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## A Case Study Of A Charter School That Is Beating The Odds Of The Achievement Gap

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**A CASE STUDY OF A CHARTER SCHOOL THAT IS BEATING THE ODDS OF  
THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

by

David Green

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

July 2017

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Peer Reviewer: Kevin Pinck

To my mother and the memory of my father, for teaching me love,  
my wife whose patience, guidance, and support was unparalleled,  
my committee for sticking with me and keeping me focused,  
the administration, faculty and students of the focus school  
for allowing me access into their world,  
my cousin Karyn, for providing loving child care,  
the staff at Caribou Coffee for keeping me attentive for weeks on end,  
and to my two boys,  
may the achievement gap be something you only learn about in history classes.  
Thank you.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Growing up in an affluent suburb of a large midwest city, my fellow grade school classmates and I were provided with an education that equipped us with the tools to succeed in our future scholastic endeavours. Our school provided a nurturing, supportive, and challenging environment using best practices, proven curriculum and the newest and greatest technological advancements that education had to offer. I can recall outdoor science expeditions to the pond, located on our school property, where we examined and recorded our observations of the flora and fauna that existed around and within the pond. We spent diligent hours crafting marionette puppets and using them in a puppet show using the script and story line we created. I have fond memories of field trips to Carver Park and meeting with Mr. Gilbert, who taught us many things about the natural world that surrounded us. I was part of a select group of students in a gifted and talented program called “Gateways” where we learned about and drew caricatures, went on a field trip to a planetarium, and dissected frogs and compared their anatomy to humans. In the late ‘70s, my school provided the students with the opportunity to explore our skill in surviving the 19<sup>th</sup> century expedition West, using teletypes connected to a phone modem. It was an early version of the soon-to-be famous Oregon Trail. The game would spit out questions and scenarios on a roll of paper, and in turn we would have to respond to those scenarios with simple prompts, such as “bang” while hunting for food. There were no graphics, just simply words typed on paper rolls. But we were all enthralled by our first interaction with a “computer”. A few years later our school purchased a slew of Apple II computers and we were having our try at surviving the great

Oregon Trail with moving graphics and sound! Our teachers integrated these early tools of technology into the curriculum to help create an engaging and exciting learning environment. We thought we were just playing and having fun, when in actuality we were feeling, “first hand” the difficulties of the settlers moving west in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Technology has come a long way since those early days of the “Oregon Trail”. Now students have more power in the smartphones they carry in their pockets than Apollo 11 had in their computers that helped the U.S. astronauts land on and return from the moon (Sutter, 2012). That is, if students have access to such technology. Many at-risk students, and especially students of color are sorely lacking the access to modern technology (Darling-Hammond, Zieleszinski, & Goldman, 2014), and thus are missing out on the educational benefits that the inclusion of technology in a classroom can provide.

Curriculums have morphed since I attended grade school. Students also now have even more choice as to where they attend school, whether it be public, private, or charter schools. It never occurred to me during my formative K-6 years that my experience was vastly different than those kids attending underserved, and underprivileged schools. This reality became clear as I progressed through my master’s courses in education at Hamline University. The Achievement Gap was a “buzzword” throughout my time in the program, as well as in the local media. One of my closest friends is the Dean of students at a charter school whose population is 92% African-American. This school has proven to “beat the odds” of the achievement gap, and continually increase the standard measurement scores of their students. This reality prompted me to ask the question and examine *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap?*

My interest in this subject was piqued for a number of reasons. I am half White and half African-American. This blending of race that is my genetic makeup has always caused me, especially from my adolescence on, to be keenly aware of the socially constructed concept of race. I was adopted at the age of 6 months old by two loving, caring, nurturing, and well-educated White parents. They provided me the encouragement, resources, love and opportunity to succeed in school and life. And as I mentioned above, my grade school did as well. Since beginning my quest three years ago to become a licensed K-6 teacher, and obtain my Master's degree, I was enlightened to the severity of the educational inequities that exist in this country. During my last semester of content courses, the media and the education world announced that Minnesota has the highest disparity in the achievement gap between White students and students of color in the entire nation. How could that be? In a state that is known for its quality of education, how could we have the largest achievement gap?

While I was completing my student teaching, we were asked by our supervisors to attend a panel discussion at Hamline University about the achievement gap. The five-person panel consisted of principals, former principals, and superintendents from different districts across the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The statement that stuck with me the most from that discussion was when one panel member referred to the achievement gap as the "Opportunity Gap". It was her belief that the disparity in achievement between students of color and their White cohorts was directly related to the amount of opportunity provided each group. In certain communities, the lack of opportunity and critical resources, both inside and outside the education system, are

hindering young students from reaching their full potential. I had never looked at the achievement gap that way.

Another reason why I have taken a keen interest in the issues surrounding the achievement gap is that my wife and I have adopted two African-American baby boys from Texas, one in January of 2014, and the other in July of 2016. In a few short years, they will be attending school in a state that has demonstrated the worst discrepancy in achievement between students of color and White students in the entire United States of America. It is for these reasons that I was prompted to look a little closer at some of the policies that the Minnesota Department of Education has in place to help shrink the achievement gap.

While enrolled in a class on educational public policy I examined the Minnesota Department of Education's Multiple Measurement Rating system ("Multiple Measurement Rating (MMR)", n.d.). As a way to help combat the achievement gap, and to stay in accordance with the No Child Left Behind act, the state of Minnesota developed an accountability system that is designed to promote high growth for all students, while also reducing the achievement gap in half by 2017. (In 2015 the No Child Left Behind act was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act. It essentially transfers power away from the federal government and back to the state and local government, which eliminates the previous accountability system that punished states if too few students were proficient in reading and math (Fránquiz & Ortiz, 2016). A Multiple Measurements Rating (MMR) is given to each school in Minnesota on a yearly basis that measures the school's performance in the areas of proficiency, growth, achievement gap reduction, and graduation rates. They also use a second rating, the

Focus Rating (FR) to measure a school's success in reducing the achievement gaps between different student groups. Based on these ratings each school is given a designation of one of the following; Reward School, Celebration Eligible, Continuous Improvement, Focus, or Priority. The last two school categories are required to set aside 20% of their Title I funds to support their efforts in improving their schools.

In discussing this system and its pros and cons with the aforementioned friend, he shared with me how his school, despite significant gains in all of the state's measurements, was still given the designation of a "focus" school. Because of my personal love of technology, initially this discussion prompted me to want to examine the use or the lack of access to technology in schools (and at home) that serve such a population. We live in a world where technology is becoming intertwined into the very fabric of our existence. The next generation of students, those brought up in the age of digital technology are labeled "digital natives" ("Definition of digital native in English", n.d.). It is critical that all young students have the same opportunity to access, utilize, become comfortable with, and learn from technology. "For at-risk students, they add the additional disadvantage of reducing their readiness to engage in the primary means of information access and transfer in a technologically based society and economy." (Darling-Hammond, Zieleszinski, & Goldman, 2014, p. 4). It has been shown that if at-risk students have access to appropriate technology, and it is used in a thoughtful, teacher-supported manner, the possibilities for significant gains in learning and technological readiness are substantially increased (Darling-Hammond, Zieleszinski, Goldman 2014). Learning this, I questioned my friend on how technology is incorporated into his school. Recently they had begun integrating the use of 5 iPads, and several

Google Chromebooks into their curriculum with surprising success. After further conversations I have had with him, I began to wonder if the disparity in achievement between students of color, and their White cohorts could not be narrowed if the students of color had the same access to technology that many of their White peers are privileged to have. His school was showing significant gains in proficiency on the state's standardized tests, yet their technology use was still minimal, and represented only a small part of their overall education plan. This realization prompted me to want to more broadly research how a small, underfunded charter school was beating the odds of the achievement gap. I would like to know more about the methods, curriculum, community, teachers, leadership and systems that are in place at this charter school that have proven successful in beginning to close the achievement gap. My research will be a case study of a charter school located in the outer suburbs of a large, midwestern metropolitan area. It is my contention that this research will provide useful and valuable insight into how such a school is able to “beat the odds” and continually meet or surpass the expected proficiency growth that is required by the state in order to shrink the achievement gap.

### **Summary**

I was fortunate enough to have a wonderful K-6 educational experience, one in which I was a non-White participant, and was given all of the same opportunities and experiences that my cohorts were given (and in some cases even more). As a result of my continued education in the world of K-6 education, I have become keenly aware of the discrepancy in academic achievement between at-risk students of color versus their White counterparts. Having one of my closest friends directly involved in an education system that is fighting hard and succeeding in closing the academic achievement gap has



only helped to “fuel my fire”. These life experiences have created a desire to embark on a case study of a charter school and examine *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap?* In the following chapter, I will examine the current research and literature as it pertains to charter schools, what they are, how they differ from the traditional public school, and their pros and cons. I will also examine the achievement gap and investigate its causes and some current methods in place to combat the issue. The literature review will also explore current qualitative research concepts and methodology. This culmination of research will guide and help shape my understanding and preparedness for conducting a case study of a charter school that is “beating the odds” and succeeding in shrinking the gap of achievement that exists between non-White and White students. Ultimately, this capstone will hope to provide useful and insightful methods, concepts and curriculum examples in place at one charter school. This school may thus serve as a model that could be incorporated at any scholastic institution that serves minority students to thereby help shrink the achievement gap.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

In order to answer the questions of *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap*, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of what exactly a charter school is, and the aspects that differentiate this type of educational institution from the more traditional public school. Exploring past research of the successes or failures of charter schools is, of course, important. It is vital to explore a number of aspects that encompass and influence the scholastic and societal environments affecting at-risk students. It is also important to look at aspects of our society and scholastic system that allow for and perpetuate such a disparity in achievement between students of color and White students. This literature review will endeavor to synthesize current research around these concepts, beginning with an investigation into the achievement gap and some of the causes that help create such a disparity in academic performance across student groups. It will also discuss some current and existing interventions that are in place to help shrink this gap. Then an inquiry into the outcomes of an unchecked, unmodified, and non-equitable education system will be explored, as well as outcomes from successful interventions, such as a multicultural education model, and positive racial identity development. From there, an analysis of the charter school, as an entity, will be examined. This section will examine the when, where, how, and why of charter schools. Finally, the literature review will explore the current trends, successes and failures of charter schools as they relate to the achievement gap.

## **The Achievement Gap**

The achievement gap is a term used to represent the academic performance disparity between different groups of students. Most commonly, this gap measures the academic performance difference between White students and students of color, however it can also refer to the disparity between able-bodied students and students with exceptionalities, or native English speakers and English language learners (“Achievement Gap Definitions”, 2013, para. 5). Another closely related term is the opportunity gap. The difference between the two is described by The Glossary of Education Reform: “Generally speaking, *achievement gap* refers to outputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits—while *opportunity gap* refers to inputs—the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities” (“Achievement Gap”, 2013, para. 2). Regardless which term is used, an imbalance has existed throughout much of the history of the United States between Black and White citizens. This imbalance has been seen in property ownership rights, opportunities for employment, voting rights, public accommodations and in education (Williams, 2011). Many of these disparities have been minimized over the course of the last century, however, a recognizable gap in academic achievement between Black students and White students is still prevalent and a serious issue in the education systems across the United States (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Milner, 2012; Williams, 2011).

### **Achievement Gap in Minnesota**

Minnesota has some of the largest disparities in academic performance between minority and White students of any state in the country (McNeil, 2014). Because of this, Minnesota has used the waivers offered under the No Child Left Behind Act to

design accountability strategies to cut the achievement gap in half by the year 2017. The new accountability system uses multiple data points, across eight student sub-groups, to analyze a school's or district's proficiency rate, gaps in achievement, student growth, and graduation rates (McNeil, 2014). These systems seem to be having a positive effect on the achievement gap in Minnesota as early data has shown that approximately three-quarters of school districts are on track to cut the achievement gap of all subgroups in half by 2017 (McNeil, 2014).

### **Causes**

As mentioned in the previous section, one of the potential causes that has perpetuated the achievement gap is an historical, societal, systemic oppression that has been inflicted upon African-Americans in this country (Williams, 2011; Yu, 2012). Researchers have looked at many different variables in an attempt to ascertain what is causing this gap between minorities and Whites. They have looked at family income level, parental involvement, socioeconomic status, racial stereotyping, and different school-based variables, such as teacher quality, standard-based instruction, and tracking (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Milner, 2012; Williams, 2011; Yu, 2012). These and other studies show that an achievement gap exists and is exacerbated by a large number of variables which therefore makes it very difficult to pin down any one solution.

A person's race and ethnicity carries with it a socially constructed, assigned identity, which many times inflicts a disadvantaged outcome (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). An example of such an outcome is made apparent when examining the Zero Tolerance practice that many schools have implemented into their disciplinary plan. Students of

color experience a higher suspension and expulsion rate than White students (Wilson, 2014).

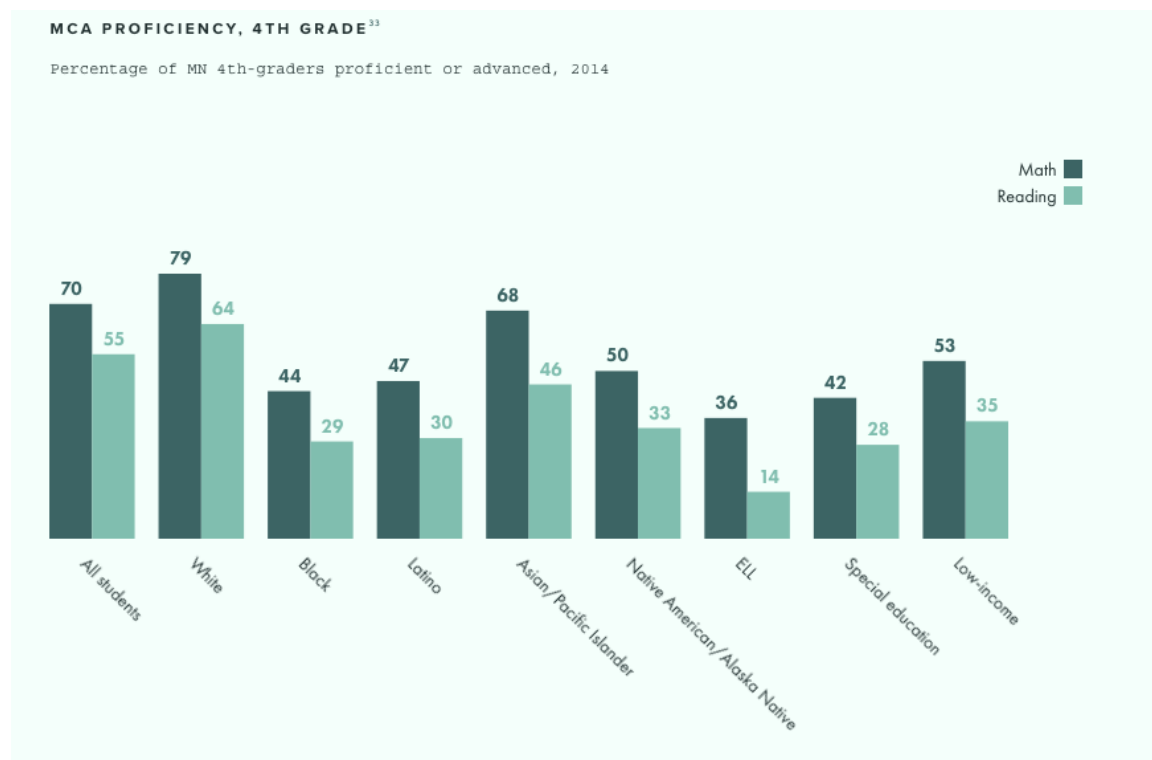
Black students are suspended or expelled three times more frequently than White students. And while Black children made up 16 percent of all enrolled children in 2011-12, according to federal data, they accounted for 31 percent of all in-school arrests. (Nelson & Lind, 2015, Black Students are More Likely to be Disciplined section, para. 1)

This perpetuates the achievement gap because it results in students of color missing more instructional time due to suspensions and disciplinary actions. In a Texas study, it was found that students who are suspended are more likely to drop out or repeat a grade than those students who were not. They found that if a student was suspended or expelled they would repeat a grade 31% of the time, compared to 5% when the students were not. They were also twice as likely to drop out (Nelson & Lind, 2015). These students simply are not in school as much as their White counterparts, so they end up falling behind. These repeated disciplinary actions can also lead to psychological distancing from the educational process (e.g. stereotype threat) which can make it even more difficult for them to achieve.

On the 2014 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, for example, Black fourth-graders trailed their White peers by 35 percentage points in math and reading.

Latino fourth-graders didn't fare much better, trailing White students by 32 points in math and 34 points in reading. (The State of Minnesota Public Education, 2014, Preface section, para. 4)

The following graphs illustrate the continued existence of an educational achievement gap between Minnesota 4th grade students of color and their White counterparts. (Graphs reprinted with permission from MINNCAN, The State of Minnesota Public Education, 2014).



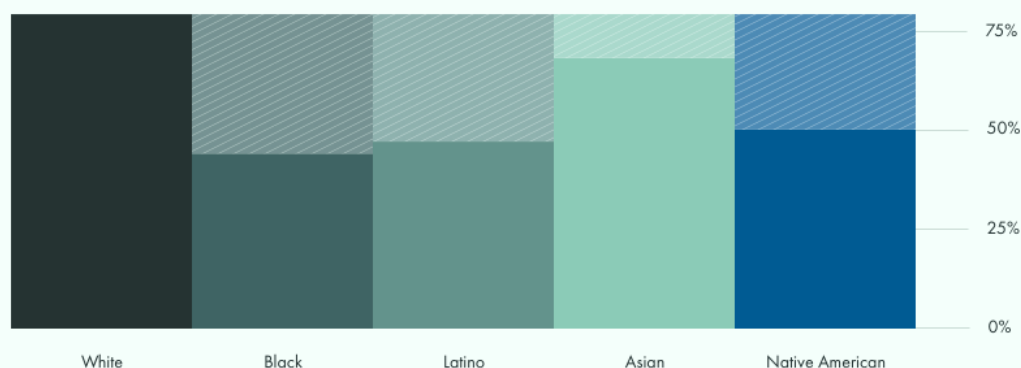
**Figure 1: MCA Proficiency, 4th Grade.** This bar graph indicates the percentage of Minnesota 4th-graders who are proficient in math and reading across races including special education and low-income students.

### MCA PROFICIENCY GAPS, 4TH GRADE<sup>42</sup>

The difference in proficiency rates between white students and students of color, 2014  
(in percentage points)

Gap 

## Math



## Reading

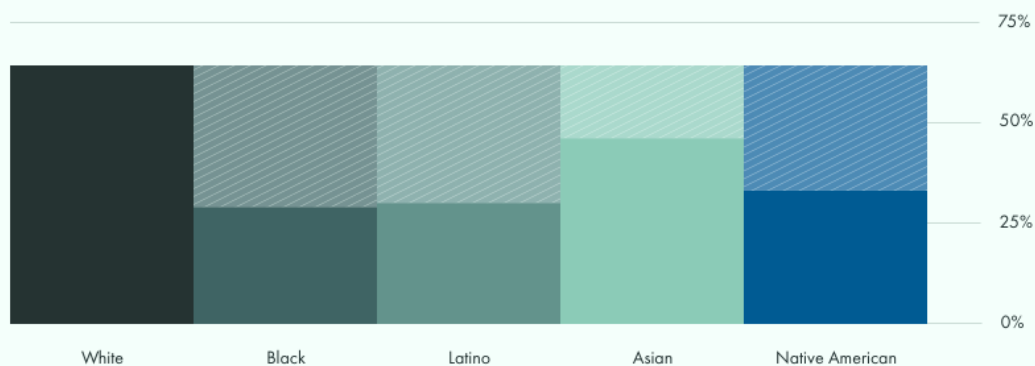


Figure 2: MCA Proficiency Gaps, 4th grade. These bar graphs illustrate the difference in proficiency rates in math and reading between Minnesota White students and students of color in 2014.

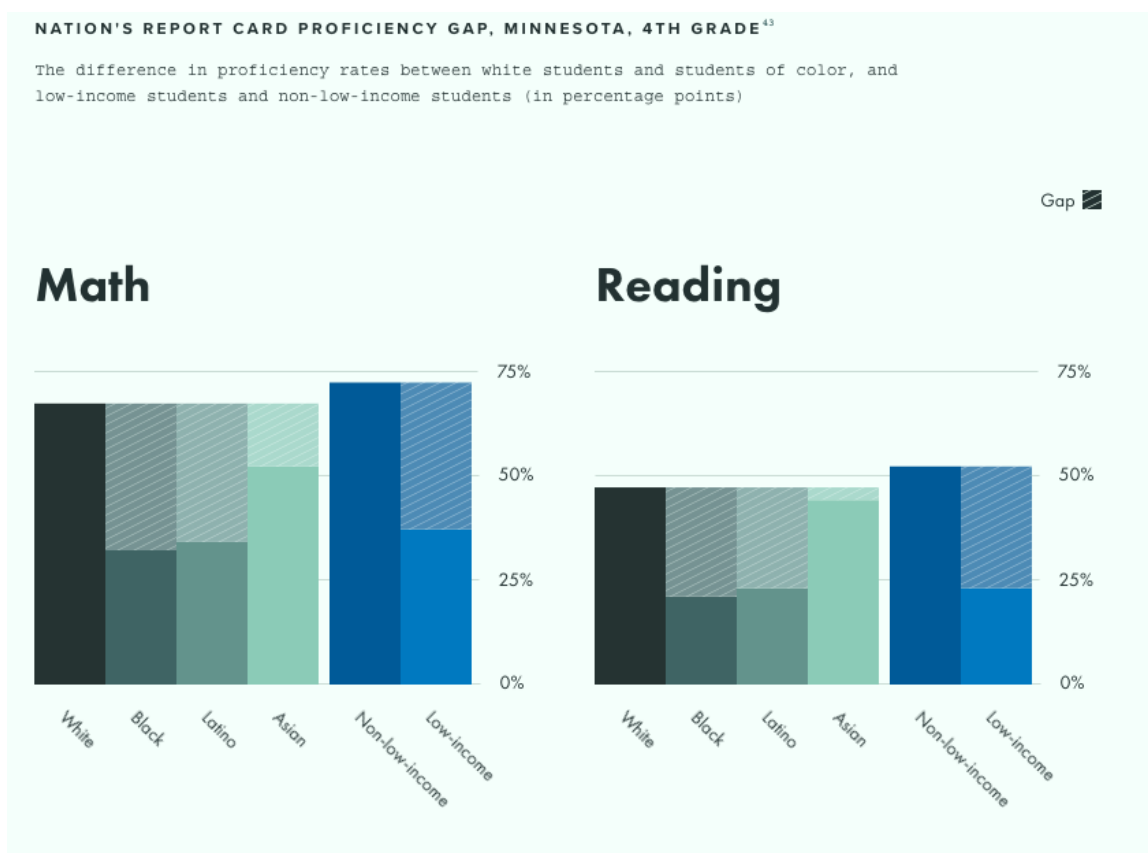


Figure 3: Nation's Report Card Proficiency Gap of Minnesota 4th grade. These bar graphs illustrate the difference in proficiency rates between White students and students of color, and low-income and non-low-income students.

