher 2 stated, “Well, I went to one conference in Dallas that taught us how to teach African American males. Something like that would help us teach those male students.”

Teachers were asked a tenth question: With regard to the MMGW model, would you say that all students understand the school’s mission?

Delta Teacher 1 stated, “I think the majority of them do. We have a great big school and because of the environment, many of our students feel included and cared for. Most of them understand that we do care.” Omega Teacher 1 stated, “No, I doubt they even know we have one. Some kids have a mission to learn and some of them don’t.”

Omega Teacher 2 explained:

> No, I don't think the students understand the mission. I think they have a general idea, but it is not taught to them. I think it should be shown to them often. It should be posted in each classroom. Maybe they could even write it in their own words.

Kappa Teacher 1 stated, "The entire student body does not know the mission, but perhaps the student ambassadors do and those that participate in different clubs at the school." Kappa Teacher 2 stated, "No, not at this time."

Alpha Teacher 1 explained:

> No, I don't think they know the mission statement or school song. It's read on the announcements, but I doubt they listen. It could be improved by letting students do announcements that reflect their ideas and issues. They don't have enough involvement with the school. We need them to be more involved.

Alpha Teacher 2 stated, "No. Well, we read the mission statement more this year, but I don't think they really understand it."

The teachers were asked an eleventh question: What do you think of the program's potential? Only three teachers gave a response to this particular question. Omega Teacher 2 stated, "I think it has good potential at my school because the students have good behavior, and they actually want to learn." Alpha Teacher 1 stated, "It has the potential to really help a lot of teachers, but it needs to be implemented in the classroom in a live demonstration." Alpha Teacher 2 stated, "If everyone was onboard 100%, it would work really well, but everyone is not onboard."

Teachers were asked a twelfth question: What might be some hindrances to the program? Delta Teacher 1 stated, “We need more parent involvement. Maybe they can develop something that would include them. A lot of the time I find that they just don’t know what’s going on in the classroom.” Omega Teacher 1 stated, “The shift to technology has to be brought in to the teachers. The stakeholders need to take a serious look at the actual state of the classroom.” Omega Teacher 2 stated, “There’s a lack of professional development and information.” Kappa Teacher 1 explained, “We need a better foundation. My class size and behavior problems hinder my ability to move the class at a steady pace. The strategies of the program sound great, but without a more stable environment they can’t be implemented.” Alpha Teacher 1 stated, “Not many want to get into the trenches with the teachers, but we need to see that in order to increase success.” Alpha Teacher 2 stated, “We need to make sure we use 100% of the program; it won’t work if we don’t.”

Teachers were asked a thirteenth and final question: In your opinion, would your school’s performance increase, decline, or remain the same without implementation of the MMGW model? Delta Teacher 1 stated, “I believe we would decline. The concepts are barely being met now, and if we stop now the students won’t have anything.” Delta Teacher 2 stated, “It would decline. Without student-teacher collaboration we would have more behavior problems.” Omega Teacher 1 stated, “Actually, our school is very lucky; our middle school is a pretty good school. We would likely be able to maintain without MMGW.” Omega Teacher 2 stated, “I believe it would probably remain the same or decrease a little bit. Overall, the students at my school are motivated; their parents want to see them succeed.” Kappa Teacher 1 stated, “This program isn’t mandatory. As long as

we have the literacy strategies that our administrator requires, we will receive a good evaluation. Our staff finds the strategies already in place to be helpful in student comprehension."

Kappa Teacher 2 explained:

> I think our school would stay the same because most of these programs are just a lot of strategies that teachers have already been doing. This program is basically just like any other. I don't see it making a big difference.

Alpha Teacher 1 stated, "It would stay the same. I don't really see how it has really made a dramatic difference. The program wasn't implemented to the fullest to begin with." Alpha Teacher 2 stated, "I think it would stay the same, and with that being said, I wasn't there when they initially used it."

School Artifacts

For this project study, the four middle schools were asked to provide artifacts that could be reviewed and analyzed for MMGW best practices. The use of documents in this study helped to establish credibility and allowed for triangulation. Three of the four schools were able to provide school documents for analysis. Some of the documents were original school publications, and others were published by a private source. Alpha Middle School was unable to provide documents, so only their website was used for triangulation. A document analysis worksheet was used to give a detailed review of each artifact.

Delta Middle School's Artifacts

Delta Middle School provided a student handbook for 2013-2014, a school calendar/bulletin for October 2014, and a flyer. The handbook was a paper document, and it was a school-specific publication. The student handbook had the following features:

- It displayed a picture of the school, the school's name, address, telephone number, fax number, school's website, the principal's name, and the names of the assistant principals on the front cover.
- The inside cover displayed the school's mission, philosophy, and motto.
- The first page displayed the hours of operation, dismissal guidelines, take-in and dismissal map, and early dismissal policy.
- The second page displayed information about visitors, after school safety, and cafeteria prices.
- The third page displayed a sample breakfast and lunch menu.
- The student handbook gave information about the uniform closet, discipline and attendance at school functions, lost and found, information for parents concerning dances, the school website, emailing the faculty, like us on Facebook, student safety, medication, monthly bulletin, payments, a list of important dates, guidelines for student badges, cell phone policy, class placement, Title I tutoring, emergency contact, Saturday school, parent advisory committee, volunteer program, PTO board members, Title I parent program, library media center, uniform policy, sample class schedule, school-parent contract, school district's attendance policy letter, bus discipline, parent make and take schedule, a map of the school, and the school district's calendar.

The calendar/bulletin provided by Delta Middle School was a paper document that displayed the school's name, motto, logo, and website on top of the page. It also displayed the school district's motto for the current year. The calendar listed the school's Partners in Education, a no bullying symbol, breakfast menu, and important dates. Some of the important dates included baseball tryouts, softball tryouts, girls' basketball tryouts, a football game, robotics meeting, advisor/advisee meeting, faculty versus student volleyball game, bullying parent meeting, and end-of-quarter test dates.

The flyer that Delta Middle School provided gave an explicit description about the make-up of each academic team. To keep the identity of this middle school protected, I will not give those details. The flyer gave a list of the extracurricular activities: running club, robotics, art club, Junior Civitan, National Junior Honor Society, Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Family Career Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), Student Council, Scholars Bowl, and Dance Team. The flyer also listed all of the athletic programs offered at the school: track, softball, baseball, football, volleyball, basketball, intramurals, and cheerleading.

After a careful review of the artifacts retrieved from Delta Middle School and a close comparison of the interviews, I concluded that the artifacts reinforced many of the statements given by the administrator and teachers. For example, Delta Teacher 2 explained that the school "was divided into different learning initiatives" and the artifacts confirmed the school is divided in learning academies. The academic teams were listed with an explicit description in the school's personal flyer. The school's calendar also reinforced the principal's statement about the students meeting in advisor/advisee meetings every three weeks; the calendar listed the advisor/advisee meeting dates. The

student handbook reinforced Delta Teacher 2 statement about the school having a "lot of extracurricular activities that students can participate in." Although Delta Teacher 1 was disappointed with the school's discipline, the student handbook revealed that the school conducted Saturday School for students with discipline problems. Also, the school seemed to be moving forward with a no bullying initiative; the calendar displayed a no bullying symbol and a date for a parent meeting concerning bullying.

Omega Middle School's Artifacts

Omega Middle School provided a student handbook for 2014-2015. The handbook was a paper document, and it was a school publication. The student handbook had the following features:

- It displayed the school's logo, the school's name, address, telephone number, fax number, the principal's name, and the assistant principal's name on the cover.
- The first page included a personal letter from the principal.
- The second page displayed the school district's mission, and the school's personal mission.
- The third page displayed the school's philosophy.
- It explained about the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), school hours, visitation, parent/teacher communication, office rules, medication, early dismissals, emergencies, immunizations, insurance, leaving campus, no smoking, payments, report cards, attendance/tardy, uniform policy, dress code, lockers, athletics, good sportsmanship, extracurricular clubs and organizations, fire drills, tornado drills, lockdown drill, code of conduct, student misconduct, behaviors not allowed at school, items not allowed at school, vandalism and property damage, retract, out-of-school

suspension, alternative school, hall passes, assembly etiquette, textbooks, school-sponsored trips, library use, internet use, bus transportation, bus rules, and problem-solving team (PST) services.

- The extracurricular activities included the Beautification Club, Band, National Junior Honor Society, Scholars Bowl, Yearbook, Archery Team, and Chorus.

Omega Middle School also presented two parent handbooks. These books were not published by the school; they were published by a private company. One book was titled A Parent's Handbook: Positive Discipline for Your Teen. The handbook could also be described as a workbook; it had several pages that could be completed by the teen and the parent. This handbook featured several topics:

- Being a parent of a teen
- Good discipline
- Be positive
- When conflict arise
- Building your relationship
- Setting rules, expectations, and limitations
- Compromise
- Setting logical consequences
- Alcohol and other drugs
- Talk about sex
- Help your teen make good decisions

The other parent handbook was titled Parenting Corner: Middle School Edition. It featured four cover stories: ensuring your child's school attendance, your powers of prevention, five top reasons students skip, and in-sync with school.

After a careful review of the artifacts retrieved from Omega Middle School and a close comparison of the interviews, I concluded that the artifacts reinforced many of the statements given by the administrator and teachers. For example, Omega Principal indicated that student academic achievement was monitored through collaborative planning meetings where student data were reviewed and analyzed. This statement was confirmed in the student handbook that revealed information concerning the school's PST. The student handbook also reinforced the principal's concern about making sure students were accountable for making the grade. The student handbook showed multiple opportunities for students to be accountable for their actions: out-of-school suspension, retract, and alternative school. Omega Principal indicated that a program called Champs was used to promote positive behavior; however, I did not see a description of this program listed in the artifacts. Also, Omega Teacher 2 explained, "The students have good behavior, and they actually want to learn." This statement was reinforced by the extracurricular activities listed in the student handbook: Beautification Club, National Junior Honor Society, Scholars Bowl, and Archery Team.

Kappa Middle School's Artifacts

Kappa Middle School provided several paper documents for review. The school provided a school flyer, a student-parent handbook, a school bulletin, and a personalized school folder.

The flyer was a tri-fold paper document that included the school's name, website, motto, address, telephone number, school district's logo, and school district's website. The inside of the flyer displayed the school's mission statement, a section about the school, uniform policy, schedule of bells, and a supply list. The back of the flyer displayed the principal's picture, name, personal letter, and assistant principals' names. The back of the flyer also gave a little information about the school district: mission statement, vision statement, and board members.

The student-parent handbook provided by Kappa Middle School had the following features:

- It displayed the school's name, address, telephone number, principal's name, and assistant principals' name on the front cover.
- The first page displayed the school's mission statement, vision statement, and motto.
- The second page listed the school's philosophy, goals, and objectives.
- It also displayed a school supply list, attendance policy, parent responsibility, school responsibility, admission requirements, immunizations, withdrawals, emergency, early dismissals, visitation, office rules, drop off/pick up, medication, breakfast and lunch information, telephone use, electronic devices, textbooks, lost and found, hours of operation, after school events, leaving campus, field trips, insurance, payments, valuables, Title I information, no smoking, hall passes, fire drills, tornado drills, using the building, assembly etiquette, PTO, morning take-in, afternoon dismissal, academic curriculum, guidance and counseling, ACT Aspire, scheduling, teacher conferences, homework, make-up work, progress reports and report cards, tutoring, grading procedures, honor roll, crossing over celebration, technology, library media

center, P. E., lockers, medical excuses, good sportsmanship, uniforms, student code of conduct, searches, items not allowed, care of school property, after school detention, Saturday school, out-of-school suspension, alternative school, bus conduct, school-wide discipline plan, obscene language, fighting, and tardy policy.

The student-teacher handbook listed several sports activities: football, volleyball, basketball, and track. The handbook also listed several extracurricular activities: band, chorus, National Junior Honor Society, Bishop State Talent Search, Sixth Grade Club, Student Council, Spelling Bee, Ambassadors, Scholars Bowl, University of South Alabama Talent Search, and Cheerleading.

The bulletin provided by Kappa Middle School displayed the school's name, logo, website, telephone number, fax number, address, principal's name, and assistant principals' names. One side reminded students of after school tutoring, the theme for the week, a note from the nurse, and drop off/pick up procedures. The other side reminded parents of the statewide parenting day, lunch menu, and report card pick up procedure.

The personalized folder provided by Kappa Middle School displayed the school's name and a huge logo on the front. On the inside of the folder, one side displayed the school's mission statement, vision statement, philosophy, goals, objectives, supply list, and the school district's mission statement. The other side of the folder listed eight frequently asked questions by parents and students. Underneath each question was a brief answer.

After a careful review of the artifacts retrieved from Kappa Middle School and a close comparison of the interviews, I concluded that the artifacts reinforced some of the statements given by the administrator and teachers. For example, the student-parent

handbook described the school-wide discipline plan, after school detention, Saturday school, out-of-school suspension, and alternative school. This reinforced the statement that Kappa Teacher 2 explained about the behavior management program. The teacher felt like a plan was in place but was not sure if it was Behavior 360. The student-parent handbook also confirmed that Kappa Middle School participates in AB honor roll. This was indicated when Kappa Teacher 1explained that students received incentives for academic success like AB honor roll. The artifacts also confirmed the principal's awareness of students' academic achievement. Two artifacts gave students a reminder about tutoring opportunities: school bulletin and student-parent handbook. The student-parent handbook also gave information on make-up work policy. The personalized folder displayed the school's mission and vision statements. This artifact confirmed the statement made by Kappa Principal: "We have a mission and a vision." Kappa Principal also indicated that teachers conducted advisor/advisee meetings with students; however, none of the artifacts showcased advisor/advisee information, but there was a section for guidance and counseling.

Alpha Middle School's Artifacts

Alpha Middle School's website was used for triangulation; I was unable to retrieve tangible artifacts from this school. The homepage listed several items: pictures, Math Club, Champion Readers, tips for parents, attendance policy, student dress code, and a supply list. One section of the website had a link to general rules and polices: skipping policy, fighting policy, cell phones, and electronics. Another link showcased a brief message from the principal, facts about the school, mission, and motto. The website listed some extracurricular activities: National Junior Honor Society, baseball for boys,

basketball for boys and girls, football, boy's track, track for boys and girls, volley ball, and cheerleading.

After a careful review of the artifacts retrieved from Kappa Middle School and a close comparison of the interviews, I concluded that the information on the website confirmed that the school participated in an honor's program: National Junior Honor Society. This also reinforced Alpha Teacher 2 statement about the school recognizing AB honor roll students. Data on the website confirmed that students needed the opportunity to showcase other skills as suggested by Alpha Teacher 2; most of the extracurricular activities listed on the website involved sports. Website data also confirmed the school's mission statement. Overall, data from the website did not strengthen the principal's and teachers' interview responses.

Qualitative Results

Administrators were interviewed about their perceptions, experiences, and understanding of the MMGW program. The interviews followed a protocol that was developed from the MMGW Ten Best Practices: (a) clear school mission with strong faculty support, (b) strong, collaborative district support for schools, (c) accelerated curriculum that supports high school readiness, (d) cooperative learning opportunities that engage students, (d) cross- curricular strategy to incorporate reading and writing, (e) opportunity to support all students with extra help, (f) extra support and identification of struggling sixth graders, (g) parental involvement for all students, (h) professional development aligned with school's mission, and (i) strong leadership team that works collaboratively (SREB, 2012). Typology categories used for coding relevant information from interviews were also developed from the MMGW framework.

Findings of Administrators' Interviews

First, I read the interview transcripts numerous times and identified reoccurring themes from the principals' interviews. After making notations of the reoccurring themes, coding was used to categorize each one. Based on comparable responses from the administrators, themes quickly developed. Three themes developed from the interviews: autonomy, new program initiatives, and innovative leadership. Characteristic comments regarding each of these three themes are highlighted in Table 11.

Table 11

Themes Emerging from Principals' Interviews

Theme	Principal	Comments
Autonomy	Delta	"Some strategies just don't work for us because of our school's size, dynamics, and needs."
	Omega	"The same program will not work the same way at a different school. Sometimes the MMGW team does not realize that every school is not going to implement things the same way."
		"The presenters can't tell you how to implement it at your school or how to implement it in your classroom. It has to work for you."
	Kappa	"The way our school is set up, we haven't completely adopted and implemented the MMGW strategies."
	Alpha	"Any program can be a challenge when trying to implement it to fidelity school-wide."
New Program Initiatives	Delta	"The school district is working with a group through Scholastics for all administrators and their professional development. The district is also using the Daggett system of effective instruction and with that comes a whole series of other things."
	Omega	Omega Principal revealed that the students took a survey concerning the school's mission through the Scholastic coaching model.
	Kappa	"We are using part of the Scholastic strategies in the school district."
	Alpha	Alpha Principal would like to see a professional development that coincides with the Daggett system, rigor, relevance, and engagement.

