CAMPUS LEADERSHIP INSTITUTIONAL PROCESS PRACTICES THAT

POSITIVELY IMPACT THE COMPLETION RATE OF ECONOMICALLY

DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

A Doctoral Thesis Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education
in Professional Leadership

by

Delic Loyde

May 2013

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May 2013

Dedication

To God be the glory, great things He hath done.

Praise the Lord!

This study is dedicated to my mother, Ora Helen Emanuel who constantly made sure that I understood the importance of education as a key to opening the world to me. To my late father, Richard O'Neal Emanuel, who called me his "pal" and encouraged me by saying "Pal, I know you can do anything." To my late husband, Robert Lee Loyde, who told me to expand my world because the world really needs me. To my son, Nolan Jager Loyde, for being my personal pride and daily ray of joyful sunshine. I hope I have inspired him through my life to have the confidence to follow his own passions. To my late sister, Mary Helen Mitchell, in appreciation for her telling me to be my own person. To my sister, Yvonne Carol Emanuel, for being the person I constantly look up to but also for always being there as my most sincere critic but also as my biggest fan. To my brother, Richard O'Neal Emanuel, Jr., I hope you read this and are a little proud of your scrawny sister. (smile)

What I am saying is:

I love you all.

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"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13

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Loyde, Delic. "Campus Leadership Institutional Process Practices that Positively Impact the Completion Rate of Economically Disadvantaged Students." Doctor of Education Thesis University of Houston, May 2013.

Abstract

This study examines the relationships between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes and practices in high poverty high schools in one school district and the impact of those decisions on the high school completion rates of economically disadvantaged students using narrative inquiry and archival data. The schools represented in this study have increasing percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

Results of this study reveal that the current demands of the principalship require school leaders to possess a transformational skill set to succeed with the neediest student population in the history of our nation. The findings from this study have practical implications for high school leaders and add to the body of leadership knowledge regarding the importance of principal decision making in the necessary transformation of institutional processes and practices that meet the needs of today's students. High school completion holds the key to opening doors of opportunity for all students.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In Lyndon Baines Johnson's Annual State of the Union Message to Congress on January 8, 1964, he stated, "Many Americans live on the outskirts of hope--some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity" (Lyndon Baines Johnson, 2012, para. 17). Johnson's statement to the nation was later dubbed the "War on Poverty" speech. Consequently, this address shed light on the state of the nation's challenges related to poverty and sparked national concern over the issue. This event eventually led to a series of bills, acts, and programs throughout the nation, such as Head Start, Food Stamps, Work Study, Medicare and Medicaid – many of which are still in existence today. The programs, initiated under President Johnson, brought about real results by reducing rates of poverty and improving the living standards for America's economically disadvantaged.   A review of history reveals that the food, nutrition, economic assistance, and other programs begun by Johnson are still in effect in some forms today. Though, not perfect, the Acts and programs that began during his presidency have a positive effect on many American families. The most enduring legacy of the War on Poverty's reforms to the nation's safety net derives from its expansion of food and nutrition programs for low-income families with children. In comparison to the cash welfare programs, these programs have proven fairly resilient to political pressures and backlash. And they have achieved a solid track record in terms of reducing poverty and food insecurity, improving nutrition, and yielding other benefits for child health and development (Waldfogel 2012, p. 16).

Later, in January of 1988, the concern over poverty was still at the forefront of the nation's conscience when President Ronald Reagan delivered a State of the Union address in which he declared to the nation that the "War on Poverty" had failed. More specifically, he stated: "My friends, some years ago, the Federal Government declared a war on poverty…and poverty won" (Reagan, 2010). The "War on Poverty" had been the nomenclature given to the set of legislations that Johnson sent to Congress. Each of these bills would lead to the "Great Society" in America and many were rejected by later presidents.

Luckily, the tide of our history has left the sad commentary for our nation behind; yet, each and every president since Lyndon Baines Johnson has had to deal with the legacy of the "War on Poverty" during their presidency. Beginning during the presidential period of Lyndon B. Johnson, the concern over poverty in America has now spanned the terms of eight different Democratic and Republican presidents. Through the legislations during their tenure, these presidents addressed the poverty issue and its devastating effect on our nation and they recognized the pivotal role that education has had in eradicating it.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the current rate of poverty in America is "at its worst level since 1993" (Census.gov, 2012). Additionally, over 46 million people are living in poverty (2.6 million more than in 2009), and the poverty rate has reached over 15.1% (Census.gov, 2010). The critical issue of our increasing national and global poverty rate demands our urgent attention and acknowledgement. There is no panacea for our current state of affairs and–perhaps more importantly–our collective efforts to assuage the effects of poverty are simply not working.

The poverty rate continues to climb and families remain entrenched in the generational cycle of poverty. Furthermore, due to our present unstable economic climate, families who have never before experienced such challenges are increasingly becoming victims to poverty. Sadly, there are also individuals who are the victims of situational poverty because of job loss. The answer to breaking the cycle of poverty and providing more positive outcomes is through education, which can provide both access *and* opportunity. Such a reality is particularly important for economically disadvantaged students so they may have an opportunity to realize their potentials and break the cycle of poverty.

Brief Review

Billions of dollars of support and decades of legislation have not resulted in an adequate solution necessary to win the war on poverty. Research compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation revealed that child poverty has increased over 20 percent nationwide (The Annie E. Casey Foundation et al., 2011). In the foundation's first examination related to the recession's impact on our nation's children, researchers concluded that low-income children would likely suffer academically, economically and socially long after their parents have recovered from the effects of their economic state. The annual survey, which was monitored by policymakers across the nation, concluded that children from low-income families are more likely to be raised in unstable environments and change schools, as compared to their wealthier peers. As a result, they are less likely to be gainfully employed as adults (Annie E. Casey et al., 2011).

All too often, many in our society look to ease the pain and break the cycle of poverty through simply meeting the survival needs of the poorest demographic of

children. This action, thus, becomes an outward symbol of meeting the most basic needs of those in poverty. Yet, the issue of poverty is much more complex and multifaceted than such an approach can address. As the face of poverty has continued to include more children, the nation's free and reduced lunch program has expanded. Most recently, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act states that schools must register 95% of the free/reduced meal eligible children by 2013 (USDA.gov, 2010). In March of 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture went a step further and initiated a pilot, titled *The Community Eligible Option*, which offers free breakfast and lunch to every student in high poverty schools in several high needs states (i.e., Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, and Tennessee) with the possibility of expanding to other states in the following year (USDA, 2011). Based on these facts, many might assume that our country is right on track and is committed to meeting the needs of the economically disadvantaged. The unfortunate truth, however, is that the current condition of economically disadvantaged students in America is still very bleak and cannot be easily eradicated by the means of merely providing free meals to children. Free meals alone are not enough to stave off the devastating impact of poverty. Poverty impacts every aspect of the present and future lives of everyone–especially children.

Statement of the Problem

The time for change is now. We can no longer wait to address the devastating effects of poverty. Additionally, solutions must be discovered and brought forward that can serve to break the cycle of poverty. In particular, such solutions will be rooted in the education of youth, by insuring that they are prepared with the necessary skills to be successful in this global society. Given today's Information and iTechnology age, our

students must be able to compete, collaborate, create, and construct solutions with people from around the world. Such interaction represents, for our students, collaboration with diverse individuals who are members of the most intellectual and diverse societies that have ever existed in the world at any one time.

Since, as the axiom states, "knowledge is power", the educational achievement of economically disadvantaged children in America is proving to be the most critical national security issue of our time. Moreover, a large-scale lack of academic student success could seriously threaten the very foundation of our civil rights. Our students, therefore, must be able to excel and compete in the global society.

Educating the poor is not a unique endeavor within America. In Vivian Stewart's latest book, titled *A World Class Education – Learning from International Models of Excellence and Innovation*, she states what most of us already recognize and acknowledge: "We don't need an international assessment to tell us that many of our schools are not doing well; we have plenty of our own testing to tell us that" (Stewart, 2012, p. 2). However, when this decline in scores and outcomes is attributed to the fact that America educates every child–even those students who are living in poverty–we rationalize that our low student achievement is due to many other countries having a more rigid selection process for educating students. Many countries have qualifying exams that, in essence, divide students into professional and vocational tracks. These exams, contrary to popular thought, do not exclude students in poverty. As the following quote demonstrates, further examination of Stewart's text (2012) quickly dispels our old myth of rationalization regarding the probable educational achievement of students in poverty with global comparisons:

In every country, students from higher income backgrounds achieve at higher levels than lower-income students. The United States has a highly unequal income distribution; this is certainly a factor in U. S. performance. However, even America's most affluent students do not do as well as affluent students in other industrialized nations. Also, while the United States does not have a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students than many other countries, the socio-economic differences translate more strongly into student performance. In other words, the educational policies and practices of other countries do a more effective job of supporting lower income students and equalizing educational opportunities. (p. 25-26)

Simply stated, America must prove to be more effective at educating students who are economically disadvantaged. With this effort in mind, Darling-Hammond and Wood (2008) stated, "While other countries are making strategic investments that have transformed schooling and produced results, we have demanded results without transforming schooling" (p. 2). Hence, the process of insuring educational success for economically disadvantaged students must improve. The process of improvement must begin in the early years and manifest itself in the first major educational milestone for students–that is, high school completion.

While legislators and educators across the country give differing results for graduation rates based on their own mathematics and state calculation configurations, America is still not adequately ensuring that all students, especially economically disadvantaged students, achieve and at least complete high school on time within four

years. Reaching high school completion is particularly elusive for the economically
disadvantaged student because of the societal and institutional barriers many of those
students may face. This adversity demands a transformation of the American high
school, which arguably remains rooted in defunct and antiquated systems of operation–a
notion that is troubling given the rapid changes within both our sociological and
technological environments.

As mentioned above, the seriousness of this issue necessitates the direct
involvement from the highest office in our nation. President Barack Obama understands
that one of the strongest predictors of student success in school has long been family
income and parents' education level. Since the beginning of his presidency, he has
continually sparked conversation around the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind
(March 10, 2010) so that schools and school districts can better support all students'
academic achievement, rather than becoming preoccupied with accountability numbers
games merely to meet state and federal requirements. Thus, his goal is to ensure that all
students have access to a high-quality, world class education, and he knows that school
leaders must drive the impetus for such change to occur. In our nation's increasingly dire
situation, which sees school children growing needier and needier by the moment, there
is no longer any room for our educational leaders to be exclusively guided and comforted
by mere "number strategies".

In comparison to the one-in-five rate of children living in poverty at the national
level, Texas has more economically disadvantaged children than most states, with one-in-
four children living in poverty. According to Children at Risk 2012:

Poverty is one of the greatest threats to a child's wellbeing. Families in need of financial resources find it difficult to provide necessities, such as adequate housing and health care, nutritious meals, and other essentials, for children to grow and thrive into healthy and productive adults. The percentage of Texas children living in poverty increased from 23.1% in 2008 to 25.6% in 2009, higher than the national percentage of 20.7% among all children in the U.S. in 2009. ………..In 2009, 50.6% of children in Texas were living in low-income families, compared to 42.2% nationally. (The Future of Texas, 2012, p. 4, para. 1-2)

More specifically, Harris County, the most populated county in the state of Texas, has more children living in poverty than adults, with 27.1% of children under five currently living below the federal poverty line. Unfortunately, these economic statistics repeat themselves throughout our state.

According to the most recent 2012 Kids Count Data Book and 23rd Annual report, in Texas:

- More than 600,000 Texas children have at least one unemployed parent who is looking for work;

- One of every four Texas preschoolers is not read to regularly, putting Texas last in the country; and

- Texas has the highest percentage of low-wage jobs in the country.

The 23rd annual KIDS COUNT Data Book profiles the status of children on a national and state-by-state basis. In addition, Texas ranked in the bottom third (35th) of all other states (KIDS COUNT, 2012).

Consideration of these grim statistics should give us pause and imbue each and every one of us with a sense of urgency regarding our nation's need for a high-quality education that caters to economically disadvantaged children. There must be supportive efforts targeted at the secondary learner that build resiliency in them for a hopeful future. Again, a critical period for students lies at the beginning of their completion of high school.

As leaders of their schools, it is important that principals realize the importance of their decisions that create positive differences for economically disadvantaged children in their schools. Furthermore, it is their duty to understand the multifaceted ways in which those families and children struggling with poverty interact with school systems. As economically disadvantaged children are fast becoming the majority population in school after school, determining effective ways to engage them in learning to make high school completion and college possible for every student is a necessary expectation.

Current research findings indicate that millions of children are born into poverty and at least half of those students grow up to be persistently poor. The lack of high school completion for the parents of these students replicates itself in their offspring without the intervention from schools and in particular school leaders with the courage and conviction to help break the continuous spiral of poverty. Children who are born poor and are persistently poor are significantly more likely to be poor as adults, drop out of high school, have teen premarital births, and have patchy employment records than those not poor at birth (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative that the impetus for change be made through education so that the youth of America have the necessary life skills and desire for continued knowledge to break the cycle of poverty for

their family in their own lifetime. Ensuring that every student–especially every

economically disadvantaged student–has the opportunity to attain at least a high school

diploma must remain a national priority.

Purpose of the Study

The sophisticated decision making required at the school leadership level requires

the ability of leaders to solve complex situations within constantly changing parameters.

The leadership preparation of the past has not prepared today's principals with the

necessary skill set for success–especially for those principals of schools (sometimes

referred to as "Turnaround" schools) with a large percentage of students living in

poverty. Principals of these schools often have little experience with the population that

they serve and often trust the "one size fits all" textbook approach to leadership

dilemmas.

In the following statement, the Wallace Foundation (2007) summarily outlines the

challenge that lies at the feet of the school leader with regard to underperforming schools

and poverty:

> Our nation's underperforming schools and children are unlikely to succeed
>
> until we get serious about leadership. As much as anyone in public
>
> education, it is the principal who is in a position to ensure that good
>
> teaching and learning spreads beyond single classrooms, and that
>
> ineffective practices aren't simply allowed to fester. Clearly, the quality
>
> of training that principals receive before they assume their positions and
>
> the continuing professional development they get once they are hired and

throughout their careers has a lot to do with whether school leaders can

meet the increasingly tough expectations of these jobs. (p. 5)

Schools leaders are not exempt from finding solutions that will academically engage

students living in poverty, especially in our urban areas where the percentage of the

economically disadvantaged grows at astronomical proportions.

Upon the announcement of his presidency, Barack H. Obama stated the following

comment that clearly highlights the reality of poverty within our schools and

communities:

What's most overwhelming about urban poverty is that it's so difficult to

escape – it's so isolating and it's everywhere. . . . Your school isn't likely

to have the right books or the best teachers. You're more likely to

encounter gang activities than after school activities. And if you can't find

a job because the most successful businessman in your neighborhood is a

drug dealer, you're more likely to join that gang yourself. Opportunity is

scarce, role models are few, and there is little contact with the normalcy of

life outside those streets. (Remarks in Washington, DC, 2013, para. 22)

Unfortunately, a large number of educators across our state and across our nation

have all but given up on making a real difference and accept what Baptist and Rehmann

(2011) dubbed as the "pedagogy of the economically disadvantaged", which is essentially

defined by low expectations and low achievement. This pedagogy is not based on actual

facts, nor does it serve the educator or student well. Rather, it represents a stereotype that

must be eradicated. High achievement cannot flourish nor can achievement goals be

reached in such an educational atmosphere. Students, especially those struggling with the

binds of poverty, lose hope and cease to persist if they are not held to high expectations and given access to opportunities. This is most noticeable at the high school level where high school completion is the necessary rite of passage for all students.

So many students can live on the fringes, and without proper support, they can become marginalized in our society. Likewise, many educators, who do not have the background of living in poverty, can take this as natural behavior and make assumptions that define limits for these students which often become self-fulfilling prophecies of disengagement and disappointment. This miscommunication and misdiagnosis is often at the heart of much of the student failure for economically disadvantaged students. "The classroom atmosphere, created by constant teacher direction and student compliance, seethes with passive resentment that frequently bubbles up into overt resistance.