The data gathered for the MINNCAN research report (The State of Minnesota Public Education, 2014) shows, that since 2011, 4th grade reading and math scores have improved across nearly all student groups. Graduation rates are the highest they have been in the last five years. However, as the above graphs indicate, there continues to be an achievement gap between ethnicities and races. In particular, these graphs illustrate the discrepancy in achievement in relation to Black students compared to White students. With the exception of English Language learners, the largest gap of achievement continues to be between those two demographics. It's also important to note the



significant gap between the non-low income and the low-income demographic. The students enrolled in the school that is the focus of this study are primarily Black, low-income students, with nearly a quarter also being English-language learners.

### **Outcomes of a Continuing Achievement Gap**

The disparity in achievement between White students and students of color has been and continues to be a negative aspect of this country's education system as illustrated in the above section. Many systems are in place to combat the achievement gap, and it is important that these systems are continually evaluated and modified to increase the likelihood of an equitable education system. Over the past 40 years an increase in the disparity in income of U.S. households has accompanied an increasing gap in academic achievement and educational attainment. This increased disparity in income has helped create a rising occurrence of residential segregation where the lowest income citizens are attending schools that have fewer resources, lower teacher performance, and lower quality learning experiences, when compared to their higher-income counterparts (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). This socio-economic divide has a high correlation to race, due to a variety of systemic factors and ongoing de facto segregation, particularly in urban school districts (Kozol, 2005). As a result of such disparity, minority students are much less likely to finish their K-12 education and graduate. As Darling-Hammond, Zieleszinski, & Goldman (2014) stated,

..nearly half of Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans do not graduate on time with their classmates. Sadly, this is not unusual: more than one million U.S. high school students drop out each year, an average of one student every twenty-nine seconds. (p. 1)

It is not only the lower graduation rate of minority students that is a problem, but the likelihood that these youth end up in the juvenile justice system. The *school-to-prison pipeline* is a term referring to the link between educational exclusion and criminalization of young students of color (Wilson, 2014). A person of color is six times more likely to be incarcerated than a White person, and more than half of those incarcerated enter prison without a high school diploma. For this reason it is vital that the education system provide a positive school climate, with high quality instruction, and foster an environment of inclusion, not exclusion (Wilson, 2014).

### **Closing the Gap**

What measures are being taken to close the achievement gap? According to Williams (2011), it is the school-based variables that have the most potential to make a difference in the achievement gap. For example, using standards-based instructional strategies that are student-centered, and discontinuing the common practice of tracking students are variables that have shown to help achievement in all student groups. In an analysis of eight highly successful charter high schools, six major characteristics were determined to be consistent across those schools: they all had a clear mission, the academic curriculum was rigorous and focused on college preparation, the teachers taught for mastery, extra support was provided for the students both during and after class, teacher collaboration and professional development was valued by the administration, and the staff held themselves accountable for student achievement (Williams 2011).

There are many other federal, state and institutional policies that have been devised in order to address the achievement gap, but according to Williams (2011),

“Regardless of the cause of the achievement gap, interventions need to be put in place in schools in order to correct the problem” (p. 67). These interventions include smaller class sizes, detracking students, using standards-based instruction, raising teacher expectations for all students, the inclusion of mentors, focusing on achievement and college preparation, and having extra support for the students. She also mentions the importance of teachers examining their own potential biases and expectations of achievement for students of color (Williams 2011). According to Hawley & Nieto (2010), there are three steps necessary to effectively implement race- and ethnicity-responsive approaches to improve the school's educational practices, that will benefit all students. 1) Understand how race affects teaching and learning. 2) Use race- and ethnicity-responsive teaching practices. 3) Promote supportive school conditions.

There are many researchers, educators and government institutional policies providing concepts, theories and methods to address the achievement gap, but are they successful? The data is mixed. Since the 1970s the White-Black and White-Hispanic achievement gaps have narrowed substantially in both reading and math for all grades (Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps. (n.d.)., Over the past 40 years). The largest narrowing of the achievement gap in reading and math took place between the 1970s and 1980s. For some cohorts, the gap was cut by more than 50 percent. During the 1990s the closing of the gap slowed and in some cases increased. From 1999 to 2004 the gap again narrowed. Between 2004 and 2008 there was little change in the mathematics gap, and a small narrowing in the reading gap (Barton & Coley, 2010). Since the late 1990s the achievement gaps in every subject and grade have been declining, albeit, very slowly. The gaps between Whites and non-Whites is still very large, and range from 0.5 to 0.9

standard deviations (Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps. (n.d.)., Over the past 40 years).

The gap in academic achievement in this country is a major issue and is one that is not easily solved. It will require the refocusing of priorities, attitudes, policies (both local and federal), and teaching methodologies in order to make any real headway in creating an equitable education system.

### **Multicultural Pedagogy**

Another important aspect in becoming an effective teacher is to have a comprehensive understanding of the student body. As classrooms across the United States become increasingly diverse (Maxwell, 2014; Yu, 2012), the importance of a multicultural pedagogy cannot be overstated. For the first time in U.S. history, the demographics of students in public K-12 classrooms is projected to contain a higher percentage of Latino, African-American, and Asian students as compared to their non-Hispanic White counterparts (Maxwell, 2014). According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, of the 3.4 million public school teachers in the 2011-12 school year, 82% were non-Hispanic White, 7% were non-Hispanic Black and 8% were Hispanic. In comparison, during the 2013-14 school year the percentage distribution of students enrolled in public schools by race/ethnicity was 50% White, 16% Black, 25% Hispanic, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 3% two or more races. This racial disparity between students and teachers creates a disconnect that can be difficult to bridge (Maxwell, 2014). This imbalance reinforces the importance of, and necessity for the inclusion of a multicultural pedagogy into the school systems, so as to create a scholastic environment that is welcoming and relatable to all students,

especially those of color. This concept is reinforced in an article by Wood and Jocius (2013) when they stated:

Because many White teachers are unaware of their privilege in the classroom, they can fail to attend to the specific needs of students with cultural backgrounds. It is important that White teachers make an active effort to consider their own privileges in relation to their instructional activities and goals. (p. 662)

An example of a school district that is attempting to address such potential inherent biases in their teachers exists within an inner ring, highly diverse, first tier suburb of a midwestern metropolitan area. They have brought in equity coaches into the classroom as part of a state legislated plan to combat the achievement gap. One of the equity coach's jobs is to observe the classroom teacher and provide feedback and best practice suggestions into how to better teach within a diverse classroom (R. Metz, personal communication, September 22, 2014). As of this writing, no quantitative research results seem to be available on if this particular practice has been effective. However, based on teacher feedback, the program has been a great success (Clos, 2015). Another district located in the second tier of the same midwestern metropolis, who were witnessing the demographic change within their district, found success when they partnered with the National Urban Alliance (NUA). Between the years of 2008 to 2011, with the help of the NUA, this district saw a 16% narrowing on the reading assessment gap between Black and White students. The same percentage change was noticed between those students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (an indication of poverty) and White students ("Case Studies, Eden Prairie, MN Closing the Achievement Gap, One Student at a Time in Eden Prairie, MN", n.d.). The NUA provides "school leaders and teachers with the

opportunity, guidance and voice to identify what practices they need that will help them build on student strengths and engage them in learning essential skills, content and strategies (“National Urban Alliance” n.d., What We Offer section, para. 1). Similar to the aforementioned equity coaches, the NUA works alongside teachers to help instruct teachers on best practices in teaching students with cultural differences.

One way to instill a multicultural pedagogy into early childhood curriculum is to include multicultural literature. The merging of multicultural literature with the common vocabulary and comprehension strategies inspires young students to make personal and significant connections to the worldly messages contained within the literature. It also encourages empathy and appreciation towards other cultures (Harper & Brand, 2010). Many African-American young boys are disenchanted, and feel alienated within the literacy classroom (Wood & Jocius, 2013). The texts used often do not reflect the experiences and family culture of young African-American males, and therefore do not engage them. It is important and helps with the engagement to include critical literacy into the curriculum, as it can be used as a springboard into examination and discussion of the institutional influence on young African-American lives:

Using critical literacy practices with young African American males can create a learning environment that raises expectations for academic achievement by challenging traditional notions of literacy instruction, encourages cooperative learning, and allows students to develop a sense of social justice. (Wood & Jocius, 2013, p. 663)

Teachers have a responsibility to provide an education that is effective, equitable and accessible to all students. In order to provide such an education, the teacher must

have an extensive understanding of the content, thorough knowledge of the diversity that exists within the classroom, and utilize a curriculum structure that the students can relate to and will help them grow academically.

### **Racial Identity Development**

Related to and complementary to multicultural pedagogy is that of racial identity development. The racial identity development model is an important aspect to an education that helps the academic achievement of at-risk, minority students. In order to achieve a more equitable and effective education system it is important to nurture a positive racial identity among both the at-risk students, and the (White) teacher (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Yu, 2012).

As mentioned in the previous section, many students of color feel alienated and disenchant within their educational environment. The students of color need to be provided with avenues of learning that are relatable, and foster a positive outlook on their race and culture (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). Recently in the Minneapolis school district, under the newly established (2014) Office of Black Male Student Achievement, a program was put into place called Building Lives Acquiring Cultural Knowledge (BLACK). This five day a week course offers the students with an opportunity to learn about African-American history, literature, and leadership development (Superville, 2015).

In a case study of 18 African-American college students, who were raised in predominantly White communities, Tatum (2004) concluded that although all of the participants were raised with parents who provided a solid foundation on which to build a positive racial identity,

...the educational experiences of all of the participants suggest that White-dominated schools, which formally and informally perpetuate the racial order, can work to undermine that foundation. In all of the cases presented, the perception that teachers did not expect excellence from their Black students (in fact, were surprised by it), the invisibility of African Americans in their curricula in their high schools, and the stereotypical expectations of both Black and White peers hindered the development of a positive Black identity. (p. 132)

Positive racial identity development, from a curriculum standpoint and from a school culture standpoint are important facets in bolstering at-risk minority student's desire and ability to succeed.

On the other hand, the (White) teacher needs to develop a deeper understanding of their own racial identity. As difficult and uncomfortable a process as it may be, in order to become a socially competent, culturally relevant and effective multicultural teacher, a teacher must be introspective of their own White racial identity. Yu (2012) states "to successfully teach diverse students, White teachers must develop a healthy White racial identity, one that challenges White privilege and the systemic oppression of racial minorities under White domination" (p. 47). According to Gary Howard,

...for Whites to become effective multicultural teachers, culturally relevant and socially competent, they must become racially educated; they must understand the larger racial histories, struggles, injustices, and the role White's play in them; and they must further understand issues such as White dominance, White privilege, and White racism and how these realities have underlined the entrenched value



systems and conceptual framework which directly or indirectly influence their philosophy and practice as teachers (as cited in Yu, 2012, p.48).

There are many teachers in the profession today who profess to be “color-blind”, meaning they don’t “see race” (Milner, 2012; Yu, 2012). When a teacher utilizes a color-blind paradigm in their planning and teaching, they run the risk of consciously or unconsciously missing or overlooking the important racial component of their students identity (Milner, 2012). According to Banks (2001), in order for teachers to develop a positive racial identity, and a deeper understanding of their minority students, they need to rethink and critically analyze their perception of race, culture and ethnicity and understand how they fit into the larger racial and cultural picture.

### **The Role of Technology**

It is no secret that technology is becoming increasingly intertwined into our societal fabric. Technology is also playing a bigger role in the world of education. Within schools today, many have access to one-to-one devices including tablets, iPads, mobile computer labs, stationary computer labs, and bring-your-own-device (BYOD) programs (Darling-Hammond, Zielesinski, & Goldman, 2014). However, schools that are located within a lower socioeconomic strata generally do not have the funding necessary to implement technology into the curriculum on a large scale. Furthermore, the students that attend these schools have limited access to computers and the internet in their homes (Forzani & Leu, 2012). Another example of an opportunity gap. This lack of access to computers and the internet, both at home and within the scholastic environment, provides a deficit to the possible benefits that such access would allow. This lack of access not only includes technology, but other important aspects that are critical to the acquisition of

a quality education. Studies have shown that low-income students and students of color have less access than White and affluent students to qualified teachers, school funding, books, materials, high-quality curriculum, and computers (Darling-Hammond, Zieleszinski, & Goldman, 2014).

A recent study of 266 kindergartners found that using iPads in school not only increased their literacy test scores, but also showed an increased interest in learning and enthusiasm for school (Stenger, 2013). A two-year case study by Warschauer (2008) looked at one-to-one laptop use and literacy practices in 10 U.S. schools. His study showed many benefits in one-to-one laptop learning in literacy. Classrooms that incorporated laptop learning in literacy provided more autonomous, student focused instruction. The literacy process on a computer provided more scaffolding, or a provision of support so students could read more challenging material. Students had greater access to published sources, and use of data from online material. Younger students were able to look up definitions for words that were unknown, or difficult to pronounce, or search the internet to gain a deeper understanding of the topic or aspects of the reading that was unclear.

Although there were differences among students, classes, and schools, students' literacy practices in laptop schools closely match the requirements of 21st-century life compared with students in typical classrooms. In addition, opportunities to engage in the kinds of media-rich, autonomous interaction and production at school that so many students carry out at home had greatly increased.

(Warschauer, 2008, p. 65)

A very popular computer assisted learning tool is Khan Academy. Khan Academy is a free web-based, intelligent multi-subject tutor, that allows for differentiated instruction. Although there is no empirical data of its success, it does provide a virtual one-on-one, tutoring type experience, with immediate feedback and disaggregated data for the teacher (Cargile & Harkness, 2015). This is only true and applicable if a student has the “opportunity” to utilize the technology.

While the success of students in technology-rich environments, whether they be at-risk or not, depends upon a variety of factors, studies have assuredly concluded that well-supported technology programs enhance student achievement and can point to a way forward for closing opportunity gaps.

It is quite apparent from the literature reviewed, an achievement gap continues to exist between White students and those of color due to a complex and often inter-related set of variables. It is also clear that from the federal level down to the state level, education administrators have implemented many different programs, ideals, methods, and pedagogy styles in hopes of rectifying this academic disparity. One area where these ideas have the potential to make a difference is within the charter school, because of its autonomous nature.

### **Charter Schools**

The Charter School phenomenon began in Minnesota, when in 1991, a law was passed that allowed for the creation of a new kind of public school that functioned outside the traditional K-12 system. The proper term for these schools is “chartered schools” as they are established by teachers, community groups or parents and publicly funded independently of the traditional public school system (Junge, 2014). Tell (2015)

defines charter schools as “tuition-free, publicly funded, performance-based, non-sectarian, public schools of choice open to all” (p. 318). As of 2014 there were approximately 6,000 charter schools in 42 states and the District of Columbia, serving more than 2.3 million students (Junge, 2014).

So why have an alternative to the already existing public school? In Junge’s (2014) article, a number of reasons were given as to why Minnesota championed for the creation of the charter school. The United States public education system was critically reviewed in the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report. The then Minnesota governor, Rudy Perpich, responded by proposing initiatives, which eventually became law, that included allowing for open enrollment. Open enrollment would allow students to attend any public school in the state. It was his view that this freedom of public school choice would allow students to have “Access to Excellence.” A potential problem arose from this notion; If all the choices were the same, not all students would be able to make the trek across town to attend the public school of choice. This prompted the idea for providing additional public school choices within communities and neighborhoods. Furthermore, by chartering additional school options, it would remove the exclusivity of the public school choice, and make the traditional school system more receptive and open to change (Junge, 2014).

To be classified a charter school in the U.S., the institution must receive government funds on a per-student basis. They may not charge tuition, nor can they select students based on admissions test scores or previous academic achievement. If the school has reached its enrollment limit, students must be admitted through a lottery system. When it comes to teacher certification and involvement in teacher unions, charter

schools have more autonomy and flexibility in their academic regulations. They are also free to create alternative curriculums and may target subsections of the population, such as drop-outs, performing arts students, or non-traditional learners. Even with the autonomy provided charter schools, all students are held to the same academic proficiency standards as traditional public schools, and have to participate in the same cognitive assessments (Flaker, 2014). In exchange for this given autonomy, the charter school organization pledges accountability in their performance contract. If they fail to meet those performance goals, their charter may not be renewed, and the school closed (Junge, 2014).

Based on the number of charter schools that have been created since their inception in 1991, (over 6,000), it is clear that the concept of charter schools is being embraced. The larger question is how well are students learning in charter schools? Are the students in charter schools performing better than the students enrolled in the traditional public schools? How are charter schools affecting the education of African American students? In the following sections an examination of the pros and cons of charter schools will be examined.

### **Cons**

A very common argument against charter schools is that they are removing available funds away from the traditional public school. Opponents argue that the very nature of funding for a charter school makes it a privatized, corporatized entity, which threatens the legacy of public education and will ultimately undermine the country's democracy (Raymond, 2014). According to Tell (2015), the privatization of education has "undermined the public interest and quality of education. The rich and their political

representatives are eager to replicate and expand charter schools because these schools ensure guaranteed profits with little risk” (p. 336). Raymond (2014) expresses that this sort of opposition is a bit far reaching as the majority of charter schools are independent, nonprofit entities.

Another argued drawback of charter schools is unveiled when one looks at the students who they serve. Charter schools enroll a disproportionately low level of students with special needs or those that are English language learners (Erikson, 2011; Tell, 2015). If one aspires to the notion of creating an educational environment that celebrates and encourages a diverse and well-represented student body, charter schools fail. Charter schools serve a considerably high percentage of Black students vs. White students when compared to the traditional public school. As many of the largest charter school districts in the U.S. are located in urban communities, charter schools are exacerbating racial segregation in public schools (Almond, 2012). This “re-segregation” of a portion of the education system defies the option of choice that a charter school is inherently meant to offer. According to Erikson (2011),

Charter schools offer parents “choice” in schooling for their children. But the constraints on that choice are massive, are based in historic and current policy, and yet are rarely acknowledged. The first and most significant constraint is that, despite claims implying broad mobility for students, most charter schools remain creatures of the school district in which they reside. Charter admissions practices respect the jurisdictional boundaries that separate city districts from suburban ones or wealthier from poorer suburbs. (p.44)

Even if the “choice” of attending a charter school is limited by district or jurisdictional factors, research has shown that Black students are overwhelmingly enrolling into charter schools, with a higher percentage of same-race students than the traditional public schools they chose to leave (Almond, 2012). This transition is happening even though the data is inconclusive on whether the charter school is, in fact, increasing the scholastic performance of Black students.

If the data is inconclusive on whether charter schools increase academic performance, why are Black students choosing to enroll in them at a greater rate than traditional public schools? In a study of 260 parents from Ohio who had recently transferred their children into charter schools (approximately two-thirds Black and one-third White), May (2006) found that the parents felt that the charter school experience would provide their children with an enhanced educational experience, even without statistically significant data indicating that charter schools provide improved academic gains. The results indicated that the main reason parents removed their children from their respective traditional public school was to improve their child’s quality of education. In this study, the parents described “quality of education” as smaller class sizes, better teachers, teacher familiarity, one-on-one attention, supportive staff, and a sense of belonging. These expressions are not directly associated with academics, but more to the environmental variables of the school, which the author framed as the “perception gap” (May, 2006, p.19). According to May, school choice provides many Black parents with a way to escape underperforming city schools and provides them with a sense of entitlement.

Many of the charter schools that serve large proportions of Black students vary significantly in their culture and practices when compared to the traditional public school (Almond, 2012). These distinct characteristic differences, Almond claims, may be how these charter schools that serve predominantly Black students entice families to enroll. She lists five commonalities found in the current literature that make up the characteristics of these schools:

- (a) a defined mission statement that emphasizes academic performance, (b) a culture of high expectations, (c) a college-going atmosphere, (d) a focus on standardized tests and the use of regular internal evaluations, and (e) longer school days and extended academic years. (Almond, 2012, p. 360)

Despite the many questions that remain about the efficacy of charter schools overall, these cultural attributes do suggest a potential way forward in the quest to narrow the nation's racial achievement gap.

### **Pros**

Even though most of the data is conflicting on whether charter schools are better at improving academic performance versus the traditional public school, one study did find that charter schools are more efficient. A study by Flaker (2014), compared the cognitive outcomes and per student spending of charter schools as compared with their traditional public school counterparts. Her analysis focused specifically on the Massachusetts public school system because of its well-documented, strong performance in public schools. She found, using individual school data for eighth grade and school-wide performance, that on average, charter schools outperform traditional public schools (TPS) in both reading and math proficiency at the 8th grade level. She found the same



results when looking at a school-wide comparison. The difference was even greater when comparing the urban area schools. These data indicate that urban schools spend \$1645 less per student on average, and non-urban charter schools spend an average of \$2198 less than their traditional public school counterparts. In summary Flaker (2014) found:

...8th grade charter schools outperform TPSs in every category of proficiency for both urban and non-urban settings, creating a strong argument for charter school effectiveness. They also prove more efficient than TPSs by producing those higher outcomes at a lower cost per pupil. However, the data suggest that charter schools are most efficient in urban setting, where the difference in gains is more than two times larger than in non-urban settings. The cost to achieve those gains, while higher than in non-urban charters, is still smaller than the urban TPS equivalents, suggesting that urban charter schools are more efficient than their TPS counterparts. (p. 244)

Charter schools, as a result of their more autonomous nature, have a potential advantage in helping shrink the achievement gap. Because they can focus on a particular mission, can potentially accomplish more with a smaller budget, can involve their faculty in more intensive professional development geared around intercultural competence, anti-racism/anti-bias work, they offer a unique solution to the quagmire of public education as it regards to racial diversity. In other words, charter schools have the potential to accomplish the recommendations in combating the achievement gap that were discussed earlier in this literature review.

## Conclusion

In an era where education reform and the continued striving for a better education for its youth is a political hot button, the United States continues to be plagued by a severe and measurable discrepancy in academic achievement between young minority, at-risk students and their White counterparts. Existing within the contemporary education climate is the continued and contentious issue of school choice. For many Black families who feel discouraged, and disenchanted by the age-old traditional public school, the option of a charter school offering innovation, choice and change is enticing. Although the data and literature that exists is inconsistent in providing proof that charter schools as a whole improve academic performance, there are charter schools that are excelling in helping shrink the achievement gap which is plaguing the education climate in this country. One charter school, located in a suburb of a large midwestern city, is continuing to meet and exceed the state's proficiency requirements. *What was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap?* The key aspects this study will focus on are:

- Student Body
  - Socioeconomic background
  - Racial composition
  - English Language Learners
- Institutional Attributes
- Curricula
- Teacher Training

The following chapter will discuss the methods, participants, and design of a case study of this school. The intent of the case study is to elaborate on and illuminate the aspects of the curriculum, faculty, school climate, parents, and students that have allowed this

particular school to be successful in meeting the state's proficiency standards, and thus shrinking the achievement gap.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methods

#### Introduction and Rationale

The basis of this Capstone is to investigate *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap?* Research shows that there is still an epidemic disparity in academic achievement between at-risk minority students and their White counterparts in this country (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hawley & Nieto, 2010; McNeil, 2014, Milner , 2012; Williams, 2011). Even with many education leaders investigating, analyzing, creating and integrating methods to shrink the achievement gap, the gap continues. There is, however, instances of scholastic institutions that are showing a successful narrowing of the achievement gap. Based on proficiency and growth test scores, a charter school located in a first tier suburb of a large midwestern city has shown a continued and improving standardized test score profile for it's primarily Black students. This chapter explains the process I used to gather data for a qualitative case study and analysis of this charter school.