Innovative Leadership	Delta	"I'm sure the MMGW strategies we use have increased student achievement, but without it I would just find another way. If I don't have the model, then I would go find something else that works."
		"This year we are dividing and conquering the grade levels. We have divided up the grade levels so you don't have all 8th graders on a hall, all 7th graders on a hall, and all 6th graders on a hall."
	Omega	"I think our school would increase with or without it because we already have a mindset." The principal also stated, "There's a diplomatic way to deal with everything. If what we're doing is not working, then we will find something else."
	Kappa	Kappa Principal revealed that the faculty was trying to move to a student-centered project based building. The principal stated, "I want to see teachers limit lectures and provide more student engagement, group work, and co-learning."

Findings of Teachers' Interviews

After reading and making notations from the teachers' interview transcripts, I was able to see six themes develop: class size, realistic professional development, sub-group support, student and parent accountability, student discipline, and time.

Table 12

Themes Emerging from Teachers' Interviews

Theme	Teacher	Comments
Class Size	Delta 2	"The one thing we need is smaller class sizes. We have the materials we need like smart boards, but we need the class size to come down. It's hard to interact with students in such a crowded environment."
	Kappa 1	"We need a better foundation. My class size and behavior problems hinder my ability to move the class at a steady pace. The strategies of the program sound great, but without a more stable environment they can't be implemented."
	Alpha 1	"I think the program is good if you have a class size under 25. It's really hard to do it if there are too many students."
		"Student success is limited by class sizes."
		"We need more teachers. We seem to have a reduction in force and it hurts the students."

Realistic Professional Development	Omega 2	"Well, I wish there was more training. Maybe more professional development or resources can be available to us especially at this level."
		"I didn't have any professional development on this program. I only received a handout for this program. They need to make sure teachers have enough information and consider doing professional development."
		"I want to go into an ideal classroom at another school site and see it in action. I don't want to just talk about it or read about it."
	Kappa 1	"We received handouts and talked about strategies. I think we need someone to come into the classroom and implement these strategies. It is different when you are talking and when you are doing it."
		"When the strategies were presented, it was wonderful. However, like I said before, we need more hands on training. The examples are good, but it doesn't always work out in the classroom."
		"I would like to see presenters come into the classroom with the kids and model the strategies."
	Alpha 1	"Teachers need to see a team come out and model the strategies with large class sizes. They should also show us how to manage the short 45-minute class periods."
	Delta 2	"It has the potential to really help a lot of teachers, but it needs to be implemented in the classroom in a live demonstration." "Maybe they could be more realistic to how many kids are in the classroom. They should show us how to work with up to 30 kids."
		"Many of the administrators were not well trained in the program. Because of that, some of the teachers got negative feedback. Also, some teachers felt as if they were re-inventing the wheel."
Subgroup Support	Omega 1	"I don't think special education students are included in the realm of normal students."
	Omega 2	"I can't think of any special practices for special education students."
	Kappa 1	"In our school, the special education teachers act more like babysitters. I need them to assist in the learning process."
	Alpha 2	"I had several ELA students. I feel like these students aren't getting much. I don't know how to teach these students. We have Saturday tutoring. Administrators tried to implement practices but dropped the ball."
	Delta 1	"This is where I'm very passionate. Our school puts on airs about this issue; I'm very disappointed with our performance."
		"We have a too thinly spread special education department. I have never had a special education teacher to work with me."

Student and Parent Accountability	Omega 1	"No Child Left Behind refocused most attention to standardized testing. If kids passed the test, it didn't matter if they actually learned the concept. The re-teach/re-test strategy does not require students to learn the concept."
		"We need to bring parents on board. Parents need to support what's going on in the school. We have to create a plan to get both sides together."
	Omega 2	"Overall, the students at my school are motivated and their parents want to see them succeed."
	Kappa 2	"The district seems to be focused on placing all the accountability on the teacher in 'I gotcha' moments. I would like to see more support from them in upholding accountability of parents and students."
	Delta 1	"I think the re-teach/re-test part of the program could use revision. In my classroom, most students re-guess instead of taking extra resources or studying."
		"We need to stop passing students at any cost. If students fail, we shouldn't add fluff grades."
Student Discipline	Omega 1	"Academic and behavior incentives must come from home. I've gotten cursed out more in the last 2 years than I have in my life. Our consequences are very ineffective. Academics are starting to decline because of this."
		"We need better classroom management. I need to know how to get my kids motivated."
	Kappa 1	"We could increase behavior incentives. We do have a behavior plan which includes giving the child a warning, parent conference, and administrative referral."
	Kappa 2	"I can't say that I know how the behavior plan works in this program. I have found that by using strategies and keeping students engaged, the behavior problems have decreased."
	Alpha 1	"The behavior strategies just go into the binder with the other ones. Teachers are told that all directives to the students must be positive and keep the students engaged."
	Alpha 2	"The only thing we reward is Accelerated Reader points. There aren't many rewards for other students. There is no discipline. We send students to administrators, and it's usually not handled well."
		"I would like to see them (school district) come into a classroom. I want them to see how students really are. If our principal could see what really goes on, that would be great."
	Delta 1	"I'm disappointed in how much we are expected to take before we can seek administrative help. Administrators are starting to side with parents and our school board is more concerned with perception and politics."

		"We have a Saturday school program to prevent a lot of suspensions. We offer drawings and give away prizes to encourage students to come to school."
Time	Omega 2	"There are so few minutes in the class period and so much to do. This program, in addition to the other things that need to be done, makes it difficult to get to the biggest priority."
	Alpha 1	"Classroom management and time management are two of the biggest challenges for me."
		"They should also show us how to manage the short 45-minute class periods."
	Delta 1	"Time. Time is the only thing that holds me back. In my eyes, I get paid for a certain amount of time, but it seems like I don't have a lot of it."
		"I have the will to implement the strategies; I just need the time."

Similar Themes

After reviewing and comparing the administrators' interview transcripts to the teachers' interview transcripts, I noticed two similar themes: teacher buy-in and professional development. The teacher buy-in theme showed supporting data from some administrators and teachers. Professional development was a reoccurring theme that some teachers and all of the administrators shared concerns about.

Table 13

Similar Themes for Principals and Teachers

Theme	Principal /Teacher	Comments
Teacher Buy-in	Omega Principal	"The more you allow people (teachers) to work with you on the program, then the more they are going to buy-in to it. It has to be a partnership with the teachers."
	Omega 2	"I think positive things would happen if every member of the faculty was on the same page and students see that consistency throughout all of their classrooms."
	Kappa Principal	"Even with the district support and professional development, you have to have teacher buy-in. Teachers have to buy-in to the program and have the ability to implement the strategies."

	Alpha 1	"Not many want to get into the trenches with the teachers, but we need to see that in order to increase success."
	Alpha 2	"If everyone were onboard 100%, it would work really well, but everyone is not onboard."
Professional Development	Delta Principal	"Administrators have been told that they can only attend one out-of-state conference per year. That's why I didn't go to the MMGW conference last year. I would have to pick a conference that's important to me for that year."
	Delta 2	"Maybe they could be more realistic to how many kids are in the classroom. They should show us how to work with up to 30 kids."
		"Many of the administrators were not well trained in the program. Because of that, some of the teachers got negative feedback. Also, some teachers felt as if they were re-inventing the wheel."
	Omega Principal	"It's difficult to send teachers to a meeting; you lose that instructional time. I would like more job embedded workshops. For the LDC workshop, they wanted everyone down there, but I sent one teacher to represent the school."
		"We could use an overview of specific things like how to work with your faculty. My teachers have gone to some workshops and they get very discouraged when they hear other teachers talk negative and give negative input."
		"Well, I wish there was more training. Maybe more professional development or resources can be available to us especially at this level."
	Omega 2	"I didn't have any professional development on this program. I only received a handout for this program. They need to make sure teachers have enough information and consider doing professional development."
		"I want to go into an ideal classroom at another school site and see it in action. I don't want to just talk about it or read about it."
	Kappa Principal	"Teachers need continued exposure to the programs, continued training, and continued coaching."
		Kappa Principal expressed a need for professional development that focused on rigor, relevance, and student engagement.
	Kappa 1	"We received handouts and talked about strategies. I think we need someone to come into the classroom and implement these strategies. It is different when you are talking and when you are doing it."
	Kappa 2	"When the strategies were presented, it was wonderful; however, like I said before, we need more hands on training. The examples are good, but it doesn't always work out in the classroom."
		"I would like to see presenters come into the classroom with the kids and model the strategies."

Alpha Principal	"We haven't received coaching for MMGW for a number of years, but we are always looking for strategies that work and professional development that works." Alpha Principal expressed a need for professional development that focuses on rigor, relevance, and student engagement.
Alpha 1	"Teachers need to see a team come out and model the strategies with large class sizes. They should also show us how to manage the short 45-minute class periods." "It has the potential to really help a lot of teachers, but it needs to be implemented in the classroom in a live demonstration."

Major and Minor Themes

When examining raw data, it is important to acknowledge that every theme does not have the same level of importance (Thomas, 2003); it is also important to understand how the themes are connected (Creswell, 2009). As a result, five major themes emerged from the data: teacher buy-in, professional development, student discipline, subgroup support, and new program initiative. The major themes reoccurred most often, but most importantly, they encompassed five minor themes: time management, class size, student/parent accountability, autonomy, and innovative leadership. The major themes emerged as critical elements from a social perspective, statistical significance, and multidimensional analysis (Schilling, 2006).

Limitations

Although I selected a qualitative design for my project study to answer the research questions, certain factors have been identified that may place limitation on the study. Case studies have time and activity constraints; consequently, the researcher must use various procedures to collect detailed information in a timely manner (Stake, 2011). This places a limit on the number of cases (middle schools), people to be interviewed,

and the length of interviews. Qualitative designs are highly interpretive; the time restraints can pose a challenge for the researcher to fully understand and articulate each case being studied.

Another limitation to the project study is that I relied on the participants to provide their perception and understanding of the MMGW program based solely on their individual experience with the program. I had to interpret the meaning that participants provided (Creswell, 2009). This could have been challenging, but open-ended interview questions were used so participants could easily express their views. Also, artifacts were collected to assist with the interpretation of the interview data.

Evidence of Quality

In case studies, some discrepancies or negative findings may arise in the data. Merriam and colleagues (2002) suggested that the researcher be engaged in the data collection phase for a sufficient "period to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon" (p. 26). When the collected data begins to repeat itself or becomes saturated and no new data surfaces, then that is a sign that enough time has been spent with data collection (Merriam, 2002). Conducting interviews with the teachers at the start of the study provided the opportunity to uncover and further examine data during the interview process with administrators.

Toma (2006) advised qualitative researchers provide rigorous standards that will convince readers to believe the data. He suggested the standards that are broadly called trustworthiness; if used, these standards will help studies become more credible, transferable, dependable, and confirm-able. Toma (2006) suggested credibility is achieved when the findings make sense from the stand point of the researcher, the

participants, and those reading the study. Credibility is enhanced when the researcher reports negative or discrepant data. Transferability is achieved when the study can be applied to similar cases and contexts. Transferability is enhanced when the study is translated in a manner in which other researchers and stakeholders can use the findings. Dependability is achieved when the same study yields similar results with the same participants but at a different time. Dependability is enhanced when the researcher continually searches for evidence that challenges the conclusions. Confirm-ability is achieved when the data can be confirmed by someone other than the researcher. It is enhanced when the findings and conclusions are based more on the participants than on the researcher. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirm-ability can be achieved through rigorous data collection, member checking, triangulation, and rich descriptions (Toma, 2006).

To ensure accuracy and credibility of the data analysis, I used two techniques: (a) *member-checking* to allow participants the opportunity to read the transcription of their interviews before data were analyzed (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013), and (b) *peer debriefing* to locate a person who would examine the study, pose questions, and provide critical feedback concerning the qualitative study so the account would be conceivable by non-participants (Houghton et al., 2013). During the *member-checking* process, participants were given the opportunity to review their results after the interview. Participants were able to clear up any wording or terminology that was vague or misleading. Some of the participants wanted me to reaffirm that all information would be kept confidential, and they wanted to read a copy of the final paper. The individual selected to review the study was a retired educator who served for approximately 28

years as a classroom teacher and college writing instructor. The individual was able to gain clarification on the topic by reading the study, taking notes, and soliciting feedback. This was done over a five-day period. Extensive data collection and multiple levels of data analysis helped to validate the accuracy of findings throughout the study (Houghton et al., 2013). The individual interviews and document analyses from each school were organized and analyzed to ensure each case was unique or could stand alone in the evaluation of the phenomenon (Patton, 2003). All interviews were used in the analysis for comparing and contrasting the cases (Patton, 2003).

Triangulation

The multiple sources of data collected were "compared with one another in a process called triangulation" (Lodico et al., 2006, p. 267). According to Hatch (2002), triangulation is a good way to improve on reporting findings and trustworthiness of the accounts in a study. Stake (2010) posited the findings appear subjective at first but will become a valid part of the report after triangulation and logical reasoning by a qualified reviewer. Triangulation was used to check and expand my interpretation of the data obtained (Stake, 2010). In an effort to "keep misunderstandings to a minimum" and to ensure "repetitious data gathering and critical review of what is being said" (Stake, 2006, p. 34), the triangulation process was necessary for data analysis. In this study the information from the teachers' interviews, administrators' interviews, and document analyses were compared to validate responses and to ensure the correct information was conveyed. Several unobtrusive, nonreactive data such as the schools' newsletter, website, calendars, and handbooks were also used in the triangulation process.

This study used three validation strategies commonly used by qualitative researchers: triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. I used interviews that I recorded, transcripts that I checked, and artifacts to confirm interview responses. Triangulation was used to collect multiple data sources in an effort to confirm findings (Houghton et al., 2013). Member-checking was used to ensure that all information was accurate and conveyed the meaning that participants expected (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). All of the participants were satisfied with the accuracy of their interview results. This process helped to eliminate significant errors that could have impacted the results of the study (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Lastly, peer-debriefing gave a non-participant the opportunity to read the study, ask questions, and provide feedback.

Conclusion

A case study is a traditional, qualitative research design used for many types of investigations and was determined to be appropriate for this study as opposed to a quantitative research design. This case study did incur a few limitations: time restraints, small sample size, and participant subjectivity toward the program. Given that the purpose of this qualitative case study was to capture the perspective of principals and teachers at four middle schools that have insight on the MMGW program, which was adopted by the school system in 2006 but never evaluated, I believe that all middle level administrators, teachers, and stakeholders should be advised on the results of this study. This study took shape as a program evaluation and has the potential to improve the perception of multiple issues concerning the MMGW program: negative and positive. The thorough description of the data in the study can be translated in other middle school settings and perhaps in other surrounding school districts.

Interview analyses revealed overwhelming discrepancies in the implementation of the MMGW model among the participating schools. With consent from the local school district, principals are allowed to exercise a great deal of autonomy and are at liberty to select whichever approach they deem effective for their school. Rather than fully implementing the MMGW model, it is evident that the middle schools have used and continue to use some components of the model along with supplemental reform measures: Daggett and Scholastic (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2014); this approach to school reform results in programs being "left on the shelf" (Schmoker, 2006). The schools are selecting and experimenting with strategies from these supplemental reform models that are not specific to the middle grades. The use of multiple strategies from multiple models may undermine the effects of the MMGW reforms and decrease the chances of school improvement. The literature indicates that school reform is more successful when it is carried out to fidelity and measured over time (Evans & Cowell, 2013). Interview analyses also revealed that teachers have developed a certain amount of confusion with the use of multiple models. Consequently, the middle level teachers are not committed to the MMGW model because it is either not mandatory at their school or because so many other models are being used; ultimately, the overall approach to school improvement has become vague and cluttered with a patchwork of methods. Being unable and unwilling to commit to the MMGW model but attempting to move forward with other supplemental models has created an unstructured learning environment for students and disconnected environment for teachers (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008; Armstrong, 2006). The middle grades model and the conceptual framework for this study indicate that school reform models must be

developmentally appropriate for students (SREB, 2012c). To ensure the optimum outcome for these middle schools, the reform models must be specific to the middle level learner, principals should use their autonomy in the most positive way and establish a sense of cohesion, and teachers must be prepared to commit to the best practices (Reeves, 2006).