With this phenomenon in mind, Haberman (2004) states that:

Teachers burn out because of the emotional and physical energy that they must expend to maintain their authority every hour of every day. The pedagogy of poverty requires that teachers, who begin their careers with the self-perception that they are helpers, models, guides, stimulators, and caring sources of encouragement, transform themselves into directive authoritarians in order to function in urban schools. (p. 50)

School leaders must not allow their schools to embrace low expectations for economically disadvantaged students and actualize a transformation of high expectations for all students. According to the Center for Public Education, a project of the Alexandria, Virginia, based National School Boards Association, "Principals have an effect estimated second only to that of teachers, with the biggest impact found in the

elementary schools and in high minority-high poverty schools" (Seashore-Louis, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., Michlin, M., Gordon, M., Thomas, E., Leithwood, K., Anderson, S. E., Mascall, B., Strauss, T., & Moore, S., 2010, p. 9). High school principals in most contexts also select their teachers, which also accounts for their increased and significant effect on student achievement.

A great deal of literature has been published that serves as a playbook for today's principals; yet, the complex job of today's school leaders cannot be relegated to a standard text or checklist. The collective literature cites today's school leader as having a job that is a dilemma and a challenge; that sees leaders as being quiet, out of the box, servants, or as having leverage; and, sees leadership as having lessons, laws, being tribal, warrior, spiritual, transformational, situational, and finally, balanced. School leaders cannot be all of these things at once, but effective leaders are needed to insure success for all students in today's schools. Further, school leaders with a conviction and a commitment to equity are especially necessary for those schools with urban or high poverty populations.

In response to the growing need for effective principals for today's high poverty schools on a national scale, both the Race to the Top and the NCLB waiver process address effective principal leadership in their application process criteria, as well as strategies to increase school success for economically disadvantaged students. The U.S. Department of Education has shown interest in encouraging states to implement reforms in principal preparation, support, and evaluation to focus on leadership success strategies with the growing percentages of students in poverty

Today's principals must take the lead in dispelling the pedagogy of the economically disadvantaged and, by their actions, create learning environments that can change the future for all students. During his presentation at the 2006 TED Conference, noted international education expert, Sir Ken Robinson stated that:

We have been trying to meet the future by doing what we did in the past, and on the way we have been alienating millions of kids who don't see any purpose in going to school. Minority and those students living in poverty are not playing the game. They are dropping out. (Robinson, 2006)

Principals must recognize factors that can cause students to become disengaged from school and create strategies that decrease the likelihood that students will drop out before completing high school. Access and opportunity prove to be essential keys to success. Successful school completion is dependent on student engagement and dropping out of school is a process of disengagement from school and the learning that occurs over many years (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godberg, 2001). Dropping out of school is a problem that educators, legislators, and those in local business communities have acknowledged, yet have found no absolute remedies.

In June 2012, The College Board set out 857 student desks around the Washington Monument. Each desk represented one of the 857 students who drop out of high school in the United States every single hour, every single school day, according to the College Board, which arranged the display to underline its effort to urge presidential candidates to put education at the top of their to-do lists. The board had nearly a dozen people, iPads in hand, gathering signatures in nearly 100-degree weather for their online

petition that stated: "If you want my support, I need to hear more from you about how you plan to fix the problems with education" (Emmanuel, 2012).

This study seeks to add to the body of knowledge regarding principal leadership institutional process practices that positively impact the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students. Moving from research and acquired knowledge (often called declarative knowledge) to what high school leaders in one school district actually do to increase the completion rates for these students will provide guidance to other educators on decisions regarding practices that engage students and increase high school completion in lieu of dropping out of school.

Present and Future Significance of the Study

The passion for making a difference with students has translated into seeking solutions through principal leadership for students and for schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students - students who are part of the free or reduced lunch program. Varied experiences have deepened a leader's desire to articulate the need to fill the gap in the research by examining the leadership skills necessary to open doors of opportunity for all students, but especially economically disadvantaged students during their critical secondary school years. School leaders must understand the impact that principal decisions have on positively affecting the institutional processes that could be implemented to increase achievement for all students, but especially for those students living in poverty. The focus for school principals must be on increasing achievement by engaging students in learning and transforming the schoolhouse to better meet the needs of these students.

While many adults viewed low achievement as an "ethnic issue" and a reason for maintaining segregation, the true issue is that it is not skin color, but rather more of an economic issue – one of lack of access, experiences, and opportunity which manifested itself in low academic performance of economically disadvantaged students. Economically disadvantaged students have two major foundations – home and school. Because of their circumstance, home is often dysfunctional and chaotic. That means that for most students, school is the most stable environment in their lives and the place that provides the most opportunity for their future. Unfortunately, many of the standards of school are not replicated at home for the economically disadvantaged student so it is the school, and in particular, the school leader who must design institutional processes and practices that support and engage the economically disadvantaged learner. As school leaders, we must help our students see that success is possible for them and that their success is not only possible, but expected.

This conviction must be held by all educational leaders if we are to dispel the myth that ignorance and low academic performance necessarily tracks with skin tone or economic level. Dispelling this myth removes ethnicity and economics as an excuse or reason for low expectations. This study is designed to confront the myth head-on and to impart knowledge to others who may not have been trained in the framework that high achievement is possible for economically disadvantaged students who are given appropriate academic and social supports. Such a framework can empower courageous principals to help economically disadvantaged students gain access to opportunities that will enable them to reach their full potential.

Principals of high poverty schools at the secondary level can meet state and national criteria for academic performance. This study examines leadership decisions that create institutional processes that have a positive impact for all students, especially for economically disadvantaged students. The ideas presented in this study are worthy of intense discussion and are timely in light of the current educational crisis in our country.

Summary of the Study

In the state of Texas, as public schools strive to meet the needs of all students and prepare them for the global society of our present and their future, it is critical that principals are equipped to make decisions that positively impact the students in their charge. In particular, high school completion is the first of many stepping stones to success. Without this critical step, students are destined to lose many other options except to continue the cycle of poverty in which they currently live. School leaders are the primary educators in the driver's seat that can, ultimately, create a true difference for students. This can be accomplished through the decisions they make to structure their schools in such ways that increasingly meets the needs of all students, and that especially provides options for children living in poverty.

In one of the fastest growing districts in Harris County, the school community has transitioned from a mono-culture German settlement to a diverse urban/suburban setting in less than twenty years. The school district of interest here has also increased the percentage of students living in poverty every year and has a current poverty rate of just over 72% (and growing) in 2013. As reflected within districts and states across the nation, maintaining and increasing academic achievement is a continual challenge within this particular district as well. Principals in this district must seek solutions now in order

to address the needs of their largest growing population–namely, children living in poverty. Knowing this, the district of study allows their high school principals many areas of autonomy in decision making.

The decisions principals make regarding campus implementations can have a positive impact for all students, but especially economically disadvantaged students. Without the academic success of these students, educators are rendered nearly powerless in assisting them in breaking the cycle of poverty in their lives. More specifically, if such a dismal scenario continues to occur, our public schools will have failed in their fundamental mission of transformation to meet the needs of the students they serve.

Research Questions

Principal decisions in this study are those processes and practices that are autonomously decided upon by the principal with full authority from the district. The following research questions were used to guide the completion of this study:

1. What are the principal leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that positively impact student completion rates in high poverty schools?

2. What are the relationships between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty schools and high school completion rates with their cohort?

3. What are the emerging leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that increase the completion rate in high poverty high schools?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions and clarifications apply:

Institutional Processes: For the purpose of this study are those initiatives, strategies, programs, and implementations that are in practice at schools identified in Chapter 3 as School A, School B, and School C.

Completion Rate: This is the term that the state of Texas uses to determine a school's accountability rating, and represents the percentage of students who graduate four years after entering high school (including those who come back for a fifth year of high school). The state changed the definition of completion rate so that students who earned a GED could no longer be counted as "completers".

Graduation Rate: This term represents the percentage of students who graduate four years after entering high school. The completion and graduation rates are perhaps the single most important indicators of a school's success.

Dropout Rates: Dropouts are defined as individuals ages 16 – 24 that are not enrolled in and have not completed high school. The "dropout rate" is the percentage of students who fail to obtain a high school diploma. These are students who disappear from a school's enrollment and do not enter another educational institution.

Economically Disadvantaged Student: For the purposes of this study, economically disadvantaged students are those students who qualify for the national free or reduced lunch program.

High Poverty School: For the purposes of this study, a high poverty school meets the federal standard for a Title I school having at least 40% of the student enrollment who are economically disadvantaged.

School Leader: For the purposes of this study, the school leader is the principal.

Declarative Knowledge: For the purposes of this study, declarative knowledge is the information that principals claim to know through coursework, staff development or other types of professional learning.

Procedural Knowledge: For the purposes of this study, procedural knowledge is that information about what the principal actually knows how to do, as supported by their personal declarative knowledge and experiences. This type of knowledge leads to decisions, implementations and results.

Distributed Leadership: This term represents a leadership style that engages many people, such as school administrators, teachers, parents and community members, in making school-based decisions.

Transformational Leadership: This term represents a theory of leadership that involves shaping and sharing a vision, as well as inspiring those within an organization to perform at their highest levels by appealing to their sense of morality, passion and enthusiasm for a common cause.

Social Justice Leadership: This term represents a theory of leadership that focuses a school's individual members on transforming the culture, curriculum, atmosphere and school-wide priorities in order to benefit students who struggle (and those who are often marginalized in a large system) – namely, students of color, low socio-economic levels, etc.

Limitations of the Study

The following are limitations of the study:

- The study purposefully included only three principals in one school district.

- The condition of the timing and atmosphere of principal interviews will be planned to be identical, but variations may have impact on principal responses.

- The study will be limited by the principal's knowledge of the processes, programs and activities implemented in their school.

Assumptions of the Study

The following are assumptions of the study:

- Principal responses will be assumed to accurate.

Delimitations of the Study

The study included the following delimitations:

- The identified principal must have served as a campus administrator at an identified campus of study for a minimum of the three school years.

- The identified principal must have served as a campus administrator at the secondary level for at least three years.

- The school population must have over 40% of students who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Poverty has an impact on people more than we can truly imagine or fully comprehend. As a direct result of poverty, many people have multiple stressors or risk factors that can affect their success throughout their life. According to Jensen (2009), these risk factors include emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and family issues. For most students, poverty and the symptoms of it are considered the primary at-risk factors to student achievement. The external and internal symptoms related to poverty are considered some of the foundational reasons why many students drop out and fail to complete school (Leroy & Symes, 2001).

In 2000, for instance, young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 % of all family incomes were six times as likely as their peers from families in the top 20 % of the income distribution to drop out of high school. Currently, over one-third of our young people nationwide are dropping out of school; yet, statistics show that economically disadvantaged students in America continue to drop out in epidemic proportions. The sad reality is that graduating from high school is neither a dream, goal, or reality for millions of economically disadvantaged American youth today.

The effects of the continual stress of living in poverty can become almost insurmountable for most students. Indeed, children living in poverty experience significantly greater chronic stress than do their more affluent counterparts (Almeida, Banks, Neupert, & Serido, 2005). Many of these students cease to persist and just drop out of school to ease the pain. In response to this dropout crisis, the Fiscal Year 2010

budget request of the Obama administration proposed a $50 million High School Graduation Initiative to promote innovative strategies for increasing high school graduation rates.

President Obama also pledged to tackle the dropout rate of American high school students, and identified the cure to the high school dropout rate an economic imperative if the United States intended to remain competitive in the global society. In his now notable Race to the Top address, President Obama (2009) specifically stated:

> We know that the success of every American will be tied more closely than ever before to the level of education that they achieve...The jobs will go to the people with the knowledge and the skills to do them. It's just that simple.

The financial benefit that this legislation has provided has proven, by far, to be the largest pot of discretionary funding for K-12 education reform in the history of the United States in an effort to improve the condition of learning for all students in America's public schools.

An appropriate response from school leaders regarding the dropout epidemic is to create school environments that meet the needs of students so that they do persist to high school completion and beyond. This involves transforming the institutional processes and practices of the American high school. Moreover, it involves attaching real faces to the wide array of numbers of students who disengage from our schools. Lastly, it involves our realization and understanding that their lost potential affects all of us.

Each of these actions will, subsequently, raise the level of urgency necessary in order to transform learning and to make sure that all students have the opportunity to

achieve. School leaders must accept the wakeup call from today's students that new practices and processes are needed to engage them. Today's students have more needs than ever before, which can be seriously amplified by the effects of poverty. One significant and initial challenge is to transition students appropriately into our schools. Then, the next challenge entails keeping them there until they have achieved high school completion. Dropping out is the largest barrier to high school completion, especially for economically disadvantaged students. An examination of this barrier will provide insight for school leaders.

The State of Affairs

In 2011, as the dropout rate continued to increase, the most chilling realization about American students in public schools was that students across our nation were choosing to become a dropout every eight seconds. Indeed, nearly one million teenagers stop going to school every single year and over 40 million Americans have never graduated from high school in the U.S. The impact of the decision to drop out has lifelong repercussions for the individual who drops out, as well as for our nation as a whole.

The following statistics, offered by the American Council on Education (2011) are even more devastating:

- The unemployment rate for people without a high school diploma is nearly twice that of the general population;

- Over a lifetime, a high school dropout will earn $200,000 less than a high school graduate and almost $1 million less than a college graduate;

- Dropouts are more likely to commit crimes, abuse drugs and alcohol, become teenage parents, live in poverty and commit suicide; and

- Dropouts cost federal and state governments hundreds of billions of dollars in lost earnings, welfare and medical costs, and billions more for dropouts who end up in prison.

Furthermore, other factors were found in at least two data sources to significantly impact dropout rates at the high school level. Three of these four factors are individual in nature and include the following: low achievement, retention/over-age for grade, and economically disadvantaged attendance. The fourth factor found to be the most significant across grade levels was the family factor of low socioeconomic status (SES) or families living in poverty. Family SES level has been tied in numerous studies to other educational outcomes at all stages of a student's school career and its appearance at all levels in predicting dropout is consistent with this pattern (Hammond, Smink, & Drew, May, 2007).

The research also demonstrates that poverty takes a toll on students, especially over the long-term. Periodically, many students may face multiple barriers to success, but economically disadvantaged students often face an entire climate of discouragement on top of their economic barriers. Even high school personnel may inhibit otherwise qualified students from their continued personal progress because of low expectations and stereotyping. The practice of building capacity and specific supports for economically disadvantaged students, while simultaneously developing their teachers, so that increased student achievement and on time graduation are the results, is a state and national imperative that cannot be ignored.

School leaders must address the needs of each and every one of their students. If students from poverty are to depend on schools to be "safe places" that can change their future, the school leader must make decisions that can create an atmosphere of encouragement, opportunity, and support, which are foundational to success. In *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk – 7 Principles*, Neuman (2009) states that "studies confirm that it is no longer a question of whether the environment matters. It matters – greatly." She also acknowledges that research and practice show that educators and policy makers may still not understand how devastating the effects of poverty are on children. For instance, she cites seven essential principles which break the cycle of poverty, and she questions the nation's response to schools with high percentages of students in poverty through an important question–namely, are we responding with sanctions or support? (Neuman, 2009)

Susan Neuman participated in a discussion at the University of Michigan which outlined the seven principles:

- Actively target the neediest when developing federal programming;
- Provide services early in children's lives as it is easier to prevent problems than remediate them;
- Emphasize coordinated services, especially as it relates to meeting children's health needs;
- Focus on boosting academic achievement through compensatory high-quality instruction;
- Ensure instruction is delivered by trained professionals, not volunteers or aides;

- Acknowledge that intensity matters, defending against dilution of program quality; and

- Hold programs accountable, conduct rigorous assessments, and change course as needed. (Changing the Odds for Children at Risk, 2009, p. 26)

Current research also shows that poverty impacts the socio-emotional health of students. In many cases, the stressors of being in poverty are brought directly into the schoolhouse. This phenomenon can manifest itself in poor student behavior, lack of engagement, absenteeism, and learning disabilities. It can also be displayed through risky behaviors, when disengagement from learning takes the place of resiliency for many of these students. Economically disadvantaged students may have chaotic home lives and changing environments throughout their lives. They depend on the structures within the school to be the primary source of stability in their lives. The focus of schools, therefore, should be on creating supportive and engaging learning environments so that students can reach their highest potential. This can only occur when school leaders realize that the socio-emotional elements of schooling are just as important as academic instruction–especially for the economically disadvantaged student.