As was brought to attention in the Williams (2011) article in the literature review chapter, there were six major characteristics that were found in highly successful charter schools examined: they all had a clear mission, the academic curriculum was rigorous and focused on college preparation, the teachers taught for mastery, extra support was provided for the students both during and after class, teacher collaboration and professional development was valued by the administration, and the staff held themselves accountable for student achievement. The literature review also shed some light as to what factors entice Black families to enroll their children into predominantly Black

charter schools: (a) a defined mission statement that emphasizes academic performance, (b) a culture of high expectations, (c) a college-going atmosphere, (d) a focus on standardized tests and the use of regular internal evaluations, and (e) longer school days and extended academic years (Almond, 2012, p. 360). It was my intention to examine if these attributes and characteristics exist in some way, shape or form at this school. And if they do, can they be attributed to the success of the school.

### **Research Design**

The research method selected for this project is a case study. The decision to use a case study methodology was chosen as it lends itself as the most appropriate method to gather and analyze data of the functionality and inner workings of a scholastic institution. Case Studies “are a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (Creswell, 2014, p.241). Case study is one of the most frequently used qualitative methods of educational research (Yazan, 2015). Qualitative research is an approach that allows for an exploration and assimilation of meaning that groups or individuals attribute to a human or social problem (Creswell, 2014, p.4). In this case, my goal was to explore and assimilate the factors that are contributing to the success of this charter school. In the article by Yazan (2015), he compares and contrasts three approaches to case study methods in education from Robert Yin, Sharam Merriam, and Robert Stake, who are seen as three foundational methodologists in the area of case study research. As is recommended by Stake (1995), this qualitative research case study focused on three data collection instruments: observation, interviews, and document review. Creswell (2014), illuminates advantages

of qualitative research within these three data collection methods. For observations he lists:

- Researcher has a first hand experience with participant.
- Researcher can record information as it occurs.
- Unusual aspects can be noticed during observation.

For interviews he lists:

- Useful when participants cannot be directly observed.
- Participants can provide historical information.
- Allows researcher control over the line of questioning.

For documents he lists:

- Enables a researcher to obtain the language and words of participants.
- Can be accessed at a time convenient to researcher-an unobtrusive source of information.
- Represents data to which participants have given attention.
- As written evidence, it saves a researcher the time and expense of transcribing. (p.193)

Qualitative research is by and large a process of investigation where the researcher, using the processes mentioned above, interprets and gradually makes sense of a social phenomenon by comparing, contrasting, analyzing, and classifying the object of study (Creswell, 2014). The following sections describe in detail, the location of the study, the participants, and how data was collected, analyzed and interpreted.

### Setting

This study took place at a charter school located within the city limits of a relatively large metropolitan, midwestern city. This charter school serves students grades K thru the 8th grade. The 2017 student body of 390 kids is comprised of 92% Black, 4% Latino, 2% Asian, 2% two or more races, and 1% White. Approximately 92.4 % of those students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. 23.9% are English language learners. 11.3% are part of the special education program. 4.2% of the students are homeless. The staff at this charter school consists of approximately 30 teachers, 3 administrators, 1 social worker/counselor, and 9 paraprofessionals. The school employs a group of 4 people who serve on something they call the student success team. The student success team manages student behavior. One student success team coach is for Kindergarten - 1st grade, one for 2nd - 4th, one for 5th - 8th, and the last (the school social worker) is the overseer of the student success team.

### Participants, Methods and Tools

In order to gather data to explore *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap*, it was vital to gather information and data from those involved in that institution. As Robert Weiss (1994) states:

Qualitative interview study may well be the method of choice if our aim is to describe how a system works or fails to work...and qualitative interviewing of members of an organization to understand how the organization works, how it moves toward goals or is paralyzed by internal friction. (p.10)

The primary method for gathering data for this case study was through one on one interviews with select members of the administration and faculty. Following the

completion of the interview, observation of each interviewed subject took place. The process of observing was done to support information learned in the interview and provided additional information. Finally, a document review of the students/schools past test scores, which indicated the school's trends in growth and proficiency, was collected. Also as part of the document review, a review of the school's mission statement and vision was examined.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with the founder and director of the school, the academic Dean, the school improvement coordinator/data assessment coordinator, and four of the teachers. The director, the academic Dean, and school improvement coordinator were chosen as interview subjects as they are the top three "players" in this scholastic institution. The success or failure of this school falls largely on these three people's shoulders. Three of the four teachers that were interviewed are part of an Instructional Leadership Team that manages the academics of the school. Presently there are 30 teachers employed at this charter school. The teachers included in the interview process were chosen based on being employed for a minimum of three years (during which time continued and steady proficiency improvement and growth have been documented), and based on recommendation from the academic Dean. The audio of these interviews was recorded to refer back to, and allowed for a transcribed record of the interview, to aid in the analysis of the findings. Transcriptions of each interview were created after all of the interviews were complete. Notes were taken during each interview to help intertwine my initial reactions to the responses with those in the transcriptions. Recording interviews, in addition to note taking, allow the interviewer to pay more



attention to the respondent and avoid any lost content that shorthand note taking can incur (Weiss, 1994, p.54). The interviews took place at the charter school. Each person interviewed was asked a similar set of questions, differing only slightly based on whether the interviewee was in administration or a teacher. The questions were created to coincide with what I found to be the key points from the literature review. They were designed to be open ended questions so as to elicit a more complex, robust answer. The following is a list of questions that were used during the interview process.

### Questions:

**Table 1: Top takeaways from chapter two literature review - Questions for interviews.**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Student Body <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Socioeconomic background</li> <li>○ Racial composition</li> <li>○ English Language Learners</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How does this school address the predominant background of its student body? - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What systems are in place to support low-income families?</li> <li>○ What systems are in place to address students' racial identities?</li> <li>○ What systems are in place to support English Language Learners?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Institutional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Tracking</li> <li>○ Class size</li> <li>○ School calendar</li> <li>○ Mission</li> <li>○ Testing process</li> <li>○ Disciplinary system</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What school-wide programming exists to best support student achievement? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Are students tracked?</li> <li>○ Does this school achieve lower than average class sizes? If so, how?</li> <li>○ What is the overall racial composition of the faculty &amp; staff?</li> <li>○ How does this school's calendar differ from local cohort schools if at all?</li> <li>○ What is the school Mission statement?</li> <li>○ How does this school prepare students for standardized tests? How does it intervene to supporting students with lower performances?</li> <li>○ What systems are in place to handle discipline and classroom management? What are the suspension &amp; expulsion rates</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	as compared to local surrounding schools?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Curricula             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Racial Identity Development</li> <li>○ Multicultural materials</li> <li>○ Technology usage</li> <li>○ Student-centered</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How does the curricula at this school support student achievement?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Does the school promote positive racial identity development through its curriculum? In what ways?</li> <li>○ Are multicultural materials readily available &amp; used throughout each grade level? If so, what?</li> <li>○ How does technology support student learning at this school?</li> <li>○ What types of student-centered curricula are in place? (Change this question).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professional Development             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Composition of faculty</li> <li>○ White privilege</li> <li>○ High expectations</li> <li>○ Collaboration</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How are teachers at this school prepared to support their students?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is the overall racial composition of the faculty &amp; staff?</li> <li>○ Do faculty &amp; staff receive training around concepts such as White privilege, cultural competency, &amp; inclusion? If so, what impact do faculty &amp; staff feel this training has had on their practice?</li> <li>○ What does teaching for high expectations look like for you. What kind of training did you receive to help achieve high expectations?</li> <li>○ How often do teachers at this school collaborate? When they do, what does the collaboration look like?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Observation

To provide additional support of the data gathered during the interview process, observations within the school took place. After each interview had been completed, an observation of the interviewee was conducted. In the case of the teachers, observations took place within their respective classrooms. Observations of the Dean took in his office while he interacted with his fellow teachers and administrators. I also observed his interactions with students during transition times, and throughout the day. The

observation of the School Improvement/Data & Assessment Coordinator, and the Director was not able to take place, as they spend a substantial part of their day working in an office.

Observation Protocol: While conducting the observations of the faculty and administration I utilized a standardized observation recording procedure. I used a single page with a box in the upper right corner to record the date, time, person being observed, and the setting. I also had a second “master” sheet of the key points and questions I asked during the interviews, numbered. The question sheet acted as my “key”. My recording sheet had a dividing line down the middle separating descriptive notes (what I saw or heard) from reflective notes (my personal thoughts and feelings of what I saw or heard). The left margin provided room for a number to be written that corresponded to one of my key points used during the interview process. The concept was that as I saw or heard something that appeared to relate to one of the questions asked during the interview, I recorded the number of the question in the margin, described what I saw into the first column, and reflected personal thoughts and impressions in the second column.

The goal within the observation process was to provide additional support to the information and data gathered during the interview process as well as to ascertain the overall school “climate”. Besides witnessing first hand the inner workings of the school, and the relationship between faculty and students, it was my intention to see if the six areas mentioned in Wilson’s (2011) article were visually apparent. Was the mission statement carried out? Was the curriculum vigorous and focused on college preparation? Are the teachers teaching for mastery? Were they providing extra support for the students both during and after class? Was there tangible appearance of teacher collaboration? Was

professional development valued by the administration, and did the staff hold themselves accountable for student achievement? The process of interviewing and observing at the school took place over a three day period.

### **Document Review**

A number of documents were reviewed within this case study to help identify the successes and educational trends of this particular charter school. With the guidance of the Dean, I examined the past and present state's comprehensive assessment test scores of the school. I also looked at documents that revealed how the school is rated using the state's multiple measurement rating (MMR). The state's MMR measures school performance in the areas of proficiency, growth, graduation rates, and achievement gap reduction. The data retrieved from this aspect of the document review was bookmarked into my web browser so I could easily access the data when needed, as it was available electronically. Graphs were created in the analysis portion of this capstone so as to highlight the school's trend in proficiency, growth, graduation rates, achievement gap reduction, and performance on the state's standardized tests. An analysis of the school's website took place to see if it yielded valuable public-facing information such as the school's mission, and to see how it demonstrated the values, vision, and overall culture of this scholastic institution. Notes were taken of my impressions of the website's content as they related to the interviews and observations previously conducted.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process I used is derived from the recommended steps that Creswell (2014) highlights in his Research Design text (p. 197-201). The first step I took in data analysis was to organize and prepare all of the information gathered from the

interviews, observations and document review. I transcribed all of the recorded interviews and the corresponding observation field notes were typed into Google Docs. All documents that were accessible via the internet (such as MMR ratings) were bookmarked for easy future access. The second step was to read through all of the data. This provided me with a general sense of the information I obtained, and provided me an opportunity to reflect on the data and its potential meaning in relation to my case study. My third step was to code the transcripts of the interviews and the observation field notes. The codes derived were ones that emerge during the process of data analysis, as is common in social science research (Creswell, 2014, p.199). The coding process followed Tesch's eight steps in the coding process (as cited in Creswell, 2014, p. 198). Step 4 involved using the coding process to generate categories or main themes discovered in the interviews and observations. In step 5 of the data analysis I established how these categories and themes were represented within the narrative of this case study. In other words, I examined the themes and categories and determined how to best relay the information into the results of the study. Finally, my 6th step of data analysis was where I interpreted the meaning of all of the data and information I gathered.

### **Human Subject Committee**

I have completed the HSC process (short form), and all was approved. I have been in discussion with the Dean of the charter school, and he has given me permission to study the school. He has discussed my intentions with the head of the school, and also with the teachers/faculty that will be interviewed. All those involved gave their verbal consent to him, and signed a consent form that I created indicating their voluntary participation in the study, and anonymity throughout.

### Summary

Chapter 3 addressed the methods used for a case study examining the inner workings of a midwest, first tier suburban charter school. Interviews of school personnel, with questions devised from the key points of the literature review were done. The purpose of the interviews with the selected questions is to gain an understanding of how this school functions, what methods and systems are in place, and if any similarities are found to some of the successful attributes highlighted within the literature review. Observations of many of the selected faculty and staff were done in both classroom and impromptu scenarios. The purpose of the observations was to support the information obtained from the interview process. A document review that included reviewing the school's demographics, standardized test scores, and growth measurements, as indicated by the state's "report card" website, was also done. It is my hope that through these three processes, a deeper understanding of *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap*, becomes apparent. If success can be found at this school, and an analysis can reveal structural and procedural processes that are working, this information may prove to be extremely valuable to other educational institutions in their on-going battle in narrowing the achievement gap.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

This chapter will attempt to synthesize the results of the data obtained through the course of interviews, observations and document review, to determine *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap?* The chapter begins with an analysis of the statistics available from the state's Department of Education website, specifically the report card section. The report card section of the state's website is designed to "provide parents, educators, schools, districts and citizens with easy access to district and school information, test results, demographic information and other critical data in a centralized location".(<http://rc.education.state.us/>). From there the chapter will proceed with an examination and synthesis of the seven procured interviews of the teachers and staff of the subject charter school as they relate to its performance statistics. Through the course of coding the interviews two overarching, main themes arose that could potentially be attributed to the school's apparent success. The word *apparent* is chosen purposefully, as the state's report card data analysis will show that, depending on how you look at it, success can be found. When viewed alternatively, areas of mediocrity or underperformance can also be found. I will attempt to explain that this is partially due to the systems in place that measure what success is.

Although the observations were not as complete or thorough as was planned, they did provide some visual evidence of aspects that were portrayed within the interviews. A description of what was observed and how it related to the interviews will be examined. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an overall melding of the three areas looked at: the documents reviewed, the interviews, and the observations, with the hope of creating a

tapestry of information that better explains what this charter school is doing to help shrink the achievement gap.

## **Document Review**

### **Focus School Website**

Briefly, before examining the statistics available from the state's Department of Education website, it should be noted that an analysis of the school's website confirmed much of what was learned from the interviews, observations and other parts of the document review. The school's website provides public-facing information such as the school's mission statement, values, vision, and overall culture of the scholastic institution. For a new, potential student of this school, the website provides a thorough notion of what this school is all about.

### **State Report Card**

The information that is available on the state's Department of Education's website, particularly in the report card section is exhaustive and comprehensive. Of the 13 sections of data available in the report card section, five of the sections seemed to be most appropriate to analyze for the case study of this charter school: Test Results, School Performance, Student Progress, Academic Standards, and Federal Accountability. Each one of those sections is fairly indepth, and can provide a plethora of information about the academic performance of any K-12 school within the state. When the data are viewed alone, without a similar comparison school, the data can be misleading or misrepresent the success or failure of a school. With that in mind, before looking at any of the data that the state's website illuminates, a comparison was first done with schools that were in proximity to the charter school of study. This way, at minimum, a narrow regional



comparison could be made. A comparison of 14 elementary schools (13 for the year 2014) within a five mile radius of this charter school, over the course of three years was examined. The criteria compared with this look was math proficiency, reading proficiency, average growth z-score, percentage of Black students and percentage of free and reduced lunch students. The z-score is a very important statistic to look at as it indicates whether the school's test scores are improving above the average or decreasing. A z-score is the number of standard deviations from the mean a data point is. In other words, it measures whether or not the school is showing growth. In the following spreadsheets, the yellow indicates the data from the focus school. The green indicates schools that show better proficiency scores than the focus school, and positive z-scores. The data gathered compares schools from 2014 through 2016.

**Table 2: 2014 4-Mile Comparison Schools**

<b>School</b>	<b>Math Proficiency</b>	<b>Reading Proficiency</b>	<b>Z - Score</b>	<b>% Black Students</b>	<b>% Free/Reduced Lunch</b>
Focus School	42.4	34.7	0.0062	96.1	93.4
School A	23.5	15.6	None	41.6	89
School B	36.6	32.4	-0.0382	51.9	90
School C	23.9	26.1	-0.1707	71.7	81.5
School D	15.9	17.3	-0.1387	16.2	74.2
School E	37.8	30.8	0.0834	48.7	75.8
School F	36.6	28.7	-0.0094	46.4	80.1
School G	32.8	29.6	-0.2762	49.3	80.9
School H	33.6	32.8	-0.0361	37.2	75.1
School I	41	43.9	-0.0736	44.2	57.9
School J	29.3	28.3	-0.1179	41.4	82.1
School K	16.2	20.6	-0.206	63.7	89.1
School L	27.4	33.3	-0.3372	31	63.3
School M	34.4	29.8	-0.1086	43.6	81.7

**Table 3: 2015 4-Mile Comparison Schools**

<b>School</b>	<b>Math Proficiency</b>	<b>Reading Proficiency</b>	<b>Z - Score</b>	<b>% Black Students</b>	<b>% Free/Reduced Lunch</b>
Focus School	45.8	41.8	0.1308	96.6	95.5
School A	44.3	30.3	-0.1339	36.8	91.8
School B	32.3	23.1	-0.1838	52.4	89.6
School C	21.3	26.7	-0.4279	76.5	81.8
School D	28.4	19.4	-0.2267	17.6	76.6
School E	38.6	31.6	0.0075	49	74.3
School F	41.6	36.7	-0.1519	40.7	83.2
School G	38.7	39.9	-0.0046	46.7	75.7
School H	39.3	47.9	-0.0874	42.3	77.3
School I	47	52	-0.2503	44.2	57.9
School J	42.4	36.4	-0.2867	42.9	80.6
School K	25.7	20.4	-0.1737	61.9	87.9
School L	43.3	47.8	-0.3562	31.5	57.5
School M	40.7	40.7	-0.0414	45.2	80
School N	38.6	40.4	-0.3068	48.5	54.4
School O	41.7	29.9	-0.0586	47.3	79.7

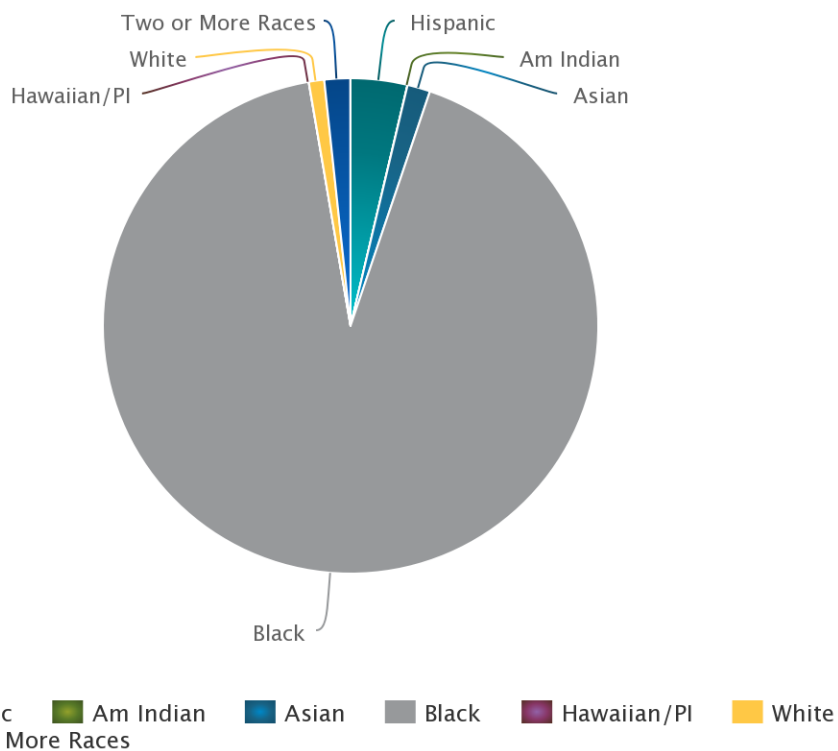
**Table 4: 2016 4-Mile Comparison Schools**

<b>School</b>	<b>Math Proficiency</b>	<b>Reading Proficiency</b>	<b>Z - Score</b>	<b>% Black Students</b>	<b>% Free/Reduced Lunch</b>
<b>Focus School</b>	<b>42.3</b>	<b>40.5</b>	<b>0.0676</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>95.5</b>
School A	30.5	32.8	-0.4527	36.8	91.8
School B	37.9	30.2	-0.0607	47.3	79.7
School C	15.5	29.9	-0.2924	76.5	81.8
School D	32.5	30.1	-0.1854	17.6	76.6
School E	49.5	35	0.2269	49	74.3
School F	32.9	30.3	-0.3757	40.7	83.2
School G	44	42.3	0.1897	46.7	75.7
School H	39.6	42.6	-0.2071	42.3	77.3
School I	53	49.6	-0.0708	44.2	57.9
School J	45.1	29.6	-0.1985	42.9	80.6
School K	18	16.7	-0.6834	61.9	87.9
School L	37	43.4	-0.4033	31.5	57.5
School M	36.1	32.7	-0.141	45.2	80
School N	36.6	49.2	-0.028	48.5	54.4
School O	32.9	32	-0.3599	36.8	91.8

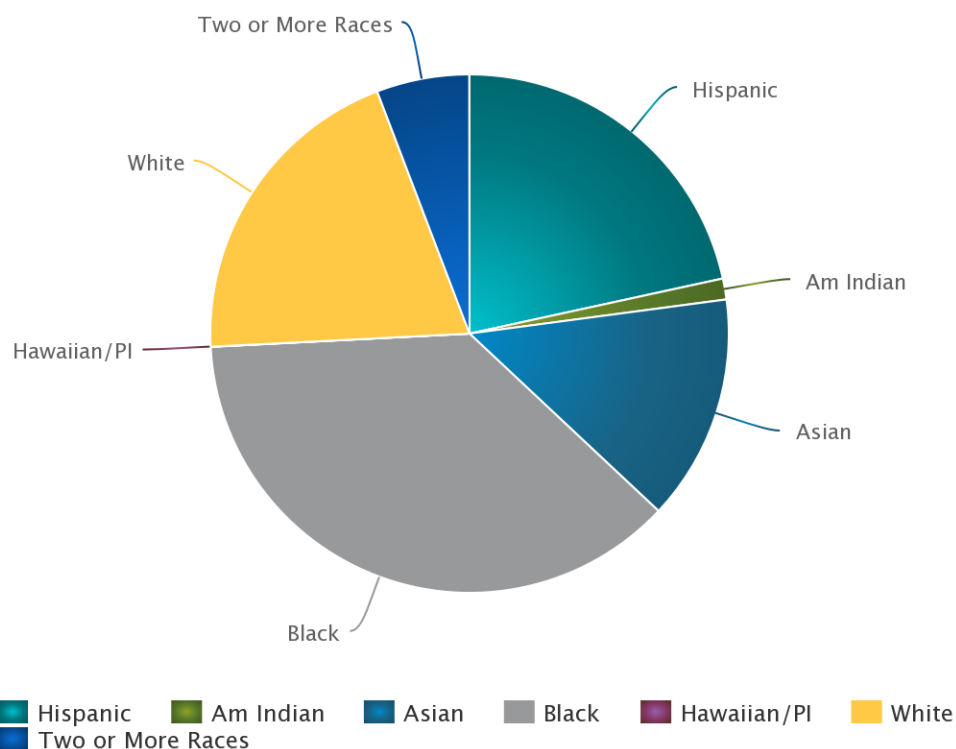
In 2014 no schools within this sample size had a higher math proficiency score than the focus school and only one school had a higher reading score. Additionally, the focus school is only one of two schools that had a positive z-score. In 2015 only one school had a better math proficiency score, and three schools had better reading proficiency scores. Again, the focus school was only one of two schools with a positive z-score. The 2016 data indicates that more of the schools had better math and reading

proficiency scores than the focus charter school, but only three schools had a positive z-score. The focus school, again, was one of them, although their growth was not as large as the two previous years. Two important aspects to look at within these data are the percentage of Black students and free and reduced lunch students the schools have. The data indicate that the focus charter school has the highest percentage of Black students, as well as the highest percentage of free and reduced students, yet their proficiency scores tend to be significantly higher than those of the surrounding schools.