Overall, the principals felt confident that their schools could achieve success with or without the MMGW model; if necessary, they would find a program that was suitable for their school's population. For example, Kappa Principal wanted to create a more student-centered school that focused on how students learn versus focusing on the way teachers teach. The literature indicates that effective leadership is crucial to ensure the success of schools; leaders are urged to redesign the culture and rethink conventional norms that are ineffective (Price, Jackson, Horne, Hannah, & Patton, 2012).

I conducted a program evaluation in the form of a case study in order to learn about the implementation of the MMGW program. The findings indicate the program was not being fully implemented, and after thoroughly discussing these findings with my committee, we decided the best project would be an evaluation report that highlights the findings and provides timely suggestions for improvement. The project genre was selected so data could be easily converted into a summary that explains the significance, methodology, conclusion, and recommendations. School officials will be provided with a copy of the report for their review and used in considering future implementation of the MMGW program. Lastly, in Section 3 I will provide an overview of the project, a rationale for the project, a project evaluation, and implications for social change.

Section 3: The Project

Section 3 provides a description of the project that I designed to address the problem identified in Section 1. This section provides a description of the project goals and a review of the current literature on teacher efficacy, professional development, student discipline, subgroup support, new program initiative, class size, time management, student/parent accountability, autonomy, and innovative leadership. The current literature supports the rationale for the project and provides information associated with the themes that emerged. Finally, this section will also provide clear implications for social change.

Description and Goals

The local problem was addressed during the data collection phase by evaluating a comprehensive school reform program that was used by middle schools in the local school district. The MMGW model was never evaluated as implemented in the district of study. A total of four principals and eight teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of, and their experiences with, the MMGW model. Data collected and analyzed in Section 2 suggest a need for more effective professional development and district support for teachers if the district plans to continue using the MMGW model.

Data reveal that the MMGW model is not the primary school reform program at the low-performing middle school and one of the high-performing middle schools that participated in the study. The other two high-performing middle schools seem to focus primarily on the MMGW strategies; however, they also used other programs. Participants from the four middle schools mentioned two alternative programs that the school district

adopted: Daggett and Scholastic (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2014). These two programs were being used primarily as alternative programs to assist with academic instruction but not as a CSR. The project document (see Appendix A) outlines the major themes of the program evaluation and includes recommendations that may help the school district improve implementation of the MMGW strategies.

My study focused on gauging the perceptions and understandings that principals and teachers had about the MMGW program. Local principals and teachers shared their experiences with the MMGW program, and I expect that other middle level educators in the school district will be able to relate to these similar experiences. Consequently, the findings may help educators improve implementation of the program. Based on my findings, I recommended a plan of action to provide teachers with updated MMGW training at local middle schools and principals with local coaching instead of relying on out-of-state conferences. I suggested teachers and principals be retrained based on the needs of their schools. After training, I recommended that teachers and principals collaborate and develop a new action plan that describes or lists the MMGW strategies the individual schools will implement. At the end of each school term, I suggested that each middle school use a survey to evaluate the implementation of the MMGW program. For local support, I suggested that the district establish a team of MMGW experts who would be readily available to provide support to the middle schools. Lastly, I recommended that all middle level educators and administrators have extensive, ongoing training on the middle school philosophy.

The recommended curriculum for this training is based on the educational guide *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*. The first edition of this guide was developed by the AMLE in 1982. The AMLE is now the NMSA. A fourth publication for *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* was released in 2010. With the young adolescent being the focus, the publication provided key characteristics of middle schools and promoted a partnership between students and educators. I believe this is an excellent tool for middle level educators who desire more information concerning middle school philosophy. According to my findings, the majority of principals and teachers agree that the MMGW program has great potential, but the implementation has been difficult because of various factors, including class size, behavior, multiple program implementation, time, professional development, district support, teacher attrition, and teacher buy-in. These factors will be discussed further in the literature.

The goal of this project was to help improve the implementation of the MMGW program that is currently being used by many of the middle schools in the school district. This project may provide other principals, teachers, and district leaders with a greater understanding of factors hindering full implementation of the MMGW program. My project used the voice of principals and teachers to increase the interest of their colleagues concerning the issues they face while implementing the MMGW program. As teachers and administrators at middle schools become more informed by the information provided in the program evaluation, they may be more effective and motivated in

implementing the MMGW strategies. Finally, the goal of this project was to also encourage ongoing program evaluations.

Rationale

First, I decided to conduct this project study because the literature in Section 1 revealed that school reform programs are available for implementation, but school districts do not always evaluate the programs after adoption and implementation. In the participating school district, some of the middle schools continued to be classified as low-performing in spite of the district's implementation of the MMGW model to increase student achievement. The program evaluation was important because it provided an opportunity to gain insight on the issue. Data gathered during the interviews indicates that the MMGW program itself was perceived by principals and teachers as effective; nevertheless, proper implementation of the program was problematic. Some of the teachers were not properly trained, class sizes hindered teacher and student performance, and other programs were implemented by the school district.

A program evaluation was selected as my project to address the problem because no formal program evaluation had ever been conducted. One-on-one interviews with teachers provided me with input from teachers' perspectives. In addition, one-on-one interviews with principals provided input from administrators' perspectives. I gained greater insight concerning the implementation of MMGW model at each school by allowing teachers and principals the opportunity to share their perceptions and understandings. Moreover, clear roles and expectations can be established for stakeholders if the school district decides to conduct this project study for a second year

(Deiger, 2010). By establishing roles and expectations, principals and teachers may feel more connected to the program. This project will also provide district leaders and other middle schools with an inside view of the problem since some of the local middle schools were categorized as failing. The information in the project provided leaders with a starting point on issues that can be addressed.

The project was used to address the problem related to the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the MMGW program. The program was evaluated from the perspective of the primary stakeholders: teachers and principals because the principals and teachers were ultimately responsible for the implementation of the program. By using these primary stakeholders in the study, the school district will be able to apply the project model for conducting similar program evaluations in the future. The strategy used for this program evaluation can be used by the school district to provide insight on the success of adopted programs at individual schools and the opportunity to consider if similar data emerges when evaluating such programs. The implementation of the same program at different schools can sometimes have inconsistent results; the program could be successful at one school but unsuccessful at another school. By using this evaluation as a model for evaluating programs, this may help the school district to identify which programs are being successfully implemented and which ones are not. Continual program evaluation may help the school district improve instruction, school climate, and student achievement. Relevant questions concerning program implementation, management, and effectiveness can be answered through a data-driven program evaluation (Deiger et al.,

2010). Additional program evaluations will assist the school district in making informed decisions in the future.

Review of the Literature

This literature review will define the type of evaluation selected for this study and describe the content of the formative report. A portion of this literature review will discuss the major or more significant themes that I identified from analysis of the data: teacher buy-in (teacher efficacy), professional development, student discipline, subgroup support, and new program initiative. The literature review illustrates the minor or less significant themes that emerged from the program evaluation: class size, time management, student/parent accountability, autonomy, and innovative leadership. The emerging themes were components that principals and teachers identified as barriers that limited full implementation of the MMGW program.

To begin the search for relevant literature, I used the following keywords: *teacher buy-in, effective professional development, discipline in middle grades, special education, reform programs, classroom management, class size, parental support, and school leadership*. The term *teacher buy-in* did not yield successful results, so I replaced it with *teacher efficacy* and *self-efficacy*. The term *special education* was replaced with more specific terms: *inclusion in middle grades, English-language learners,* and *behavior in middle grades*. The *terms middle school principal, school district leaders, school principal,* and *effective school leader* were used to expand the search on innovative leadership.

Formative Evaluation

During this study, a wealth of data were collected; it conveyed the perceptions of principals and teachers about the MMGW program as implemented at four local middle schools. The findings were translated into a formative report. A formative evaluation was chosen for this study, so data collected could be used to determine how the implementation of the program could be improved and perhaps support decision-making in terms of whether to continue or suspend local implementation of MMGW. The qualitative approach to this program evaluation gave the participants the opportunity to express concerns in detail versus expressing concerns via Likert scale or other surveys. Perceptions and understandings are easily expressed with words. Formative evaluations are conducted to ensure program goals are being met and to ensure information is used to improve upon the program if necessary (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997). A formative evaluation is used for several reasons in this study: (a) it provides a means to find out whether a project has reached its goals/objectives/outcomes, (b) it provides the opportunity to make results-based decisions on future spending allocation (taking into account unintended consequences), (c) it provides a chance to create a better understanding of the process of change, and (d) it determines what works, what does not, and why (Museum of Science, 2013). Ultimately, this study may assist the local school district in determining the future of the MMGW program.

Formative evaluations are usually conducted more than once or can be ongoing processes used to inform decisions to make changes to a program. Based on the findings, the majority of the participants did not believe the MMGW program needed changes;

however, those participants revealed several factors that hindered proper implementation of the program. Hence, the way the program is currently implemented could be improved upon.

Teacher Buy-In

Based on the findings, five of the 12 participants (42%) expressed concern about teacher buy-in for the MMGW program: two principals and three teachers. In this literature, teacher buy-in will be synonymous with the following terms: self-efficacy, teacher efficacy, and teacher commitment. Coladarci (1992) suggested much credit is given to Bandura for "providing the theoretical framework for studying teacher efficacy" (p. 323). His theory is based on human behavior coupled with an individual's beliefs concerning expectations. For example, a teacher's knowledge, talent, and skill set alone are not enough to achieve a desired outcome (Karabiyik & Korumaz, 2014). The teacher's knowledge, talent, and skill set must be paired with belief. In other words, teacher buy-in and belief in a program are critical for the proper implementation of a school-wide program. The teacher efficacy theory posits that there is an outcome expectation and an efficacy expectation; teachers believe specific attributes will promote desired outcomes, and they are capable of successfully executing that specific behavior (Coladarci, 1992; & Mojavezi and Tamiz, 2012). With this study, five of the participants did not express self-efficacy or confidence in executing the MMGW program in order to promote student learning (Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012).

Teacher self-efficacy is closely connected to a teacher's ability to implement a program successfully. According to Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012), studies have indicated

teacher self-efficacy has been tied to several key issues, including a teacher's willingness to implement new programs and professional commitment. Karabiyik and Korumaz (2014) posited that the level of a teacher's self-efficacy is among several main factors that affect academic success and the quality of instruction in the classroom. They suggested that a teacher's willingness to meet students' academic needs by using new methods is tied to high self-efficacy.

Teachers who maintain high self-efficacy possess various characteristics that are clearly displayed in the classroom and throughout the academic setting. According to (Coladarci, 1992), teachers with high self-efficacy will freely adopt change proposals associated with innovation and staff development programs. According to Karabiyik and Korumaz (2014), teachers who exhibit high self-efficacy increase performance and participation for their organization; they tend to be open-minded, effective communicators, cooperative, and willing learners. According to Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012), teachers with high self-efficacy "tend to be more organized, display greater skills of instruction, questioning, explaining, and providing feedback to students having difficulties, and maintaining students on task" (p. 483). These teachers are more likely to use several models in order to meet the needs of their students. Teachers who possess high self-efficacy are more likely to use innovative teaching methods, use management approaches to reduce problems, maintain on-task behavior, implement teaching strategies that foster autonomy, and support special needs students (Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012). Overall, self-efficacy is a desired trait that effective teachers possess; these teachers are not afraid of new challenges because they believe in their skills.

If teachers believe in a comprehensive reform program, they will see a higher success rate with proper program implementation. A teacher's belief in a program could potentially minimize negative attitudes towards a program and eventually help to increase self-efficacy. If teachers have a positive attitude towards a program, this could create a better sense of cohesion among teachers and administrators.

Professional Development

Based on the findings in the study, eight of the 12 participants (67%) expressed concerns about professional development; this was all four principals and four teachers. With the adoption of CCSS across the country, school districts are left with the challenge of not only effectively educating their students but also effectively educating their teachers (Gulamhussein, 2013). School districts are providing teachers with plenty of learning opportunities. In a recent study, 9 out of 10 teachers reported participating in some type of learning opportunity, but the same 9 out of 10 also reported that the learning opportunity was not beneficial (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). DeMonte (2013) listed three well-documented complaints about professional development that has no effect on student learning: it does not relate to actual teaching practice, it is too broad to address the issues teachers encounter, and it is implemented infrequently with no opportunities for follow-up.

Another issue with professional development is the terminology; *effective* or *high quality* professional development can take on different meanings for educators. For example, teachers might perceive professional development as being effective simply because they enjoyed the activities. Even though this enjoyment has little to do with

student achievement, the teachers may or may not implement the strategies in their classroom. Some education reformers believe much of the professional learning opportunities for teachers are typically "thin, sporadic, and of little use when it comes to improving teaching", and schools are relying on "short-term, episodic, and disconnected professional learning for teachers—the kinds of training programs that are unlikely to positively influence teaching and improve students' achievement" (DeMonte, 2013, p. 1). No matter what the debate is concerning effective professional development, the fact is, professional learning opportunities are essential components for teacher learning, student achievement, and comprehensive school reform (DeMonte, 2013). When teachers have opportunities to learn new curriculum, strategies, or retrain, school districts should provide professional development that will connect to the big scheme of things versus disjointed and irrelevant professional development.

Researchers have compiled a list of several characteristics for effective professional development programs that achieve their intended goal. The Institute for the Advancement of Research in Education at AEL (2004, p. 14) developed a list of nine components of effective professional development: "(1) addresses student-learning needs, (2) incorporates hands-on technology use, (3) job-embedded, (4) application to specific curricula, (5) addresses knowledge, skills, and beliefs, (6) occurs over time, (7) occurs with colleagues, (8) provides technical assistance and support to teachers, and (9) incorporates evaluation." This list was compiled from research on trial studies with data associated with quasiexperimental studies. Gulamhussein (2013) reviewed a 2012 Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) study that involved 7,491 videos of teacher

instruction from 1909 to the present. The study revealed that not much has changed in the form of teacher practice; the majority of the teaching instruction was not promoting critical thinking skills (Gulamhussein, 2013). It resides in the power of district administrators to ensure professional development for teachers will promote a change in teaching practices and increase student achievement.

Meeting the needs of the learner is paramount when considering the quality of professional development opportunities. Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Shapely (2007) conducted a comprehensive study that analyzed 1,300 studies encompassing professional development. They discovered that only the lengthy--more than 14 hours--intensive professional development programs had an impact on student achievement; this would be a systematic, long-term approach that involves the participants in collaborative decision-making (Mayotte, Wei, Lamphier, & Doyle, 2013). Recent studies have also revealed that teacher change can be linked to intensity and duration of professional learning (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). Workshop style-- one day--sessions had no effect on student achievement and failed to change teachers' teaching practices. Even though participants usually report limited change in their classroom practice and student achievement, one-shot workshops remain very popular among professional development designs (Mayotte et al., 2013; Yoon et al., 2007). This clearly shows a gap in practice and research; therefore, when preparing for professional development opportunities, school districts must remember who the primary learner is and cater to their needs.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (2009) conducted a meta-analysis study to determine which types of professional development programs showed growth in teacher preparedness and changes in student achievement. The researchers revealed a limited amount of studies clearly show a direct correlation between teacher preparation and student outcome. Timperley (2008) synthesized a breath of research on teacher professional development that provided a positive influence on student outcome. Based on the research synthesis, Timperley (2008) identified ten key principles that were connected to professional development that contributed to valued student outcome.

1. Focus on valued student outcomes- Professional learning experiences that focus on the links between particular teaching activities and valued student outcomes are associated with positive impacts on those outcomes.
2. Worthwhile content- The knowledge and skills developed are those that have been established as effective in achieving valued student outcomes.
3. Integration of knowledge and skills- The integration of essential teacher knowledge and skills promotes deep teacher learning and effective changes in practice.
4. Assessment for professional inquiry- Information about what students need to know and do is used to identify what teachers need to know and do.
5. Multiple opportunities to learn and apply information- To make significant changes to their practice, teachers need multiple opportunities to learn new information and understand its implications for practice. Furthermore, they need to encounter these opportunities in environments that offer both trust and challenge.