In fact, the supportive culture which schools can develop is critical to the success of all students. School culture affects everything that happens in a school, including student achievement (Wagner, 2006). School leaders must have a vision of what they want for the climate of their school and insure that their vision is renewed day by day. Additionally, particularly for students who are economically disadvantaged, a consistent and positive school culture can help them overcome personal barriers. According to associate professor emeritus of educational leadership at the University of West Georgia,

Clete Bulach, a school's climate "is probably the best predictor of whether a school will have high achievement"—more so than the socioeconomic status of students or the its past levels of achievement (as cited in Stover, 2005, p. 30).

Nevertheless, much past research on school culture and climate has focused on students or teachers. More recently, however, the focus has shifted toward the school principal who is the educator with the power to build capacity for the design of learning environments which support student success. Economically disadvantaged students, who often live in chaotic environments, need the constructs of a healthy and stable school climate in order to persist to high school completion. Many economically disadvantaged students, as well as the high poverty high schools they attend, have to overcome the effects of poverty through careful planning, effective leadership, and the combined efforts of administrators, teachers, parents, students, and staff (Harris, 2007).

American education is indeed in a state of flux as we transform from an industrial model to the information age. Knowledge and the ability to continually acquire new knowledge is the new global currency. Rather than schools being merely responsible for exposing students to information, today's schools are more results oriented and accountable for the educational outcomes of that endeavor to instill in students. Now more than ever, schools are being judged and supported based on their results while at the same time being expected to educate the most diverse and highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the history of our country. Despite all this, schools are expected to prepare students for the rising standards and requirements of the global workplace. With this new and demanding context in mind, our collective definition of a "school" must fundamentally change so that this progress can occur.

Each year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) releases a report on important education developments and trends in the U.S. In 2010, due to the growth in the percentage of students living in poverty, the NCES included a special section in its report on high-poverty schools for the very first time in its existence. Within this particular publication, using the percentage of students who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program's free or reduced-price lunch as its poverty measure, NCES reported that nearly one-fifth of all public schools in the U.S., including nearly 10 % of public high schools, educate students from high-poverty homes.

The famous Equality of Educational Opportunity Report, commonly known as *The Coleman Report*, documented the issue of the education of economically disadvantaged students in 1966 as a federal response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. New research by Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University has traced the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families over the last 50 years and finds that the achievement gap between rich and poor students now exceeds the black/white ethnicity achievement gap.

As national standards continue to rise, global expectations mount, and the needs of our school populations increase, educators must search within themselves in order to develop a level of expertise that will be effective with all students. Leading educators through this uncharted territory requires a different type of school leader than has been seen in the past. The school principal must have the courage to do what has not been done in prior decades, and that is to transform education and the American high school in particular, to meet the needs of students.

Focus on the Principal

The practice and theory of principal leadership (also generally referred to as the "principalship") has long been a topic of educational study. For example, in his seminal work titled *Leadership*, Burns (1978) declared a great crisis in leadership. Burns moves from the historical study of great leaders to one of the most important works about what leadership really is and how it operates in our lives. Leadership is defined within this piece as moving from transactional to transformation. Burns believes that the best leaders are those who inspire others to come together toward the achievement of higher aims. In addition, the themes of power and purpose are the essential elements of a true leader. Moral leadership is also examined in this philosophical view of leadership.

Burns' transformational leadership has great implications for school leaders. In the following explanation, he outlines and describes the tenets of this form of leadership:

Such leadership occurs when one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Their purposes, which might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused. Power bases are linked not as counterweights but as mutual support for common purpose. . . . The relationship can be moralistic, of course. But transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and has transforming effect on both. (Burns, 1978, p. 20)

Tracing the many stages of school leadership theory over the past decades from the "Great Man Theory" to "Trait Theory" to "Transactional Theory" to the Leadership

and School Success Theory, and in more recent years, the "Situational Leadership

Theory" of Hersey and Blanchard (1982), and the Transformational Leadership Theory of

Bennis and Nanus (1997) highlights the fact that leadership does make a difference. The

many theories of school leadership that have been developed have helped school leaders

understand their roles and responsibilities in the greater context of the organization.

Situational leadership maintains that instead of using just one style, successful

leaders can change their leadership styles based on the maturity of the people they are

leading and the details of the task. Leaders are to be able to place more or less emphasis

on the task, and more or less emphasis on the relationships with the people they are

leading, depending on what is needed to get the job done successfully.

According to Hersey and Blanchard, the four main leadership styles are as

follows:

- *Telling (S1)* – Leaders tell their people exactly what to do, and how to do it.

- *Selling (S2)* – Leaders still provide information and direction, but there is
  more communication with followers. Leaders "sell" their message to get the
  team on board.

- *Participating (S3)* – Leaders focus more on the relationship and less on
  direction. The leader works with the team, and shares decision-making
  responsibilities.

- *Delegating (S4)* – Leaders pass most of the responsibility onto the follower
  or group. The leaders still monitor progress, but they are less involved in
  decisions.

This theory continues by matching the leadership style to the maturity level of the person or group being led. In addition, maturity is divided into four different levels. The school leader must be able to accurately match maturity levels to the appropriate leadership style, which is certainly not an exact, fixed science.

Blanchard (2007) has continued to research and study leadership and his latest work, *Leading at a Higher Level*, wherein he translates decades of research related to leadership and 25 years of experience into simple, practical, and powerful strategies to equip leaders at every level to build organizations that go beyond simply producing the necessary results to become high performing organizations (HPOs). Specifically, Blanchard (2007) states, "While it makes perfect sense to us to set our focus first on setting your sights on the right target and vision, it makes more sense for you to start with having the right leadership."

Kouzes and Posner (2002) have completed extensive research that was summarized in a work titled *The Leadership Challenge*. In particular, their study describes five aspects of effective transformational leadership. These distinct categories can be described as:

1. *Model the Way* refers to leading by example; exemplary leaders motivate followers by setting the example through direct involvement in the organization's mission.

2. *Inspire a Shared Vision* means the leader is able to formulate, verbalize, and create enthusiasm for a vision of the organization. To create a desire to strive for the organization's goals, the leader must motivate the followers by relating to their personal goals and ambitions.

3. ***Challenge the Process*** is the leader's ability to look for and choose innovative ways to improve the organization. The leader must study the organization and its people to determine the best course of improvement to lead the organization to become more.

4. ***Enable Others to Act*** is the leader's ability to create teamwork and trust and to empower followers to work toward the organization's goals.

5. ***Encourage the Heart Leadership and School Success*** refers to the leader's resilience to keep motivating and encouraging the followers through the exhaustion and frustration that often occurs with change.

(Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 13)

Ron Edmonds (1979) wrote, "Urban schools that teach economically disadvantaged children successfully have strong leadership and a climate of expectation that children will learn" (p. 15). As leader of the school, the principal is undeniably the most important and influential individual in the school (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Today's school principals must make appropriate decisions that serve to increase student achievement; that are based on a variety of theories of both teaching and learning; and, that react to the ever-present changes in student populations, as well as provide access for the utilization of new technologies in a more personalized and progressive manner. In fact, the appropriate decisions and continuous support–or lack thereof–on the part of the principal can make or break a school. Even considering this knowledge, research on the leadership skills of principals often comes from varied perspectives and reveals no single characteristic or set of characteristics which absolutely guarantee success.

Research shows that effective principals must possess a complex skill set. And, as an essential component of this skill set, the principal's core values and beliefs must serve as the major influencer of leadership-based decision making. This statement is true even of the least effective principals. The foundation of decision making for school leaders lies within the intrinsic core values and beliefs of the principal. There also appears to be a disparity between principals' declarative and procedural knowledge. For example, what they know they *should* do and what they *actually* do are often quite different, especially when the school leader lacks the confidence to implement change or the courage to face the adversity of a decision.

Principals of high schools with increasing percentages of economically disadvantaged students must know that their students depend on the core values and beliefs of the principal in a more heightened sense than do schools with students who are more advantaged. In her book, *The Pedagogy of Confidence*, author Yvette Jackson (2011) states:

> We cannot change the out-of-school conditions, but we can consider the way we judge, penalize, and design practices and structures to respond to the behaviors and achievements of these students. We ardently need to believe in their intellectual capacity as well as have confidence in our own ability to inspire that capacity. (p. 52)

Whether it is the ability to access time and materials, support risk taking in the classroom, or embrace capacity building, the principal must understand that she or he is the foundational support for the school, and that their decisions must be made in the best interest of students. It is imperative that the school leader not only have a vision but also

be morally dedicated to the high quality achievement for all students, including those who are economically disadvantaged.

Even in spite of the demands of increased accountability, our nation's schools must have leaders with the moral compass as well as the ability to make the complex decisions necessary to save the economically disadvantaged youth of America. In today's heightened accountability culture, school leaders must be counted on to operate within a social justice framework at the core of their beliefs to ensure equitable education for all students. Economically disadvantaged students need much more from school leadership than to feel that they are just a percentage of a school's standardized test score. Hull (2010) says, "Research clearly shows that principals are a key ingredient in the performance of their school, especially if that school enrolls a large number of low performing and/or economically disadvantaged and minority students."

High poverty schools, therefore, must have effective principals. A study conducted by the Wallace Foundation, which has been examining principal effectiveness for over a decade, revealed that (in general) schools with highly effective principals:

- Perform 5-to-10 percentage points higher than if they were led by an average principal (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003);

   Have fewer student and teacher absences (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003);

- Have effective teachers stay longer (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011; Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Portin et al., 2003);

- Typically replace ineffective teachers with more effective teachers (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011; Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Portin et al., 2003);

- Have principals who are more likely to stay for at least three years (Branch, Hanushek; & Rivkin, 2012); and

- Have principals who have at least three years of experience at that school (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012).

Principals are expected to continually increase student learning in the midst of increasing accountability with the largest percentage of economically disadvantaged students who are often the least prepared for learning. Moreover, under the current state and federal accountability systems, schools are accountable statistically for every student who is unsuccessful or drops out (sometimes multiple times). This policy remains in federal accountability provisions under No Child Left Behind. Under the new rule, which took effect in the 2011-12 school year, schools that accept students who have previously dropped out will not be penalized statistically if they drop out again.

Today's high school principals quickly realize that they cannot do it all, nor can they do it the way it has always been done. National education governmental agencies sought, first, to resolve this leadership skill gap by changing leaders in high-poverty low-performing schools as an initial act of school improvement. However, these actions have not proved effective in many cases. In fact, due to unplanned principal turnover, there are often negative effects including disruption or cancellation of programs, increased student disengagement, arbitrary tracking of students, and lack of personalization for student achievement in high poverty high schools. Frequently replacing principals often

creates instability in schools, which can potentially undermine the system's overall improvement efforts (Dillon, 2011).

Combining that fact along with the percentage of school leaders of high performing high poverty schools who do not intend to remain at the campus in the first place, leaves scores of economically disadvantaged students at peril for a disjointed education. Many schools—particularly those with disadvantaged student populations—face high rates of principal turnover that are driven, at least in part, by the principal's desires to move to schools that they find more appealing and less challenging (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng, 2010). Additionally, student achievement is directly affected by the leaders of schools, whether they are a new principal to a school or a new to the profession principal. The best correlation for positive results is between high poverty schools and experienced principals with a multifaceted skill set.

Consistent success in working with students and parents from poverty can be professionally draining. Thus, the ongoing support for principals of high poverty schools is critical. Effective practices are beginning to emerge that include the distributive leadership approach to assist school principals in more effectively transforming their high school (Spillane, 2006). What we do know is this: There is a "knowing and doing gap" in leadership due to the enormity of the position, with its shifting landscape of real student learning and accountability. The lack of implementation of effective institutional processes that increase student achievement is disastrous for students, especially for students who may already feel marginalized because of their economic status and experience with multiple barriers to their success. Schools must be transformed and principals must possess the necessary skill set to lead this transformation. Lastly, Wolk

(2011) states, "The existing high school model was not designed to meet the needs and challenges of the new century. We are blaming it (high school) for not doing what it was never intended to do" (p. 96).

Business Influence on Leadership

In his recent book, titled *Class Warfare,* Stephen Brill (2011) accentuates the urgent need to fix America's schools and make true achievement possible for all students, especially economically disadvantaged students in America. The book details how business and government have joined educators with a heightened sense of urgency to solve the dropout crisis (Brill, 2011).

In the mad race to produce results, schools and school districts have had to answer to the worlds of business and the workforce regarding their efforts to ensure that students complete high school ready for college or career. Colleges state that most economically disadvantaged students do not complete high school and the positions that require less than a high school diploma are increasingly rare. Moreover, for those in poverty who do graduate and aspire to college, many often lack the rigor in their education and are relegated to remedial college courses. And, within these courses, unfortunately, these same students become part of a disengagement cycle and drop out of college.

For high school graduates that state their desire to enter the military, the data is just as dire. The latest Department of Defense Report measures demonstrate the following:

> 75 percent of American young people are not qualified to join the armed services because of a failure to graduate from high school, physical obstacles (such as obesity), or criminal records. Schools are not directly

responsible for obesity and crime, but the lack of academic preparation is troubling: among recent high school graduates who *are* eligible to apply, 30 percent score too low on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery to even be recruited. (Department of Defense, n.d.)

Thus, it is not hard to imagine that the very role of higher level education, which has produced today's principal pools, is not always perceived as doing the most effective job of producing today's school leaders. This view is especially true given the fact that many students continue to fail to graduate or graduate still needing extensive remediation in college. Businesses reviewed school leadership credentials and found that many principals across the nation had graduated from educational leadership preparation programs without experiencing the shifting landscapes found in most urban high schools and urban school districts.

Many higher educational programs have not adequately prepared school leaders for the complex reality associated with the position. In fact, several of the nation's largest cities—including New York, Los Angeles, Denver, Seattle, Miami, Toledo, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Diego—have taken advantage of the flexibility by hiring non-educators to become the CEOs of their school systems, and have looked to the business world for answers that leaders in public schools should be driving.

There are well known examples of businesses forging partnerships with principal and superintendent leadership development with attentiveness to the development of schools with large percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Eli Broad, Mark Zuckerberg, and Bill Gates have each made tremendous financial and developmental contributions to school and district leadership.

One such example of the business world making leadership decision is the AT&T Aspire Program. In 2008, AT&T Aspire was launched and specifically focused on confronting the high school dropout crisis to help ensure that students can graduate prepared for the future challenges of continuing education and the workforce. They recognize that a future-driven educated workforce is critical to the success of our nation. Through the Aspire program, AT&T and the AT&T Foundation work in concert to help reverse this trend by identifying those programs that work and bringing them to scale, supporting the work of educators and helping students get excited about setting and achieving their goals. With our nation's future global economic reputation at stake, AT&T has made Aspire the biggest and most significant education initiative in the company's history, as well as being one of the largest corporate commitments of its kind in America.

Founded in 1997 with General Colin Powell as Chairman, and currently chaired by Alma Powell, the America's Promise Alliance is a cross-sector partnership of 400+ corporations, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and advocacy groups that are passionate about improving lives and changing outcomes for children. The America's Promise Alliance partnered with AT&T to create Dropout Prevention Summits in order to explore the high school dropout crisis and consider ways to address the problem. By the end of 2010, 32,500 stakeholders from all sectors of society had participated in the summits. Each community has produced its own action plan which includes tactics for ensuring that resolving the underlying dropout issues remain the primary focus.

The newest initiative of the Alliance is Grad Nation, a 10-year campaign to mobilize the nation as never before in an organized attempt to reverse the dropout crisis

and enable our children to be prepared for success in college, work and life. Grad Nation is a national movement whose goal is to transform awareness of the dropout crisis into sustained, results-driven action. In addition, it represents a call to action for concerned citizens, businesses, community leaders, policy makers, educators and the nation as a whole. The primary sponsor of Grad Nation is the State Farm Insurance Company. Other major sponsors include the Simon Foundation for Education and Housing, ING Foundation, Wal-Mart Foundation, AT&T, The Boeing Company, the Pearson Foundation, Jim and Donna Barksdale, DeVry, The Packard Foundation, Target Corporation, Philip Morris USA, an Altria Company, Fidelity Investments, Ritz-Carlton, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Rockefeller Foundation, and Wellspring. In highlighting the importance of leadership in address our nation's educational dilemmas, General Colin Powell stated, "With leadership and focus, the dropout crisis is a solvable problem. Together we can - and we will - prepare children and youth for college, work and life" (America's Promise, 2000).