The following graphs, tables, and images are a comparison of the focus charter school and the district within the state that has the highest demographic of Black students. According to ProximityOne (State School District Demographic Characteristics, n.d.) the school district where this charter school lies within is 31.11% Black, the highest percentage in the state. Their data is from 2009 and according to the state's Department of Education website in 2016 the district is now up to 37% Black student enrollment. That is nearly double the Black population of the next highest in the state in the district located in the biggest city in the state. Before breaking down the five sections of the "State Report Card", it may be useful to take a brief revisiting of the focus school's 2016 enrollment by race/ethnicity and special population, as compared to the district it lies within. All of the following tables and figures are from the state's education website (<http://rc.education.state.us/>).



**Figure 4:** Focus School Demographics. The pie chart illustrates the demographics based on race, of the focus school



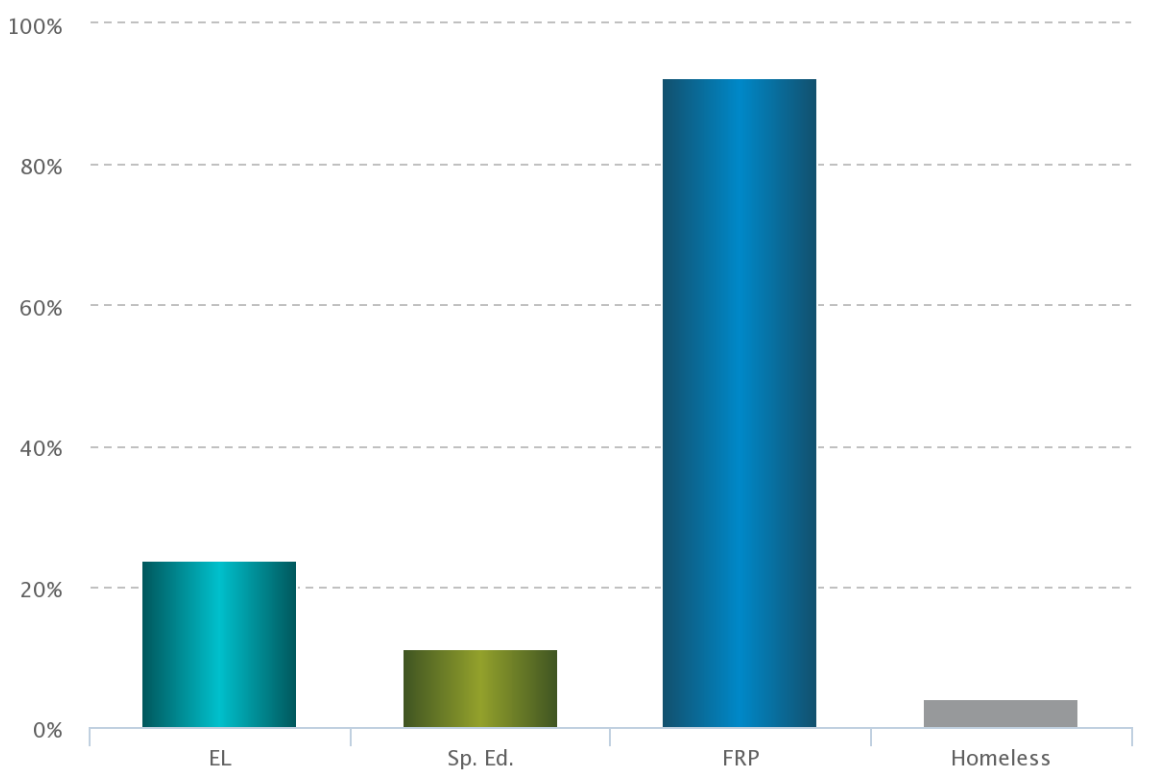
**Figure 5:** Comparison District Demographics. This pie chart illustrates the demographic based on race of the comparison district.

**Table 5: 2016 Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity Focus School**

Ethnicity	Count	Percent
Hispanic/Latino	15	3.7%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	0.0%
Asian	6	1.5%
Black/African American	374	92.1%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0%
White	4	1.0%
Two or More Races	7	1.7%
All Students	406	100.0%

**Table 6: 2016 Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity Comparison District**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Hispanic/Latino</b>	521	21.6%
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native</b>	32	1.3%
<b>Asian</b>	341	14.1%
<b>Black/African American</b>	899	37.2%
<b>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</b>	0	0.0%
<b>White</b>	483	20.0%
<b>Two or More Races</b>	139	5.8%
<b>All Students</b>	2,415	100.0%

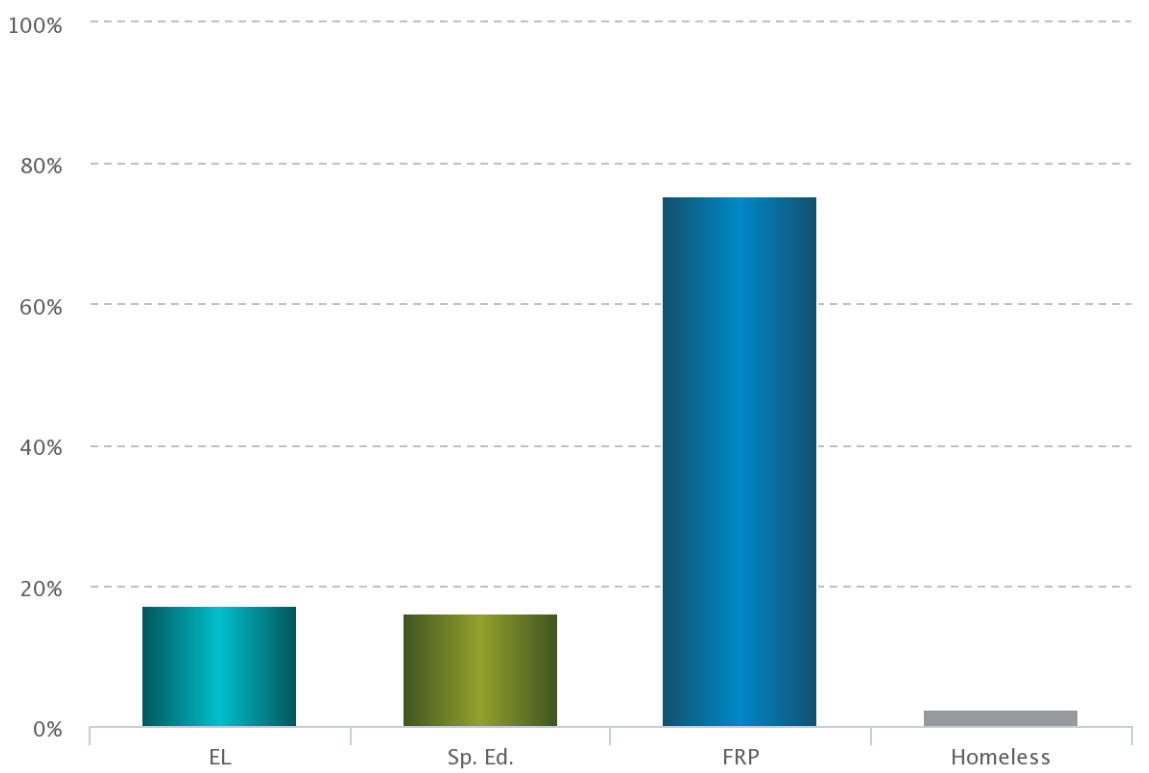


**Figure 6:** 2016 Enrollment by special population of the focus school. This bar graph illustrates the percentage of students of the focus school who are english language learners, special education, get free or reduced price lunch, or are homeless



**Table 7: 2016 Enrollment by Special Population Focus school**

	Count	Percent
<b>English Learner</b>	97	23.9%
<b>Special Education</b>	46	11.3%
<b>Free/Reduced Priced Lunch</b>	375	92.4%
<b>Homeless</b>	17	4.2%



**Figure 7:** 2016 Enrollment by special population in the comparison district. This bar graph illustrates the percentage of students in the comparison district who are english language learners, special education, get free or reduced price lunch, or are homeless.

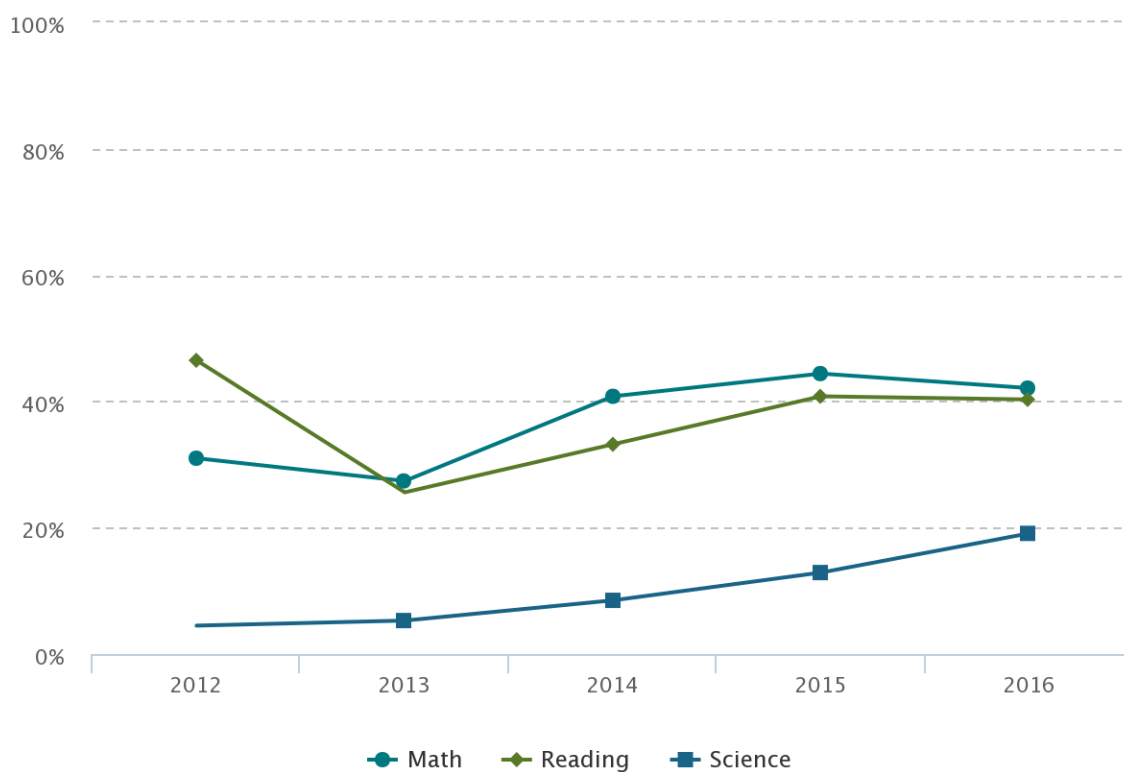
**Table 8: 2016 Enrollment by Special Population Comparison District**

	Count	Percent
<b>English Learner</b>	413	17.1%
<b>Special Education</b>	392	16.2%
<b>Free/Reduced Priced Lunch</b>	1,818	75.3%
<b>Homeless</b>	59	2.4%

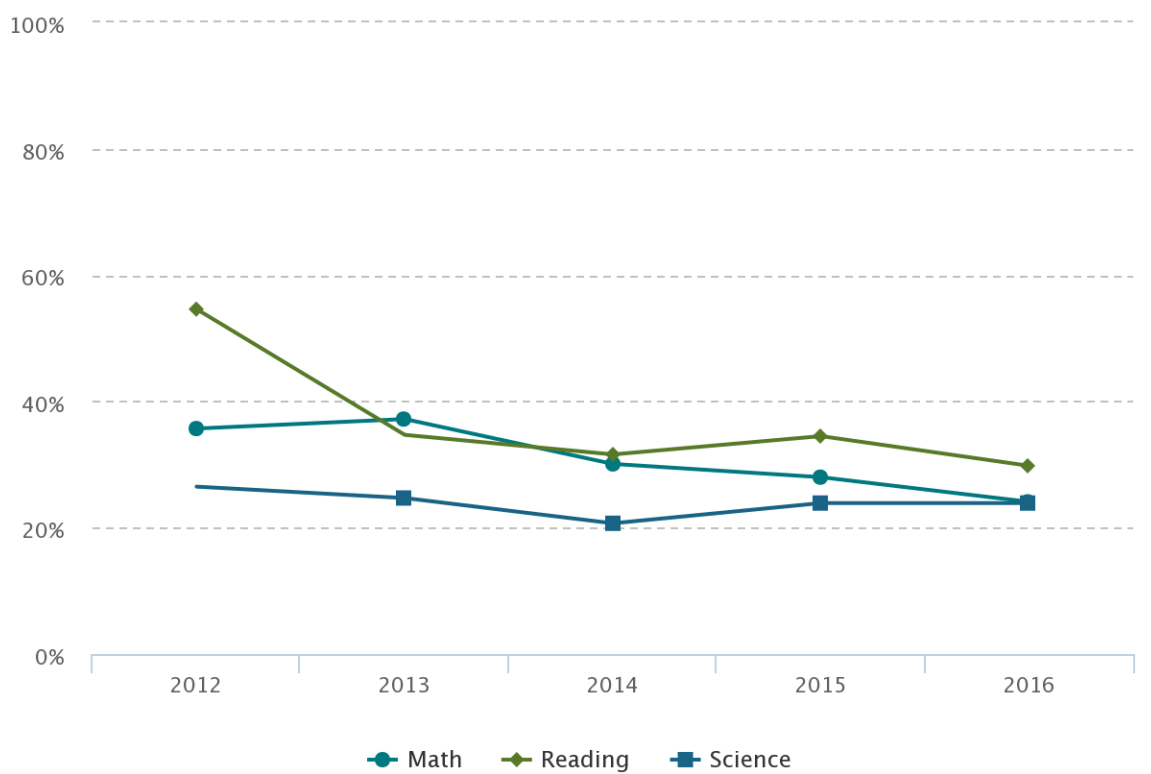
This information illustrates that this charter school's student demographic are primarily minority students coming from a low-income situation.

### **Test Results**

The test results section of the state's department of education website allows the user to break down proficiency trends in math, reading and science over the course of five years. This report shows the percent of students tested who meet or exceed achievement standards set by the state's education leaders. The proficiency trends shows results over time for each subject. The goal for the state's students is proficiency in all subject areas. The graph below is a school wide representation of the proficiency trend from 2012 through 2016 in math, reading, and science across all the grades that are required by the state to take accountability tests. The proficiency trends provided for math, reading, and science are only those using one of the required tests, and not all accountability tests. The state where this charter school is located requires the students to take two types of accountability tests throughout the course of their education: Students are tested in mathematics in grades three through eight and 11, in reading in grades three through eight and 10, and in science in grade five, grade eight, and once in high school. New standards in Reading were implemented in 2013. Comparisons in Reading from 2012 and 2013 should not be made. Again a comparison to the nearby district is made.

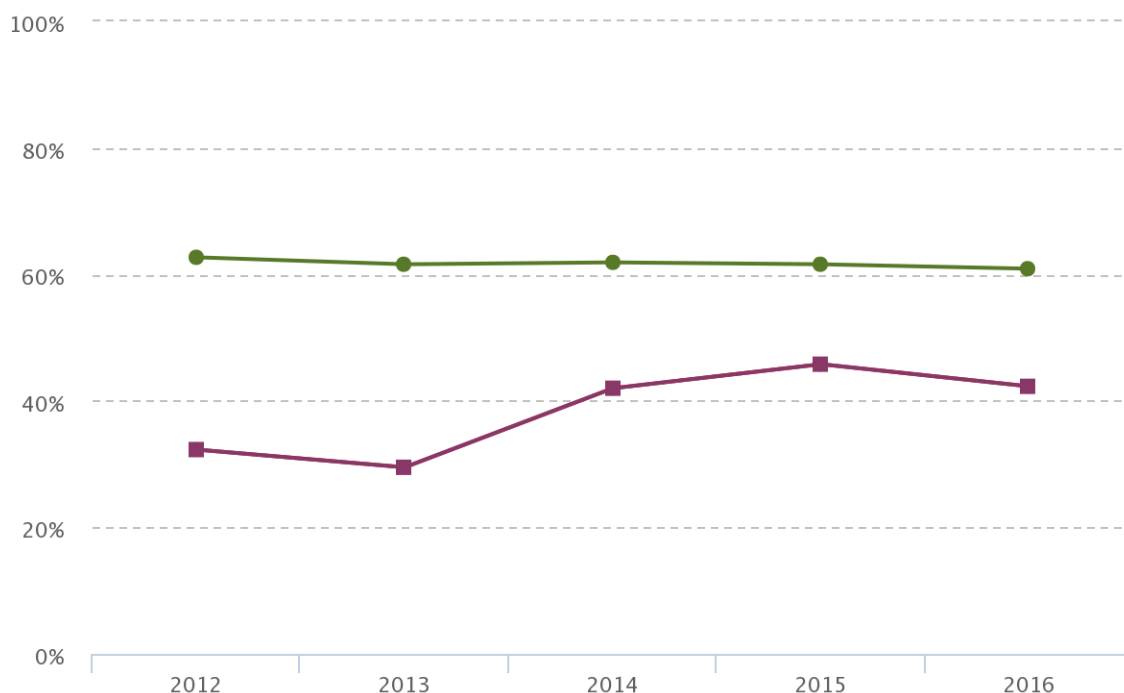


**Figure 8:** Proficiency trends 2012-2016 focus school. This line graph shows the proficiency trend in percentages from 2012 through 2016 in math, reading and science of the focus school



**Figure 9:** Proficiency trends 2012-2016 comparison district. This line graph shows the proficiency trends in percentages from 2012 through 2016 in math, reading and science of the comparison district.

When comparing the proficiency trends of the focus charter school to the district, the charter school is trending upwards, and the district is trending downwards. As mentioned above, these trends are using only one of the two required accountability tests. The following graphs and statistics do include data from both required accountability tests. The statewide averages are also indicated to get a reference point as to where the district and the focus school fall within the state.



**Figure 10:** Proficiency trends in math 2012-2016 focus school. This line graph shows the proficiency trend in percentages from 2012 through 2016 in math of the focus school.

The green line indicates the statewide averages, the purple line indicates the focus school's averages.

**Table 9: 2012 - 2016 Statewide Math Proficiency Percentage**

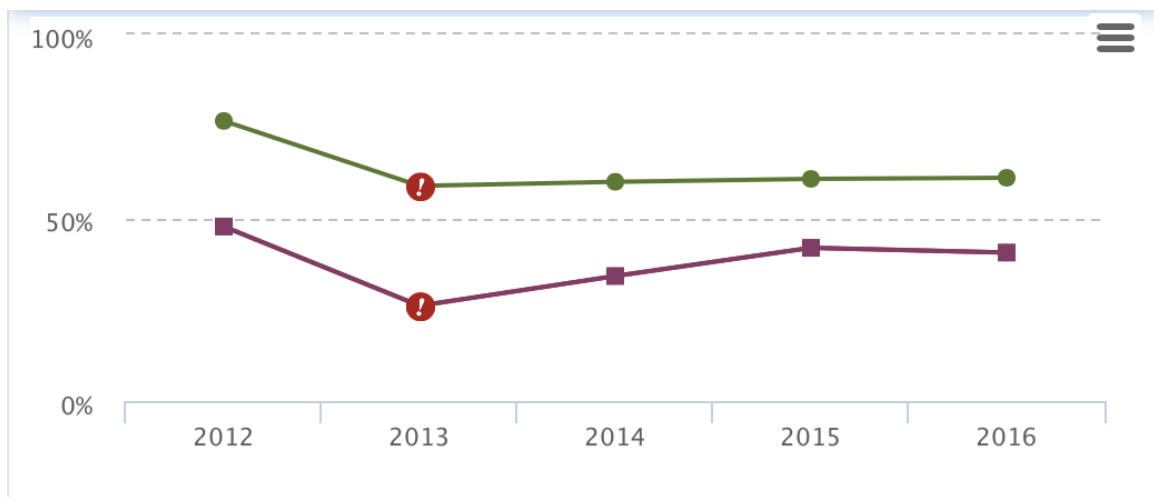
Statewide			
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	62.7%	258,733	412,856
2013	61.6%	256,030	415,656
2014	61.9%	259,166	418,796
2015	61.6%	259,411	421,401
2016	60.9%	258,168	423,967

**Table 10: 2012 - 2016 Focus School Math Proficiency Percentage**

Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	32.3%	70	217
2013	29.5%	59	200
2014	42.0%	74	176
2015	45.8%	81	177
2016	42.3%	83	196

**Table 11: 2012 - 2016 Comparison District Math Proficiency Percentage**

Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	38.5%	343	891
2013	39.1%	373	954
2014	32.6%	305	937
2015	30.0%	316	1,054
2016	25.9%	273	1,056



**Figure 11:** Proficiency trends in reading 2012-2016 focus school. This line graph shows the proficiency trend in percentages from 2012 through 2016 in reading of the focus school. The green line indicates the statewide averages, the purple line indicates the focus school's averages.

**Table 12: 2012 - 2016 Statewide Reading Proficiency Percentage**

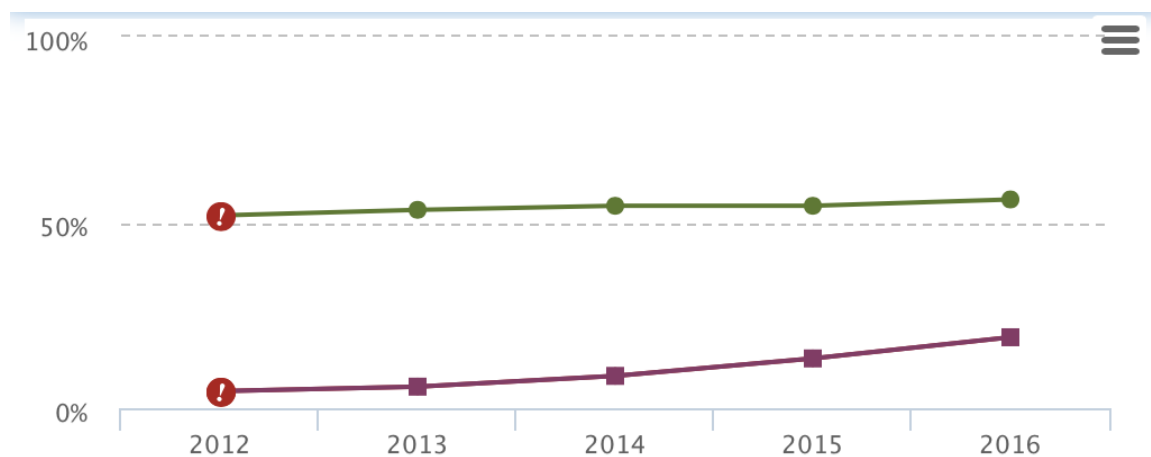
<b>Statewide</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>Percent Proficient</b>	<b>Number Proficient</b>	<b>Number Tested</b>
<b>2012</b>	76.4%	314,808	412,008
<b>2013</b>	58.7%	244,810	417,222
<b>2014</b>	59.8%	251,668	420,526
<b>2015</b>	60.6%	256,727	423,954
<b>2016</b>	60.9%	261,040	428,727

**Table 13: 2012 - 2016 Focus School Reading Proficiency Percentage**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Percent Proficient</b>	<b>Number Proficient</b>	<b>Number Tested</b>
<b>2012</b>	47.6%	101	212
<b>2013</b>	26.0%	52	200
<b>2014</b>	34.1%	60	176
<b>2015</b>	41.8%	74	177
<b>2016</b>	40.5%	79	195

**Table 14: 2012 - 2016 Comparison District Reading Proficiency Percentage**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Percent Proficient</b>	<b>Number Proficient</b>	<b>Number Tested</b>
<b>2012</b>	57.1%	527	923
<b>2013</b>	35.9%	346	963
<b>2014</b>	32.9%	312	947
<b>2015</b>	35.8%	362	1,012
<b>2016</b>	30.5%	337	1,104



**Figure 12:** Proficiency trends in reading 2012-2016 focus school. This line graph shows the proficiency trend in percentages from 2012 through 2016 in science of the focus school. The green line indicates the statewide averages, the purple line indicates the focus school's averages.