6. Approaches responsive to learning processes-The promotion of professional learning requires different approaches depending on whether or not new ideas are consistent with the assumptions that currently underpin practice.
7. Opportunities to process learning with others- Collegial interaction that is focused on student outcomes can help teachers integrate new learning into existing practice.
8. Knowledgeable expertise- Expertise external to the group of participating teacher is necessary to challenge existing assumptions and develop the kinds of new knowledge and skills associated with positive outcomes for students.
9. Active leadership- Designated educational leaders have a key role in developing expectations for improved student outcomes and organizing and promoting engagement in professional learning opportunities.
10. Maintaining momentum- Sustained improvement in student outcomes requires that teachers have sound theoretical knowledge, evidence-informed inquiry skills, and supportive organizational conditions. (Timperley, p.8-24)

High-quality professional development is multilayered and should not be confused with one-shot workshops. Professional development should be ongoing teacher learning that focuses on influencing teaching practices and student outcome. Many researchers posit that job embedded professional learning is effective for teacher learning and student development based on its design characteristics: (a) occurs for multiple days and weeks, (b) emphasizes teaching and learning of explicit educational curriculum, (c) connected to other school initiatives, and (d) builds strong working rapport between teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, Powers, and Killion

(2010) researched hundreds of meta-analysis studies that provided guidance on developing high quality job embedded professional learning programs. This type of job related activity is ideal for teacher learning because "adults learn best when they are self-directed, building new knowledge upon preexisting knowledge, and aware of the relevance and personal significance of what they are learning—grounding knowledge in actual events" (Croft et al., 2010, p. 8). These are opportunities for teachers to be active participants in a learning procedure that focuses on the need of their school and their students. For example, job embedded professional development is actual practice that occurs at the school, in real time, with real students; it can also occur inside the classroom, in nearly real time without students, or inside the school away from students (Croft et al., 2010). Just like student-learners, teachers learn more effectively and retain information longer when actively engaged and presented with relevant material in a realistic time frame.

Formats for job embedded professional development can include many strategies: "action research, case discussions, coaching, critical friends' groups, data teams/assessment development, examining student work, implementing individual professional growth/learning plans, lesson study, mentoring, portfolios, professional learning communities, and student groups" (Croft et al., 2010, p. 6-7). Learning can be a complicated process for both teachers and students; therefore, just like students, teachers benefit from various learning opportunities. Yoon et al., (2007) suggested that future studies on professional development fully address the direct effect on teacher learning and its indirect effect on student outcome. Professional development might be 'high

quality' in theory, but it cannot simply focus on teacher learning; it has to be linked to student learning in the academic setting (Mayotte et al., 2013). Ultimately, professional development opportunities are used to equip teachers with new ideas, strategies, and resources that may have a positive effect on student outcomes.

Student Discipline

Based on the findings in the study, seven of the eight teachers (86%) expressed concern about student discipline hindering implementation of MMGW strategies. Teachers and students have the most interaction with each other throughout the school day. This daily interaction can be positive, negative, motivating, or discouraging. Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012) described the teacher-student relationship with a theory called Gardner motivation theory (1985). The theory suggests that "students are motivated to learn and achieve when they perceive their teachers care about them" (Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012, p. 484). The authors called these teachers efficient, caring, and democratic. Caring teachers make their subject area more meaningful, provide constructive feedback, seem enthusiastic about learning, and are sensitive to students' needs. Ultimately, all of these factors influence the overall classroom climate. According to Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012), teachers are responsible for many critical functions of the classroom environment: "classroom discipline, implementation of approaches and methods to learning, and interacting with the students in the classroom" (p. 484). So much is required in the daily function of a classroom, and teachers must be prepared to facilitate every aspect to ensure optimal student outcomes.

Watson, Miller, Davis, and Carter (2010) suggested a teacher's personality plays a far greater role in student achievement than teacher skill and knowledge. Consequently, effective classroom management combined with high levels of academic instruction are closely associated with a teacher's characteristics (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Middle level teachers have a greater advantage in their classrooms when they communicate effectively with students, establish a rapport, and understand adolescent development rather than simply understanding content knowledge (White et al., 2013). According to Watson et al. (2010), Stronge created a comprehensive checklist of affective qualities of effective teachers after summarizing more than 300 studies of effective teaching. The list includes six nonacademic qualities: (a) caring, students believe teachers are trustworthy; (b) fairness and respect, students believe teachers will follow through on commitments; (c) interactions with students, teachers communicate with students whenever or wherever the opportunity arises; (d) enthusiasm and motivation, teachers believe they can teach and students can learn; (e) attitude toward teaching, teachers are dedicated to their profession; and (f) reflective practice, teachers are consistently improving their craft.

For the sake of research and social change, middle schools are often compared to elementary schools. Researchers have found several factors that contribute to unwarranted behavior among middle school students. Davis (2006) suggested that middle schools tend to have an impersonal structure, atmosphere, and an increased student-teacher ratio. The researcher suggests that middle school students have a difficult time transitioning from elementary to middle school; moreover, motivation and academic

performance declines (Davis, 2006). According to Davis (2006), students perceived "their middle school teachers were less friendly, less supportive, and less caring than their elementary school teachers" (p. 194). Davis also suggests teachers assumed students performed better for those teachers they admired and teachers that challenged them. This work ethic was based on the supportive relationship that teachers developed throughout the school year.

Strahan, Faircloth, Cope, and Hundley (2007), explored the dynamics of a teacher's attempt to reach students and the student's feedback in the middle school setting. The authors discovered that "students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school" (p. 21). Middle school students will aim for success if they believe adults in their environment are concerned about their individuality and academic achievement. The authors suggest that teachers should make every effort to reconnect with students that have become disconnected with the learning process. When students have a sense of belonging, it promotes cognitive, behavioral, and emotional involvement (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015). Students feeling disconnected from their learning environment is "a major cause of under achievement", and this causes the "inability to control one's self-regulation" (p. 21). School success and self-regulation go hand in hand in the learning environment. Strahan et al. (2007) provided a description of goal orientations students possess: (a) performance goal orientation, to complete a task to get a grade; (b) mastery goal orientation, to improve on one's own ability; and (c) "work avoidant" goal orientation, to complete a task with minimal effort. The "work avoidant" goal orientation characterizes students that are disconnected academically.

Strahan et al. (2007) discovered that disconnected students made very little progress and often developed a “survival orientation” toward activities. These students practiced looking busy, waited for the teacher’s assistance, and created disruption in the classroom. In order to break the cycle of academic disconnection, teachers are encouraged to form working relationships with students and engage in learning activities. Years of research dating back to 1908 shows that school environment is associated with healthy and safe relationships in school, student engagement, and teaching practices (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). According to the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) for middle schools, student behavior and attitudes are dependent upon several factors: satisfaction with school, perception of school, well-being, education aspirations, education expectations, and school engagement (Tuttle et al., 2013). When students feel alienated in the learning environment, they disengage, develop negative attitudes, and underperform academically. If teachers recognize this behavior in a student, they should try to reconnect the student to the learning environment.

Subgroup Support

Based on the findings in the study, five of eight teachers (63%) expressed concerns about inadequate support for subgroups. There are several placement options for special education students: inclusion, resource, self-contained, and alternative. Inclusion refers to special education students being served in a general education classroom with their peers without disabilities; resource refers to special education students being removed from the general classroom for a certain time frame to receive services; self-contained refers to special education students that remain in the special education

classroom throughout the day; and alternative refers to special education students that receive services outside of the general public school (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). Idol (2006) used the term *mainstreaming* to describe a placement option for special education students similar to resource. Idol (2006) suggested that inclusion and mainstreaming are ideal placement options for students who are academically and physically challenged; these students should be educated in the least restrictive environment. A least restrictive environment provides special needs students the perfect opportunity for academic engagement with their typical peers by using the same regular curriculum (Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, & Haines, 2015; Obiakor, 2011). The placement of students does not guarantee success or appropriate practice. Obiakor et al. (2012) posited, "there are occasions where placement in general or special education does not result in improved academic or social outcomes for students with or without disabilities" (p. 480). Practice takes precedence over placement; general classroom teachers must modify their teaching practices so they can effectively educate the exceptional child and the typical child (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). Ultimately, it does not matter where a student is sitting inside a school; if they are not being provided with appropriate practice that matches their learning ability, then the placement is ineffective.

Many students with exceptionalities receive services in the general classroom; however, nearly two million exceptional students do not receive appropriate services designed specifically to maximize their potential (Obiakor, 2011). Because of legal mandates, Carpenter and Dyal (2007) posited that school principals are responsible for staffing their special education department with content area specialist or they must use

an inclusion model to service their exceptional students. According to Santoli, Sachs, Romey, and McClurg (2008), research showed the unique interdisciplinary formation of middle schools was ideal and conducive for effective inclusion. Middle schools are viewed as the hallmark of diversity, social behavior, and belonging; those attributes of the middle school culture would provide special education students the best environment for inclusion (Santoli et al., 2008). Inclusion in a secondary education environment ensures that special needs students receive coaching from regular classroom teachers who are qualified in the content area versus special education teachers who are not content area specialist (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). Middle school principals have the opportunity to maximize their resources by using interdisciplinary teams when providing inclusion services to their exceptional students.

First, a school's definition of inclusion will determine how classes are structured and how resources are distributed (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015). Schools with successful inclusive communities provide collaborative support programs for general education teachers. A consulting teacher model is when the consultant works directly with the classroom teacher; a cooperative teacher model is when the special education teacher and the regular classroom teacher coteach in the same classroom; and a supportive resource program is when resource teachers and instructional assistants are used (Idol, 2006). Carpenter and Dyal (2007) posited that secondary principals must be proactive and knowledgeable when providing "support and tools that foster collaboration and promote inclusive practices" (p. 346). In order to establish the success of an inclusive environment, principals are encouraged to set clear teacher expectations and student

outcomes before instruction takes place (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). If the secondary principal sets the standard for an inclusive environment, things can flow smoothly for the teachers and students.

Even though classroom instruction is a main function of inclusion, Obiakor et al. (2012) suggested the most essential part of inclusion is not where instruction happens but what happens. For example, when elementary students with learning disabilities (LD) reach middle school, the reading goals often disappear from their Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and the general education teacher is often unaware of their LD students (King-Sears & Bowman-Kruhm, 2011). Middle schools typically use the coteaching model to deliver instruction to students with IEPs, but instead of giving those students specialized and individualized instruction, the teachers rely heavily on accommodations and modifications (King-Sears & Bowman-Kruhm, 2011). Accommodations and modifications in the general education classroom cannot take the place of consistent, intensive instruction that many LD students require in the middle school setting (King-Sears & Bowman-Kruhm, 2011). Moreover, it is important for principals to ensure these students are identified in a timely manner and advocate appropriate services for them.

Some students in middle school struggle with social and emotional issues, but students diagnosed with behavioral disorders experience problems at a disproportionate rate. In the middle school setting, students diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a chronic disorder, “experience higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and school dropout, as well as poorer report card performance” (Schultz,

Evans, & Serpell, 2009, p. 15). Vannest, Temple-Harvey, and Mason (2009) posited that students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) typically have negative school experiences, poor grades, and poor social skills. Research concerning students with EBD indicates that teachers typically lack knowledge, training, and academic intervention that is required to provide these students with proficient instruction (Vannest et al., 2009). According to Burke (2015), EL students in middle school were suspended or expelled more often than non-EL students in 2011-2012. These students had lower scores on state reading and math assessments than EL students that were not expelled or suspended.

New Program Initiative

Based on the findings in the study, all of the principals mentioned a new program that the local district had implemented: Daggett System for Effective Instruction. This system is categorized as a school improvement model. According to Hanover Research (2014), DSEI is driven by five themes: leadership, high expectations, relationships, student opportunities, and professional culture. This system can be described as a non-traditional, student focus, teacher supported, research-based approach to improving instruction and instructional capacity. Teachers, instructional leaders, and organizational leaders are encouraged to drop traditional practices that hinder overall student achievement (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2014). For example, teachers are encouraged to promote active learning versus passive learning or promote growth versus proficiency. Instructional leaders are encouraged to change the system versus managing the current system or adapt to unique situations versus promoting

standard procedures. Organizational leaders are encouraged to provide flexible school structures that will support student needs versus rigid structures that only support adult needs or encourage long-term improvement versus short term results (Hanover Research Council, 2014). When schools adopt a new program, it is important for school leaders to restructure the schools learning and social environment.

No matter which program a school district adopts or a school implements, the adoption and implementation alone will not guarantee a favorable outcome. Researchers suggest that an overwhelming majority of school improvement is contingent upon several factors: school stability, school culture, staff engagement, and district awareness (Evans & Cowell, 2013). Program fidelity is also difficult to gauge because schools will sometimes adapt programs by "picking and mixing" approaches; this adaptation to programs may cause inconsistent levels of participation from school to school (Evans & Cowell, 2013). In order to eliminate the many challenges of program implementation, the organization should have the following process in place: needs assessment, strategic planning, implementation and execution, leadership enhancement and teacher training, and sustainability (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2013). Before a school adopts a program, they should develop a process that will guide them through the unexpected challenges of implementation.

Class Size

Based on findings in the study, three of the eight teachers (38%) expressed concern about class size; none of the administrators mentioned class size. The debate over class size reduction effecting student achievement has been a controversial issue for

several reasons: (a) it is typically a legislative action or state policy; (b) researchers have not come to a clear consensus on the topic; and (c) it is a complex and expensive intervention for states (Bascia, 2010; Cho, Glewwe, & Whitler, 2012; Whitehurst & Chingos, 2011). Creating smaller classes for teachers is a complicated process, and researchers are not in agreement that it is worth the effort.

According to Whitehurst and Chingos (2011), reducing the size of a teacher's class would involve a domino effect of reducing the size of all classes across an entire state. Class size reduction requires more teachers to be hired and probably more administrators. With that in mind, this would involve a state level decision on determining which class size would prove most effective for student learning outcomes; this would require states to allocate more expenditure toward teachers' salaries and other resources (Chingos, 2013). Just like a domino effect, if more has to go toward teacher salaries, then something else would be cut from the state's education budget. Many states are not willing to cut other areas in their education budget in an effort to hire additional teachers to accommodate reduction in class sizes.

Some researchers believe many factors have to be considered before concluding that decreasing class size is effective in improving student outcomes: classroom environment, teaching practices, pupils' characteristics, grade level, and pupils' ages. For example, Konstantopoulos and Li (2012) argue that "value-added" from the effects of smaller classes have not been properly investigated. For instance, a substantial amount of studies on decreased class size has not provided enough evidence to show the effects that smaller classes have on all learners; it is also unclear as to how many years those students

should continue learning in a small class environment (Konstantopoulos & Li, 2012). Teaching practices, student behavior, socio-economic status, cost, and curriculum are other contributing factors that should be considered when measuring the effects of class size reduction. Without paying close attention to other learning factors, it is challenging to establish the "value added"; this also causes discrepancies in some of the current research. For example, Schanzenback (2014) suggests that class size matters when it comes to student achievement and teacher effectiveness. According to Schanzenback (2014), a reduction in class size allows students in the early grades and students from disadvantaged backgrounds to perform better; it also gives teachers more opportunities to engage with their students. More high-quality research is needed for older grades and the impact of class size reduction (Bruhwiler & Blatchford, 2011; Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2009; Schanzenback, 2014). Many researchers agree that a reduction in class size would provide the avenue to high-quality instruction and improved education, but it is not always guaranteed that classroom teachers will revamp their teaching practices to take advantage of the shift in class size (Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011; Zyngier, 2014). Even though class reduction could potentially help to improve classroom instruction, it is important to know that teacher ability, student ability, and class environment may also affect the process.

Over the years, class reduction or placing a cap on class sizes has been a popular intervention for school improvement. The intuitive response to reducing class sizes seems simplistic in nature; however, the undertaking is extremely complex and expensive (Maasoumi, Millimet, & Rangaprasad, 2005). For example, according to Jepsen and

Rivkin (2007), the state of California decided to implement a state-level class reduction policy after observing the results from a research study that was conducted in Tennessee from 1985-1986 and 1988-1989: Project Star (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio Experiment). California spent $11 billion between the years of 1996-1997 and 2004-2005 in an effort to decrease classes to 20 students or less in all K-3 (Hattie, 2005). Consequently, an astounding 25,000 new teaching jobs had to be created within the first two years of implementation of the class size reduction policy (Jepsen & Rivkin, 2007). With so many teaching positions available, there was an influx of non-certified and inexperienced teachers hired across the state of California. Although some believe reduction in class size will lead to more individualized instruction, high-quality instruction, and positive behavior, the research shows that reduction in class size carries significant costs and various uncertainties for states (Chingos, 2013). Reduction in class size is a state-mandated process that may be lengthy, and student achievement is not guaranteed.

Time Management

Based on the findings in the study, three of the eight teachers (38%) expressed concern about insufficient time to deliver instruction; none of the administrators mentioned time management. For several decades, middle grade advocates have suggested flexible scheduling, but the majority of middle schools continue to use the fixed, seven or eight instructional periods (Daniel, 2007). This is a more traditional scheduling system which allows for 41 to 55 minutes of instructional time per period. With traditional scheduling, students take more classes during the day which results in

teachers having less time to deliver engaging and diverse instruction. Over the years, several flexible scheduling models have been adopted and implemented by high-achieving middle schools.