In November of 2010, research funded by AT&T, Target and the Pearson Foundation was released showing some of the first positive signs that America was, in fact, making progress with both Grad Nation and in efforts to reduce the number of students who drop out of high school. A new report titled *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* was released by America's Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.

Additionally, Target Corporation, with help from The Ellen DeGeneres Show and its viewers, selected 50 schools in need and each received a $100,000 grant. The $5

million donation from Target to local K-12 schools across the country is part of the company's commitment to education, which includes plans to give $1 billion for education by the end of 2015.

A commentary on America's dropout crisis and education reform was written by editorialist RiShawn Biddle in 2004 and has been revisited four years later in the Indianapolis Star with *Left Behind*, a series of editorials detailing Indiana's (as well as the nation's) dropout crisis. And, since the time of this original series, Biddle has expanded his coverage to include the underlying causes of dropouts, including chronic truancy and the sclerosis of educational leadership within the nation's secondary-public education system. This continuous commentary is called *Dropout Nation* and reveals the most unsuccessful schools–referred to as "dropout factories". Review shows that there is a small subset of chronically underperforming high schools that are economically disadvantaged; they are serving some or all of their students; and, are responsible for the majority of our nation's dropout crisis (dropoutnation.net, 2013).

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have identified nearly 2,000 high schools (or approximately 13 percent of American high schools) where the typical freshman class shrinks by 40 percent (or more) by the time the students reach their senior year. The researchers studied urban high schools across the country and performed an enrollment comparison based on what they termed the "promotion" or "holding power" of a school. They examined enrollment data in urban schools from the 100 largest school districts in the country. In those schools where 90% or more of the enrollment were students of color, only 42% of all the freshmen advanced to grade 12 (Balfanz & Legters, 2006).

According to the study from John Hopkins University, "dropout factories" serve large numbers of minority and low-income students, and have fewer resources and less-qualified teachers than schools in more affluent neighborhoods with larger numbers of white students. In fact, 38 percent of African American students and 33 percent of Latino students in America attend dropout factory schools. The nearly 2,000 dropout factories turn out 51 percent of the nation's dropouts. Additionally, these institutions produce 81 percent of all Native American dropouts, 73 percent of all African American dropouts, and 66 percent of all Hispanic dropouts. By addressing the persistent failure of this relatively small number of high schools (i.e., by transforming the nation's dropout factories), we can fundamentally improve educational outcomes for America's students and better their impact on America's society (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

We increasingly treat urban public schools as if they created their segregated and inadequate conditions and were solely responsible for the national failure to effectively educate poor students of color (Fruchter, 2012, p. 7). The past decade has introduced a new dimension to this transformation of discomfort into blame (Fruchter, 2012, p. 7). Often these schools are characterized by a host of problems, including lower levels of competition from peers, less qualified inexperienced teachers, narrower and less advanced course selection, more student/staff turnover during the year, and students with many health and emotional problems related to poverty and to living in ghetto or barrio conditions. Few white students, including economically disadvantaged white students, ever experience such schools; therefore, making some stereotype students who drop out and do not graduate as an ethnic or cultural issue. Instead, research and reality have found that poverty, more than ethnicity, is most highly linked to low graduation rates.

America must continue to develop principals with the courage and conviction to win the war on poverty through the high quality education and achievement level of our youth. This process begins with principals ensuring that every student is a graduate and is ready for post-secondary education. The Alliance to Reform Education Leaders (AREL) at the George Bush Institute is an innovative, integrated initiative to change the way America's public school principals are identified, recruited, selected, prepared, evaluated, and empowered. As almost half of existing principals will leave the profession before the end of this decade, this institute holds promise for developing the leaders we need for today's schools. It is no secret that school leaders need professional development beyond certification to meet the challenges and responsibilities of today's school leadership. Today's school leaders often have less experience and fewer resources than their predecessors.

An important strand of the AREL institute is dedicated to developing school leaders who are effective within schools with large percentages of students from poverty. The goal of the institute is that, by 2020, they will certify at least half of U.S. public school principals around a set of radically improved standards for leadership competency–50,000 principals will be fully empowered to lead. These principals will be responsible for an improvement of up to 15 percent in all measures of student achievement. The hope here is that this success will serve as "next practices" for principals across the country. Principals really do count and they count the most for students from poverty.

The Wallace Foundation has calculated that:

[P]rincipals represent nearly 25 % of the variation in a school's achievement (Seashore-Louis, et al. 2010). This is because while individual teachers may have a tremendous impact on their students' achievement, it takes multiple in-school factors coming together to significantly improve student achievement on a large scale (The Wallace Foundation, 2012). Principals are in the unique position to bring all of those factors together.

Unfortunately, the following statement from over forty years ago still rings true today: "There are factors inherent within the school and school system itself that not only cause many school problems but actually accentuate many of the problems that students bring to school" (Glasser, 1969). What have we done to change schools in order to accommodate students with the greatest need and assist them in ending the cycle of poverty that they inherited? Dropout recovery—not simply prevention-- must become a top priority in today's public schools. Dropout recovery efforts are varied, including traditional public schools, specially-created recovery-focused schools, alternative learning centers, community-based non-profit schools and programs, for-profit schools, federal-, state-, and county-funded efforts, community colleges, the adult education system, and other social services.

Current Principal Leadership Development

While school reform has looked to students as well as teachers for the answers to increasing student achievement, only in recent decades has there been renewed collective thought focused on the changed role of principal effectiveness as a causal agent to school success. Datnow and Castellano (2000) stated, "…it is axiomatic that strong leadership is

critical for successful whole-school reform" and found that "not only did principals shape reform implementation but the reform itself also reshaped the role of the principal" (p. 219). For schools with large numbers of students living in poverty, the school leader is the most important employee. Furman (2004) stated that the study of leadership in the twenty-first century is about how leadership can help achieve valued outcomes, such as social justice, racial equity, and learning for all children in school. Bates (2006) argued how social justice in education, as elsewhere, demands both distributive justice (which remedies undeserved inequalities) and recognition justice (which treats cultural differences with understanding and respect). Educational leaders can no longer escape the consideration of such issues as they are brought to the fore by the recognition of the failure of schools and school systems to ameliorate injustice in the distribution of resources and to recognize and celebrate difference as a means to social and cultural progress (Bates, 2006).

Several initiatives have targeted principal leadership that supports student achievement for all students with an additional focus on meeting the needs of children from poverty. These principal decision making frameworks provide a laboratory for leadership for developing effective institutional processes.

The Marilyn Hohmann's Principal's Academy is sponsored by the Schlechty Center and provides principals with a deep understanding of fundamental concepts, such as the nature of engagement, the core business of school, and marketing change. Principals learn to view themselves as leaders of leaders, and superintendents learn to view themselves as intellectual and moral leaders who transform problems into opportunities and encourage others to seize these opportunities. Principals also develop a

personal plan for leadership, exploring the role of the principal and including appropriate strategies for causing and sustaining change. Since its inception in 1987, the Schlechty Center has developed a track record of working with superintendents, school boards, principals, and other district leaders across the country.

The Center's leadership development is based upon a theoretical framework that purports that the core business of schools is providing students with engaging work. Over the years, the Center has learned that leadership development must be linked with system development–not simply via an independent endeavor. If system and leadership development are not aligned, it is unlikely that the district will develop either leadership or system capacity. It is for this reason that the Schlechty Center's following set of Leadership Capabilities, which provide leaders with the skills and knowledge necessary to lead change, are directly related to the District Standards:

- The Theory of Change focuses on transforming schools from organizations based on the assumption that the core business of schools has to do with producing compliance and attendance to organizations where the core business focuses on nurturing attention and commitment. The Theory of Change is the basis for the Schlechty Center's 10 District Standards.

- The Theory of Engagement focuses attention on student motivation and the strategies needed to increase the prospect that schools and teachers will be positioned to increase the presence of engaging tasks and activities in the routine life of the school. The Theory of Engagement is the basis of the Working on the Work framework.

The Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform (2003) allows the following five basic assumptions to guide all of our work and creates partnerships with school district leaders that share these beliefs:

1. There is an urgent need for dramatic improvement in the performance of America's public schools.

2. The key to improving the schools is the quality of the work students are provided. To improve the quality of the work students are provided, schools must be organized around students and the work provided to students rather than around adults and the work of teachers.

3. Students are volunteers. Their attendance can be commanded, but their attention must be earned.

4. The changes required to organize schools around students and student work cannot occur unless school districts and communities have or develop the capacities needed to support change-capacities that are now too often lacking in even the best run school districts.

5. Leadership and leadership development are key components to the creation of district-level capacity to support building-level reform.

Furthermore, leaders learn about the six critical systems that help with school transformation:

- Recruitment and induction;

- Evaluation;

- Power and authority;

- Directional;

- Knowledge development and transmission; and

- Boundary.

Schlechty design teams are established at participating schools, and a Cross-functional design team is created at the district level in order to develop the overall leadership and reform vision. Based on the resulting vision, the Schlechty Center team focuses their efforts upon student work and on structures for building continuity, innovation, flexibility, participatory leadership, and results-oriented decision making. By increasing student engagement to increase student achievement, the Schlechty Center helps secondary school principals nationwide organize themselves around creating institutional processes that meet the needs of students.

The Raise Your Hand Texas Institute recognizes that quality campus leadership is key to the success of all public schools. Raise Your Hand Texas leaders have helped over 100 Texas principals, representing a diverse cross-section of school district demographics, travel to Boston and attend one of four leadership seminars each summer. Raise Your Hand Texas was founded as a bi-partisan effort by influential business and civic leaders. Its advisory board includes Jim Adams, former chairman of Texas Instruments; Michael Boone, co-founder and partner, Haynes & Boone; Charles Butt, H-E-B chairman and CEO; T.C. Frost, senior chairman of Frost National Bank; Larry Kellner, Continental Airlines Inc.'s chairman of the board & CEO; and Bobby Tudor, former managing director of Goldman, Sachs and Co.

The Harvard Principal Institute - The RYHT Harvard Leadership Program is a selective, weeklong professional development summer course taught by a world-class

faculty at one of the best graduate schools of education in the country–namely, the

Harvard Graduate School of Education, in Cambridge, MA.

RYHT (2008) states its mission as follows: "By investing in the leadership of

today's schools, we will realize the positive impact of the Harvard training in day-to-day

school management, in campus morale, and, most importantly, in the classroom." One of

the largest initiatives of its kind in the state, the Raise Your Hand Texas Institutes

exposes Texas public school leaders to the foremost national and international experts in

the fields of education and leadership, as well as offer a hands-on opportunity to work

alongside renowned educators from across the country.

National Association of Secondary School Principals Breakthrough Schools

Project Roundtable - The MetLife-NASSP Breakthrough Schools project, initiated in

2004, is sponsored by MetLife Foundation. The goal of the project is to identify,

recognize, and showcase middle level and high schools that serve large numbers of

students living in poverty and are high achieving or dramatically improving student

achievement. The National Association of Secondary School Principals in Breaking

Ranks II outlines the framework for such a school transformation.

The following are the specific Breaking Ranks II Recommendations in High

School Renewal:

1. Collaborative leadership/professional learning communities

2. Personalizing the school environment

3. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment

(NASSP, 2004, p. 16)

Addressing these components takes a new type of leader: one that is committed to being transformational. With this in mind, the executive director of the National Association of Secondary Principals, Gerald Tirozzi (2001) stated:

> The principals of tomorrow's high schools must be instructional leaders who possess the requisite skills, capacities, and commitment to lead, not follow, the accountability parade. Excellence in school leadership should be recognized as the most important component of school reform. Without leadership, the chances for systemic improvement in teaching and learning are nil. The principal's role must shift from a focus on management and administration to a focus on leadership and vision—on facilitating the teaching and learning process. (p. 7)

In 2003, as cited by the International Center for Leadership in Education Model Schools and Successful Practices Network, the Successful Practices Network was established as a way for K-12 educators to share strategies, practices, research, data and experiences (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2012). The International Center for Leadership in Education, Bill and Bonnie Daggett, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation support the Network along with member fees (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2012). The Network is a not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to enabling K-12 school leaders and teachers to share successful practices, provide tools and expertise to improve education and to prepare students to the challenges of the 21st century. The Network aims to provide services and resources to members that sustain rigor, relevance and relationships for all students.

According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) only a small fraction of school principals are well trained to lead efforts of instructional improvement, particularly in culturally diverse, low-income communities and schools. Students from low income families face different and specific challenges. The effective principal for the 21st century must accept the challenge to be an agent of change and a warrior for social justice. They must be willing to confront the traditional school structure that in many ways perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

Most recently, for the largest urban schools and districts, the Broad Prize and the Broad Superintendents Academy work to train experienced school leaders from business, education, military, government, and nonprofits to take charge of the United States' large school districts. The $1 million dollar award has four basic premises:

- Reward districts that improve achievement levels of disadvantaged students;

- Restore the public's confidence in our nation's public schools by highlighting successful urban districts;

- Create competition and provide incentives for districts to improve; and

- Showcase the best practices of successful districts.

(Overview, n.d., para. 1)

New Leaders for New Schools is a non-profit organization whose mission is to ensure high academic achievement for all children, especially students in poverty and students of color, by developing transformational school leaders and advancing the policies and practices that allow great leaders to succeed. According to their website (2013), the organization seeks to train the next generation of principals. Its evidence based approach to developing leaders has three dimensions:

- Gains in student achievement;

- Increasing teacher effectiveness; and

- Taking effective leadership actions to reach those outcomes.

The philosophy here is that, when taken together, principals and teachers account for over 50% of the factors that impact student achievement. With that being known, principals are in the driver's seat to make the most impact through the decisions they make and from the teachers they hire and retain.

Impact of Principals on Student Achievement

- Principal Impact — 25%
- Teacher Impact — 33%
- Other Factors — 42%
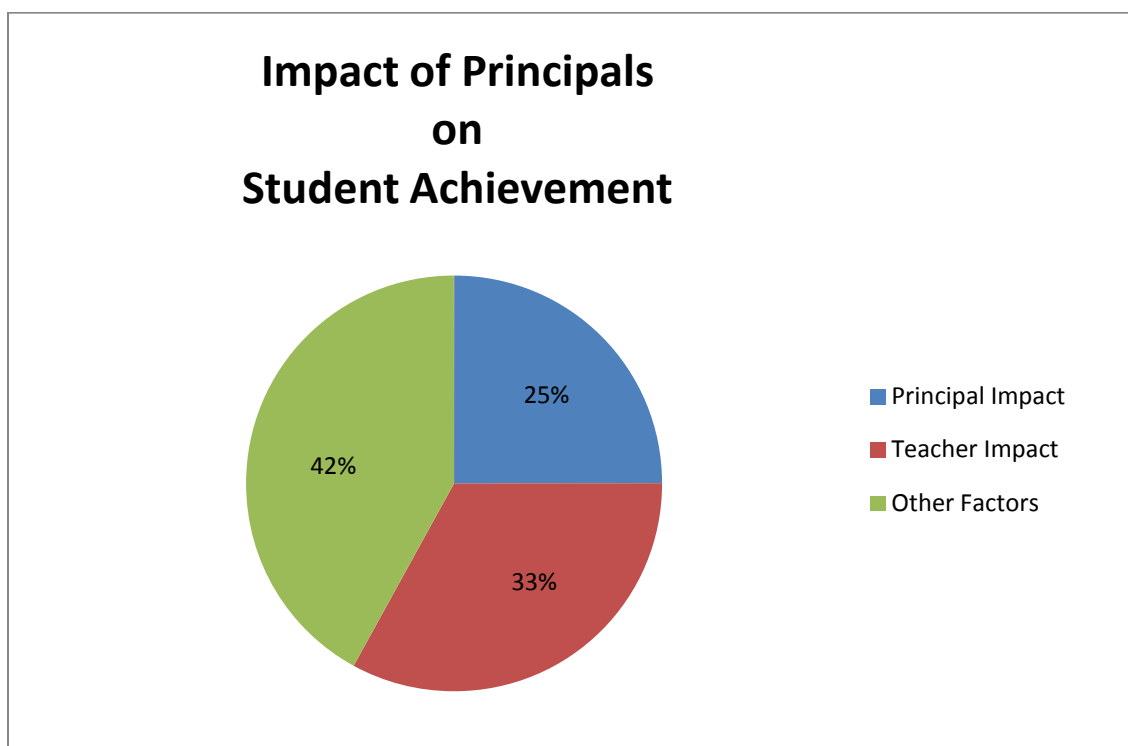
Figure 2.1. Impact of Principals on Student Achievement. This illustration displays the different percentages of principal, teacher, and "other factors" with regard to impact upon student achievement (Researcher created graphic from New Leaders for New Schools website data - Principal Effectiveness - A New Principalship to Drive Student Achievement, Teacher Effectiveness, and School Turnarounds, New Leaders for New Schools, p. 12)

As with each of these organizations, their leadership development and their prestigious awards are specifically directed toward those who are currently or seek to be more effective in the future with the outcomes for their economically disadvantaged students. This can only be done through the merging of a leader's declarative and procedural knowledge founded in a core belief system of social justice to build the condition on a campus and in a school district that insures an equitable education for all students.