**Table 15: 2012 - 2016 Statewide Science Proficiency Percentage**

Statewide			
Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2012	51.9%	89,498	172,498
2013	53.4%	91,541	171,311
2014	54.5%	94,856	173,939
2015	54.5%	96,735	177,483
2016	56.2%	99,026	176,167



**Table 16: 2012 - 2016 Focus School Science Proficiency Percentage**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Percent Proficient</b>	<b>Number Proficient</b>	<b>Number Tested</b>
<b>2012</b>	4.6%	3	65
<b>2013</b>	5.8%	3	52
<b>2014</b>	8.7%	4	46
<b>2015</b>	13.4%	9	67
<b>2016</b>	19.1%	13	68

**Table 17: 2012 - 2016 Comparison District Science Proficiency Percentage**

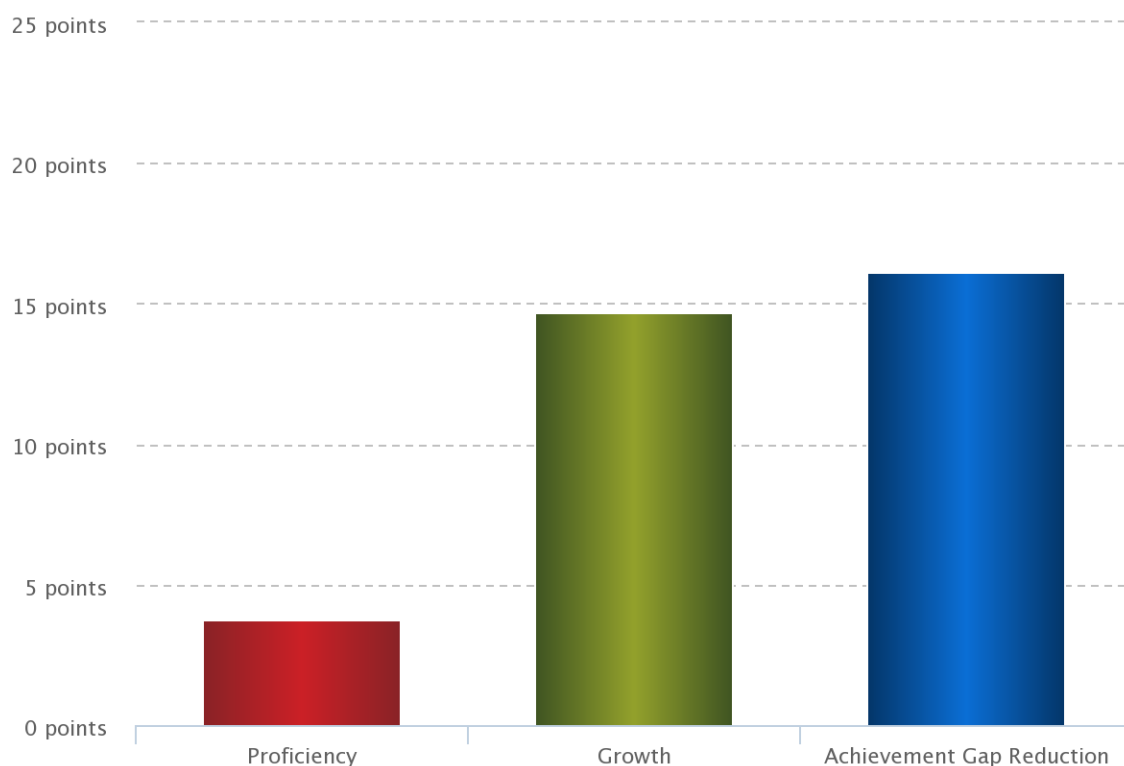
<b>Year</b>	<b>Percent Proficient</b>	<b>Number Proficient</b>	<b>Number Tested</b>
<b>2012</b>	27.0%	101	374
<b>2013</b>	25.9%	103	397
<b>2014</b>	23.0%	91	396
<b>2015</b>	24.6%	115	467
<b>2016</b>	26.1%	120	459

The data from these graphs and charts indicate that both the focus school and the district falls continually below the statewide proficiency percentage for both reading, math and science. However, as the proficiency percentage for the state over the course of the 5 years measured has stayed relatively consistent, that of the focus school has trended upward (with the exception of the small dip in 2016).

### **School Performance**

The Multiple Measurement Rating (MMR) is a measurement of school performance used for holding schools accountable under this state's approved No Child Left Behind waiver. Since the NCLB waiver is no longer enacted, the data from these reports will be removed from the state's Department of Education website on July 27,

2017, as they report information that is no longer applicable under ESSA. This means that Multiple Measurements Rating (MMR) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data will no longer be found on the state's page as of July 27, 2017. The MMR considers the proficiency, growth, achievement gap reduction and graduation rates of schools. Points are assigned in each of the four domains based on how well the school performed, and the total MMR is the percentage of possible points that the school earned. Since the charter school that is the focus school is a K-8 school, the fourth domain of graduation rate is not included in the graph. The Focus Rating (FR) is a secondary measurement within the MMR that measures schools specifically on the performance of student groups that exhibit an achievement gap in the state. Since the MMR is an individual school measurement a district comparison can not be made. As a mode of comparison, one of the schools that were included in the 5-mile radius comparison from the beginning of this chapter was used. The school of comparison had the highest Black student demographic of all of the schools used in the 5-mile radius comparison save the focus charter school.

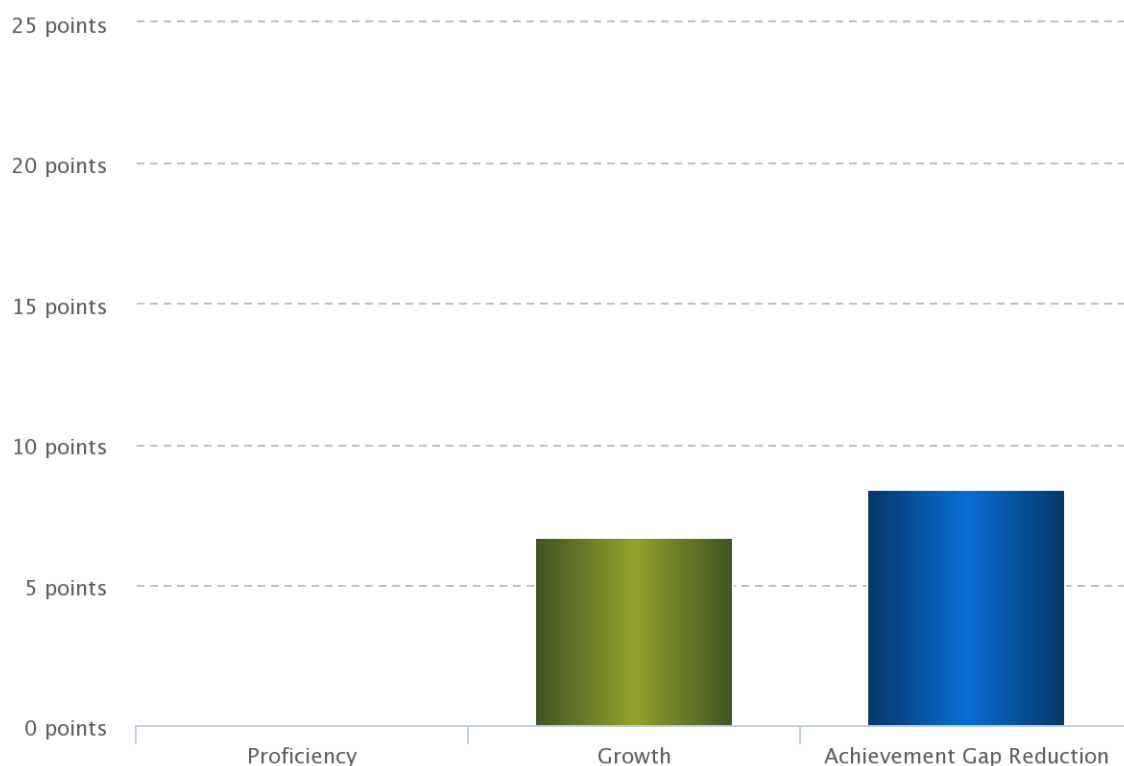


**Figure 13:** 2016 multiple measurement rating of the focus school. This bar graph illustrates the points of proficiency, growth, and achievement gap reduction of the focus school.

**Table 18: 2016 Multiple Measurement Rating of the Focus School**

**Multiple Measurements Rating (MMR) is 46.11%.**

Domain	Score
<b>Proficiency</b>	<b>3.75 points</b>
Weighted percentage of subgroups reaching targets	15.0%
<b>Growth</b>	<b>14.69 points</b>
Average Growth Z-Score	0.0676
<b>Achievement Gap Reduction</b>	<b>16.15 points</b>
Achievement Gap Reduction Score	-0.0410
<b>TOTAL POINTS</b>	<b>34.58 points</b>
Possible points	75 points

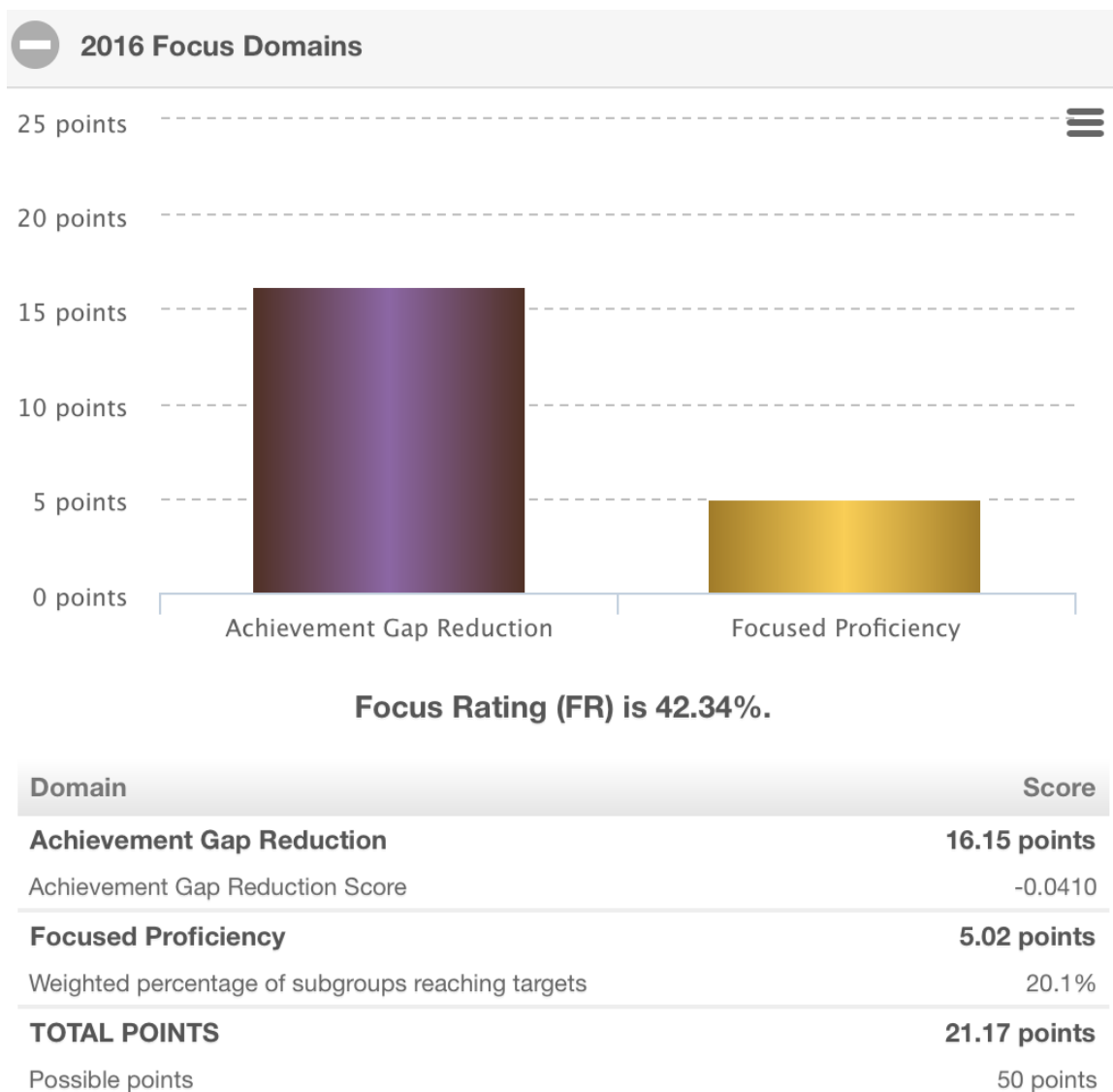


**Figure 14:** 2016 multiple measurement rating of the comparison school. This bar graph illustrates the points of proficiency, growth, and achievement gap reduction of the comparison school.

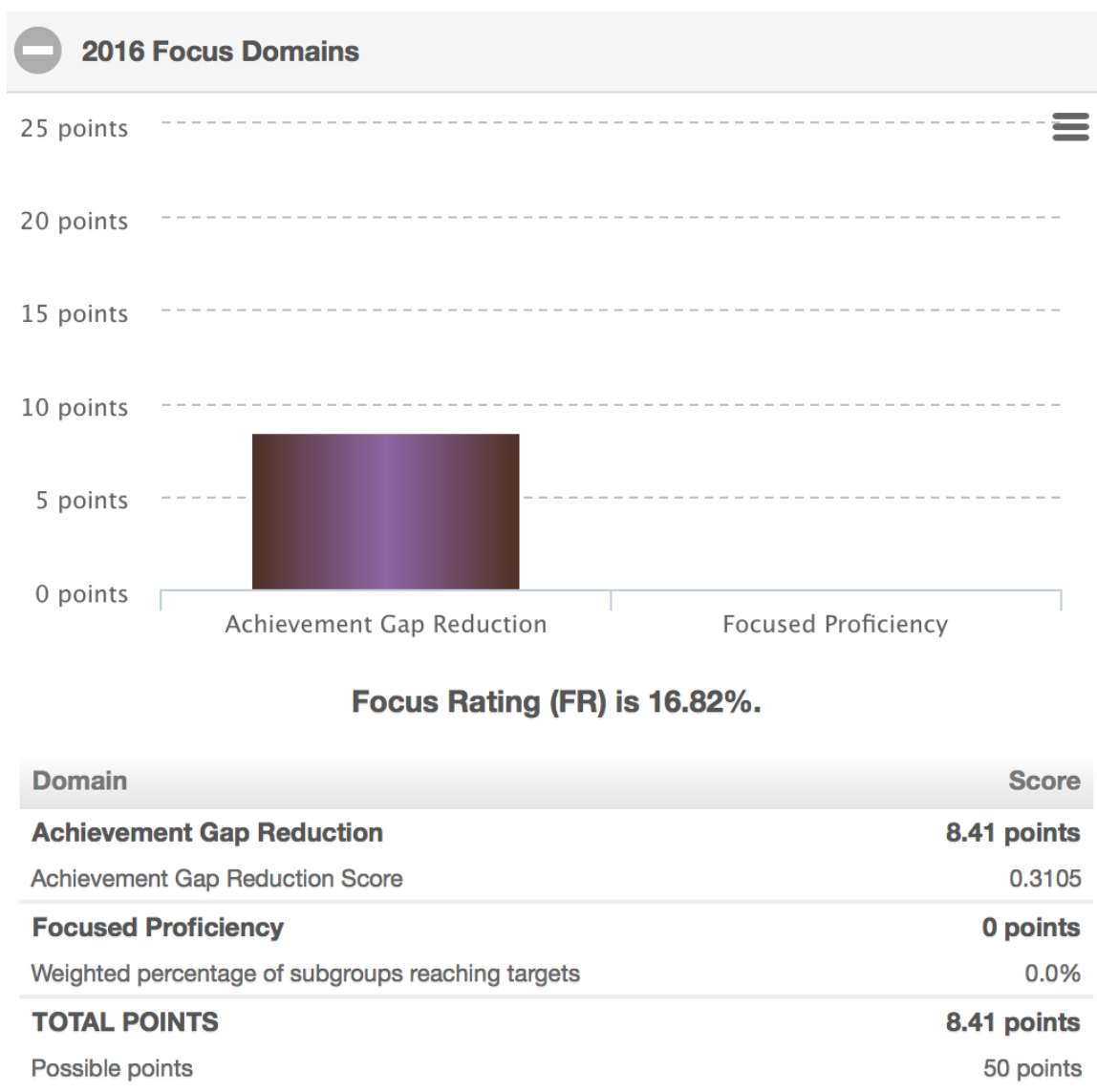
**Table 19: 2016 Multiple Measurements Rating Comparison School**

**Multiple Measurements Rating (MMR) is 20.14%.**

Domain	Score
<b>Proficiency</b>	<b>0 points</b>
Weighted percentage of subgroups reaching targets	0.0%
<b>Growth</b>	<b>6.69 points</b>
Average Growth Z-Score	-0.2924
<b>Achievement Gap Reduction</b>	<b>8.41 points</b>
Achievement Gap Reduction Score	0.3105
<b>TOTAL POINTS</b>	<b>15.10 points</b>
Possible points	75 points



**Figure 15:** 2016 focus rating of the focus school. This bar graph illustrates the focus domains, which is the achievement gap reduction and focused proficiency scores. The table attached indicates the points of both those measurements.



**Figure 16:** 2016 focus rating of the comparison school. This bar graph illustrates the focus domains, which is the achievement gap reduction and focused proficiency scores. The table attached indicates the points of both those measurements.

Although it's difficult to make broad conclusions from such a narrow comparison as was done when comparing these two school's MMR ratings, important information is learned. One of the goals within the MMR is to indicate achievement gap reduction, and the two highlighted schools both have a high population of students within the

achievement gap demographic. These data show that the focus school is doing a better job at reducing the achievement gap than a similar school with similar demographics and location.

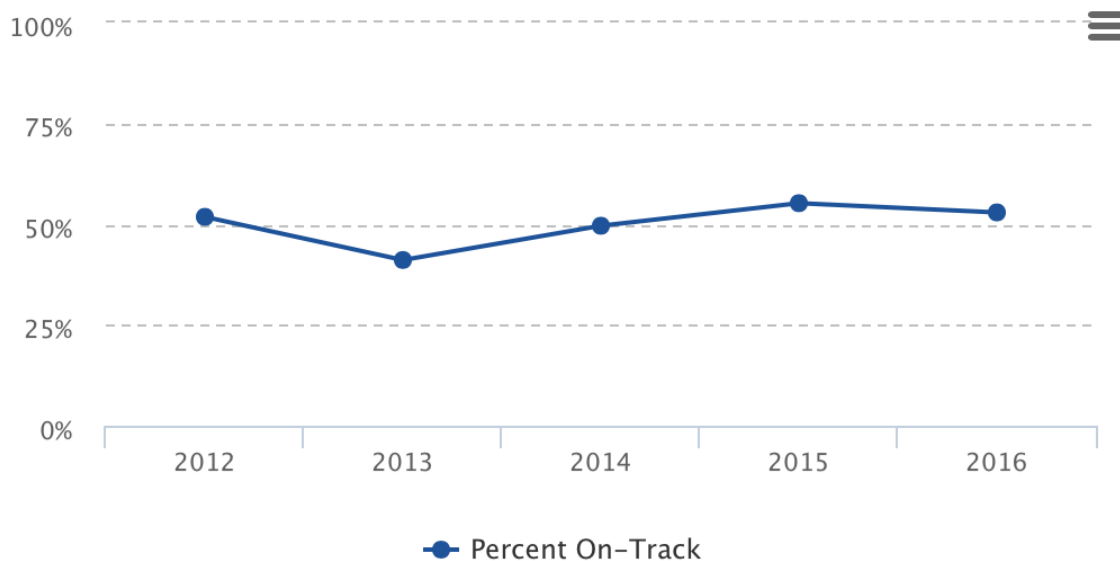
### **Student Progress**

The state's Growth Model was designed with input from parents and educators to determine if students are gaining and maintaining skills necessary to be academically successful. Growth towards that goal is classified as low, medium or high.

For each student in the state, scores from last year are compared to the current year.

Expectations are set based on average improvements from year to year on statewide assessments. Students considered "on track" include proficient students who made medium or high growth and non-proficient students who made high growth.

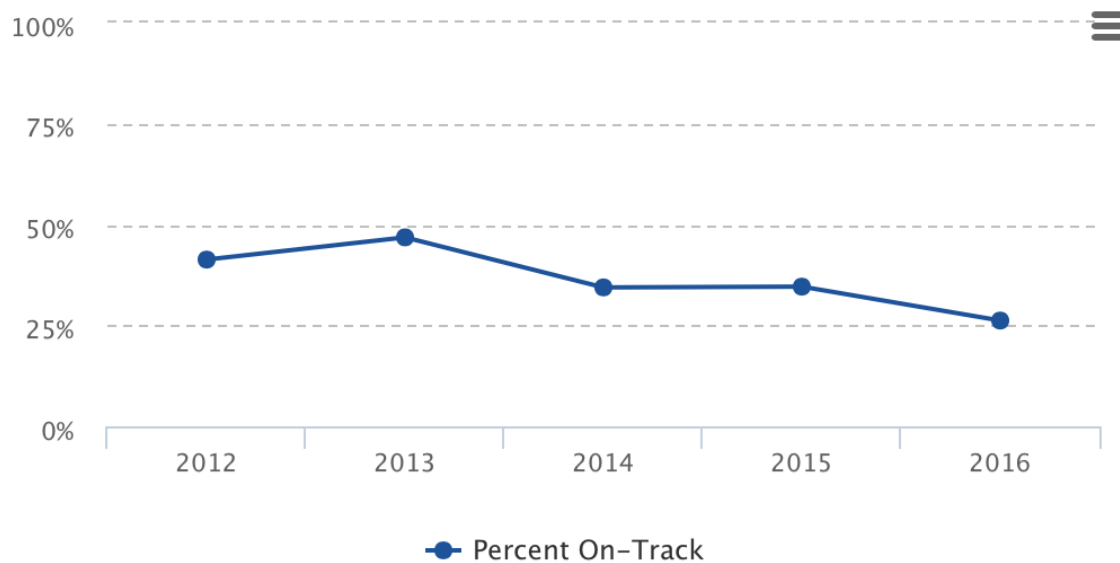
This provides an indication of how well a district/school is doing to help students know and understand the content of the state's K-12 Academic Standards.