With flexible schedules, teachers have the opportunity to devote more time towards meaningful instruction: 75 to 150 minutes (Hanover Research Council, 2009). This flexibility provides teachers with more time to deliver instruction in various ways: whole group, small group, project-based learning, technology-based learning, and peer tutoring. According to Daniel (2007), block scheduling or four-by-four (4X4) is a popular model for flexible scheduling. The 4X4 model has very distinct characteristics: the school year is divided into 2 semesters, each course ends in a semester, students attend the same 4 classes each day for an entire semester, and the instructional time lasts for approximately 90 minutes. This schedule provides more time for teachers and students to engage in core subjects and less time transitioning throughout the day; advisory periods, planning periods, lunch, and electives are also incorporated into the daily schedule (Daniel, 2007). With flexible scheduling, teachers are responsible for delivering quality lessons for only 4 classes each day instead of 7, and students are accountable for completing homework assignments and taking tests for only 4 core subjects instead of 7 (Harmston, Pliska, Ziomek & Hackmann, 2003). Flexible scheduling is not a new strategy, in fact, it has been a key component in the middle school movement (McEwin & Green, 2011). Some researchers agree that flexible scheduling in middle grades will prepare adolescents for similar models that are already being used in most high schools.

According to McCoy (2013), many middle grade teachers continue to use an ineffective structure of class time that is typically divided into two segments: delivering content and completing assignments. This common strategy promotes disengagement, boredom, and disruptive behavior. Since adolescents learn best through active engagement, McCoy (2013) suggests that teachers break the instructional period into several smaller activities that follow-up with higher order thinking and reflective questions. This strategy keeps students fully engaged for the entire instructional period and helps to eliminate excessive downtime. Filling the instructional period with engaging activities will require a large amount of preparation and dedication from the teacher and resources from the school.

Student/Parent Accountability

Based on the findings in the study, four of the eight teachers (50%) expressed concern about student accountability and parental involvement. Middle school is a transitional point when young people experience mental, physical, and psychological changes continuously; parental involvement is a critical component during this time. Parental involvement or engagement is an opportunity for parents to advocate for their child in various aspects that are not limited to the school setting (Howard & Reynold, 2008). Researchers agree that parental involvement has a direct impact on student learning and continuous success (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; Shim, 2013). Parents have a critical role in developing a student's attitude and behavior concerning academic engagement and aggression (Finigan-Carr, Copeland-Linder, Haynie, & Cheng, 2014). Nevertheless, much of the research suggests that parental involvement usually declines

during a child's middle school and high school years (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013). There are several contributing factors for the lack of parental involvement: teachers feel ill-prepared to partner with parents, parents feel insecure about partnering with schools, parents have different parenting styles, and schools have vague expectations concerning parental involvement.

As far back as John Dewey (1902), researchers claimed that teachers sometimes neglect to transfer techniques from teacher programs to the real world classroom: a gap between theory and practice (White et al., 2013). Many teacher programs that address parental involvement are usually early childhood, elementary education, and special education programs. This disparity leaves middle grade teachers ill-equipped to promote parental involvement. With this lack of training, teachers typically use reactionary strategies that simply involve conferences when concerns arise or a difficult situation occurs. Researchers suggest that teachers be trained in more proactive strategies to promote parental involvement: year-long partnerships, class-originated newsletters, interactive homework, workshops, and constant contact. Teachers are encouraged to consistently communicate with parents in various ways: phone calls, emails, letters, meetings, home visits, newsletters, conferences, positive notes, text messages, and internet tools (Bergman, 2013). With increased technology, there are various ways for teachers and parents to communicate on a regular basis.

Some parents refrain from participating in school activities or working with teachers if they perceive teachers and administrators as having poor attitudes; this can include an uninviting school climate or a cultural disconnection. Bennett-Conroy (2012)

suggests that parents must perceive that school staff is caring and can be trusted. Based on several focus groups and the use of the critical race theory, researchers found that parents of color sometimes feel “powerless, silenced, and marginalized” when forming a partnership with schools (Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014). Consequently, family engagement is encouraged versus parental involvement. Family engagement is not a prescription for what parents should do, but it is a culturally responsive paradigm used to establish a reciprocal connection between families and schools (Bergman, 2013; Yull et al., 2014). Family engagement should be used as a vehicle to address concerns and maintain a trusting relationship among families and schools.

All parents are not equipped with the same parenting styles; some parents are authoritarian/autocratic, authoritative/democratic, or permissive/laissez-faire (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009). According to Robbins and Searby (2013), parental involvement can have a different meaning for parents, teachers, students, and geographic locations. Without a common understanding of parental involvement, misconceptions form; this results in low levels of parental involvement. Robbins and Searby (2013) suggest middle school interdisciplinary teams establish clear strategies and guidance for parental involvement in an effort to engage parents more effectively. This will require implicit training and orchestrated practices, so the interdisciplinary teams can function as a bridge to effectively connect parents to their child and the school. Interdisciplinary teams in the middle school setting are designed to involve adolescent learners in ways that a single teacher cannot by creating small learning communities; therefore, parental involvement would be a team effort and not simply the responsibility of one teacher. Many researchers

encourage teachers to work collaborative with colleagues towards a common goal versus working in isolation (Lane, Oakes, & Menzies, 2014). According to Robbins and Searby (2013), research involving middle school interdisciplinary teams associated with parental involvement is limited; nevertheless, the modest research uncovered great benefits for adolescents and parent-teacher communication.

Consistent parental involvement provides significant benefits for parents, students, teachers, schools, and the overall community (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011). A large number of students have linked parental involvement to positive academic and behavioral outcomes, homework completion, positive attitudes, better attendance, lower dropout rates, fewer special education referrals, and decreased student retentions (Smith et al., 2011). Bergman (2013) posits that parental involvement should be viewed as a partnership that flows in many directions. Families and schools are accountable for making continuous contributions to the partnership (Patel & Stevens, 2010). Parental involvement should not cease after elementary school; this involvement should continue throughout the middle school years.

Autonomy

Based on the findings in the study, all of the principals expressed a certain amount of autonomy delegated by the local district. As teachers gain more knowledge and expertise, they begin to expect a certain amount of autonomy in their profession (Torres, 2014). Researchers agree that policymakers have increased the demands on teachers and school accountability in recent years; however, Boser and Hanna (2014) discovered that most teachers across the United States reported a high level of autonomy in their

classroom instruction and other methods. This data was collected in several recent surveys: Scholastic and Bill & Melinda Gates survey, MetLife teacher survey, and the 2012 Gallop poll. Although most states layout the framework for standards of learning for each grade level and teachers are accountable for delivering the curriculum, some administrators are not following up on the delivery and teacher understanding. Boser and Hanna (2014) believe this approach is providing teachers with too much autonomy in the learning process. Consequently, unsupervised autonomy may lead to poor classroom instruction and poor student achievement.

When teachers are given autonomy and leadership roles, it is critical for principals to act as the catalyst and ongoing developer (Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013). As catalysts, principals assist teachers with understanding federal, state, and local policies. As ongoing developers, principals support professional learning and student-centered environments (Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013). Overall, the level of autonomy that teachers and principals possess is dependent upon decisions made by local district administrators.

Innovative Leadership

Based on the findings in the study, three of the four principals (75%) made statements that showed innovative leadership. Strong leadership has been one of the most consistent findings of successful schools: school building level, district level, and state level (Whitney, Maras, & Schisler, 2012). Leadership is a critical role that principals instantly step into when they are placed over a school. The principal cannot lead effectively without the support of the local district leaders. Therefore, it is important for district leaders, especially the superintendent, to be authentic, forward thinking, resilient,

optimistic, and consistent; these characteristics will help them establish long-term, transparent relationships with teachers and principals (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013). Bird et al. (2013) suggests that a superintendent's behavior concerning leadership should promote ethical changes aligned with executive actions conceptualized through school improvement practices. Since principals are the driving force behind the overall success of their schools, Lock and Lummis (2014) suggest districts provide principals with opportunities to make financial, operational, and program autonomy decisions in exchange for this responsibility.

According to Bambrick-Santoyo (2012), exceptional leaders should focus on 7 areas to improve student learning: data-driven instruction, observation and feedback, instructional planning, professional development, student culture, staff culture, and managing school leadership teams. Sustained change is critical for schools that need improvement; strong and committed leaders are urged to redesign how time is spent during the day, redesign the culture of the school as an organization, and rethink conventional norms (Price et al., 2012). Mediocre, inconsistent leadership will not help with establishing and maintaining school improvement.

Leadership and its effects on student learning have been well documented; however, research on the leadership of middle grades is limited (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Many researchers believe middle school principals face unique challenges in their building: the exceptional developmental stage of 10 to 14 year olds, the variety of grade configurations, and the awareness of the long term effects of middle grades (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Lounsbury (2015) reminds middle level leaders to take advantage of the

unique and urgent mission of educating the whole adolescent; this is a golden opportunity to shape impressionable adolescents into the adults they will become.

Implementation

The goal of this project study was to conduct an evaluation of the MMGW model. As a result of the evaluation, I prepared an evaluation report for district administrators; the report consists of the results and recommendations for successful implementation of the program (Appendix A). The report and recommendations will be presented to the superintendent and assistant superintendent. I will offer support and guidance to the district to help find solutions that will strengthen the existing program in ways that are financially feasible.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

During the program evaluation, there were a few resources in place that were identified in the MMGW model. The school system was dedicated to ensuring that all middle school students achieve academically and behaviorally. The district demonstrated its support to the middle schools by providing professional development that correlates with the MMGW model: Language Design Collaborative (LDC) and Math Design Collaborative (MDC). The school system also had middle level administrators at the district office who were available for principals' questions and concerns. Principals had the autonomy to use the MMGW components in a way most conducive for their school's environment. Principals and some of their teaching staff had the option of attending a large MMGW conference that was held out-of-state each summer.

Potential Barriers

Although the school district has made a commitment to this program, it has also elected to incorporate supplemental programs this year: Daggett and Scholastic. The middle school principals and teachers seem to be leaning more toward using the Daggett system because some of the teachers have not received current training in the MMGW model, and they are not familiar with some of the strategies.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

The evaluation report will be presented to the administrators of the district upon successful completion of this study. Some of the recommendation--ongoing, job embedded professional development--will be demonstrated to the district administrators so they can see the potential benefits.

I will be available for principals and district administrators to discuss in detail the recommendations and brainstorm possible solutions to specific barriers for each middle school. The recommendations could be put into place during the 2016-2017 school year.

Roles and Responsibilities of Researcher and Others

My responsibility for implementing the project begins with providing the evaluation report to the district's superintendent and assistant superintendent. My subsequent responsibility will include clarifying the report as needed and providing any requested assistance with following through on recommendations.

District administrators will be responsible for identifying how the information from the program evaluation is shared with principals and teachers and for creating a plan for implementing recommendations from the evaluation as they see fit. Once principals

and teachers have access to the evaluation report, the principals' role will be to consider the logistics of any school-based efforts and to provide the necessary resources for implementing these efforts. Ultimately, it is the teachers who have direct contact with the students, and their responsibility will be using information they gain from the evaluation report and resources provided by their principals and the district to more effectively use the middle school philosophy to meet students' needs. It is important for middle school teachers and administrators to be cognizant of the middle school philosophy and equipped with developmentally appropriate practices that will help educate the whole adolescent.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

This project study provided an evaluation of the MMGW model that is currently used by the middle schools in the district. It serves as the first qualitative evaluation of the program. This district serves a large population of at-risk adolescents because of the socio-economic status of families that live in the district. The evaluation report will serve to guide district administrators in making recommendations for changes to the MMGW program implementation that may enhance its impact for students. The recommendations include ongoing, job embedded professional development and raising awareness of the middle school philosophy.

The evaluation report for this project gives evidence that the benefits of the MMGW program can be further enhanced at the middle schools and can incorporate parents, education partners, and other community leaders. By sharing the success of the

program, the district could encourage community and parental support for at-risk students. The school district's effort to ensure all middle school students will be prepared for high school will benefit the broader community. Better preparation for high school could assist the local high schools in reducing the number of students exiting school before graduation due to academic and behavior challenges.

Far-Reaching

In a larger context, the knowledge exists that middle schools face many challenges when attempting to prepare students academically for high school. When students are unsuccessful in middle school, they will potentially be unsuccessful high school students. Local communities feel a negative impact when high school graduation rates are low. The graduation rate inadvertently affects the local economy and crime rate. This project study provides some insight into the multi-layered factors that teachers and administrators face when implementing a school reform program in diverse school environments. This insight could aid educators beyond those in the district in which this project study took place by giving them a model and a starting point for evaluating how their own practices and programs serve students.

Conclusion

Districts often implement programs such as MMGW with the intent to support students, teachers, and administrators; however, they seldom have the resources to conduct a thorough evaluation of the program in order to make informed changes that will help to ensure program success. This project study afforded the district this opportunity through the development of the evaluation report.

To provide the district with a thorough analysis of the program, it was important to review teachers' and administrators' perceptions about the program. This section provided such a review, and consequently, sited practices that could strengthen and improve the implementation of the MMGW program. This information is included in the evaluation report or Project genre. Also, the evaluation report will offer a synthesis of the research on the middle school philosophy, outline the research conducted as part of this project study, and make recommendations for the implementation of the MMGW program that will enhance the effectiveness of the program. The goal of this project study was to help the district strengthen its approach to creating high-performing middle schools.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

In this section, I will reflect on my project study and personal learning experiences. The section will begin with an analysis of the strengths and limitations of the project, which was intended to provide insight on the perception of teachers and principals at four middle schools regarding implementation of the MMGW program. A discussion follows about what I learned from the study in the areas of scholarship, project development, and leadership. I will discuss my self-analysis as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. Finally, the implications for future research and social change will be discussed.

Project Strengths

I had the opportunity to interview teachers and principals about their perception of the effectiveness of the MMGW program implemented at their schools. I also analyzed school documents. The evaluation of the program was important for the school district because it had never been previously evaluated. As a result of this study, I realize the critical need for reform programs to be evaluated for effectiveness on a consistent basis to ensure the purpose of the program is being accomplished.

Data from the stakeholders revealed that program changes are not necessary for successful implementation; however, the school environment and other factors may need to be altered to ensure full implementation of the program. The MMGW program has several strengths: a network involving several states, local representatives, annual conferences, annual workshops, a website, current publications, a developmentally appropriate framework, a focus on adolescents, and proven results. The program does

have a few areas that need immediate attention, and this could possibly improve the life of the program in the school district. Based on my analysis of the study findings, the program could use additional components, including: an annual survey of teachers and administrators and district leaders, professional training in realistic settings, and a sufficient number of MMGW coaches for each school. If these improvements can be made, the MMGW model may have a more effective life span in the school district. Teachers and administrators may embrace the program again and implement it to its highest potential.

Even though my evaluation included four middle schools, the conceptual framework and data collection could be transferable and initiated at the remaining middle schools in the district. The district can use my report and any additional data collected to make targeted decisions about the implementation and strengthening of the program. By using this project study, qualitative feedback has been successfully gathered about a reform program that has been used in the school district since 2006. The project serves as a timely program evaluation of the MMGW model. In addition, it provides district leaders with an opportunity to reflect on this 10-year-old program.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

This project study has provided the local school district with a framework for evaluating the MMGW program, which may be used in the future. The school district should continue monitoring program implementation in an effort to ensure desired results are being achieved. Middle school principals may want to consider developing an open-ended survey containing questions similar to those I asked teachers who participated in

my study; this would help principals gather teacher perception data at the end of each school year. Information from the surveys would furnish perspectives that could illuminate possible needs for changes. Such a survey would also be particularly useful if schools are fully implementing the MMGW program as suggested.

While the evaluation of the program is necessary, it will not single-handedly increase student achievement nor program effectiveness, so this could be identified as a limitation. The limitation should be remediated through continued support for teachers and administrators from the school district. I recommend that the district establish a local MMGW team that would be accessible to all local middle schools. This team could provide ongoing coaching, technical support, and other necessary resources. By establishing a local MMGW team, teachers and principals would have timely feedback for major or minor concerns and allow for preventative measures to be taken. This process would help to create a more proactive environment for middle level educators.