Institutional Processes

Rodriguez (2008) substantiated Mehan's construct by stating how structural conditions and constraints pervasive in high schools also encourage dropouts. This is evidenced by the structurally large size of high schools which make the experience for many students impersonal and makes them feel invisible, anonymous, ignored, and/or even dehumanized. Furthermore, research showed that disciplinary procedures and policies perpetuate such student dispositions in school (Rodríguez, 2008). Powell (2004) stated that children of poverty are at-risk of never graduating from high school because of cultural constraints and higher federal and state educational standards. There must be specific processes, programs or initiatives in place dedicated to students in poverty to support them in sustaining school efforts as well as to reclaim students through dropout recovery in order to increase the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students. Research conducted by the Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy (Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2009) revealed that the second most referenced reasons for students dropping out, after home family issues, were academic struggles and boredom due to lack of engagement in school.

Even more recently, Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant (2010) released findings that revealed that the leading reason cited by students for dropping out was not seeing the connection between classroom learning and their own lives and career dreams. For many students and their families the school is their main link and point of contact with the community and with society. Fusarelli (2008) states that:

> Schools need to respond to both academic and social needs. They need to seek and maintain a balance between an emphasis on improved instruction and achievement and an emphasis on providing the needed services and supports for economically disadvantaged children and their families. Tensions arise in trying to achieve this balance. Strong educational leadership may help to reduce these tensions over the purpose and role of the public school. (p.369)

While identifying and analyzing the reasons why students drop out of school is important in order to address the diverse needs of students, schools and districts must identify the specific and effective practices and programs schools can put in place to help students stay in school (Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2009). One way to accomplish this task is to study and measure the success of existing and emerging institutional processes and capitalize on the lessons learned from principal leaders that keep students in school and reduce the number of students dropping out. Institutional processes within schools are important for understanding variations among minority student achievement. This study (Color of Success, Conchas, 2006) shows that programs based on successful integration, community building, and access to opportunities, serve as a model for how institutional mechanisms can promote the social mobility of urban

minority student populations………………Institutional processes matter. Evidence suggests that minority students in urban schools can achieve academic success with support from specific institutional programs. (Conchas, 2006, p. 19) This approach matters most for students who live in poverty. Examples of promising institutional process practices include 9th Grade Academies, Smaller Learning Communities, Professional Learning Communities, AVID, Online Credit Recovery, Project Based Learning, Universal Design, Career Academies, and parent involvement opportunities.

Parent involvement opportunities. Parent involvement is the single most important factor in determining high school completion (Anderson & Minke, 2007). In fact, NCLB documented its importance by stating the important role parents play in participating in their children's academic lives (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). In a report, issued by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) on student drop-out rates, it was reported that only one-fifth of parents are actively involved in their child's education (Azzam, 2007). The author of the report concluded that increasing the relationship between parents and schools should increase student success by keeping them enrolled in school. Also noted in the report was that parents should communicate regularly with schools and track student progress. Lastly, ASCD found that over half of the parents of recent student dropouts had never been contacted by the school (Azzam, 2007).

Smaller learning communities. Smaller learning communities are schools within a school that downsize the effect of the massive number of students and teachers within one school campus (Heath, 2005). Heath learned that schools utilizing the small learning communities concept benefited in three distinct areas: school climate, school

attitude, and academic persistence. Effective implementation of small learning communities may increase standardized tests scores and affect other factors of educational success such as drop-out rates, attendance, and overall academic success (Heath, 2005). Due to its overall success, administrators should consider the implementation of small learning communities in schools that have high counts of at-risk students (Azzam, 2007). Small learning communities benefit at-risk students most by providing closer communication between staff and student which allows for more personal contact and less opportunity for students to fall between the cracks (Zvoch, 2006). The support of the smaller learning community is facilitated by the personalized approach allowed by teachers working with a specific group of students in a sheltered environment (Heath, 2005).

Summary

Since its inception, the "War on Poverty" has had its genesis in the public schools of America. In Texas, as state assessment systems continually change and continue to transform high schools across the state, educators must be sure to support the risky decisions of transformational leaders in their quest to create learning organizations that will enable all types of learners to achieve their goals. Bridgeland, Dilulio and Burke Morrison (2006) listed in their findings the following major reasons that students gave for dropping out: (1) A lack of connection to the school environment; (2) a perception that school is boring; (3) feeling unmotivated; (4) academic challenges; and, (5) the weight of real world events. Their findings also revealed that dropping out of school was not a sudden act; rather it occurs as a gradual process of disengagement initiated by attendance patterns (Bridgeland, Dilulio and Burke Morrison, 2006).

There is indeed a crisis in America's high schools–specifically, an ongoing war that gets to the core of the very fabric of our country. Edmonds (1979), for instance, states, "Inequity in American education derives first and foremost from our failure to educate the children of the economically disadvantaged" (p. 15). Nationally, both the Race to the Top competition and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waiver process have emphasized the need to develop educational processes and educational professional capital that evaluates the effectiveness of teachers, principals, and processes that translate into higher results. Yet, it is interesting to note that no state or national study outlines the needed characteristics or strategies that leaders must possess to make appropriate decisions in this area. Rather, results indicate that dropout prevention programs in schools are reporting successes in various settings and with different populations.

The evidence demonstrates that it is possible to achieve positive results using a core set of effective strategies, even among the highest risk populations (Texas Education Agency, 2008). It is principals, however, who *must* make and be the difference. In the spirit of such change, Rodriguez (2008) called for courageous leadership that moves beyond the traditional teaching and learning dynamic to address the dropout problem. The necessary skills required to lead the schools of the 21st century have changed as the needs of our schools and students have shifted.

M. Christine DeVita, President of the Wallace Foundation seeks to describe the changing role of school leaders in her letter at the beginning of the 2012 work titled *School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals.*

More than ever, in today's climate of heightened expectations, principals are in the hot seat to improve teaching and learning. They need to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. They are expected to broker the often-conflicting interests of parents, teachers, students, district office officials, unions, and state and federal agencies, and they need to be sensitive to the widening range of student needs.

If we are to maintain education as a civil right as provided for in our Constitution and open the doors of opportunity to all, we must acknowledge the power of school principals to lead the charge by making the appropriate decisions about institutional processes on their campus to make this possible. The economically disadvantaged students in every school often depend on that very school, more than their advantaged counterparts, to help them actualize their full potential.

According to the U. S. Education Reform and National Security Independent Task Force Report:

> The United States' failure to educate its students leaves them unprepared
> to compete and threatens the country's ability to thrive in a global
> economy and maintain its leadership role, finds a new Council on Foreign
> Relations (CFR)–sponsored Independent Task Force report on U.S.
> Education Reform and National Security. The lack of preparedness poses
> threats on five national security fronts: economic growth and

competitiveness, physical safety, intellectual property, U.S. global awareness, and U.S. unity and cohesion. (Klein, 2012, p. 14-41)

These conditions threaten our nation on the following diverse fronts:

- More than 25 percent of students fail to graduate from high school in four years; for African-American and Hispanic students, this number is approaching 40 percent.

- In civics, only a quarter of U.S. students are proficient or better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

- Although the United States is a nation of immigrants, roughly eight in ten Americans speak only English and a decreasing number of schools are teaching foreign languages.

- A recent report by ACT, the not-for-profit testing organization, found that only 22 percent of U.S. high school students met "college ready" standards in all of their core subjects; these figures are even lower for African-American and Hispanic students.

- The College Board reported that even among college-bound seniors, only 43 percent met college-ready standards, meaning that more college students need to take remedial courses.

(Klein, 2012)

School leaders must openly accept the challenge to insure that every student has rigorous and relevant instruction, develops 21st century skills, completes high school on time, and are equipped to sustain themselves in the world of college or career. Today's principals must close the gap, raise the ceiling, and support the needs of the iGeneration –

those students born in the last ten to fifteen years as they move forward in their education. The decisions principals make must set the stage for success and be based on the future. To make this happen, principals must have vision, have the ability to create collaborative cultures and appropriately utilize declarative knowledge to effect the needed changes that positively affect students.

School leaders must have the courage to break from the status quo in order to transform campus structures and processes and allow access to profound learning opportunities for all students. We cannot assume that principals already have the necessary knowledge base that addresses the needs of America's neediest students; because, if they did, all of the barriers to high achievement for poor students would already be solved and there would be no need to improve schools. We must admit that there are many school leaders who possess mountains of declarative knowledge, but their lack of translating that knowledge into practice, processes, and procedures prevent the needed innovations and transformations at the high school level that would result in an educational breakthrough for many economically disadvantaged students who depend on the school as their only sure hope.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-method approach of narrative inquiry interviews and archival data from one school district to examine the distinct relationship between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty high schools and the implementation of those processes with fidelity that have resulted in increased high school completion rates for economically disadvantaged students.

This chapter describes the selected district's background and setting, the participants, the instruments, the procedures, data analysis, qualitative feedback, and limitations of the study. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the body of knowledge and provide implications for future practice for high school leaders.

Significance of the Study

As school accountability increases, and the percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds increases as well, principals must make decisions in new ways that positively impact the completion rate of all students, but especially students from poverty who often face challenges to school completion. This mixed method study is of three principals of high schools located in one school district in north central Houston, Texas. The district's vision is that "By 2015, 'the district' will be a leader among learning organizations and known for exemplary student achievement."

Research Questions

The below targeted research questions drive this study:

1. What are the principal leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that positively impact student completion rates in high poverty schools?

2. What are the relationships between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty schools and high school completion rates with their cohort?

3. What are the emerging leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that increase the completion rate in high poverty schools?

District Background and Setting

The school district of study for this research is the fifth largest in Harris County and is continuing to grow as a fast growth district in Texas. The school district was created in 1935 when two small thriving schools merged to form one independent school district. Economic times and segregation initially allowed the district to send its economically disadvantaged and minority students to a neighboring district until 1966. Then, with the beginning of desegregation, these students were allowed to attend school in the district and the district was charged with evolving to meet the needs of these students. The district has continued to grow from a low populated suburban setting to one of the many densely populated urban areas of Harris County, located 20 miles north of downtown Houston, and spans 57 square miles. There is no incorporated town or city within the District.

The greatest challenge for the district has been, and continues, to be its rapid growth. For instance, the district's enrollment has grown by 17 percent over the past five years including approximately 1,200 students who arrived to the district in 2005 following the Katrina and Rita hurricanes–thus, further increasing the district's percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The District now serves over 36,000 prekindergarten through twelfth-grade students in 36 schools. Those campuses include three comprehensive 5-A high schools, a high school career academy, six traditional sixth- through eighth-grade middle schools, a middle school of choice that focuses on math, science and the fine arts, one prekindergarten through second-grade primary school, one third- through fifth-grade intermediate school, and 23 prekindergarten through fifth-grade elementary schools. In addition, a virtual school offers core-subject and elective courses taught in an online learning environment.

The percentage of economically disadvantaged students has increased as well in the district, from 62% in 2008 to 72% in 2013. The percentage rate of growth of students living in poverty in this district has continued to increase and be higher than the state average. Projections indicate that the percentage of economically disadvantaged students will continue to increase and bring economic as well as academic challenges to students, schools, and the school district as a whole.

The high schools in this district are of interest to study because, unlike some high schools in other districts, the principals in this district do have the responsibility to create and implement school institutional processes and practices that meet the needs of the students at each school. There are established Board policies, superintendent initiatives, and centralized procedures. The district does allow principals monitored autonomy over

budget, personnel, program implementation, and instructional practices. This is of particular note as the information received from each school regarding this study will be a result of purposeful decisions by that school principal.

Believing that poverty is not an indicator of student achievement potential, the district continues to set high goals for its students and staff. This includes a priority on closing the achievement gap and increasing the completion rate for all students. The target high schools have not been immune from the challenges facing the district, state, and nation. Seeking solutions to the needs of students so that they complete high school and are prepared for higher learning have been at the very core of their work.

Participants

Three comprehensive high schools and their principals in one school district are the target schools and principals for this study. According to the 2010 – 2011 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report compiled by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the district has a student population of 36,230. The comprehensive high schools within the district each have enrollments in excess of 1500 students. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students at each high school included in the study meets the Title I standard criteria of 40% FRL; however, none of the high schools utilize these funds.

Informed Consent

Prior to attempting to locate or contact any participants, permission was obtained from University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A). In addition, informed consent was obtained from the school district's office of research (see Appendix C). Upon approval for research from the University of Houston IRB and the

school district, the potential participants were contacted directly. Through such contact, the participants were informed and assured about the commitment of protecting their identities and maintaining confidentiality. Also, they received a full verbal explanation regarding the purpose of the study, their role in the research, and were then provided with a copy of this message in writing (see Appendix B).

The sample size in qualitative studies is typically small since the focus is more in the depth in the discussion than in the quantity and numbers. In this study, I will select purposeful sampling as the sampling procedure. According to Creswell (2007), in purposeful sampling the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.

Assurance of Confidentiality

Every precaution was taken to protect the confidentiality of each and every one of the participants. Interviews were privately secured and held at a separate site outside of the campus setting. In addition, a coded system was used for schools and principals to protect their identity. No names were released to any party without the express written consent of that participant.

School A

School A is a comprehensive high school composed of grades 9-12, and is divided into smaller learning communities. The student demographics represent a wide range of ethnic diversity and socio-economic levels. The 2011 – 12 student body numbers approximately 2,860 students comprised of 61% African American, 34 % Hispanic, 3% Asian, 2% Caucasian, and 0% American Indian students. About 78% of the students are

economically disadvantaged, 7% students who are English language learners (ELL), and 10% students who are Special Education students.

School B

School B is a comprehensive high school composed of grades 9 – 12 and serves a student population of over 3000 students. Over 60% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch and the student population demographics consist of 52% African-American, 35% Hispanic, 11% Caucasian, and 2% other. The student enrollment includes 4% of students who are English language learners (ELL), and 9% of students who are Special Education students.

School C

School C is a high school of choice composed of grades 10-12, and is divided into career academies. The student demographics represent a wide range of ethnic diversity and socio-economic levels. The 2011 – 12 student body numbers approximately 1543 students comprised of 31% African American, 24 % Hispanic, 11% Asian, 23% Caucasian, and 0% American Indian students. About 42% of the students are economically disadvantaged, 2% are English language learners (ELL), and 3% Special Education students. School C is a Career Academy High School where students have opportunities to enhance academic and career success through participation in workplace learning activities, internships, mentorships, and/or cooperative learning programs. Students also are able to earn college articulated credit.

Principal A

Principal A was the principal at the school from 2007-2012. Prior to this, Principal A was a middle school principal in another district. Principal A has 15 years of

experience as a principal, as well as has a Doctorate in Education. Principal A is also currently a Director within the district of study.

For the 2012–2013 school year, Principal A is a new and was formerly the Dean of Instruction at the same campus. Before that, Principal A was a high school principal in another district with similar demographics. Principal A has 5 years of experience as a high school principal and a Masters of Education.

Principal B

Principal B has been the principal of School B for 6 years. This is Principal B's first high school principal position. Prior to becoming the principal of School B, Principal B was a middle school principal. Principal B has a Masters of Education. Lastly, Principal B remains the principal of School B for the 2012 – 2013 school year.

Principal C

Principal C was the principal of School C from 2006-2012. Principal C was also a former elementary school principal. Principal C has a Masters of Education and is now an Executive Director within the district.