Year	Percent On-Track
2012	51.8%
2013	41.1%
2014	49.6%
2015	55.2%
2016	52.9%

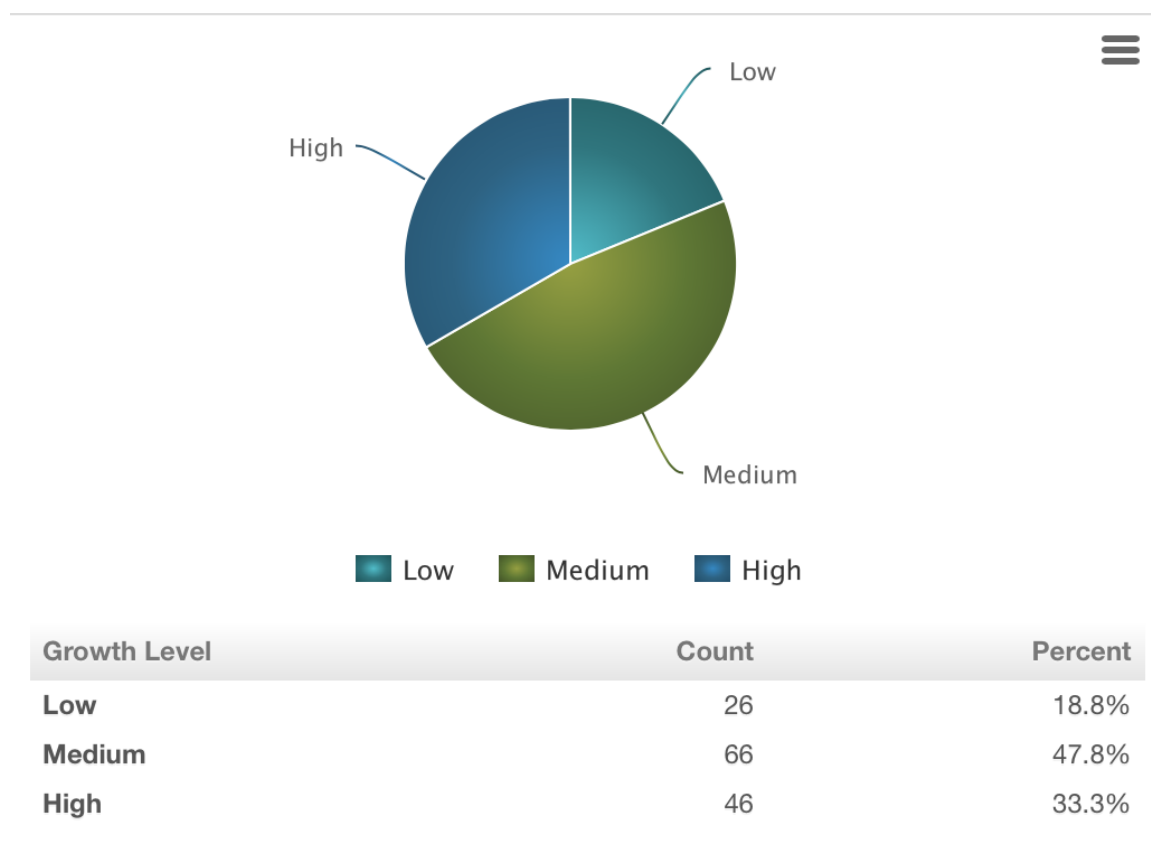
**Figure 17:** 2012 - 2016 students “on track” for success in the focus school. This line graph illustrates the percentage of students “on track” for success in percentages of the focus school. The table below the graph reiterates the same data.



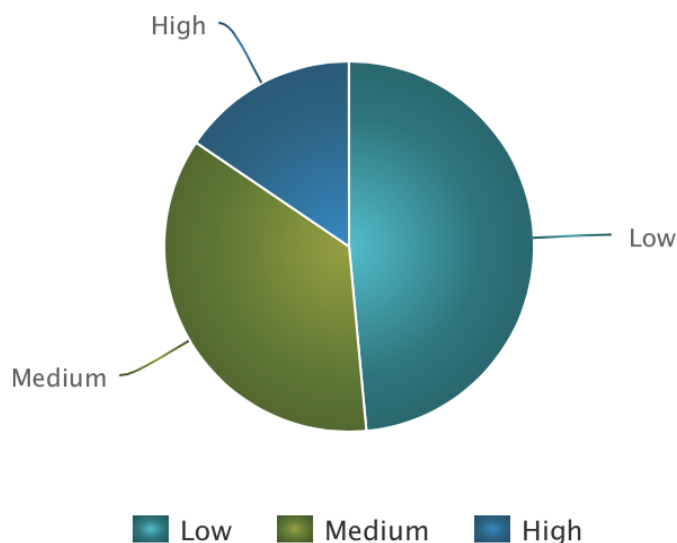


Year	Percent On-Track
2012	41.3%
2013	46.8%
2014	34.4%
2015	34.6%
2016	26.2%

**Figure 18:** 2012 - 2016 students “on track” for success in the comparison district. This line graph illustrates the percentage of students “on track” for success in percentages of the comparison district. The table below the graph reiterates the same data.



**Figure 19:** 2015 - 2016 student growth of all students at the focus school. This pie chart illustrates the different levels of growth, low, medium, and high, in percentages of all students at the focus school during the 2015 - 2016 school year.



Growth Level	Count	Percent
Low	397	48.5%
Medium	295	36.0%
High	127	15.5%

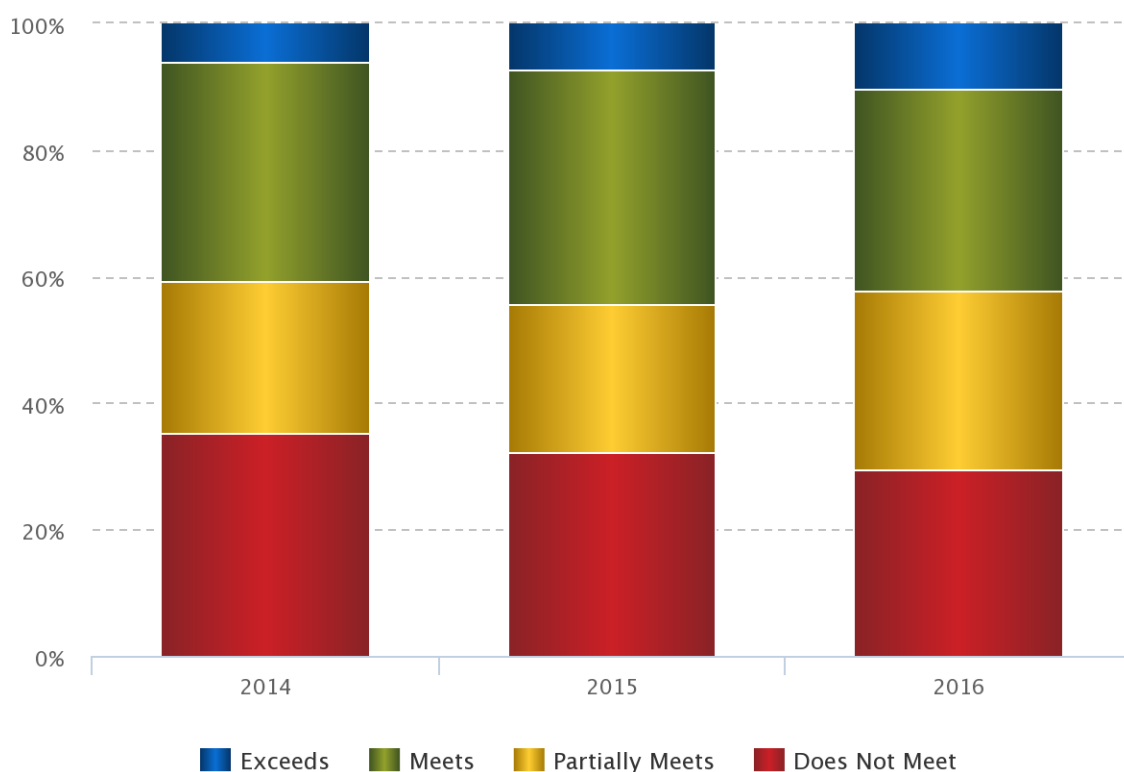
**Figure 20:** 2015 - 2016 student growth of all students in the comparison district. This pie chart illustrates the different levels of growth, low, medium, and high, in percentages of all students in the comparison district during the 2015 - 2016 school year.

The comparison of the student progress data between the focus school and the comparison district tells us a few things. Over half of the students at the focus school are “on track” for success in 2016, whereas only about one quarter of the students in the comparison district are “on track”. The focus school has 81.1% of their students falling in the High to Medium growth category. The comparison district, on the other hand, had 84.5% falling in the Medium to Low growth category. Again, this is another indication that this charter school was doing better than their surrounding schools in growing the academic proficiency of their students.

## Academic Standards

This report shows the achievement level distribution by subject of tested students with valid scores on a state accountability test. The goal for a district/school is to increase the percentage of students earning an achievement level of “Meets the Standards” or “Exceeds the Standards” while decreasing the percentage of students earning an achievement level of “Partially Meets the Standards” or “Does Not Meet the Standards.”

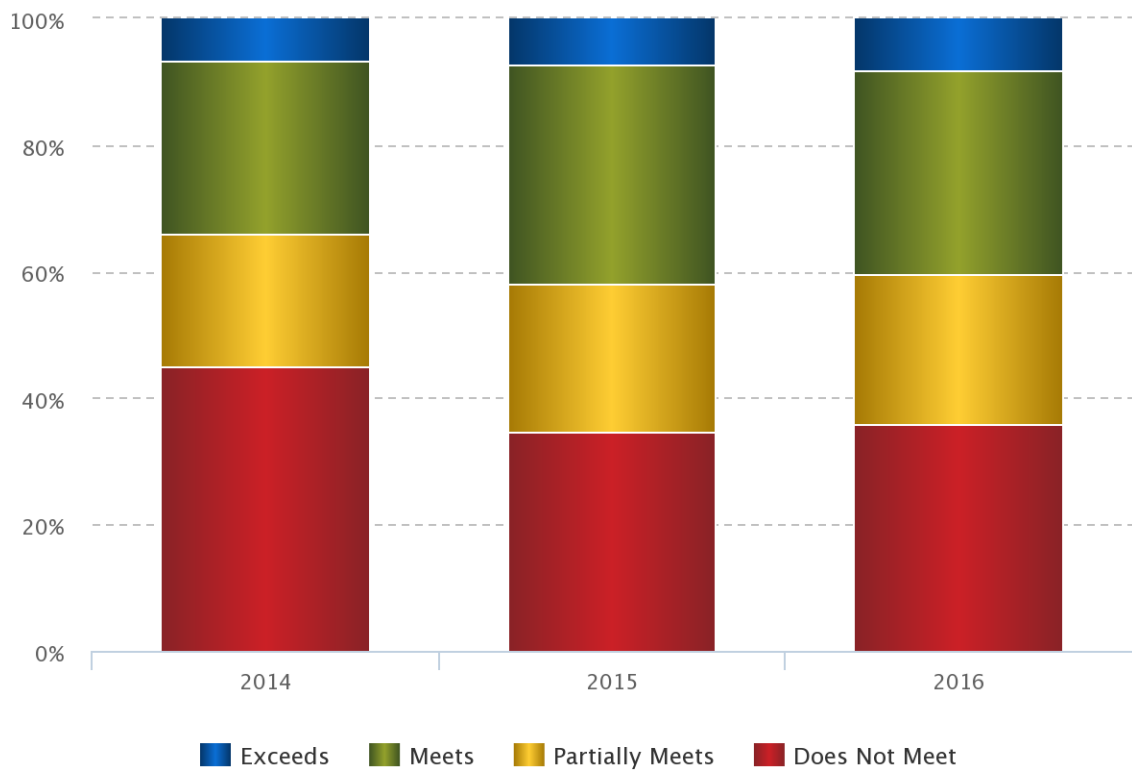
Due to rounding procedures it is possible for the sum of the percentages to minimally exceed 100%.



**Figure 21:** 2014 - 2016 student achievement level in math. This bar graph illustrates student achievement level in math from 2014 - 2016 of the focus school. It indicates the percentage of students earning exceeds, meets, partially meets or does not meet achievement level standards.

**Table 20: 2014 -2016 Student Achievement Level in Math - Focus School**

Year		Exceeds	Meets	Partially Meets	Does Not Meet
<b>2014</b>	Count	11	63	41	61
	Percent	6.3%	35.8%	23.3%	34.7%
<b>2015</b>	Count	14	67	42	54
	Percent	7.9%	37.9%	23.7%	30.5%
<b>2016</b>	Count	20	63	56	57
	Percent	10.2%	32.1%	28.6%	29.1%

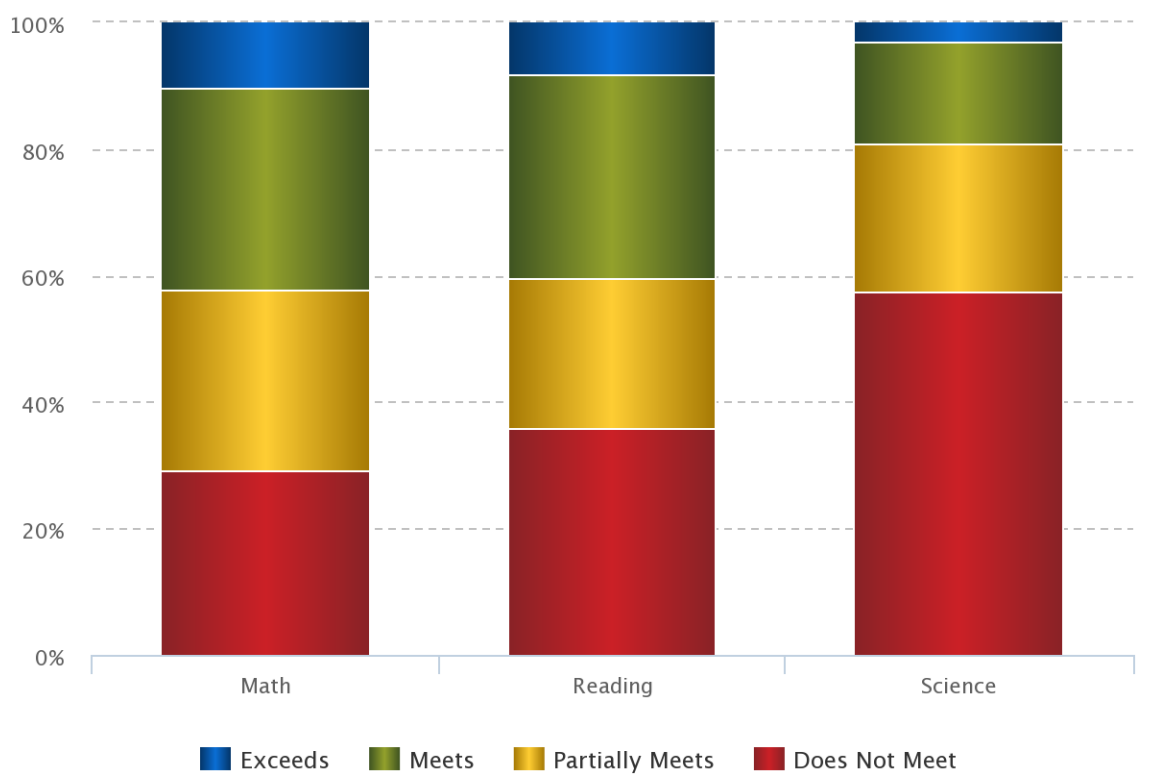


**Figure 22:** 2014 - 2016 student achievement level in reading. This bar graph illustrates student achievement level in math from 2014 - 2016 of the focus school. It indicates the

percentage of students earning exceeds, meets, partially meets or does not meet achievement level standards.

**Table 21: 2014 - 2016 Student Achievement Level in Reading - Focus School**

Year		Exceeds	Meets	Partially Meets	Does Not Meet
<b>2014</b>	Count	12	48	37	79
	Percent	6.8%	27.3%	21.0%	44.9%
<b>2015</b>	Count	13	61	42	61
	Percent	7.3%	34.5%	23.7%	34.5%
<b>2016</b>	Count	16	63	46	70
	Percent	8.2%	32.3%	23.6%	35.9%

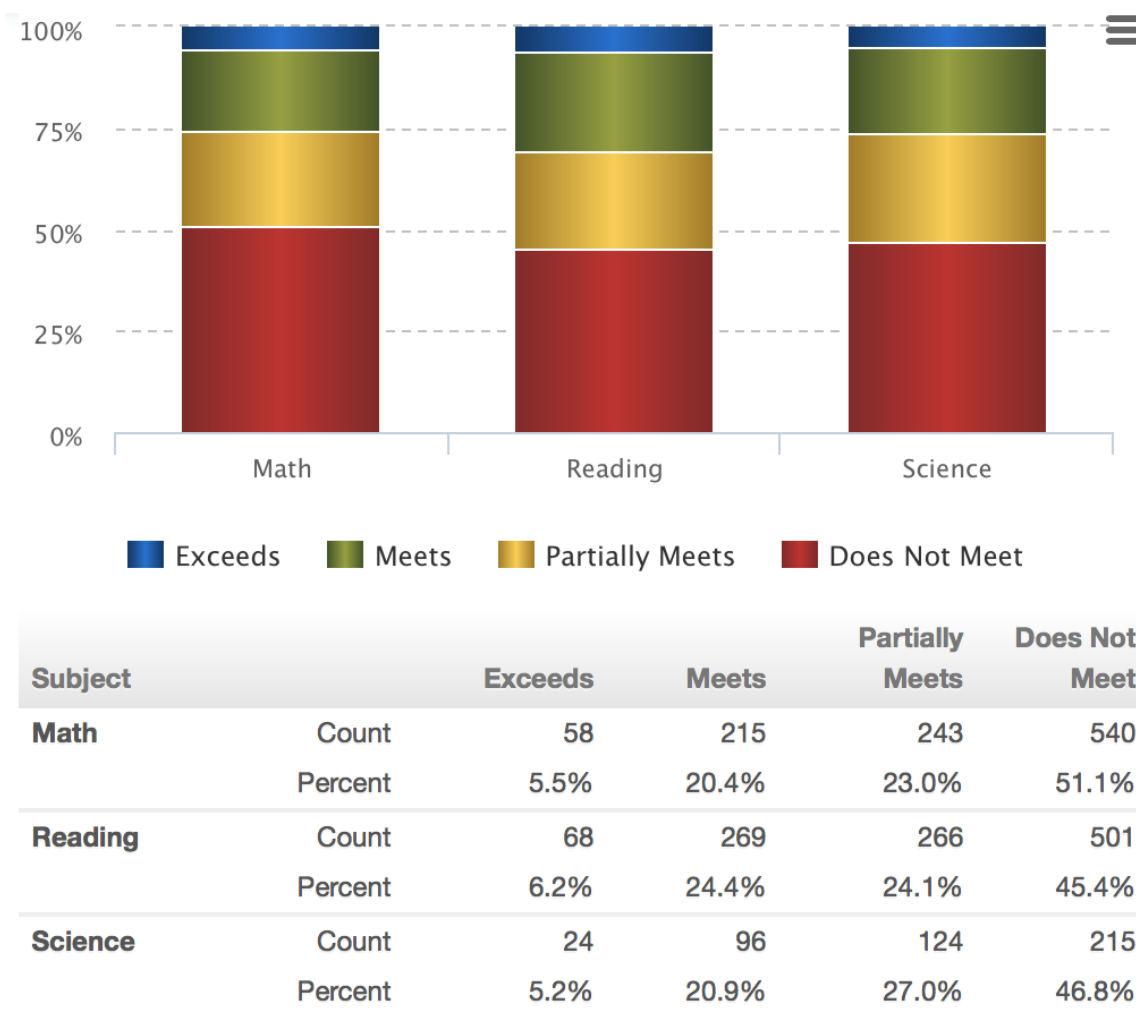


**Figure 23:** 2016 student achievement level in all subjects. This bar graph illustrates student achievement level in all subjects in 2016 of the focus school. It indicates the

percentage of students earning exceeds, meets, partially meets or does not meet achievement level standards.

**Table 22: 2016 Student Achievement Level in All Subject - Focus School**

Subject		Exceeds	Meets	Partially Meets	Does Not Meet
<b>Math</b>	Count	20	63	56	57
	Percent	10.2%	32.1%	28.6%	29.1%
<b>Reading</b>	Count	16	63	46	70
	Percent	8.2%	32.3%	23.6%	35.9%
<b>Science</b>	Count	2	11	16	39
	Percent	2.9%	16.2%	23.5%	57.4%



**Figure 24:** 2016 student achievement level in all subjects of the comparison district. This bar graph illustrates student achievement level in all subjects in 2016 of the comparison district. It indicates the percentage of students earning exceeds, meets, partially meets or does not meet achievement level standards.

Again, these data indicate that the focus school is out performing the district in virtually all aspects. The focus school has a substantially higher percentage of students meeting or exceeding their achievement level than the district. The only area where the focus school falls short in is the subject of science.



## Federal Accountability

The federal accountability data essentially mirrors the data found in the Multiple Measurements Rating (MMR), proficiency and growth data shown earlier. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and the MMR is a holdover from NCLB, and is now gone.

## 2017 Preliminary Data

The 2017 test results data were supplied to me even though the data isn't official until the state deems them official. (While writing this capstone some of the data became official and is indicated as such). The preliminary results are as follows:

### State's Comprehensive Assessment 2017 - Preliminary Data

Reading Proficiency: 46.7% - (Official data adjusted to 46.0%)

**Table 23: Focus School Reading Proficiency 2014 - 2017**

Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2013	26.0%	52	200
2014	34.1%	60	176
2015	41.8%	74	177
2016	40.5%	79	195
2017	46.0%	92	200

Math Proficiency: 39.4% - (Official data adjusted to 39.2%)

**Table 24: Focus School Math Proficiency 2014 - 2017**

Year	Percent Proficient	Number Proficient	Number Tested
2013	29.5%	59	200
2014	42.0%	74	176
2015	45.8%	81	177
2016	42.3%	83	196
2017	39.2%	78	199

**Reading Growth on the State's Comprehensive Assessment (4th-8th grades):**

- The schoolwide Z score was .029 (their average score was slightly above average).
- 51.7% of students grew at above average rates.
- 74.1% of students made medium growth or higher.

**Math Growth on the State's Comprehensive Assessment (4th-8th grades):**

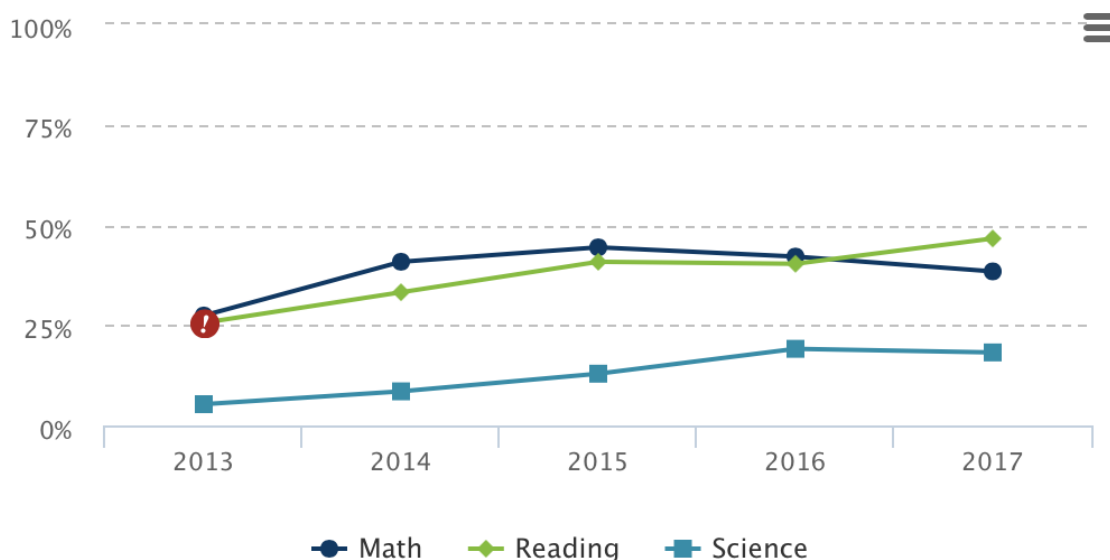
- The school's growth score in math was: -0.17 (their average score was slightly below average).
- 41.4% of students grew at above average rates.
- 62.1% of all students made medium to high growth.