Scholarship

The motivation for this project study extends back to my personal experience as a middle school student in the district of study. I can recall having so many mixed emotions during that developmental stage in my life. I was disconnected from peers and teachers and had low self-esteem and a negative attitude. Nevertheless, I was very studious. This research on the philosophy of middle schools and adolescent characteristics has given me greater insight on what I was dealing with at that stage in my life. Had it not been for my love of learning and a strong family unit, I probably would have been a drop out statistic because I loathed middle school. Based on my research, I was unknowingly behaving like

a typical adolescent. Thankfully, the knowledge that I have gained from conducting this study, along with my past experiences, will help me assist the school district in finding and implementing best practices and strategies for the middle schools.

During the literature review on the MMGW program and collection of data, I learned that many complex factors affected the implementation of the program. Although school districts select reform programs, principals and their staff are ultimately responsible for the proper and consistent implementation. Schools are not identical; therefore, identifying elements that a school should address to effectively implement a program can be a difficult task. The issue can be further complicated when the school district provides principals with the autonomy to select alternative programs and to use practices and strategies for their school. Two alternative programs that some schools are using are not CSR: Daggett and Scholastic (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2014). I believe if multiple supplemental programs are adopted and implemented simultaneously, this could cause a lack of focus and dedication to CSR programs.

As a researcher, the decision to narrow the focus on a program evaluation gave me the opportunity to more comprehensively understand the research on issues affecting U.S. middle schools. One issue is grade configuration and its relationship with student learning (Carolan & Chesky, 2012). In the school district that I studied, more middle schools have been categorized as failing than elementary and high schools. Consequently, immediate and continuous support for the middle schools will be necessary. I will

continue to share my knowledge and research about best practices for middle school education in the local school district.

Project Development and Evaluation

Prior to this project study, I was familiar with best practices in teaching for the primary and elementary grades focused on developmentally appropriate activities and a healthy and safe environment. Developing a project regarding middle level education gave me the opportunity to discover knowledge about secondary education. I did not realize how complex and interesting middle level education was. Through the development of this project, I discovered many other research-based programs that middle schools are using all over the country. Prior to this project, I never thought about adolescents needing developmentally appropriate activities to promote academic and behavioral success (Lounsbury, 2009), so I gained a significant amount of new knowledge.

During the early stages of developing my project, I was determined to conduct a focus group of teachers along with and individual principal interviews. After revising my project, I decided to conduct individual teacher interviews instead of the focus group. This change allowed me to gather more reliable data from the teachers. By conducting the individual teacher interviews, I believe they spoke freely and honestly. Also, during the development of my project, I assumed the teachers and principals would give details about why the MMGW program was not a good school reform program. Surprisingly, they felt like the program was an overall good program; instead, they sited other issues that effected proper implementation.

Lastly, I learned the importance of selecting and including the appropriate stakeholders in my project. The appropriate stakeholders provided the most valuable insight necessary for the program evaluation. I also learned that unexpected data should be included in the findings because the project will be more reliable with this information.

Leadership and Change

Leonardo da Vinci once said, "I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do" (Carthey, 2007, p. 35). Leaders in education have a wealth of knowledge at their fingertips, but I'm willing to believe that very little of it is actually being applied. Leaders must not only read and hear the research but they must trust the research and apply it. It is important for district leaders to make sure their teachers and principals are working toward a common goal. This is imperative for the academic and behavioral growth of each student. It is important for administrators to capitalize on the strengths of their teachers, parents, and community. Leaders should be skillful at creatively involving every stakeholder in the lives of their students. Also, effective leaders should be aware of their own weaknesses; they should immediately and diligently find ways to improve those weaknesses.

Change can be frightening, but it is often necessary. Teachers usually feel the effects of change before principals and district leaders. For example, if a program is adopted, teachers typically have to begin implementation even before the kinks have been worked out or before all of the professional development has been established.

Nevertheless, it is important for teachers to obtain all necessary knowledge on program implementations and the students that they serve throughout the school year. By doing so, they become a more effective scholar in their profession and facilitator in their classroom.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

Throughout this project study, I was able to reflect on many of my strengths and weaknesses. Reading and learning new information has always intrigued me, so I consider that a strength for any scholar. This project study gave me the opportunity to pursue more critical literature that promoted social change. I was amazed by the amount of meaningful and timely information that I discovered concerning my topic. This entire process gave me the opportunity to become an expert on a topic that I am ready to share with anyone who is willing to listen. I learned how to search for credible articles until saturation was reached.

As a scholar, I learned how to be flexible and take constructive criticism. It is so easy to get off topic, include irrelevant information, or not include enough details. As a scholar, I had to listen to my more experienced committee members and revise my writing whenever necessary. This process has helped me develop into a better scholarly writer and researcher. Overall, I now realize how multifaceted academic topics can be. As a scholar, I am equipped with the skill to read studies critically, interpret the data, and draw a reasonable conclusion. I embrace this growth and will continue to foster it.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a practitioner, I have enjoyed being involved with the entire research process. Though it was not easy, my love for the profession made the journey worth it. This

process has made me a well-rounded practitioner. Before I began my project study, I was an ambitious, one-dimensional practitioner; most of my experiences had been in early childhood education and elementary education.

As a summer camp developer and facilitator, I decided to allow sixth to eighth grade students to participate in my enrichment camp. Typically, I would stop at fifth grade, but after realizing the deficiencies that many middle school students struggled with, I included the middle grades. This decision illustrates my growth as a practitioner. I also provided private tutoring services to students after school and on the weekends. Typically, I would only service pre-K to fifth grade students; however, I have extended my services to pre-K to eighth grade students. As a practitioner, I am able to provide expert service and advice to parents and students. As a practitioner, I am putting my new knowledge into practice.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

As a project developer, I had to step out of my comfort zone of primarily dealing with teachers, students, and parents. I had to connect with the district research administrator and the local middle school principals. As a project developer, I had to be prepared with plan B in case principals and teachers declined my invitation to participate in the project. While developing my project study, I had to be persistent and consistent. I could not rely on anyone else to get my project fully developed; however, my committee members were there to oversee the entire process and lead me in the right direction. In order to be a great developer, one must be coachable, flexible, approachable, and

knowledgeable. Those characteristics are essential to gaining insight from the stakeholders.

Developing my project took a lot of preparation. I had to make sure I was well versed and current on the issue. I had to obtain approval from the school district and participation from teachers and principals. Without approval and participation, there would not have been a project study.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

Middles schools have been referred to as the Bermuda Triangle of education or a *hurricane of hormones*. This project study will enlighten the school district on critical issues concerning the middle level learner and the middle school philosophy. It will serve as a resource for teachers and administrators as well. This project study will help get low-performing middle schools on track for academic success and will help prepare students for high school curriculum. This will be done by helping schools understand what is needed in order to more effectively implement the MMGW program. This project study can be translated to a larger context and help reduce the number of low-performing middle schools in the district by providing a model for future, similar, program evaluations. The main social change is to ensure that effective programs are in place in the low-performing middle schools to provide resources that support students' ability to excel academically.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

There is a large body of research on educational programs and the crisis with low-performing middle schools. This project study contributes to that body of research. It is

clear that the MMGW model has been successful for some schools but unsuccessful for others. Based on the evaluation, it appears that the MMGW program itself does not require modification but issues at the schools may need to be addressed to ensure better implementation of the program. This project study focused on data from only four middle schools in the district; however, future research might be conducted with other middle schools that are fully implementing the MMGW program. Such research would assist the district in determining the future use of the MMGW program.

Conclusion

This project study will serve as a tool for district administrators, principals, teachers, students, and parents. Throughout the process, I was given the opportunity to reflect as a scholar, practitioner, and developer. My research will add to the body of work that already exists on the topic of program evaluations. My program evaluation on the MMGW program will be new for the school district because the program has not been previously evaluated. This will make me an available researcher for the local school district because it is important to continue the evaluation of any implemented program.

In the school district, middle school principals have been given various programs to explore, but it is necessary to evaluate these programs in order to gauge their effectiveness or to see if they are being properly implemented. It is important for principals to embrace research-based strategies that have been proven effective for the middle level learner. Leaders cannot operate based on their feelings, teachers cannot be reluctant to change, and the district cannot neglect to provide essential resources. In the future, I hope the school district will become more consistent in the implementation and

evaluation of middle school reform models; this may help to ensure that low-performing schools achieve success. After all, success is not something that happens sporadically; it is intentional and strategic.

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Appendix A: The Project

Making Middle Grades Work
Project Summary Report

Wycondia West

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Introduction

Middle schools are facing multiple challenges that include low achievement, poor attendance, increased discipline problems, insufficient learning environments, and decreased parental involvement (Hough, 2009). In an effort to address these challenges and promote academic progress, some school systems are searching for a model to facilitate change in the middle grades (Green & Cypress, 2009). Even with the adoption of a specific comprehensive school reform model, the positive effect on student achievement is not guaranteed; success of the model can be uncertain because of complex implementation procedures (Zhang, Fashola, Shkolnik, & Boyle, 2006). For middle grade initiatives to meet the developmental and academic needs of adolescents, it is important to know what approaches work and have adequate evidence to demonstrate they work (Anfara, 2009). Schools have several models to choose from.

Middle School Reform Programs

- MMGW
- Middle Start
- Success for All-Middle School
- Career Start
- Turning Points

Problems Associated With School Reform Programs

Even with so many current middle school reform models promising positive results, researchers are concerned that very little evidence suggests the effects are sustainable once the supports are no longer available (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine,

& Constant, 2004; Taylor, 2006). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has recognized that countless reforms are potentially effective but acknowledged uncertainty of how many are actually implemented (NASSP, 2010). The full adoption, effective implementation, continuous maintenance, and proper sustainability of a program are essential contributing factors to any program.

Organizations like Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, The National Forum, and the NMSA have concentrated on middle level instruction and their standards to develop rigorous academic programs for middle level students (Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009). Many professional organizations have researched the best educational practices for adolescents in the middle grades setting. The problem is these practices are not being effectively implemented and properly evaluated in many of the nation's middle schools.

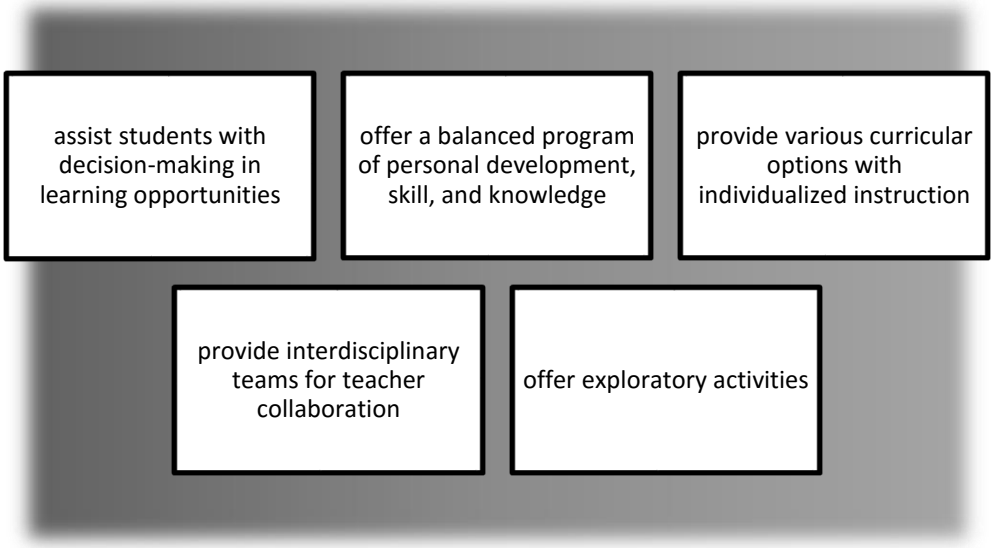
Research on Middle School Philosophy

Lounsbury, Alexander, and Williams were significant education leaders involved with the middle school movement in the early 1960's and helped to develop the main principles for the middle school concept (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Alexander (regarded as the "Father of the American Middle School") and Williams characterized a model middle school as being created to promote the needs of all adolescents (Alexander & Williams, 1965). Alexander and Williams (1965) suggested a model middle school should provide a rich exploratory experience, individualized instruction, and emphasize skills of continued learning. The middle school philosophy encourages the education of the whole child: intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and physical aspects (Musoleno & White, 2010).

The middle school educational philosophy in the early 1960's focused on growth and development for adolescent learners. Figure 1 shows five distinct characteristics of the middle school philosophy (Gatewood, 1973).

Figure 1

Characteristics of Middle School Philosophy



Over time, the middle school concept has not been implemented successfully (Huss & Eastep, 2011; Lounsbury, 2000); nevertheless, schools that have tried to execute the concept find it challenging because of other pre-established school procedures (Lounsbury, 2009). *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, generated by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1989, revealed the inadequacies of middle schools and the educational experiences for adolescents that lacked quality (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Approximately 11 years later, *Turning Points 2000* revealed that middle schools in America had not shown much improvement (Cook et al., 2009; Jackson, 2009). Moreover, in hopes of improving

test scores, many middle schools have decreased electives and increased their focus on mundane approaches that are not developmentally appropriate for adolescent learners (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003). An interdisciplinary approach to learning is more appropriate for the adolescent learner. It is important for middle schools to show how knowledge is connected across the curriculum and not isolated to a particular subject area. The following are examples of ineffective practices at the middle school level:

- recalling facts
- drills
- direct instruction
- less independence

Consequently, teaching beliefs and practices have threatened student engagement in the middle school environment (Raphael, Pressley, & Mohan, 2008). Teachers are primarily concerned with teaching the required curriculum, maintaining control of their classroom, and complying with school regulations. Instead of middle level learners being engaged with meaningful activities that incorporate career-goals and learning autonomy, they are subjected to teacher-centered activities.

- worksheets
- drills
- more discipline
- restricted student decision-making
- school structure

Lounsbury (2009) posited, “The middle school concept is a philosophy of education” that recommends principles and practices to focus on “the nature and needs of young adolescents in the learning environment” (p. 32). In respect to effectively educating young adolescents, Anfara and Mertens (2012) posited practitioners know what to do and why they need to do it, but they do not know how to accomplish the goals (Anfara & Mertens, 2012). Having knowledge of the middle school philosophy and understanding its value are not sufficient strategies in the quest to educate middle level learners; the philosophy has to be applied to programs that work. Even though the middle school concept and best practices have been discussed since the 1960’s and have been developed into comprehensive school reform programs, the obstacle of properly educating middle learners continues to be a concern.

Characteristics of Making Middle Grades Work

The foundation of the MMGW framework was established based on core beliefs; students are the primary focus of these beliefs (SREB, 2012). With students being the primary focus of the MMGW framework, it is imperative for middle schools that adopt the program to prepare themselves to operate as a student-centered building. The following list describes understandings inherent in a student-centered focus:

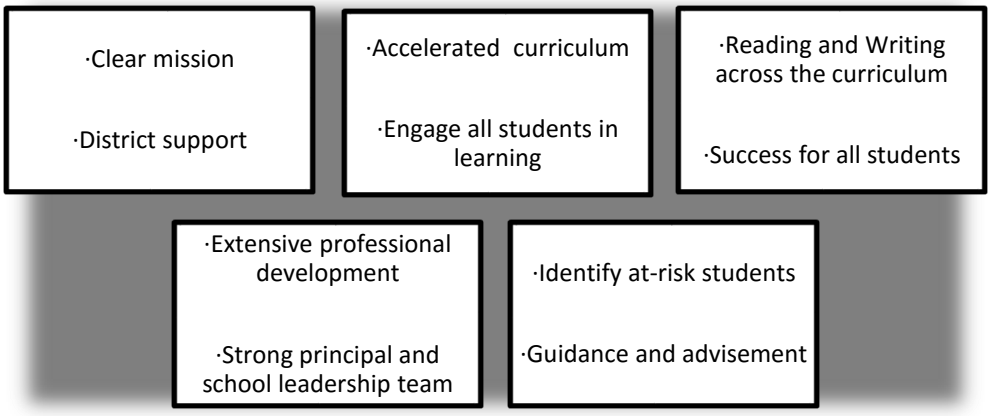
- Students will make an effort to learn if adults create the right conditions.
- Students will be enrolled in a program that will enhance their learning and a career.
- Students with goals and purpose will be motivated to learn.

- Students will learn if adults maintain a stimulating and reassuring environment.
- Students will be better learners if they maintain a personal connection to their learning environment.
- Students will be motivated to pursue school goals when practices are based on effort and not ability.
- Faculty members will be engaged in efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Along with the core beliefs, MMGW also has essential practices that individual schools and their school district are expected to implement (SREB, 2012). The proper implementation of these key practices should yield desired results for middle level educators: a rigorous curriculum, positive student outcomes, collaborative teams, strong leadership, and parent participation. Figure 2 shows an illustration of the ten key practices.