For the 2012–2013 school year, Principal C is new and was formerly a central office employee working in curriculum and instruction. The 2012–2013 school year is Principal C's first year as a high school principal.

Procedure and Data Analysis

This study includes archival completion rate data published in AEIS reports. In addition, the principals of these comprehensive high schools were interviewed to determine their beliefs. Research guided by the qualitative research paradigm is important to the field of education because of the reflection, action, and collaboration that

define the type of knowledge produced by research conducted within this paradigm

(Meriam, 1991). Furthermore, this study did not disrupt the educational process.

Principal interviews did not occur during the school day, and access to archival data

occurred after hours.

Instrumentation

The leadership practices and decisions of principals in the selected comprehensive

high schools were reviewed by conducting a narrative inquiry interview process

supported by archival data. The qualitative research design was explained to the

participants along with a description of the archival quantitative data being used. The

population and sample was described. The data collection methods were fully discussed,

and then the data analysis was explained. The results from the data analysis are presented

in the following chapter. Investigator-constructed interview questions allowed each

participant to share their complete thoughts on the topic of each question.

Analysis

The overarching research questions are as follows:

1. What are the principal leadership decisions and practices regarding school
   institutional processes that positively impact student completion rates in
   high poverty schools?

2. What are the relationships between principal decisions regarding school
   institutional processes in high poverty schools and high school completion
   rates with their cohort?

3. What are the relationships between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty schools and high school completion rates with their cohort?

The purpose of the qualitative part of the study uses the narrative inquiry interview method to investigate the beliefs and effective decision making practices regarding institutional processes of the high school principals within one school district. Each school has an increasing percentage of economically disadvantaged high school students.

The interview questions are correlated to the research questions of the study. This insures that each research question is addressed (see chart below).

Research Question	Corresponding Principal Interview Question
1	2
1	4
2	1
2	3
2	6
3	5
3	7

The interview questions are:

1. What has the completion rate trend been at your campus for the last three years?

2. How does the completion rate for the economically disadvantaged students on your campus differ from the completion rate for the subgroups as well as All Students?

3. What beliefs do you have as a high school principal that have influenced your practice with economically disadvantaged students?

4. What are the principal leadership decisions you have made regarding school institutional processes that have positively impacted the student completion rate for economically disadvantaged students at your school?

5. What specific strategies do you use to establish a desire for high school completion for the economically disadvantaged students on your campus?

6. What are the relationships between your decisions regarding school institutional processes and the actual high school completion rate of the economically disadvantaged students on your campus?

7. What are the emerging leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that you feel are being or could be implemented to increase the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students at your campus? What evidence do you have?

Limitations

The reliability and validity of the principal interviews used in this study was assured through use of an interview protocol of scripting and taping the interviews. All participants were presented with the same stimulus, wording, format, and content. Each principal and the Executive Director for Planning and Accountability will receive a copy of the completed study.

The following are limitations of the study:

- The study only purposefully included three principals in one school district;

- The condition of the timing and atmosphere of principal interviews was planned to be identical, but variations may have had an impact on principal responses; and

- The study was limited by the principal's knowledge of the processes, programs and activities implemented in their school.

Assumptions of the Study

The following are assumptions of the study:

- Principal responses were assumed to be accurate.

Delimitations of the Study

The study included the following delimitations:

- The identified principal must have been employed as a principal at an identified campus of study for a minimum of the three years;

- The identified principal must have served as a campus administrator at the secondary level for at least three years; and

- The school population must have over 40% of students who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Results for Research Questions

The three comprehensive high schools and their principals in one school district were the target schools and target principals for this study. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge and provide implications for future practice for school leaders regarding the distinct relationship between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty high schools and the implementation of those processes with fidelity that has resulted in increased high school completion rates for economically disadvantaged students.

High school students are considered "completers" if they: (1) graduate, or (2) continue in high school after their anticipated gradation date. The completion rate is the percentage of students from a cohort group – more specifically, a class of beginning ninth graders who graduate or continue in high school. The completion rate used for the regular state accountability system (completion rate I) is calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Completion Rate I: } \frac{\text{\# of graduates + continuers}}{\text{\# of graduates + continuers + GED recipients + dropouts}}$$

The 4-year completion rate of the schools in the school district in this study were tracked from the 2008-2009 school year to the 2010-2011 school year for the 4-year completion rates of economically disadvantaged students as well as for the 4-year

completion rate of All Students. Additionally, the school district 4-year completion rate during that time frame was analyzed.

The data on the following pages represents the archived high school completion rate data obtained from the district of study and validated online from the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System for 2009, 2010, and 2011. Delineated in Table 4 - 1 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled at School A for the 2009 school year.

Table 4.1

Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled at School A for the 2009 School Year
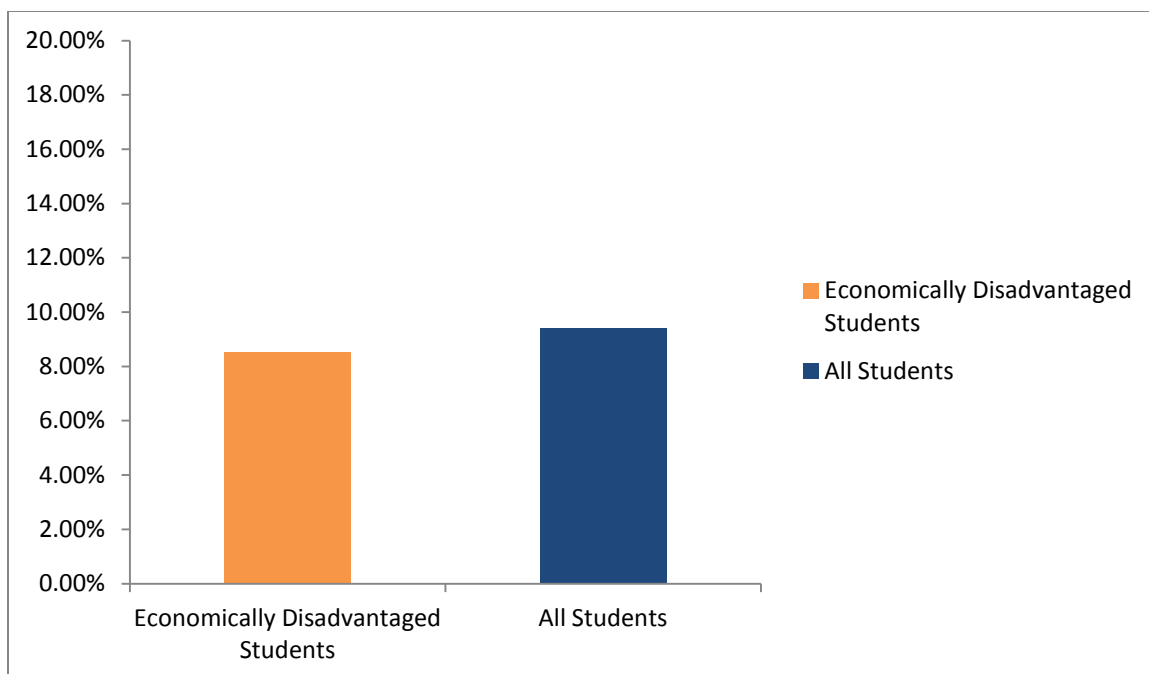
Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	87.00%	85.4%
Received GED	0.6%	0.6%
Continuer	3.9%	4.5%
Dropped Out	8.5%	9.4%

Depicted in Figure 4.1 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School A in the 2009 school year. A slightly higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated in the 2009 school year in comparison to all students who were enrolled at School A.
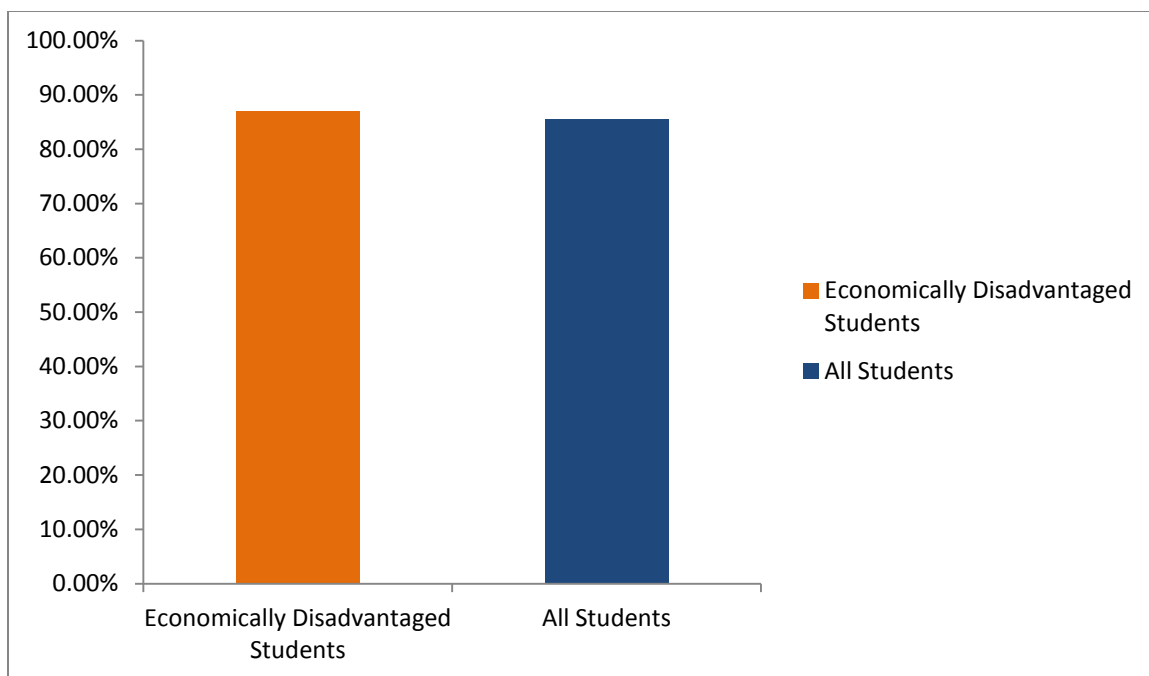
Figure 4.1. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School A in the 2009 school year.

Delineated in Figure 4.2 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School A in the 2009 school year. A slightly higher percentage of all students dropped out of school than did students who were economically disadvantaged.

Figure 4.2. Percentages of all students and students who were economically

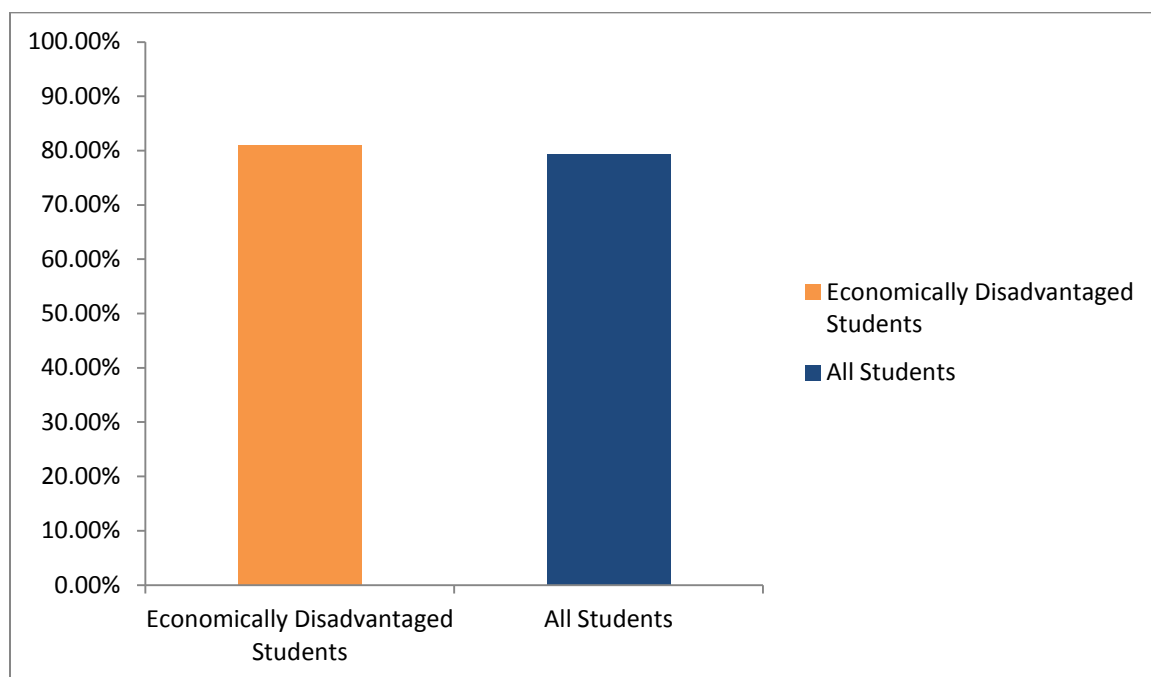disadvantaged who dropped out from School A in the 2009 school year.

Revealed in Table 4.2 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled at

School A for the 2010 school year. Once again, a slightly higher percentage of students

who were economically disadvantaged graduated from School A in the 2010 school year

than did all students.

Table 4.2

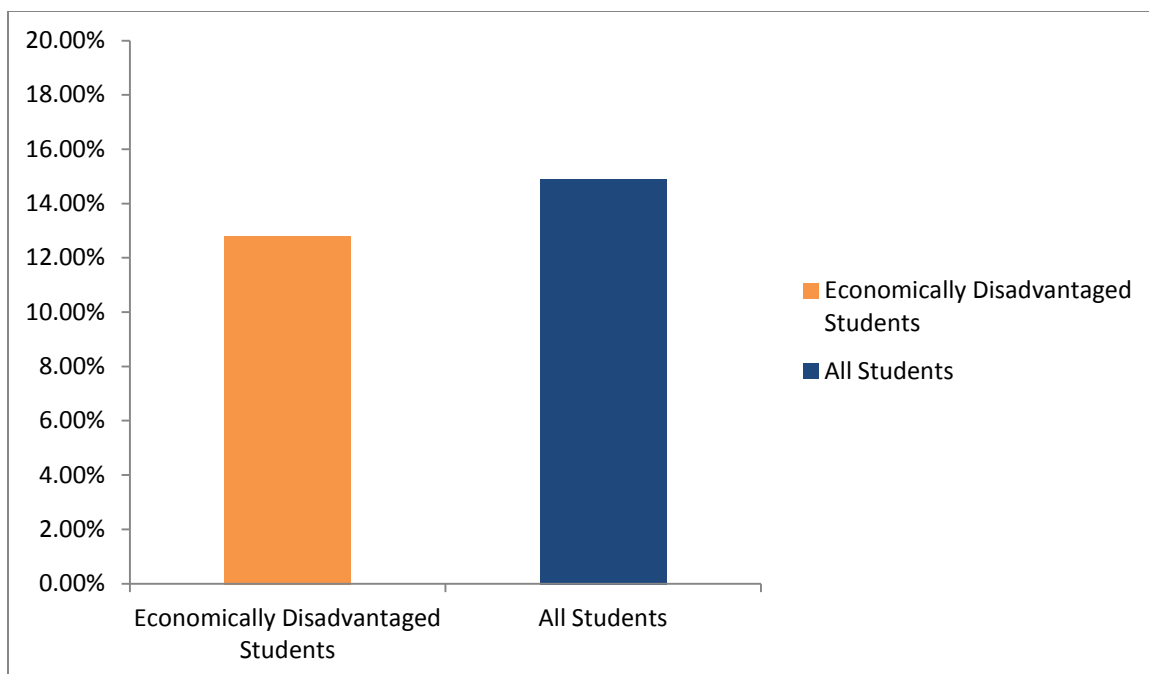*Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled at School A for the 2010 School Year*

Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	81.00%	79.4%
Received GED	0.0%	0.2%
Continuer	6.1%	5.5%
Dropped Out	12.8%	14.9%

Depicted in Figure 4.3 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School A in the 2010 school year. A slightly higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated in the 2010 school year in comparison to all students who were enrolled at School A.

Figure 4.3. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School A in the 2010 school year.

Shown in Figure 4.4 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School A in the 2010 school year. A slightly higher percentage of all students dropped out of school than did students who were economically disadvantaged.