**Measures of Academic Progress Test (MAP) Growth:**

MAP Test: 54% of students K-8 met their growth targets in reading.

MAP Test: 68.1% of students K-8 met their growth targets in math.

### Proficiency Trends



**Figure 25:** Proficiency trends of the focus school including 2017 (official). This line graph illustrates the trend in proficiency of the focus school from 2013 thru 2017.

The 2017 preliminary and official data indicates that the school is showing continued growth in reading, and a small dip in math growth. Yet, when one looks at the Measures of Academic Progress results, more than half of the students met their growth targets in reading and over one-third of the students met their growth target in math.

What do all these data mean? If one compares the school's data to the data from the statewide averages, this charter school is performing below the state's averages. When comparisons of data were made between schools located within a 5 mile radius of this charter school, the school was performing far better than the majority of those schools. When district comparisons were made, again, the focus school was performing better in almost all aspects. The only aspect where the focus school was under performing the district was in science, although the focus school's proficiency has been trending

upwards. This fact and an explanation as to why this is the case will be illuminated when an analysis of the interviews is done in the next section.

### **Interviews**

A true indication of *what this charter school was doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap* became clearer in analyzing the interviews. A total of seven interviews were done. Three of the interviews were done with administration, and four with teachers. Each interviewee was given the same set of questions with slight modifications based on the person's role in the school. As mentioned in the Methods section of this thesis, the questions were devised based on what was gleaned as the key take-away points from the literature review section. After a few interviews, a few questions were removed as it became clear that the question wasn't prompting any new, pertinent information. No longer was the question about tracking asked, nor if the school attempted to lower class sizes. It was quickly established that this school did not track their students, nor did they concern themselves with limiting class size.

All the interviews were transcribed from the recordings. I read through each interview multiple times and took keywords/phrases from each interview and noted them on a separate piece of paper that corresponded to each interview. I then re-read through the notes of keywords and phrases from each interview and created a set of codes that corresponded to similarities and commonalities between interviews. I then combined codes that had similar themes together and came up with a set of two main, overarching themes; *High Expectations*, and *Feedback*. Underneath the umbrella of those two main themes are related sub-categories that exemplify what this school was doing to create a learning environment that was really attempting to educate and grow their students, and

inevitably help shrink the achievement gap. First I will examine *high expectations* and the sub-categories within. Then I will look at *feedback* and its sub-categories. None of these notions or themes are mutually exclusive. Both the high expectations and feedback and all of the sub-categories are intertwining and acting upon the other to create the dynamic that is this charter school.

### **High Expectations**

It became quite clear that this charter school was doing all of the things that Wilson (2011) mentioned that were found in successful charter schools: they were using standards-based instructional strategies that were student-centered, they all had a clear mission, the academic curriculum was rigorous, the teachers taught for mastery, extra support was provided for the students both during and after class, teacher collaboration and professional development were valued by the administration, and the staff held themselves accountable for student achievement. It was also exemplifying some of the traits that Almond (2012) lists as common characteristics of predominately Black charter schools: a defined mission statement that emphasizes academic performance, a culture of high expectations, a focus on standardized tests and the use of regular internal evaluations. What this all boils down to is that this school, across the board, has nurtured a culture of *high expectations*. *High expectations*, not only for the students, but also for the staff.

Over the course of my examination of this school, it became apparent that there was a conscious effort four years ago to restructure the entire school's programming. In the 2013- 2014 school year, the director "Tina" promoted "Gerald" (all names used are pseudonyms) to the role of academic Dean, and together with "John" the school

improvement coordinator, some significant implementations were added to or modified to the school structure. This restructured system could only work if you have complete “buy-in” from all of the faculty and staff at the school. One of the first changes made was the introduction of aspects from the McRel International research-based framework from a book they published called *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Dean, Pitler, Hubbell, & Stone, 2013). Some of the teachers/staff were sent to a training in Colorado to learn about the McRel framework. The McRel framework from *Classroom Instruction that Works* provides scholastic institutions with nine instructional strategies for improving academic achievement. Gerald says,

...we are currently, as a leadership team, implementing a series of instructional initiatives that we have based on needs analysis from a school (perspective) we have deemed critical. Learning objectives, success criteria, feedback, getting and giving evidence, cooperative learning. They are all components under this framework. It's a massive framework instruction...We are through five to six components.

These instructional initiatives do not exist in isolation nor as simple points on a checklist that can be crossed off. They exist within an intertwined “web” of co-existing “strands” that must function together to work effectively. The faculty and staff work together to effectively implement these initiatives, as will be explained in the following paragraphs. The system and its implementations demonstrates the commitment of the faculty and staff to tailor its instructional methodology and curricula to the specific needs of its student body. This is a noteworthy aspect of one way in which this school is working to narrow the achievement gap

The focus school uses varied curricula to achieve its objectives. At this school they use *National Geographic Reach* (Frey, et al., 2011) for their reading curriculum. The math curriculum is created by the teachers, based off of the state standards for each grade level. As Tina states,

We have some teacher-developed curriculum that I'm excited about because then it's more strategic and geared toward the needs of our (specific) students. To me that is the highest quality teaching you can do, when you develop your own curriculum.

The National Geographic Reach curriculum has an extension built into it for English language learners, and also follows relatively closely to the state standards. This is important because one of the big factors, and part of the McRel frameworks, is clear *learning objectives*. As Gerald said, "First and foremost your curriculum has to be aligned to the state standards. Bottom line. If we are being held accountable for an assessment given on the state standards, the curriculum has to match that." For that specific reason, the school has created a standard alignment tool they call "Matrices" for the curriculum for every grade level and every standard. They have created a reading matrix and a math matrix. According to Gerald, these matrices,

...ensure that there is alignment to the state standards. So we built a tool for our curriculum that pares it down to align with our state standards perfectly. And then we embed the academic language development, the learning objectives, the success criteria, and the assessment for it, in both math and reading.

This school teaches two to three standards a week. So with this matrix system in place, everyone knows what the learning objectives for the week are. The teachers inform the

students what the learning objectives are too, so everyone is on the same “page.” This system also allows the teachers and staff the ability to create criteria to measure the success of the learning, of which the students are also well-aware. As Tina, the director stated,

...we get our students involved directly in their learning. We teach them and talk to them about the state standards. All of our kids...you can ask them, “Why is your teacher teaching you that?” They can tell you “It’s because it’s a state standard. It’s going to help me when I go to college.”

The teachers can then give feedback to the students, and at the end of the week a formal assessment is given.

As mentioned in a previous paragraph, lodged within the reading and math matrices is English language support. This school doesn’t use the term English language learners, they call it *academic language development*. They understood that all students can benefit from developing their academic language, so they built a scaffolded academic language structure into their reading and math matrices. And since the reading curriculum intertwines social studies, academic language is learned for that subject as well.

Additionally, this school has three full-time teachers in their ALD (academic language development) department. These teachers specifically help those students who require additional language support. This extra support happens during another school-created program called WIN time. WIN time stands for *What I Need*. As Gerald explained,

It’s a block in our school day that is 45 minutes long, at every grade level. From kindergarten through eighth grade. That’s when students who need academic language development services receive them. It’s when Title 1 students receive



Title 1 support, it's when our special ed students receive special ed support.

There's a team of about seven teachers that are traveling the building providing support.

In essence, WIN time is a block of time during the school day specifically designed to provide students extra support in any area where they need extra help. This type of specialized instructional time is one of the methods the school uses to help provide students with the tools for academic growth, progress toward mastery of a subject, and ultimately help in narrowing the achievement gap.

### **High Expectations Realized**

So how is all of this measured? How does the school know that the learning objectives are known by both the teachers and the students? How does the staff know the teachers are actually teaching the standards? How does the school know if the students are actually learning the material being taught to them? In short, how are the *high expectations* for teachers realized? Much of this will be elaborated more in the *feedback* section to follow, but one way that the high expectations for teachers and students is reinforced is on what the school calls *Learning Walks*. Learning Walks are done throughout the course of a day by both Tina (the Director) and Gerald (Dean). They will walk into a classroom, unannounced, and evaluate whether the expectations of both the student and teacher are being met. To track these evaluations, Gerald has created a Google Form that he and Tina can access from their smart phones which contains the criteria they want to measure. Gerald explains,

I'll walk in (to a classroom), I'll look up. Are the learning objectives based on state standards? Yes, check. Are they in student friendly language? Yes, check.

Do they have success criteria that's based on *moving thinking forward*? Yes. I'll grab a kid and ask, "Hey Julian, what are you learning right now?" (Kid) "I'm learning how to divide fractions." Great, check. I'll grab another kid... "Hey Stephanie, what's your success criteria?" (Kid) "Learning what the common denominator is." Great, check. I'll interview three to four kids. That gives me a little snapshot as to what's happening in that room.

All of this data that the two of them collect is then analyzed at a later time. Again, the specific nature of this analysis and how these evaluations are shared with faculty will be discussed in the feedback section.

Another example of *high expectations* expected at this school is in the discipline/classroom management realm. This school has a very purposeful and specific discipline system that was put in place four years ago. The school discipline plan begins with a team they built called the *Student Success Team*. This team is made up of 4 team members. One team member is in charge of Pre-K and 1st grade, another 2nd - 4th grade, and another 5th - 8th grade. The school social worker is the 4th member of this team. As Gerald describes,

We kind of describe our school as having a local system within the classroom, and then a federal system, which is our school-wide system. In each classroom you (the student) are given a series of "chances." Once you have exhausted those chances, you go on "strikes." When you get three "strikes," a student success coach is called in to pull you from the class. This is all tracked electronically and on *success cards* that every kid carries. Each student goes home with a summary of their day on paper to give to their parent(s) about what behavioral infractions

occurred and did they end up getting sent to their success coach. That's a constant dialogue that's happening on a sheet of paper all week long.

This is how they track any and all behavioral issues within the the school for Pre-K through the 5th grade. On the back side of the success cards Gerald explains,

...we have their learning objectives and success criteria for the week written on it.

So we also use it as a means to communicate what the kids are learning. Because if parents are going to sign off on behavior, they might as well sign off and become familiar with what kids are learning.

The student success coach's job is to figure out what things may be causing the behavioral issues, and help the student through it.

The system changes a bit for the middle school students, 5th - 8th grade. The behavior expectations increase for the middle school students. They no longer receive the "chances" that the younger kids get, they move right to strikes. As Gerald elaborated upon,

There's a massive spreadsheet that all middle school teachers have. If you (students) get a certain amount of strikes in a day, it equals a discipline form. If you get three strikes in one class, that equals a discipline form. Then we have a flow chart that you move up on as you get discipline forms. You get an opportunity to reset your position on that chart. Every morning I'm meeting with the Student Success Team. This is a standing meeting from 8:30am to 8:45am where we are looking at every spreadsheet that houses all of this behavioral data. They exist for everything; uniform infractions, lunchroom infractions, discipline forms, bus writeups, hallway infractions, technology violations. It's my

responsibility to pull all of that data together and review it with the coaches every morning.

The discipline form is like a behavioral referral request. As a student gets more and more of them, the consequences get more “steep”. The main idea or concept of this tiered behavioral system is to help the students and to avoid causing them to miss any important instructional time. As the director Tina explained,

...our Student Success Team which is non-academic, supports the academic. Our SST, or behavior coaches some people would call them, this team is not just monitoring behavior or enforcing our rules, but they also support the students with what they need. We know that kids, adults, act a certain way because of some issue or some problem. So instead of just enforcing the rules, our student success coaches actually help to meet needs of those students, to find out the root cause. They (student success coaches) have social conferences with them, talk to them, have checkins in the morning, to find out where they are that day mentally or emotionally. If something happens over the weekend on Facebook, for example. They are there to intervene, they hear about it. They build additional relationships with the students. They are in the classroom on a regular basis checking in with the students. The students know that they can come to the students success coach if they have needs. We have a whole behavior system here, and if a student gets so many strikes, before they get suspended or a discipline form they will be able to talk with a SSC to prevent a lot of that behavior...get them back on track, get them back in class so that they can make the most of their learning time.

The teachers have received a lot of training in Responsive Classroom and Teach Like A Champion which are research-based behavioral programs that emphasize building relationships with the students and building classroom community. Tina elaborates,

The teacher has the responsibility to set up their own management system for their classroom, manage their classroom, build classroom community, and have clear systems in place where the students can learn to self manage, etc. When their systems have (been) exhausted...then that's when we have the additional support for the teachers and students which is the SST. That's when they come into play, after the students have exhausted the classroom system...which, you know, for most students the classroom management system works. You always have some students who need additional supports, so that's when they get the SST, they need to go through that system visit.

As John, the school improvement coordinator stated, "Because our discipline system is so systematic and explicit, kids know where they are at. They know exactly where the process goes, and parents are brought in very early, and the interventions happen early."

The 7th and 8th grade language arts teacher, "Brenda" expressed her views on the behavior system, "Things are very different with behavior expectations, and we have so much support, and so much data that we can collect with behavior that it's...Behavior has taken a backseat to learning now." This behavioral system that this school has created is a large factor in helping keep their students in the classroom and focused on learning. This is another important factor on helping the school close the achievement gap. Wilson (2014) and Nelson & Lind (2015) discussed how students of color have a much higher

suspension and expulsion rate and as a result end up missing crucial instruction time.

This school's behavior system counteracts that trend.

### **Teacher High Expectations**

*High expectations* for students, faculty and staff is the norm at this charter school.

When the teachers and staff were asked the question, "What does teaching for high expectations look like to you?" across the board, responses demonstrated the school's overarching commitment to excellence and why *high expectations* is such a key ingredient to its success in narrowing the achievement gap. Gerald (Dean) stated, "What it looks like in a lot of classrooms is setting a rigor that's above average. Our best teachers are super aggressive with how rigorous they make the assessments." Tina, the director said,

That is one of the important things, that our foundation of our school is high expectations. That is something that I'm a strong believer of. High expectations for *all* students. That's a part of our core values here that we agree upon as a staff. We talk about that...what does that look like? What does high expectations for students mean? What does high expectations for staff mean? We have those discussions. We do not believe in low expectations for anyone! That is non-negotiable for me. We have to have high expectations for all of our students, no matter what age, what grade, no matter what ability level, no matter exceptionality.

Teacher "Jennifer" expressed her views,

It means no matter what student I have, no matter if it's a special ed student that receives resources, I'm still always expecting them to perform their best. High

expectations for everybody doesn't mean that I have the same expectations for everybody. I always say "fair isn't equal". If you are a struggling reader, I still expect you to achieve your goals. And if you are an awesome reader, I'm going to teach you to be an even better reader.

No matter who was asked the question, everyone had a firm understanding of what *high expectations* meant to them, to the school, and to the students. As Almond (2012) and Wilson (2011) indicated, a staff holding themselves accountable for student achievement, and creating a culture of high expectations are critical factors in creating a successful learning environment, and thus narrowing the achievement gap.

### **Feedback Loop**

The systems mentioned above, from the McRel framework (Dean, Pitler, Hubbell, & Stone, 2013), the academic language development, the math and reading matrices, the learning walks, the discipline/classroom management system, to the student success team, really only work in an environment where there is clear and consistent communication taking place between all constituents within the school community. This is accomplished at this school by a systematic and purposeful set of programs that all interact with one another and create what I like to call a "feedback loop." The following will discuss some of the systems that the school has in place to provide it with feedback.

The definition of feedback from the Google search engine defines it as "1. information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task, etc., used as a basis for improvement. 2. The modification or control of a process or system by its results or effects." ([www.google.com/feedback definition](http://www.google.com/feedback_definition)(n.d.) These definitions, especially the second one, really exemplify how many of the systems that this school has

put into place are designed to gather data, react to that data, provide feedback, implement the information learned from the feedback, and do it all over again. This is the feedback loop to which I was referring. The school has a set of intertwining systems in place whose goal is ultimately to better educate their students and are yet another key factor in how this school works to narrow the achievement gap.

As mentioned, four years ago, the school initiated some significant shifts in instructional and disciplinary systems to create a more effective school program from top to bottom. As the faculty, staff, and administration worked together to create this new program, one of their realizations was that in order to elevate the students' academic performance they needed to get performance data more frequently than the fall, winter and spring assessments. They realized they needed a structured, organized, purposeful way to gather data, analyze it, modify it, and implement instructional changes to better address it. The first step in this process was creating what they call the *Instructional Leadership Team* (ILT). The ILT is a team made up of the school's lead teachers. They meet every Monday with Gerald, the Dean, and discuss all things instruction related. On Tuesdays the school has data meetings where John, the school improvement coordinator or "data guy," and Gerald get together with teachers to look at the assessment data from the students, which is collected weekly. Any necessary modifications to instruction and implementation strategies are discussed at this time. On Wednesdays a group called Professional Learning Communities (PLC) meet. These communities consist of the team teachers for each grade level. The PLC time is designed as a planned, collaboration time for grade-level teachers to internally discuss grade-level issues, and implementations of the suggestions that were learned from the ILT and data meetings. This collaboration



between the administration and teachers, which is driven by raw data, creates a highly supportive student and teacher environment. Teachers can now address student needs in a much more timely fashion than was possible before this system was implemented. Instead of anecdotally thinking that all students “get it” and then coming to find out that two-thirds of them failed on that particular section of the standardized assessment exam, the teachers know right away which concepts are causing trouble. The micro-assessment of both student work and teacher performance is creating an environment where both teacher success and student success can be realized. It’s a recipe in shrinking the achievement gap.

Weekly assessments are given to the students in Google Forms format. Gerald has created a template that all the teachers use for these assessments. This allows the data to be compiled, calculated, and interpreted easily by John and Gerald. As mentioned, information learned from this data analysis is discussed and interpreted during the Tuesday data meetings, which in turn influence what ideas and concepts are introduced to the ILT and PLC teams. This process repeats every week. All of this data gathered also helps in informing the teachers/staff which students may need extra support during WIN time. As Gerald said,

Students with lower performances on the common assessments would come up when I sort the data at a data meeting. Then I basically ask the teachers “What are we going to do to meet the needs of these students?” Then we make a plan.

Sometimes we bring in outside support. That’s where if we notice patterns, we might bring in someone from the Special Ed. Department to a meeting, or the Title 1 department, or the ALD department, to look at the data to see, do we think

the student might need extra support? We might look for some kind of trend with a learning disability, or something in the family. Bring experts into that. But typically it's more like, what are we going to do to address this need in the classroom? Seven kids failed this test, why did they fail it? It's drilled down, look at every standard, every benchmark. "Ms. Monahan why are students in your room understanding main idea and theme, when Ms. Gerbshmidt, in your room, they are not? How did you teach that differently?" So we start that discussion. "You're both teaching 4th grade, your students are getting it, but yours are not. How are you teaching it? Let's talk about how you're delivering the content."

This "feedback loop" that is in place at this school is critical in understanding where each student is at, in terms of academic growth and success. It provides the raw data that can be used by the administration and the teachers to modify their approach to make sure each student is mastering the subject matter, a key component in helping to shrink the achievement gap.

Another interesting aspect of the school, is that each grade school level teacher (2nd through 8th) only teaches reading and math. This allows the feedback system to be applied with far greater efficiency. The school employs specialists for science and social studies. What that means is each teacher only has to focus their teaching skills on two subjects. What's more is that in this two-teacher cohort, one teacher writes all of the lesson plans for reading, while the other writes the lesson plans for math. This practice really allows each teacher to become more of an "expert" of their subject, and share that "expertise" with their cohort teacher. This also allows the data collection and analysis to have the potential to be more useful and insightful, as Gerald mentioned in the previous

paragraph. Why did one class do better than the other class (same grade)? Was it in the instruction or is there some other barrier preventing student success? These discussions can happen during the weekly ILT meetings, and appropriate adjustments can be made. This practice also allows for some additional teacher prep time. While the specialists for science or social studies are teaching their lessons, the teachers are given an additional teacher prep time to analyze data, which Gerald says

...was the only way we could pull off data meetings, because you can't take a regular teacher schedule and expect them to do everything we are asking them to do. So we had to say 'O.K. You only teach reading and math, and you get an extra 30 minutes of prep everyday. But, on Tuesdays we are going to hold you accountable for your results on reading and math.' It's worked really well.

Again, this "feedback loop" that incorporates the ILT, data meetings, PLC, and even the SST, and the fact that the grade-level teachers are only responsible to teach reading and math, fits right into aspects of what Williams (2011) found in highly successful charter schools. This practice allows for the curriculum to be rigorous, it allows the teachers to teach for mastery since they have frequent hard data on where the students are at academically. They can provide extra support to students who need it based on all the data and feedback they are receiving. Teacher collaboration is more than just valued by administration at this school, it's required and is a joint effort between teachers and administration. As was said by one of the teachers interviewed, "Before Gerald took over as the Dean, we were silos. Just trying to make it through the day. So it's been a great change." With these systems in place the staff holds themselves directly accountable for

student achievement. It is these school-based variables that this charter school has incorporated that are helping to shrink the achievement gap.

### **Student Feedback**

Another example of feedback happens in their newly revamped computer lab. A brief explanation of how they acquired an updated computer lab is appropriate at this point. In a way to raise awareness of their school and a way to raise funds, Gerald, the academic Dean, offered a challenge to any basketball players via a social media campaign. Gerald filmed himself during an assembly with the entire grade school, making 13 basketball shots in a row. Six shots were taken around the key, six were taken outside and around the 3-point line, and one was a half-court shot. He then challenged anyone to duplicate his performance, in a row, without missing any shots, and film it. If participants were unable to duplicate his performance, they would donate money to the school. He used the power of social media to try to entice professional basketball players in particular to take part. One such player from the local NBA team came to the school to meet the kids, and attempt the shots. He made 11 out of the 13 shots. Because he couldn't duplicate the feat, he donated money to the school to create a new and improved computer lab in his name. The school now calls the lab the Creative Learning Lab. Along with the donation of money and computers, the player donated software to go along with those computers that allow the newly hired computer lab teacher to monitor and provide immediate feedback to the students "live," as they are using the computers.

This live feedback is important for several reasons. The computer lab used to be a place where kids went to use the computers, but really in a less structured way.

Previously there was no dedicated lab teacher until the opening of the Creative Learning Lab. As Gerald indicated,

We use our lab as sort of an extension of classroom learning. Not just a lab where kids go and goof around on the computer. The teacher in the lab collaborates with the classroom teachers, so when they go into that space they use that as a continuation of the class. Not just, “Hey log in to Khan Academy, and goof around.” (Now it’s more) “we are writing a paper on the civil war. Let me read through your outline, and I’ll support you as you continue writing it.”

This immediate feedback conveys high academic expectations from the students, and holds them accountable for what they are doing while using the computers. Additionally, unlike the schools described in Forzani & Leu (2012) and Darling-Hammond, Zielesinski, & Goldman (2014), where a lack of access to technology and computers hindered student opportunity, the focus school was providing them purposeful access to computers.