Figure 2

MMGW Ten Key Practices



Explanation of Results

The following data is based on principals' and teachers' perceptions and understanding of the *MMGW* model in XYZ school district. This data were collected in September and October of 2014. Each school was provided a pseudonym: Delta Middle School, Omega Middle School, Kappa Middle School, and Alpha Middle School. According to the Alabama Accountability Act standards and guidelines, one school is categorized as failing/low-performing: Alpha Middle School. Four principals and eight teachers participated in individual interviews. The interview questions were developed by using the MMGW ten key practices. Various school artifacts were also retrieved from the schools in order to determine if interview responses would be strengthened or weakened.

Recommended Areas of Focus

After reviewing the archived responses of principals' and teachers' interviews, there were five areas that needed to be addressed in order to improve upon continued implementation. These five areas emerged as major themes that represented barriers that impeded successful implementation of the MMGW program:

- Teacher Buy-In/Self Efficacy
- Professional Development
- Student Discipline
- Subgroup Support
- New Programs

Teacher Buy-In/Self Efficacy

Based on the findings, five of the 12 participants (42%) expressed concerns about teacher buy-in for the MMGW program: two principals and three teachers. One principal believed that teachers would buy into the program if a clear partnership was established; another principal suggested that teachers need to have the ability to implement the strategies. The three teachers suggested a lack of consistency and administrator support impeded teacher buy-in. Figure 3 gives an illustration of the number of principals and teachers who expressed concern. Figure 4 gives an illustration of the percentage.

Figure 3

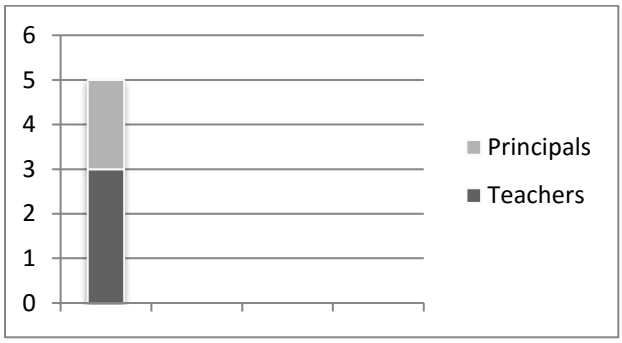
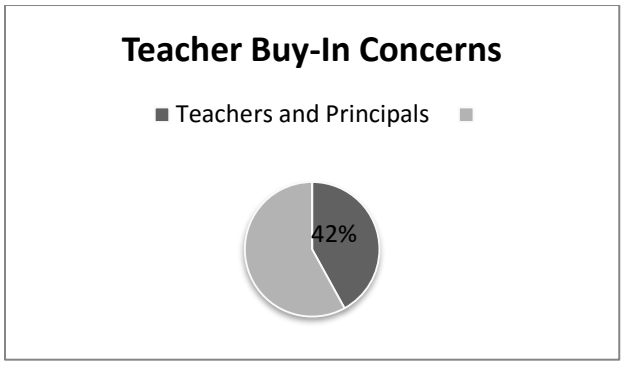


Figure 4

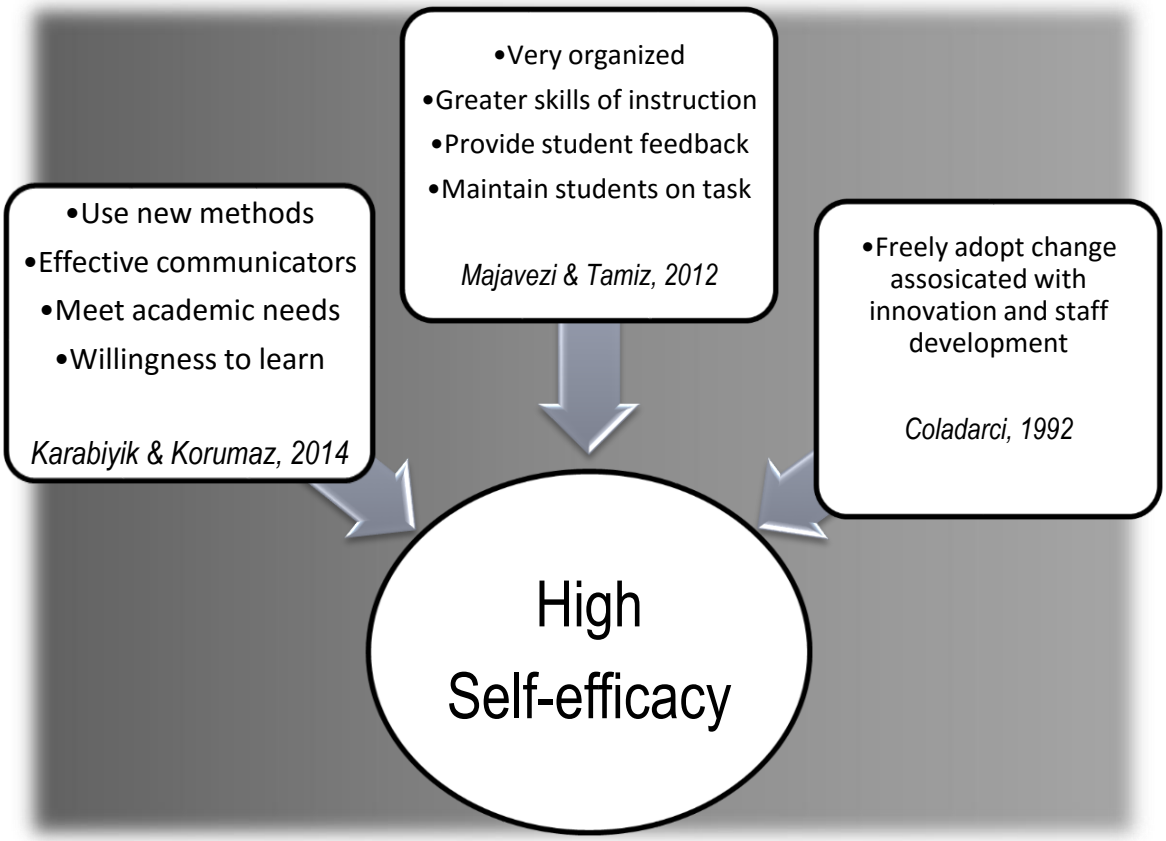


Teacher buy-in can be synonymous with self-efficacy, teacher efficacy, and teacher commitment. Bandura's theory on teacher efficacy is based on human behavior

paired with an individual's beliefs concerning expectations (Coladarci, 1992). A teacher's knowledge, talent, and skill set alone are not enough to achieve a desired outcome (Karabiyik & Korumaz, 2014). According to Mojavezi & Tamiz (2012), research has concluded that teacher self-efficacy has been linked to key issues: teachers' willingness to implement new programs and professional commitment. Figure 5 gives an illustration of the positive aspects of teachers with high self-efficacy.

Figure 5

High Self-Efficacy Characteristics



Professional Development

Eight of the 12 participants (67%) expressed concerns about professional development: all four principals and four teachers. These participants believed professional development for the MMGW program could be improved through consistency and job-embedded learning. They wanted to participate in professional learning locally in a more realistic environment. Figure 6 gives an illustration of the number of principals and teachers that expressed concern. Figure 7 gives an illustration of the percentage.

Figure 6

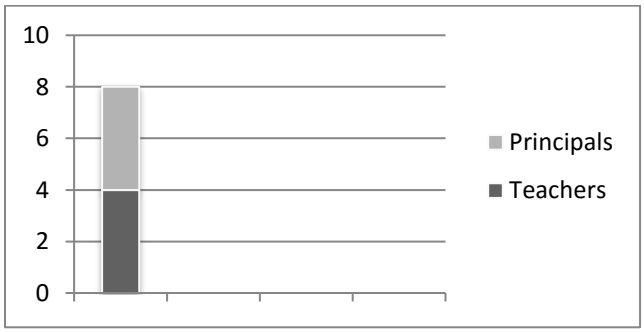
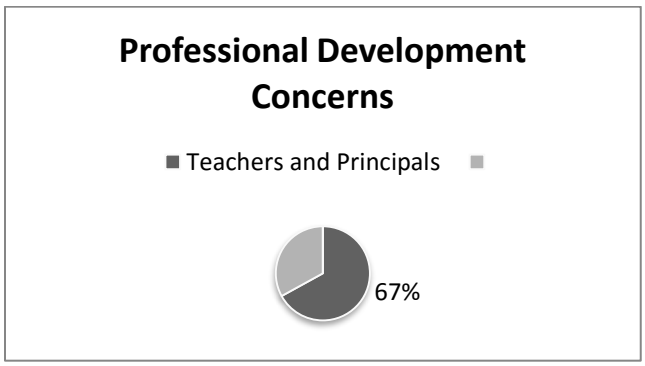


Figure 7



The concentration and length of professional training have been linked to change in teachers' teaching practices (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). A

recent comprehensive study that involved analyzing 1,300 studies revealed that lengthy—over 14 hours--intensive professional training programs positively influenced students' outcomes (Yoon, Duncan, Lee Scarloss, Shapley, 2007). Nevertheless, workshop style/one-shot sessions remain very popular among professional development designs (Mayotte, Wei, Lamphier, & Doyle, 2013).

Professional learning experiences should be multi-layered and should include 10 essential components (Timperley, 2008). Those 10 components have been converted into a checklist (Table 1) that can be used when designing or evaluating a professional development program.

Table 1

Professional Development Checklist

Professional Development **10** Professional Learning Checklist
_____1. **Focused on valued student outcomes.** The professional learning experiences focus on the links between particular teaching activities and valued student outcomes associated with positive impacts on those outcomes.
_____2. **Worthwhile content.** The knowledge and skills developed are those that have been established as effective in achieving valued student outcomes.
_____3. **Integration of knowledge and skills.** The integration of essential teacher knowledge and skills promotes deep teacher learning and effective changes in practice.
_____4. **Assessment for professional inquiry.** Information about what students need to know and do is used to identify what teachers need to know and do.
_____5. **Multiple opportunities to learn and apply information.** Teachers will have multiple opportunities to learn new information and understand its implications for practice. These opportunities will take place in environments that offer both trust and challenge.
_____6. **Approaches responsive to learning processes.** The professional learning takes different approaches that are consistent with the assumptions that currently underpin practice.

_____7. **Opportunities to process learning with others.** Collegial interaction is focused on student outcomes that will assist the teacher with integrating new learning into existing practice.
_____8. **Knowledgeable expertise.** Expertise external to the group of participating teachers in order to challenge existing assumptions and develop the kinds of knowledge and skills associated with positive outcomes for students.
_____9. **Active Leadership.** Designated educational leaders assist in developing expectations for improved student outcomes and organizing and promoting engagement in profession learning opportunities.
_____10. **Maintaining momentum.** Sustained improvement in student outcomes. Teachers will have sound theoretical knowledge, evidence-informed inquiry skills, and supportive organizational conditions.

Source: Taken from *Teacher professional learning and development.* (Timperley, 2008, p. 8-24)

Student Discipline

Seven of the eight teachers (86%) expressed concerns about student discipline hindering implementation of MMGW strategies. Figure 8 gives an illustration of the number of teachers that expressed concern. Figure 9 gives an illustration of the percentage.

Figure 8

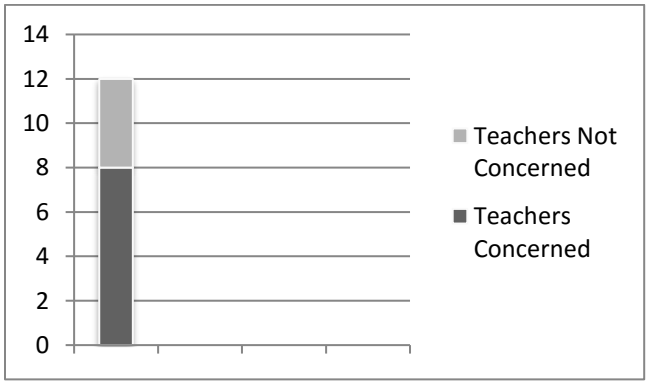
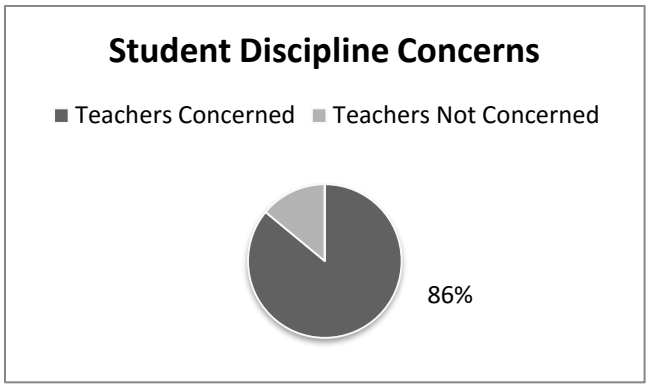


Figure 9



Students feeling disconnected from their learning environment is "a major cause of under achievement", and this causes the "inability to control one's self-regulation" (Strahan, Faircloth, Cope, Hundley, 2007, p. 21). School success and self-regulation go hand in hand in the learning environment. According to Davis (2006), students perceived "their middle school teachers less friendly, less supportive, and less caring than their elementary school teachers" (p. 194). Davis (2006) suggests student discipline is a major issue in middle schools for various reasons:

- Impersonal structure and environment
- Increased student-teacher ratios
- Academic motivation declines
- Academic performance declines

Subgroup Support

Five of the eight teachers (63%) expressed concerns about support for subgroups at their schools as being inconsistent with MMGW standards. The teachers were not satisfied with services being provided to the special education population in their schools;

this also included ELA students. Figure 10 gives an illustration of the number of teachers that expressed concern. Figure 11 gives an illustration of the percentage.

Figure 10

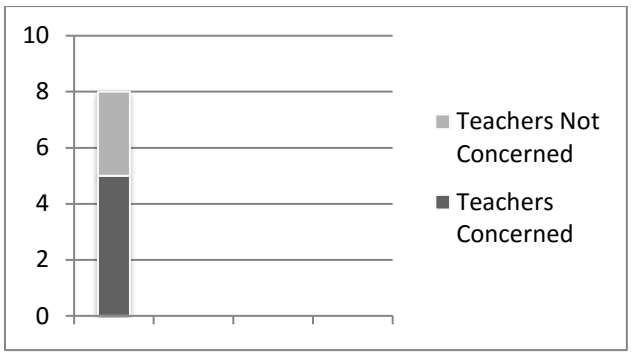
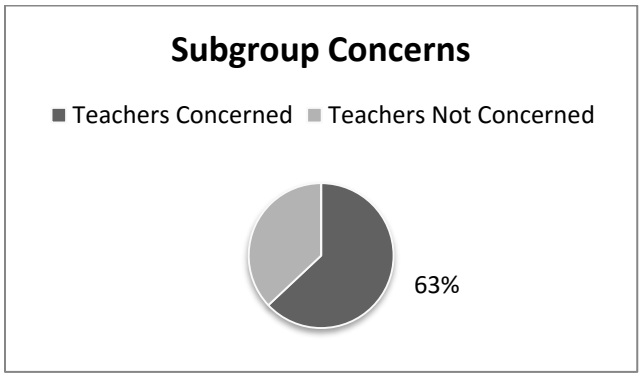


Figure 11



There are several placement options for special education students:

- Inclusion
- Resource/Mainstreaming
- Self-contained
- Alternative

No matter what the placement is, “There are occasions where placement in general or special education does not result in improved academic or social outcomes for

students with or without disabilities" (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012, p. 480). In the middle school setting, teachers rely heavily on accommodation and modifications in the general education classroom, but this cannot replace consistent, intensive instruction that many learning disability (LD) students require (King-Sears & Bowman-Kruhm, 2011).

New Program Implementation

The data collected revealed that the MMGW model is not the primary school reform program at the four middle schools that participated in the study. Alpha Middle School (low-performing) and Kappa Middle School (high-performing) seemed to be using a limited amount of MMGW strategies. However, Omega Middle School (high-performing) and Delta Middle School (high-performing) seemed to have a primary focus on MMGW strategies, but these schools were also using other programs. Overall, the four middle school administrators mentioned two supplemental programs that the district of study had adopted: Daggett and Scholastic.

Proper implementation and sustainability are critical aspects for the success of school programs. Sustaining comprehensive school reform over a sufficient time frame to achieve desired results can be an overwhelming task for some schools (Taylor, 2006). At the same time, it is difficult to continue models that are not being properly implemented (Friend & Thompson, 2010).