Figure 4.4. Percentages of all students and students who were economically

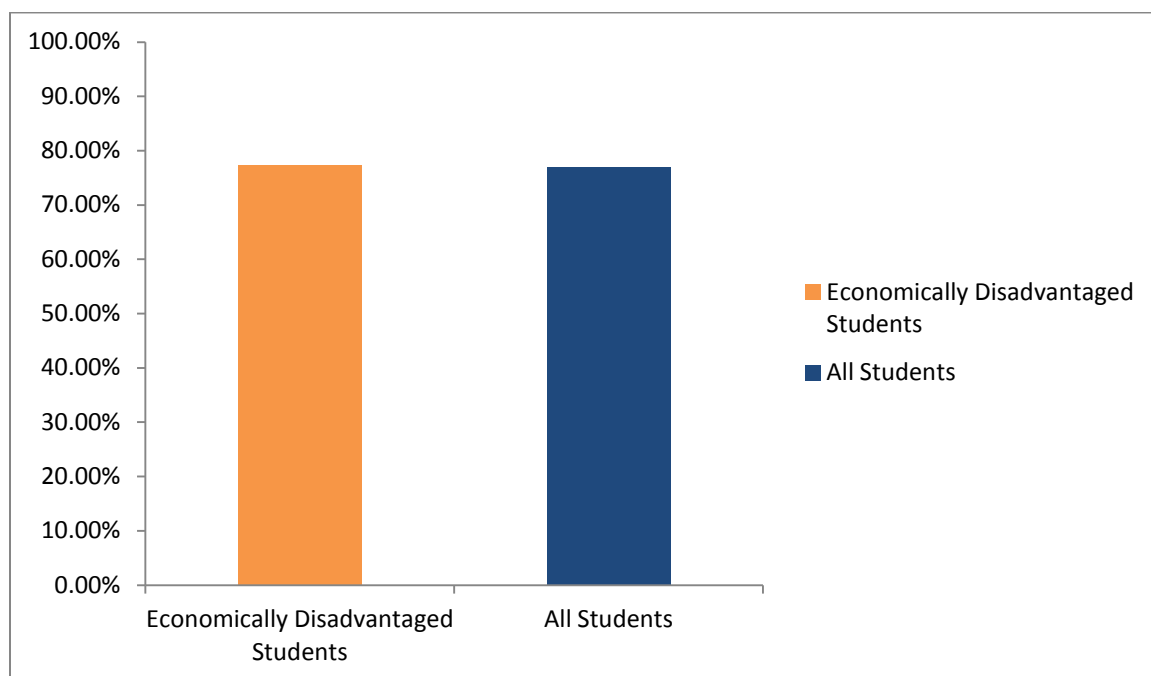disadvantaged who dropped out from School A in the 2010 school year.

Presented in Table 4.3 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled at

School A for the 2011 school year. Once again, a slightly higher percentage of students

who were economically disadvantaged graduated from School A in the 2011 school year

than did all students. Similar to the previous two school years, a higher percentage of all

students dropped out than did students who were economically disadvantaged.

Table 4.3

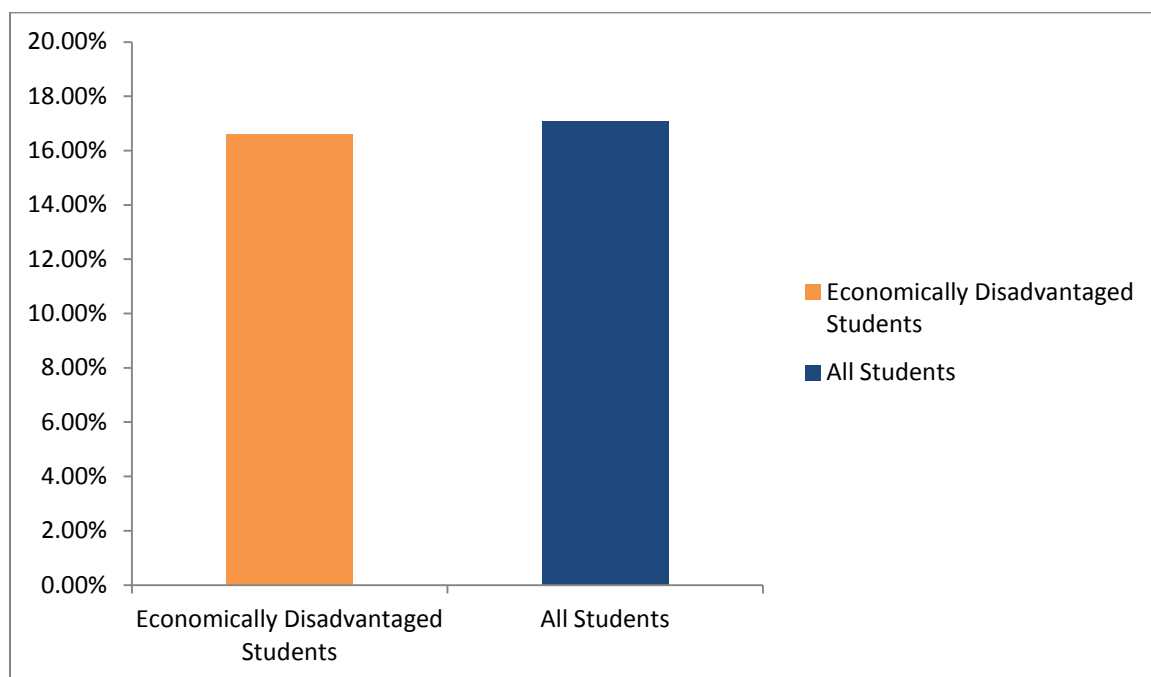*Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled at School A for the 2011 School Year*

Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	77.4%	77.0%
Received GED	0.0%	0.1%
Continuer	6.0%	5.8%
Dropped Out	16.6%	17.1%

Revealed in Figure 4.5 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School A in the 2011 school year. A slightly higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated in the 2011 school year in comparison to all students who were enrolled at School A.

Figure 4.5. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School A in the 2011 school year.

Shown in Figure 4.6 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School A in the 2011 school year. A slightly higher percentage of all students dropped out of school than did students who were economically disadvantaged.

Figure 4.6. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School A in the 2011 school year.

Delineated in Table 4.4 are the 4-year completion rates for students enrolled at School A for the 2009, 2010, and 2011 school years. A trend was present for both groups of students in that the 4-year completion rates showed a steady decrease over this 3-year time period.

Table 4.4

Descriptive Statistics for the 4-Year Completion Rates for Students Enrolled at School A

for the 2009 through the 2011 School Years

School Year	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
2009	87.0%	85.4%
2010	81.0%	79.4%
2011	77.4%	77.0%

Revealed in Figure 4.7 is the trend in the 4-year completion rates across this 3-year time period for students enrolled in School A who were economically disadvantaged. This figure reflects a decrease of 9.6% in the 4-year completion rate of students who were economically disadvantaged from the 2009 through the 2011 school year.
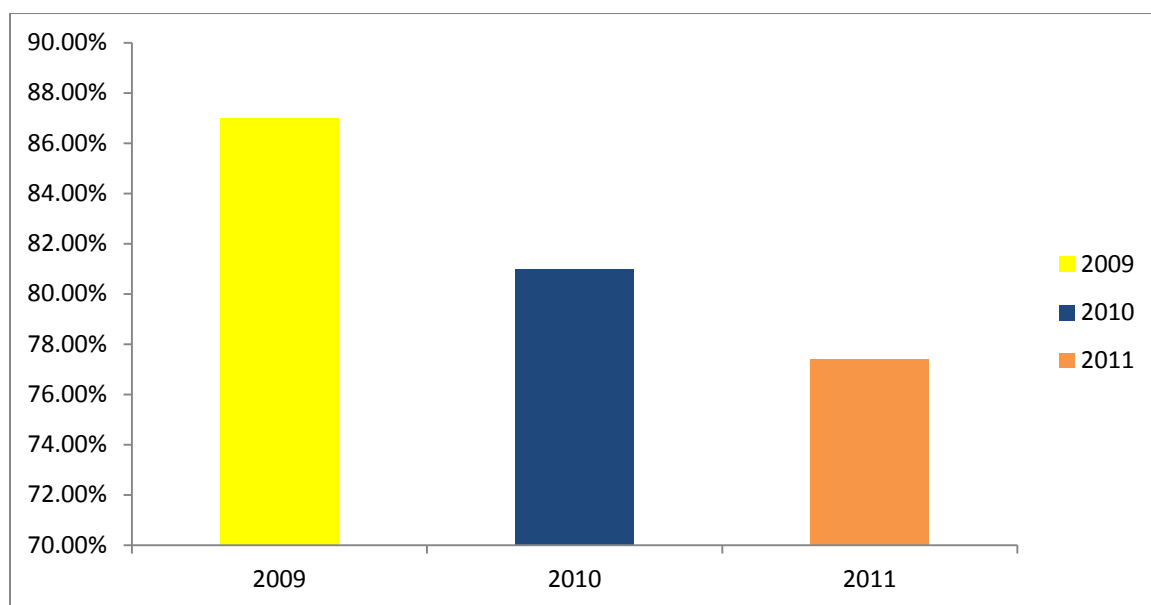
Figure 4.7. Percentages of students who were economically disadvantaged who completed their degrees from School A from the 2009 through the 2011 school years.
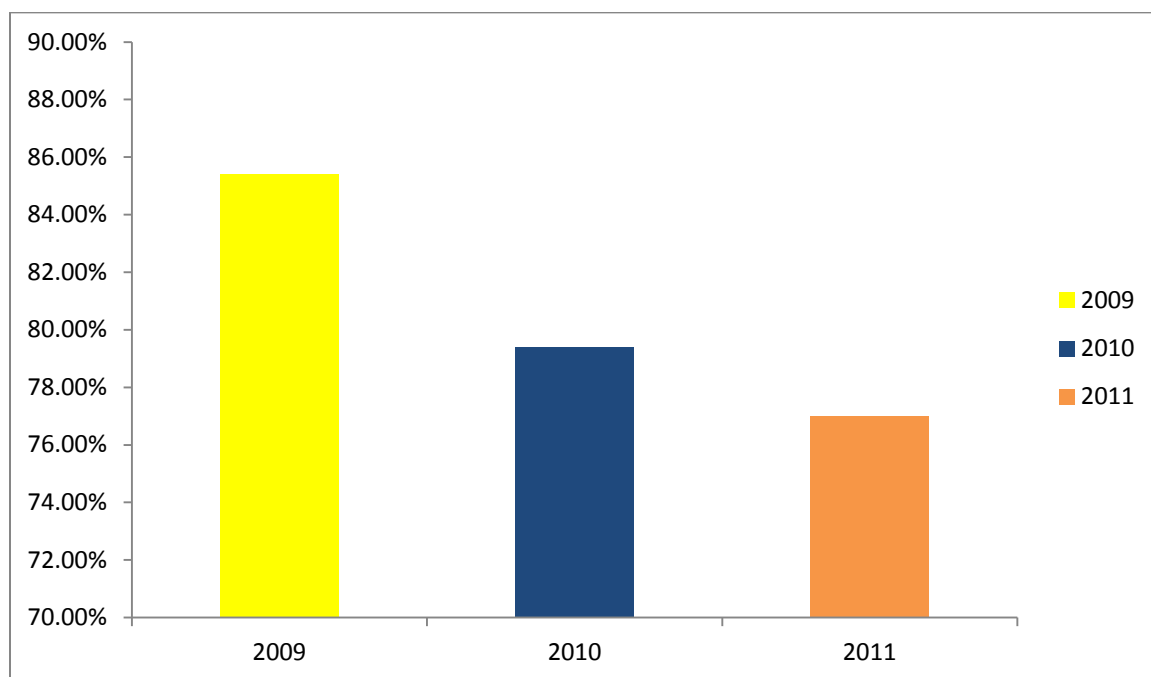
Depicted in Figure 4.8 is the trend in the 4-year completion rates across this 3-year time period for students enrolled in School A who were in the All Students category. This figure reflects a decrease of 8.4% in the 4-year completion rate of all students in School A from the 2009 through the 2011 school year.

Figure 4.8. Percentages of all students who completed their degrees from School A from the 2009 through the 2011 school years.
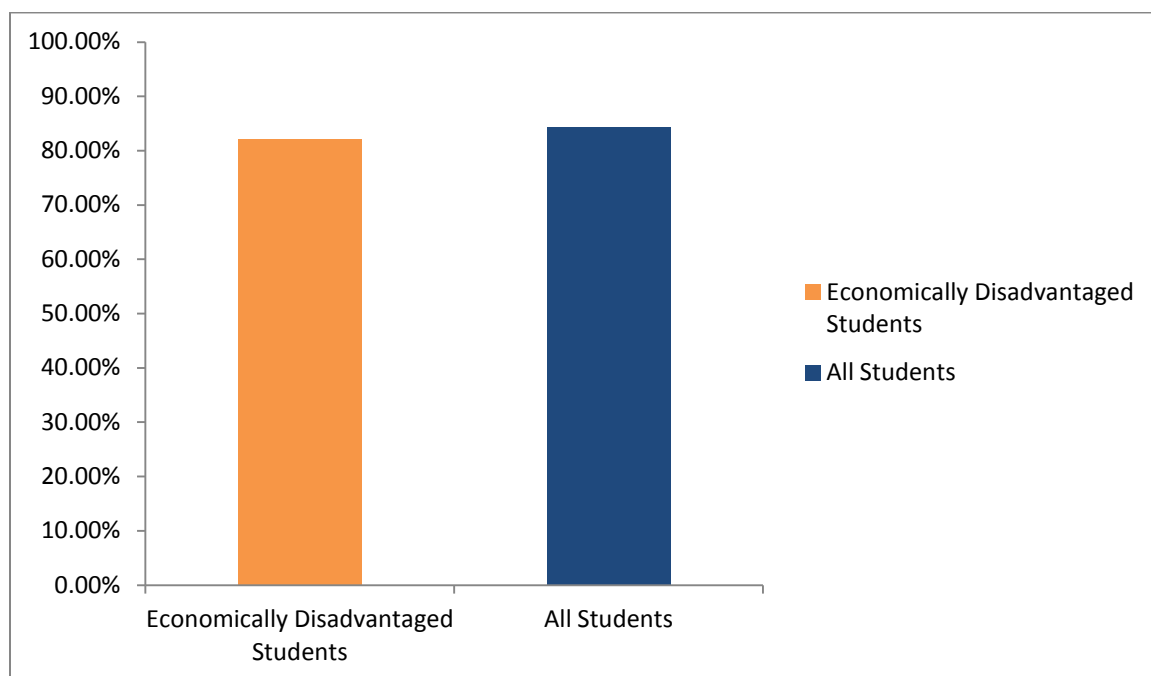
Revealed in Table 4.5 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled at School B for the 2009 school year.

Table 4.5

Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled at School B for the 2009 School Year

Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	82.1%	84.4%
Received GED	0.0%	1.5%
Continuer	5.9%	4.4%
Dropped Out	12.5%	9.7%

Depicted in Figure 4.9 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School B in the 2009 school year. A slightly higher percentage of all students enrolled in School B graduated in the 2009 school year in comparison to students who were economically disadvantaged.

Figure 4.9. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School B in the 2009 school year.