Another example of student feedback that happens in this school is their use of personal white boards in the classroom. During a math lesson, for example, the teacher will propose a question for the students to answer. Each student will then write their answer on a white board and hold it up on their heads. The teacher can now peruse the room and get an immediate response from students, or a formative assessment, on how all the students are doing with the concept. Gerald elaborated, “We are trying to put these systems in place where you...where your lesson is a constant system of getting feedback from every kid, not just a few. So we do tons of whiteboard work. The power of a white board...you have a whiteboard in front of you, I’m (the student) responsible for producing

an answer. ‘What’s 9x7?’ It’s on me. No one else is going to help me with this. You answer, and you put it on your head.”

They also use an interesting device called a “picker” to gather student feedback. Each student carries with them a keychain that has 4 different picker cards representing A, B, C and D. The teacher presents a question with 4 possible answers A, B, C, or D. The students then hold up above their heads their response on their pickers. The teacher then takes out their cell phone and scans the room with the camera on the phone (using the picker app) and scans the room left to right. The camera collects live data from all of the students. The teacher therefore receives immediate feedback. They can know immediately that 97% of the kids showed the right answer. Not only does this picker system provide live data, it also houses all responses, thereby providing longitudinal data of how each individual student did on answering questions while using the picker.

Gerald explained,

Our goal at our school is to keep kids accountable for producing an answer constantly, so that you can never check out. So if you know, that regardless of who answered the last question, I might be up next, or I have to raise my picker, to show I’m paying attention.

That is one of their feedback models.

There are several additional systems in place that help reinforce high expectations and provide plenty of feedback to students and faculty. All faculty use the more common popsicle sticks with names on it, where the teacher draws a stick randomly before calling on that person. They also use a randomizer app on a phone that will randomly suggest

who the teacher should call on. Gerald shared an interesting and relevant story about the use and benefit of gathering feedback using such random methods,

I was doing an observation on Mr. X and he liked to argue that, “If I can pick and choose who I can call on, I can help drive the instruction.” Which is true to a certain extent. But you never know subconsciously what you are doing to the group when you are doing that. So I asked him to use a randomizer for a lesson and I came in to watch him. He called on a student with special needs 3 times in a row, because the randomizer selected that person. He never in a million years would have done that. But he learned something about that student that he never would have known before. He learned that they knew more than he thought they did, because he forced that kid to answer a question. In the past he never would have put him on the spot like that. But he did it wanting to prove me wrong. Instead she (the student) produced the correct answer, thus proving my entire point. Look, that’s why we would do this.

These systems of student feedback that are used at this school not only provide important feedback for faculty and staff, but also help to instill a level of accountability within the students. These systems all work together to help create a scholastic environment that promotes high achievement and ingrains a level of high expectations throughout the school.

### **Positive Student Feedback**

All of the feedback and data acquisition that happens at this school allows for the recognition of good work and positive feedback geared toward the student. As part of the school-wide system modifications that took place 4 years ago, Gerald and another staff

member developed incentives programs for the students. These incentives for students are earned through their day to day scholastic efforts, good behavior, and test scores on the state assessment exams. Some incentives are individual and other incentives are classroom based providing for group achievement. The incentives range from the simple to the material as Gerald explained,

Every day during the morning announcements, I've made a spreadsheet, and developed a system where depending on what grade level kids are in, they can be nominated for their effort, like their work. Just, how hard do they dig in, in the classroom. Then they get called down to my office. I give them a mint, I take their picture, we put it up on the electronic billboard (which is seen as you walk into the building), everyday. And they get their name called over the announcements, which they like. And I give them a little, funny pep talk. On Fridays I meet them all in the gym and we do a drawing and we give away a \$10.00 gift card. Then at the end of a two month period, we give away a pair of Beats headphones to the Winner.

John elaborated,

We have incentives wrapped around the Z scores. As a school we tell the kids the day they take the test what their scores are, which is not typical in other schools. Before the test, they know their target. We have incentives for classroom Z scores averaged. Kids know if they meet their target. If they do the students get excited, the teacher gets excited.

Tina, the director, explained more about the incentives,

We give lots of incentives for our students to do well. We make learning cool and



fun here. So when the students come here, you *want* to learn. We motivate them to learn. It's cool to be smart here. You get to win Beats headphones. You get to go to Valleyfair. You get to go to the Mall of America.

One of the teachers had mixed feelings about the incentives for testing when she stated,

We have lots of incentives for testing. We make a big deal out of testing. I'm always on the fence, is that a good thing, or is it a bad thing? But when we didn't make it a big deal, they (students) didn't care. They didn't see the value...they just didn't do anything on it. Now it's almost gone the opposite way, where it's almost too big of a deal.

The incentive systems that the school has implemented into their methods is really an example of the high expectations and desire for their students to demonstrate effort at this school. It also relates to the concept of feedback, as the school uses the the data collected from assessments and behavioral charts, to reward the students for their hard work and provide some positive reinforcement. The incentives also help to build the sense of community at the school, and paired with high expectations and feedback, these are all ingredients that can help the students succeed and help shrink the achievement gap.

### **Observations**

The observations that were to coincide with the interviews were not able to all be fulfilled. This was primarily a result of the time of year when I visited the school. It was the last week of school for the students at this school, and some of the teachers who I interviewed were having end of year classroom parties; one left for a field trip right after the interview. The ILT, data meetings, and PLC meetings were done for the year, so there

were no opportunities to witness any of those. Of the three administrators I interviewed it was really only feasible to observe Gerald, the Dean. I was able to watch him interact with the teachers and other members of the staff throughout the two days I spent at the school. Tina, the director, was busy working diligently in her office. John, the school improvement coordinator spent most of his time crunching numbers and sifting through the data in front of a computer. Of the four teachers interviewed, I was able to observe three of them. One observation took place during an 8th grade math lesson, another during a 5th grade reading lesson. The other was during a 7th grade reading class where, because it was the end of the year, the students were playing a teacher driven game of “Scattergories.” Initially Gerald, the Dean, cautioned me that the reading teacher wasn’t going to be doing anything academic in her class. I reassured him that observing the students and this teacher could still be beneficial.

As was mentioned in the Methods section, descriptive notes were taken during the observations. If any of the things witnessed related to any of the questions that were asked during the interviews, it was marked on the sheet next to the observation. Reflective and personal thoughts were written to the right of the observation notes. Through the course of observing both formally, and informally some faculty and staff of this charter school, a few key observations reinforced aspects revealed from the interviews. Each classroom where I observed, whether formal instruction was taking place, or games were being played, had clear learning objectives and success criteria visible for all to see. For example, when observing the 8th grade math lesson, on the wall to the right of the whiteboard was written: SWBAT (Students will be able to) 7th grade - Use properties of algebra to make equal expressions. 8th grade - Solve systems of

equations numerically and or as a group. Next to these were the state standards benchmark codes. Below those were the student success criteria statements: “I can identify and define systems of equations.” and “I can make one equation into Y or X equals.” Every classroom where I observed had these clear learning objectives and student success criteria easily visible.

During the observation with the 5th grade teacher, who was engaged in a reading lesson, the students were learning about listening and speaking skills. Again, the learning objectives and success criteria were clear and visible. As the lesson began, the teacher introduced a potential new term to the students: “Poise”. This was a direct indication of how they include academic language development (ALD) into the reading matrix that the school has created.

High expectations from both the teacher and the student were also visible during the observations. During the aforementioned 5th grade reading lesson, one student, as they were presenting their slide show (as part of the “listening and speaking” lesson), had a slide indicating what they wanted to be in the future. On the slide was #1 - NASA Engineer, #2 - NBA Basketball Player, #3 - College Professor. While observing an 8th grade math lesson, students were self-policing each other if a student or students began to get disruptive. High expectations from the teachers was visible in a few ways. During the 8th grade math lesson the teacher would call on students who appeared to be losing focus. This kept everyone “on their toes”, and understanding that the teacher expected everyone’s attention. There was an instance where a student was playing with a “spinner”, and the teacher said “Schools are for learning. If you want to play with toys, you can stay at home, but I want you here to learn.” This teacher also has a method where

at the end of the lesson, if the class has avoided receiving one strike the class could vote on which of the two worksheets they would have to complete. Throughout the course of the lesson, the teacher would announce every so often “We are at zero strikes.” Then a bit later, “We are halfway through and we are still at zero strikes.” This constant reminder seemed to keep the kids on task. Toward the end of the lesson two students were having a difficult time staying focused and the individuals, and thus the class received strikes. Thus they had to do both worksheets. Either way, they were still working on math and learning the objectives. The reinforcement of high expectations was also apparent when the teacher projected a fortune cookie fortune on the whiteboard while the students were independently working on math problems that read, “You’re never a loser until you quit trying.” As a matter of fact, there were slogans and sayings throughout the entire school that encouraged effort and reinforced high expectations.

One fascinating and relevant observation happened unexpectedly in Gerald’s office after I had completed an interview with a teacher. A group of four 8th grade, female students came into his office along with a gentleman that I had not seen before. The man worked for a company called Inspire, who was hired by this school to run sections for a week. Gerald explained Inspire as, “...a social and emotional mindfulness program that helps kids become more comfortable in their own skin.” In the process of spending a week at the school he “inspired” these four girls to enter into an Inspire run contest where the prize was a \$2000.00 scholarship. The contest had 24 other contestants from different schools, all of which who wrote something, or created something whose intent was to change the world in a positive way. The girls called themselves “Black Is Beautiful” and wrote a self-titled song called “Black is Beautiful”. The song’s message

was to inspire young Black students to keep achieving and to beat the achievement gap. The girls won the contest, and were in Gerald's office to discuss with Gerald and the leader from Inspire how to use the \$2000.00 that they won. The discussion was focused on using the money to record the song and make a YouTube video so they could "keep spreading" the message of the song. They sang the song for me, and I was very impressed. I only wish I would have had the forethought to record it, so I could reiterate the powerful lyrics these young ladies had come up with.

Aside from the scholastic methods, discipline regimen, and high expectations, the big take away that I found in observing the classrooms, the interactions between teachers and students, administration and students, and between the administrators was an all-encompassing sense of community. This school has created a very strong sense of community within its walls. This was seen through the self-policing that the students were doing during classes, to help ensure that their peers were able to learn (and not receive the consequences of strikes). It was witnessed while observing Gerald, Tina the director, and John the school improvement coordinator collaborating on how to best get public attention on their newly donated "Creative Learning Lab" from the NBA player. It was obvious during the meeting with the *Inspire* coach, Gerald, and the four contest winners. It was apparent at the beginning of each lesson I observed when the teachers spent the first few minutes engaging in shared conversations about each other's lives (outside of school), like friends would do who were just "catching up." There is a very apparent common goal at this school, and that is of student success, and the kids know it.

### **Self-Identified Areas of Growth**

Through the course of interviewing the administrators and teachers of this charter school, a potential area for growth kept recurring. When asked the two questions: “What systems are in place to address students’ racial identities?”, and “Do faculty & staff receive training around concepts of such as White privilege, cultural competency, and inclusion?” a common response was that these were areas the school could improve on. Tina, the director, expressed her thoughts on how the school addresses its students’ racial identities,

we have made some strides, but we really need to do better with helping our students to embrace who they are, their racial identity, their culture, and being comfortable, confident in being validated in who they are. That is something, I feel, we need improvement on, we are working on that. We have improvements to make.

John, the school improvement coordinator added,

(This is) probably an area where we need to grow, and be more explicitly affirming of racial identities. We do have a very positive environment around culture and diversity. There are some things we do that affirm cultural identity but being more explicitly affirming of African culture...We have a lot of students from West Africa, and Black culture as well. Being more intentional about that as a staff is an area where we need to grow.

The school has considered participating in staff wide programs and training on concepts such as White privilege and cultural competency. So far only a few staff have gone to any trainings relating to those subjects. The choice of not engaging the entire

staff and faculty, and fully implementing a cultural competency type program has been an intentional one. As Tina expressed, before they implement any training program,

We needed to build community, we needed to build relationships, we needed to build *trust* first, with our staff, with our families and students before we got to that level. Because if we really want that to work, we need to be at a place as a staff, as a team, where we can handle having those kind of conversations. Where it's not just my idea but it becomes the idea of the other staff members. Which now, that's beginning. Now they are starting to ask "I think we need some more training in this area". So *they* are wanting it. And that's the way it should be vs. just forcing something.

The uncertainty of whether or not the teachers were ready to engage in the difficult conversations and concepts associated with White privilege were expressed by one teacher when she said,

It's still one of those things where some of the school is there and ready to hear those things about White privilege, and some are not. So the leadership team has been talking about how to get everyone on the same page about that. It's delicate.

Another teacher reflected on that same notion similarly when she said,

I don't think any of us have received any formal training about it. No. Should we? Probably. It's something (White privilege) I constantly reflect on because I *am* the White teacher in front of a class of all Black students. And I know that I have that authority there. I try to both choose my words carefully, but at the same time, I have to be myself, because my students need to see me as me. And that's part of developing relationships with them, so that they trust me. I think there are a lot of

teachers (here) that reflect on this, and are conscious of it while teaching. And then there maybe are others that are not.

As an area of improvement, those interviewed, unanimously felt that these were notable growth areas. In lieu of any system-wide formal training the school currently relies on a few members of the leadership team who have participated in White privilege training, one who is African-American, and is often used as a confidant or a mentor to other staff members needing support. Wood and Jocius (2013) in their article, expressed the importance of White teachers considering and understanding their privilege in relation to their instructional strategies and goals within their classrooms when teaching primarily non-White students.



## CHAPTER 5

### Introduction

The goal of this capstone was to get a deeper understanding as to *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap?* Through the course of interviews and observations of select faculty and staff, and examinations into the documents and data that was available on this charter school it became clear that, indeed, this school was succeeding in narrowing the achievement gap. Through the process of creating purposeful, deliberate, and systematic programs that emphasized learning objectives, success criteria, feedback, getting and giving evidence, having and maintaining a dedicated staff, and creating a systematic discipline system, the school has been able to continue their goal of growing the academic achievement of their students and thus narrowing the achievement gap. In this fifth and final chapter of this capstone, I reflect on the process of embarking on a case study research project and share what has been learned along the way. These things that were learned will be connected back to aspects brought to light in the literature review. I will also consider implications and limitations of the study, and look toward ideas of future research. Finally, I will reflect on the influence on participating in such a research project.

### What was learned

Through the course of writing, researching and conducting this case study things were learned that pertained to the research goal, and I learned other things that were of a more personal nature. A realization came to me as I was learning more and more about the focus charter school and the people who worked there. Through the course of completing all the required coursework to obtain a teacher's license and earn a master's

degree, I learned that all the concepts, methods, and strategies obtained from an institutional perspective can only take one so far. It takes experience, passion, desire, sacrifice and commitment if one really wants to make a change...a positive change. This school studied is exemplary of that notion. In order to meet the needs of their student body and be successful (to meet the state's accountability measures) they had to create a unique and extremely structured system to begin to reach their goals. This school had to essentially focus all of their immediate attention on those subjects that they were being held accountable for...reading and math. Although the school still instructs in the subjects of science and social studies, less emphasis is placed on those subjects much less music and art. With an increased emphasis on instruction that is directly aligned with the state standardized tests, the school is essentially “teaching to the test.” As Williams (2011) stated, standards-based instruction is one potential way to help narrow the achievement gap. A further question arises, at what cost? Are the students missing out on other potential academic growth in other subjects? Are they missing out on the learning opportunities that can happen when open-ended discussion, debate and inquiry are the norm? The concept of an achievement gap, by definition, indicates that somewhere someone has deemed what are the most crucial aspects that students need to learn, and certain groups aren't obtaining or demonstrating a fluency in those aspects. By no means am I saying that reading and math are not important, because they are. However there seems to be an imbalance of power when a school is held accountable for such a limited and specific measure. That is a subject for another research endeavor.

Schools such as this one were being evaluated and held accountable for their performance in accordance with the now defunct No Child Left Behind act. NCLB has

been replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). As ESSA is new, and not fully implemented yet, it will be interesting to see what effect it has on schools going forward. Another potential area of further research. One thing is for certain, there still continues to be a gap in academic achievement between non-White students and White students and it is still prevalent and a serious issue in the education systems across the United States (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Milner, 2012; Williams, 2011).

### **Revisiting the literature review**

Williams (2011), and Yu (2012), discussed that one of the potential causes that has perpetuated the achievement gap is an historical, societal, systemic oppression that has been inflicted upon African-Americans in this country. Many different variables have been studied, such as socioeconomic status, family income level, parental involvement, racial stereotyping, and different school-based variables to ascertain what may be perpetuating this gap (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Milner, 2012; Williams, 2011; Yu, 2012). As a result of the large number of variables involved it has been difficult to pin down any single solution in eradicating an achievement gap. One thing we do know for certain is that a disparity in U.S. household income creates areas of residential segregation, where the lowest income citizens attend schools with fewer resources, lower teacher performance, and lower quality learning experiences relative to their higher-income counterparts. This socio-economic divide is highly correlated to race due to ongoing de facto segregation and a variety of systemic factors, particularly in urban school districts (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Kozol, 2005).

Williams (2011), indicated that school-based variables have the most potential to make a difference in the achievement gap. When analysing eight highly successful

charter high schools, Williams (2011) found six major characteristics that were consistent across those schools: they all had a clear mission, the academic curriculum was rigorous and focused on college preparation, the teachers taught for mastery, extra support was provided for the students both during and after class, teacher collaboration and professional development was valued by the administration, and the staff held themselves accountable for student achievement. Although Almond (2012) indicates that charter schools are exacerbating racial segregation in public schools, May (2006) found that the parents who enrolled their kids in charter schools felt that the experience would provide their children with an enhanced educational experience with smaller class sizes, better teachers, teacher familiarity, one-on-one attention, a supportive staff, and a sense of belonging. Flaker (2014) found that charter schools, and more specifically urban located charter schools, were more efficient than traditional public schools by producing higher outcomes at a lower cost per pupil. Charter schools, like the one that was the focus of this study are more autonomous in nature, and can thus focus on their particular mission, can potentially accomplish more with a smaller budget, can involve their faculty in more intensive professional development, and create unique systems that focus directly on their student body, thus providing a potential advantage in helping shrink the achievement gap.

### **Implications and Limitations of the study**

If anything was revealed by embarking on a case study of this particular charter school it is the old adage “where there is a will, there is a way”. This school created an in depth “feedback loop” system, that allowed it to gather assessment data of their students performance on a weekly basis, then use that data to modify, differentiate and alter the instruction. They also created a discipline structure that supports the students and helps

them to be successful and improve their behavior, as well as an incentive program that rewards the students for good behavior and academic success. These strategic systems were shown to make a significant improvement in the school's academic growth since being introduced. The strategies and methods implemented at this charter school could benefit any school looking to improve academic success, especially one with a similar demographic of low-income, minority students.

There were some limitations to this case study. This case study was only a brief snapshot of what was going on at this school. If one really wanted to get a closer, more in-depth understanding of the inner workings of the school, one would want to study the school throughout an entire school year. That way a more detailed understanding of how, through the course of the "feedback loop," instruction was modified and the effects of doing so. A true understanding of the reading and math matrices would also become clearer with a longer study. The new federal Every Student Succeeds Act will change what this and other schools will need to focus on for accountability requirements, potentially changing aspects that were proving to be successful at this school. Only a longitudinal study in place far into the future will tell if the success at this school will continue to narrow the achievement gap.

Another limitation was that the sample size of the interviews was small. However, as this was a case study of this school, a good sense of the fundamental aspects of this charter school was achieved. What is not known is the true implications of the achievement gap reduction of the school. Granted, this capstone illustrated hard data using the state's resources and graphs to show the school is reducing the gap. And when compared to other schools surrounding this school it was shown to be even more

successful. However, other schools with a different school demographic and different resources were reducing the gap even further. Those comparisons are difficult to make as the schools are so different. What I'm trying to say is that although it appears that the work at this school is indeed helping to shrink the achievement gap, there are other schools succeeding even further (when viewing the state's achievement gap reduction statistics). Another limitation of this study and a way to make the results more valid would have been to delve into a national comparison of schools and those schools/state's achievement gap reduction.

### **Future Research Projects**

There is still a necessity for continued research on the achievement gap and ways to eliminate it. Williams (2011), and Yu (2012) indicated that one of the potential causes that has perpetuated the achievement gap is an historical, societal, systemic oppression that has been inflicted upon African-Americans in this country. Based on the events that have happened in this country since the process of writing this capstone began, I would say this societal and systemic oppression is alive and well. As was learned in the literature review section of this capstone, in an attempt to discern what is causing this gap between minorities and Whites, researchers have looked at many different variables. They have looked at socioeconomic status, family income level, parental involvement, racial stereotyping, and different school-based variables, such as teacher quality, tracking, and standard-based instruction, (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Milner, 2012; Williams, 2011; Yu, 2012). Future research on the achievement gap is paramount, but more importantly the systemic racism issues that continue in this country need to change. Opportunities need to increase for minorities. More opportunity could potentially lead the ability of

minority citizens to earn higher incomes. Higher incomes could potentially decrease the likelihood of the continuation of the residential segregation that has been occurring over the past 40 years. As Duncan & Murnane (2014) stated, the lowest income citizens end up attending the schools with fewer resources, have lower performing teachers, have lower quality learning experiences, all as a result of this residential segregation. There is a correlation between the disparity in U.S. household income to an increasing gap in academic achievement and educational attainment.

As was mentioned earlier, more future research that could help inform teachers, administrators, and districts would be looking at what happens to students overall development when schools focus so directly on what the state is holding the school accountable for. Are the students missing out on other potential academic growth in other subjects when schools “teach to the test”? Also, with the ongoing implementation by the federal government of ESSA, it will be interesting to see what effect it has on schools going forward. The research potential of this new law and its implications is endless.

### **Growth of the Author**

This capstone project, as difficult and time consuming as it was, really pushed the boundaries of my research and writing capabilities. I really feel that each has improved dramatically. It has also made me look at literature with a more critical lens. I am much more inclined to search out academic literature that is researched based when answering even the most mundane question.

This process has also made me realize the “rabbit hole” one can go down when becoming deeply interested in, and researching a subject. The research can go on and on. Once one aspect of a subject is approached, a new “window” of relevancy is opened up,

and one wants to peer out that “window” to learn more. Then one investigates aspects shown through that “window” and new information is found that intrigues. I have a new understanding of how a lifetime of research can happen, and one will *still* have unanswered questions.

As far as the achievement gap is concerned, I will continue to monitor the gap both from afar, but also from the lense of my two sons who are rapidly approaching their years of schooling. When that happens, I intend to seek employment within a school. Witnessing the structure and collaboration methods created at the charter school that I focused on for this case study, it will be interesting to see what sort of systems are in place at the school I may work at. My wife works at an affluent independent college preparatory school. She read through one of my interviews of an administrator of the school and couldn’t help but reflect on what the implications would be for her at her school if they could implement such a structured “feedback loop” of weekly assessments, data analysis, and teacher/administration collaboration. Her school is much larger and would require more resources to pull off a similar structure. Nonetheless, she saw value in the methods and thought her school could benefit from such a collaborative, feedback rich structure.

My objective going into this capstone was to see *what was this charter school doing to excel at narrowing the achievement gap?* Through the process of answering that question I learned much of what was helping this school succeed. I learned that it takes a lot of work, dedication, passion, patience, cooperation, desire and heart to “beat the odds,” and create a successful learning community when many around you are failing. I also learned that I have chosen the correct career path, because I want to be a part of



making any sort of gap based upon a person's race a thing of the past. It will require system-wide changes, both outside and inside the education world, for the word *achievement gap* to exist only in the history books. I will do my part.

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