Results of Artifacts Analysis

Three of the four participating middle school principals provided artifacts that were reviewed and analyzed for MMGW practices. Some of the documents were school

publications and some were manufactured through private companies. The schools submitted various documents:

- Student handbook
- Parent handbook
- School calendar
- School bulletin
- Flyer
- Bulletin
- Personalized folder

A document analysis worksheet was used to give a detailed review of each artifact and to determine its connection to the MMGW key practices. For the school that did not provide tangible artifacts, the school's website was reviewed. Table 2 gives an illustration of some of the content found inside the documents.

Table 2

Review and Analysis of Artifacts

Artifact Contents	Kappa Middle	Delta Middle	Omega Middle	Alpha Middle
Mission	√	√	√	√
Vision	√			
Philosophy	√	√	√	
Motto	√	√		√
Tutoring	√	√		

Advisor/Advisee Guidance/Counseling	√	√	√	
Honor Roll/ Honor Society	√	√	√	√
Parent Advisory Committee/PTO	√	√	√	
Extracurricular Activities	√	√	√	√
Personal Letter from Principal	√	√		√

Justification for Continued Implementation

From the findings, the majority of the principals and teachers agreed that the MMGW program has a focused framework, good strategies, and positive potential; however, the implementation has been difficult because of several challenging factors at each school.

- class size
- behavior
- multiple program implementation
- lack of time
- insufficient professional development
- lack of district support
- teacher attrition
- teacher buy-in.

Overall, teachers and principals believe the program design has great potential and could be successful if the underlying issues were improved upon. Although teachers and principals are responsible for proper implementation of reform programs, they do not

have the authority and the finances to amend major issues. School district officials and administrators will have to begin the process for improvement.

The goal of this project was to help improve the implementation of the MMGW program that is currently being used by many of the middle schools in the school district. This project will provide other principals, teachers, and district leaders with a greater understanding of factors hindering full implementation of the MMGW program. As part of this process of conveying information, the project used the voice of principals and teachers to increase the interest of their colleagues. As the schools become more informed through the project, the implementation of MMGW strategies may increase. Finally, the goal of this project was to also encourage ongoing program evaluations.

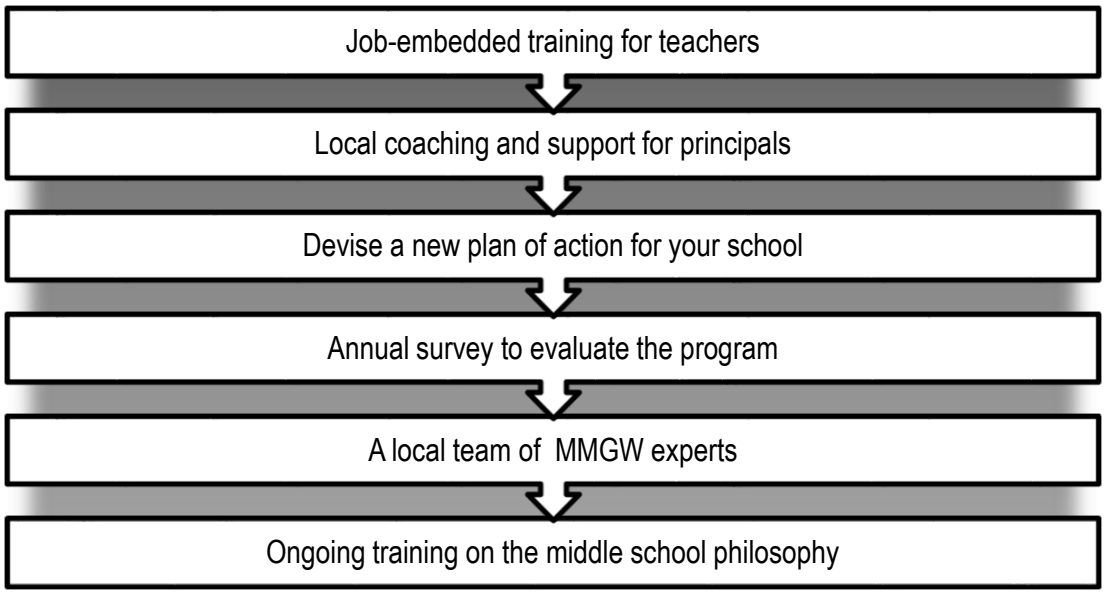
Next Steps

From the findings, I recommend a plan of action to provide teachers with updated training at the school's site and principals with local coaching instead of relying on out-of-state conferences. I suggest that teachers and principals be retrained based on the needs of their school. After training, I recommend teachers and principals collaborate and develop an action plan that describes or lists the MMGW strategies that the individual schools will implement. At the end of each school term, I suggest each middle school use a survey to evaluate the implementation of the MMGW program. For local support, I suggest the district establish a team of MMGW experts that would be readily available to provide support to all middle schools. Lastly, I recommend all middle level educators and administrators have extensive, ongoing training on the middle school philosophy. The recommended curriculum for this training would come from the book *This We Believe:*

Keys to Educating Young Adolescents. Figure 12 gives an illustration of these recommended steps to be implemented for the next school year.

Figure 12

Recommended Steps for Improvement



The MMGW program should be evaluated annually. This will help determine if schools are on the right track or if they need additional resources and learning opportunities. Table 3 gives an illustration of a sample survey that was designed for a quick program evaluation. This survey provides a two-fold purpose. Not only will it serve as a survey, but it will also serve as an accountability checklist. Along with the survey, schools will be required to submit various documents to confirm survey responses.

Table 3

MMGW Key Practices Accountability Checklist

MMGW Key Practices End of Year Accountability Checklist XYZ School District School: Observer: Date:		
1. A clear mission designed to prepare students for high school	YES	NO
2. Classroom practices that engage all students	YES	NO
3. High expectations and a system of extra help and time	YES	NO
4. Literacy across the curriculum	YES	NO
5. Teachers working collectively	YES	NO
6. Supporting teachers with quality professional development	YES	NO
7. Continous improvement and strong leadership	YES	NO
8. Comprehensive system of guidance and advisement	YES	NO
9. Support from parents	YES	NO
10. Intervention program for at-risk students	YES	NO

Note: Taken from *Improved middle grades schools for improved high school readiness: Ten best practices in the middle grades* (SREB, 2012, p. 5)

***Disclaimer:** All keys that receive a YES response must have appropriate documentation(s) provided when this checklist is submitted by the Observer. Documentation can be in the form of hard copies, email, fax, pictures, etc. All keys that receive a NO response must have a sufficient action plan established before the start of the upcoming school year. This action plan should be submitted to the Observer.

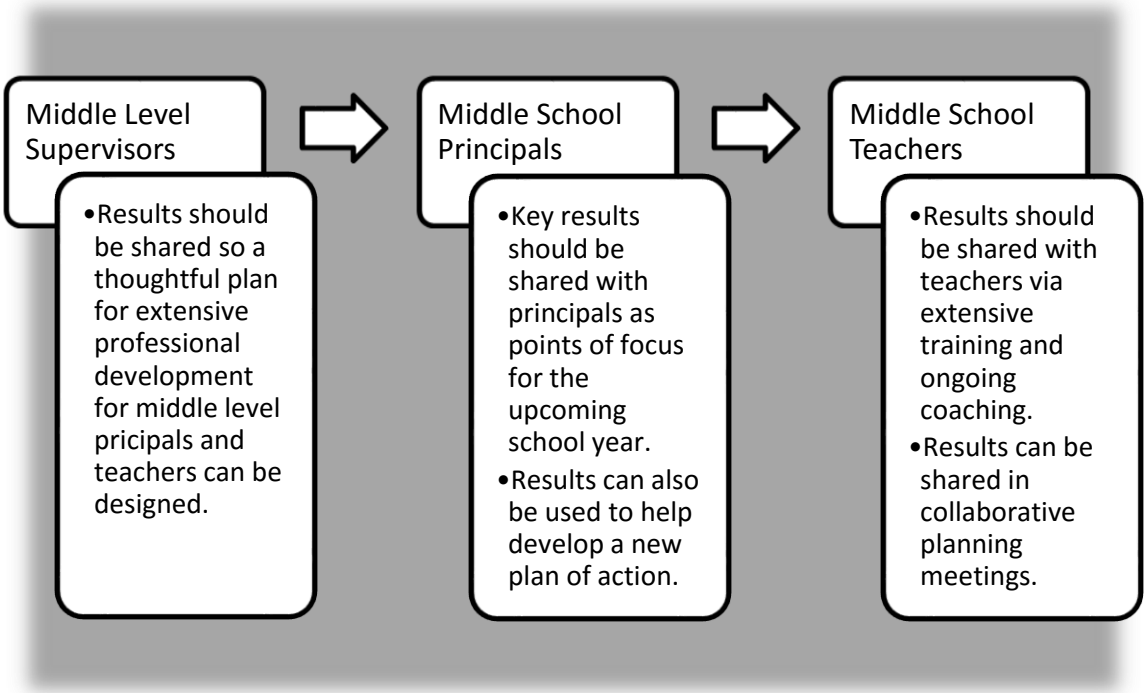
Sharing Results

When the district's superintendent has received the Making Middle Grades Work Summary Report, it is important to share this information with the community of middle

level supervisors, principals, and teachers. It is recommended that these results be disseminated in a thoughtful and purposeful manner as to achieve the greatest benefit possible. Figure 13 illustrates the process in which the community of middle level educators should receive results.

Figure 13

Sharing Process



Conclusion

Although results of this project study revealed many implementation challenges for the MMGW program, continued implementation of the program is highly recommended. The anticipation is that over time and with continued support, school principals and teachers will be motivated to use the MMGW framework in their learning communities. This will occur as the district builds the momentum for the program by

providing necessary resources to middle level educators: redesigned professional development, principal coaching, teacher support, accessible MMGW team, and consistency. This increased momentum will have a positive social change on the entire middle level learning community in the district.

A Program evaluation of school reform programs should be an essential part of every learning community. Simply adopting and implementing a reform program will not yield desired results for school or students. In conjunction with a program adoption and implementation, school districts must strive to provide consistent program evaluations for all adopted programs. Consequently, this will give the program more credibility and possibly create longevity of implementation.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Teachers

TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Questions: What are teachers' perceptions and understandings of the *MMGW* model in XYZ school district? How effective is the *MMGW* model as instituted at the middle level schools in XYZ school district?

Interview Guide-

- Describe the research study
- Review all confidentiality guidelines
- Clarify any questions or concerns
- Explain that this interview will be to explore teacher knowledge and perceptions of the *MMGW* model

1. Please describe your experiences with the *MMGW* model.

    a. What are the positive aspects of the program?
    b. What do you like or dislike about the program or implementation of the program?
    c. What challenges do you face as you attempt to implement the program?

2. With regard to the *MMGW* model, tell me about the strategies you use to engage students in learning?

    a. Have you noticed strategies being implemented to improve reading and writing across the curriculum? If so, explain and describe them.
    b. What best practices have administrators implemented to ensure success for every student including those in subgroups?
    c. How has the program implementation influenced the administrator's ability to promote academic and behavioral achievement? What do you think can be done to improve academics and behavioral achievement?

3. With regard to the *MMGW* model, describe how the school district provides support for middle school teachers.

    a. Based on the program model, what do you think is needed in the form of support for teachers from the school district? Please explain.
    b. Which *MMGW* professional development for teachers has been most beneficial to help you improve student achievement?
    c. What would be an ideal *MMGW* professional development for teachers?

4. With regard to the *MMGW* model, would you say that all students understand the school's mission? If so, please explain how this has been established. If not, please explain how this could be improved.

5. Do you have any suggestions on how the *MMGW* program could be improved?

    a. What do you think of the program's potential?
    b. What might be some hindrances to the program?
    c. In your opinion, would your school's performance increase, decline, or remain the same without the implementation of the *MMGW* model? Please explain.

Probes to be used to obtain richer data during the interviews:

- Tell me what you mean by….
- How could you explain/describe that further?
- Are you saying….?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Nonverbal: pause to allow more response time.

Interview Conclusion

- Thank the interviewee for participating in this research and donating time to talk.
- Restate the confidentiality and double check for questions or concerns.
- Remind interviewee that they can contact you if needed.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol for Administrators

ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Questions: What are administrators' perceptions and understandings about the *MMGW* model in XYZ school district? How effective is the *MMGW* model as instituted at middle level schools at XYZ school district?

Interview Guide-

- Describe the research study
- Review all confidentiality guidelines
- Clarify any questions or concerns
- Explain that this interview will be to explore administrator knowledge and perceptions of the MMGW model

1. Please describe your experiences with the *MMGW* model.

    a. What are the positive aspects of the program?
    b. What do you like or dislike about the program or implementation of the program?
    c. What challenges do you face as you attempt to implement the program?

2. With regard to the *MMGW* model, tell me about the best practices that you have implemented to ensure the success for every student including those in subgroups?

    a. How has the program implementation influenced your ability to promote academic and behavioral achievement?
    b. What are some things that you will do differently next year?

3. With regard to the *MMGW* model, describe how the school district provides support for you as an administrator.

    a. Based on the program model, what do you think is needed in the form of support for administrators from the school district? Please explain.
    b. Which *MMGW* professional development for administrators has been most beneficial to help improve student achievement?
    c. What would be an ideal *MMGW* professional development for administrators?

4. With regard to the *MMGW* model, would you say that all students understand the school's mission? If so, please explain how this has been established. If not, please explain how this could be improved.

5. Do you have any suggestions on how the *MMGW* program could be improved?

a. What do you think of the program's potential?
b. What might be some hindrances to the program?
c. In your opinion, would your school's performance improve, decline, or remain the same without the implementation of the *MMGW* model? Please explain.

Probes to be used to obtain richer data during the interviews:

- Tell me what you mean by….
- How could you explain/describe that further?
- Are you saying….?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Nonverbal: pause to allow more response time.

Interview Conclusion

- Thank the interviewee for participating in this research and donating time to the talk.
- Restate the confidentiality and double check for questions or concerns.
- Remind interviewee that they can contact you if needed.

Appendix D: Ten Best Practices in the Middle Grades

The MMGW comprehensive reform model is guided by 10 best practices and the five conditions that are used to assist middle schools in establishing and achieving annual goals.

Ten Best Practices in the Middle Grades

1. Have a **clear mission**, with strong faculty support, to ensure that more students leave the eighth grade with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a college-preparatory curriculum in high school, to graduate high school prepared for postsecondary education and to become productive adults.

2. Have strong, collaborative **district support** for the school's mission, for implementation of proven and promising practices, for professional development, and for adjustments to master schedules to provide teachers with common planning time.

3. Enroll more students in an **accelerated curriculum** that is benchmarked with ninth-grade college-preparatory standards and emphasizes teaches working together to plan and share classroom learning, student assignments and classroom assessments that reflect high school readiness standards in English/reading, mathematics and science.

4. **Engage student in learning**--intellectually, emotionally, socially and behaviorally--by making greater use of authentic problems, project-based learning, cooperative learning and technology.

5. Focus on improving students' **reading and writing** skills by giving reading and writing assignments that engage students in reading grade-level materials specific to each content area---English, math, science, and social studies.

6. Strive to achieve **success for every student** by maintaining high expectations for all students and supporting them through re-teaching, tutoring, extra help and extra time to relearn and redo work until it meets standards.

7. **Identify at-risk students** as early as grade six and provide them with additional instruction and support to help more of them meet grade-level standards and get on track to enter high school prepared for the ninth grade.

8. Ensure students receive high-quality **guidance and advisement** by providing students with a personal connection with an adult in the building, involving parents in discussions about their child's performance and readiness for high school, and helping students develop a six-year plan for high school and post-high school studies.

9. Provide extensive **professional development** to staff, aligned with the school's mission and improvement plan, with emphasis on implementation of new strategies learned.

10. Have a strong **principal and school leadership team** that work collaboratively with the school community to keep them focused on the school's mission, to ensure students are engaged in a rigorous curriculum, and to review and use data to engage in ongoing school improvement efforts.

Note: Southern Regional Education Board. (2012c). Improved middle grades schools for improved high school readiness: Ten best practice in the middle grades. Retrieved from http://www.sreb.org

Appendix E: Document Analysis Worksheet

Document Analysis Worksheet	
Title of Document:	Source:
Date of Document:	Author of Document:
Public Record ☐ Private Record ☐	Electronic ☐ Paper ☐

What important facts can I get from this document?	What inferences can be made from this document?	How can this document be used for my research?