Delineated in Figure 4.10 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School B in the 2009 school year. A higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged dropped out in School B than did all students.
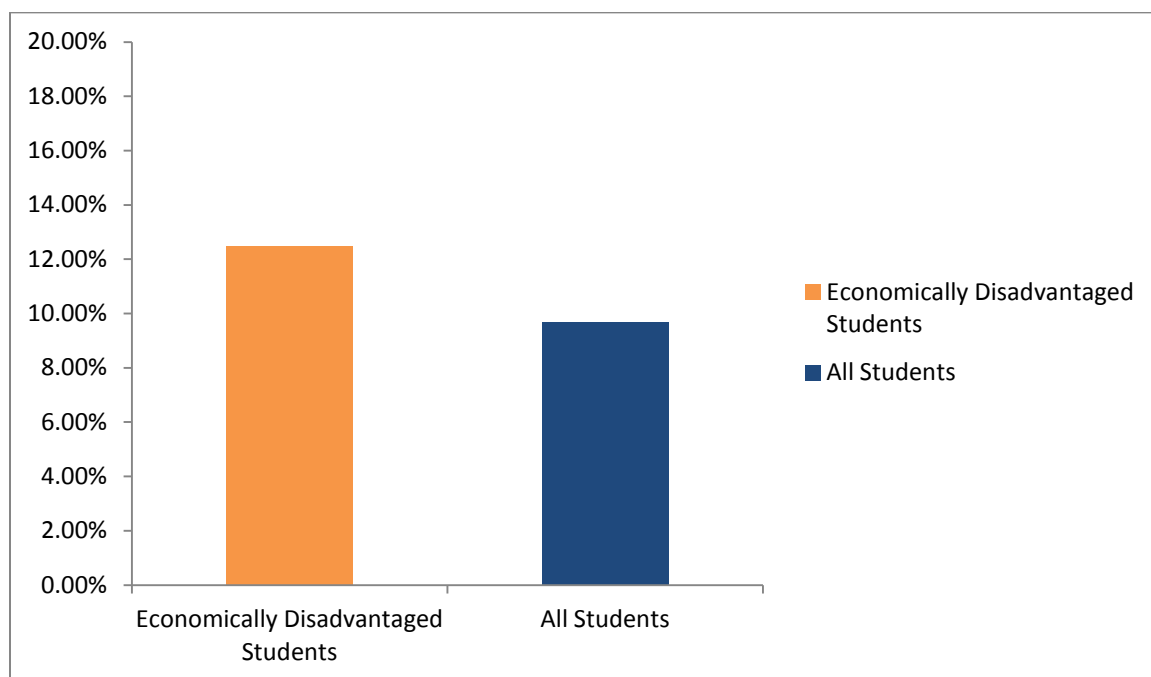
Figure 4.10. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School B in the 2009 school year.

Revealed in Table 4.6 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled at School B for the 2010 school year. The same percentages of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated from School B in the 2010 school year as compared to all students.

Table 4.6

Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled at School B for the 2010 School Year

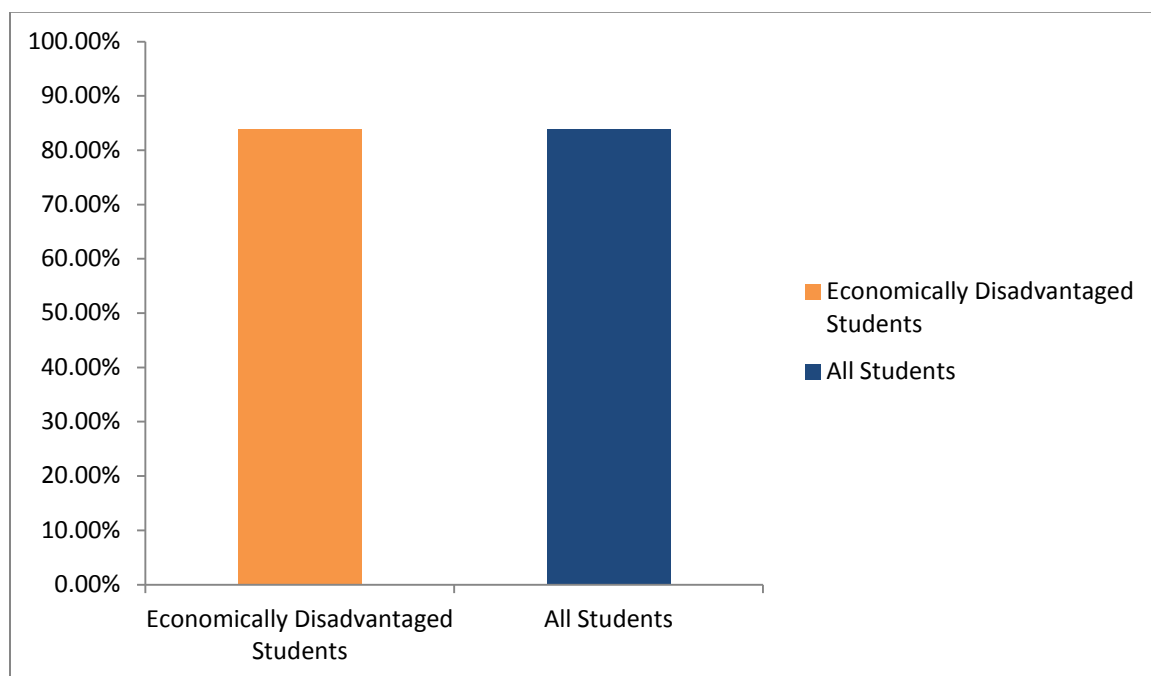| Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	83.9%	83.9%
Received GED	1.1%	1%
Continuer	4.0%	4.5%
Dropped Out	10.9%	10.6%

Depicted in Figure 4.11 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School B in the 2010 school year. The same percentages of both groups of students who were enrolled in School B graduated in the 2010 school year.

Figure 4.11. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School B in the 2010 school year.

Shown in Figure 4.12 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School B in the 2010 school year. A slightly higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged dropped out of school at School B than did all students.

Figure 4.12. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School B in the 2010 school year.

Presented in Table 4.7 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled at School B for the 2011 school year. Similar to the 2009 school year, a slightly higher percentage of all students graduated from School B than did students who were economically disadvantaged. Also commensurate with the previous two school years, a higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged dropped out of school at School B than did all students.

Table 4.7

Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled at School B for the 2011 School Year

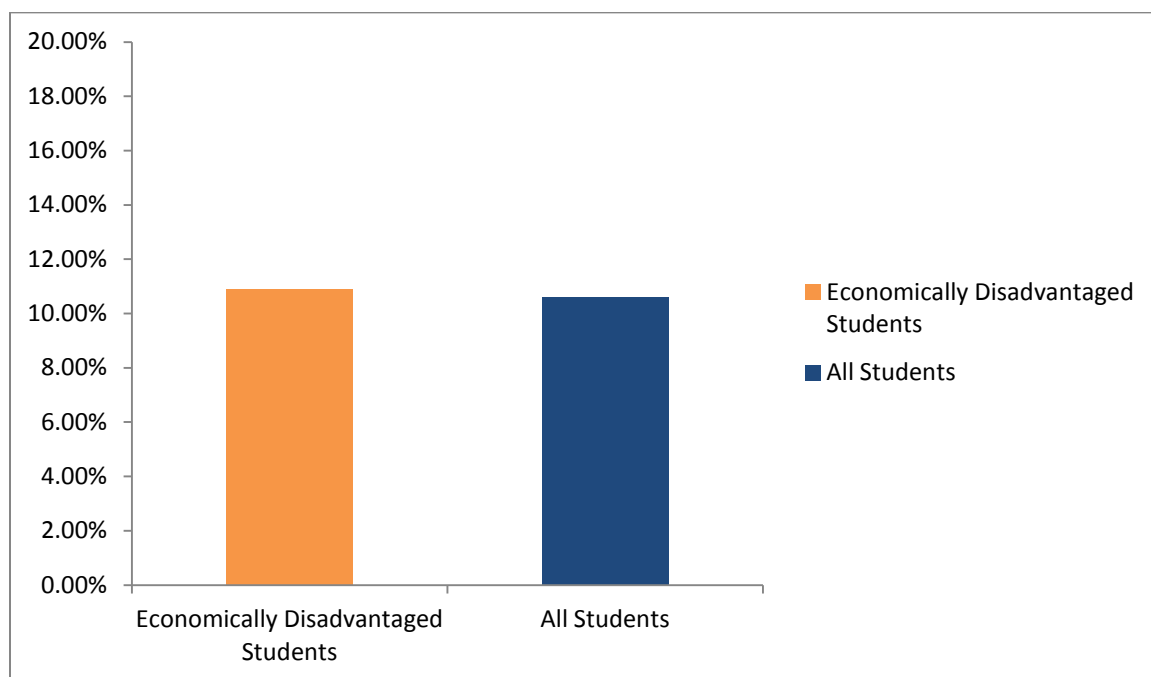| Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	86.3%	87.3%
Received GED	0.5%	0.7%
Continuer	2.3%	3.6%
Dropped Out	10.9%	8.4%

Revealed in Figure 4.13 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School B in the 2011 school year. A slightly lower percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated in the 2011 school year in comparison to all students who were enrolled at School B.

Figure 4.13. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from School B in the 2011 school year.

Shown in Figure 4.14 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School B in the 2011 school year. A lower percentage of all students dropped out of school from School B than did students who were economically disadvantaged.
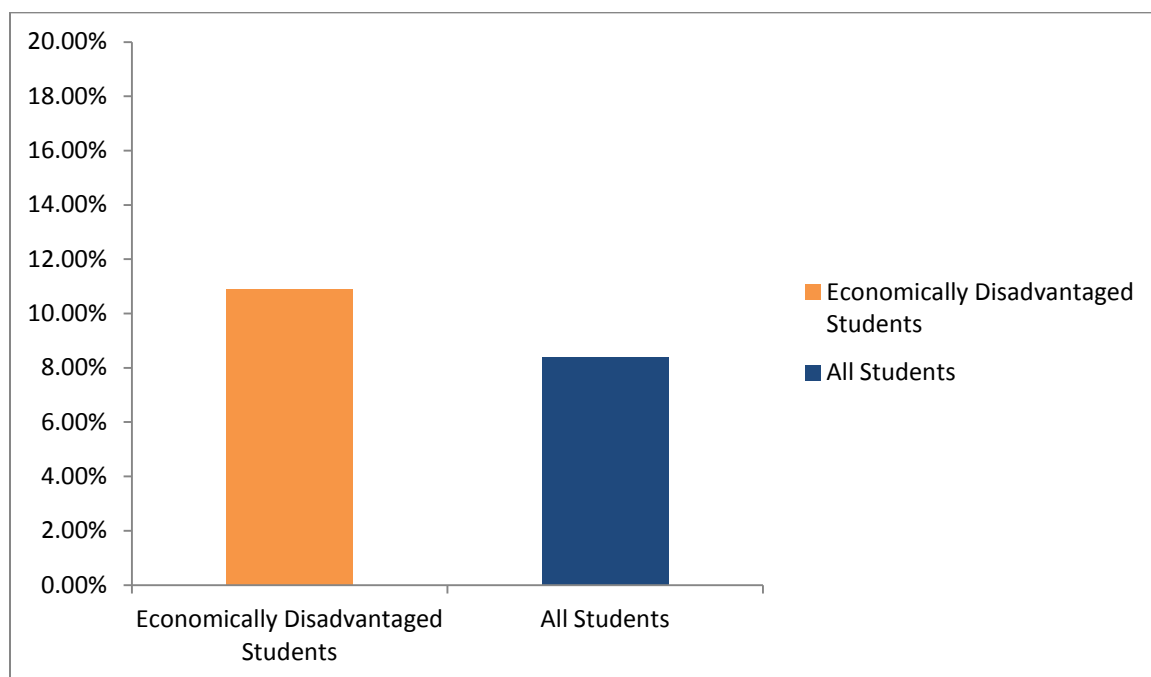
Figure 4.14. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from School B in the 2011 school year.
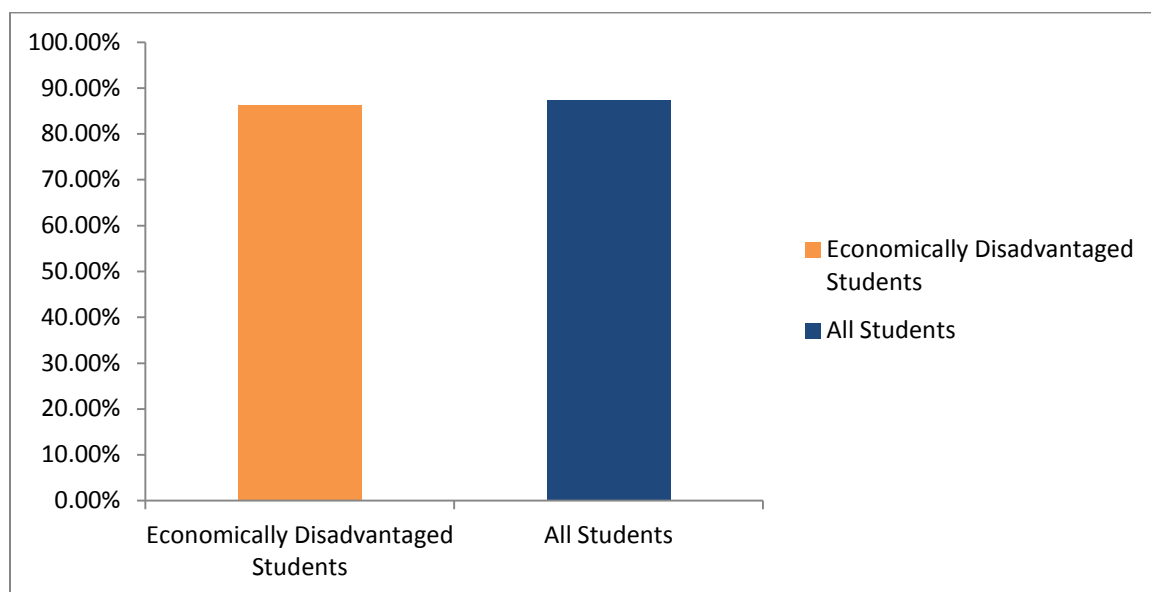
Delineated in Table 4.8 are the 4-year completion rates for students enrolled at School B for the 2009, 2010, and 2011 school years. A trend was present for both groups of students in that the 4-year completion rates showed a steady increase over this 3-year time period.

Table 4.8

Descriptive Statistics for the 4-Year Completion Rates for Students Enrolled at School B

for the 2009 through the 2011 School Years

School Year	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
2009	82.1%	84.4%
2010	83.9%	83.9%
2011	86.3%	87.3%

Revealed in Figure 4.15 is the trend in the 4-year completion rates across this 3-year time period for students enrolled in School B who were economically disadvantaged. This figure reflects an increase of 4.2% in the 4-year completion rate of students who were economically disadvantaged from the 2009 through the 2011 school year.
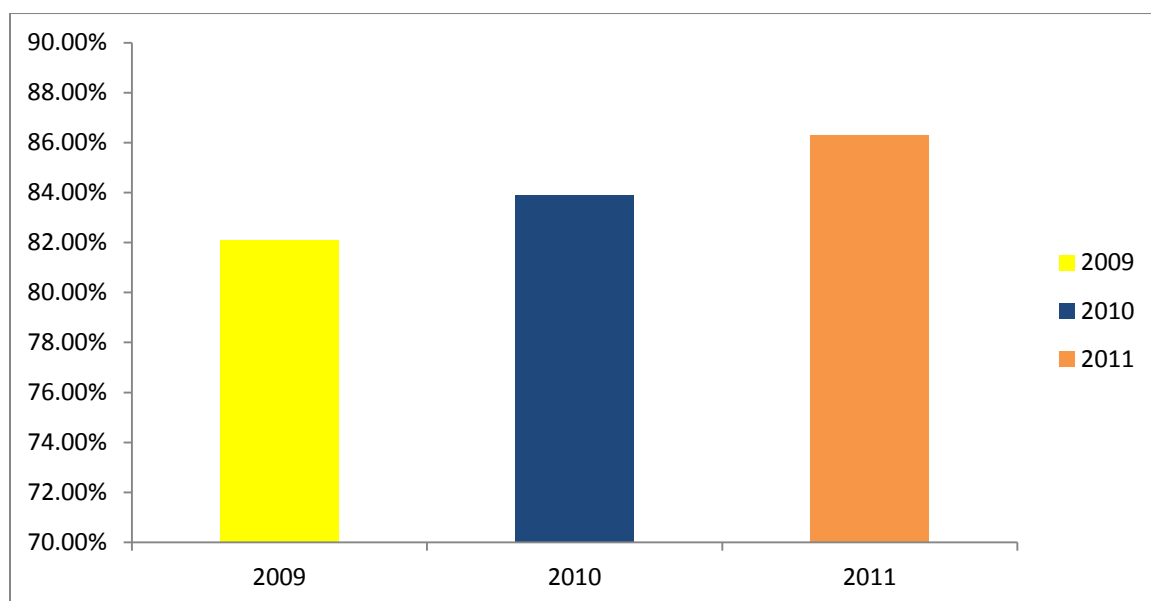
Figure 4.15. Percentages of students who were economically disadvantaged who completed their degrees from School B from the 2009 through the 2011 school years.
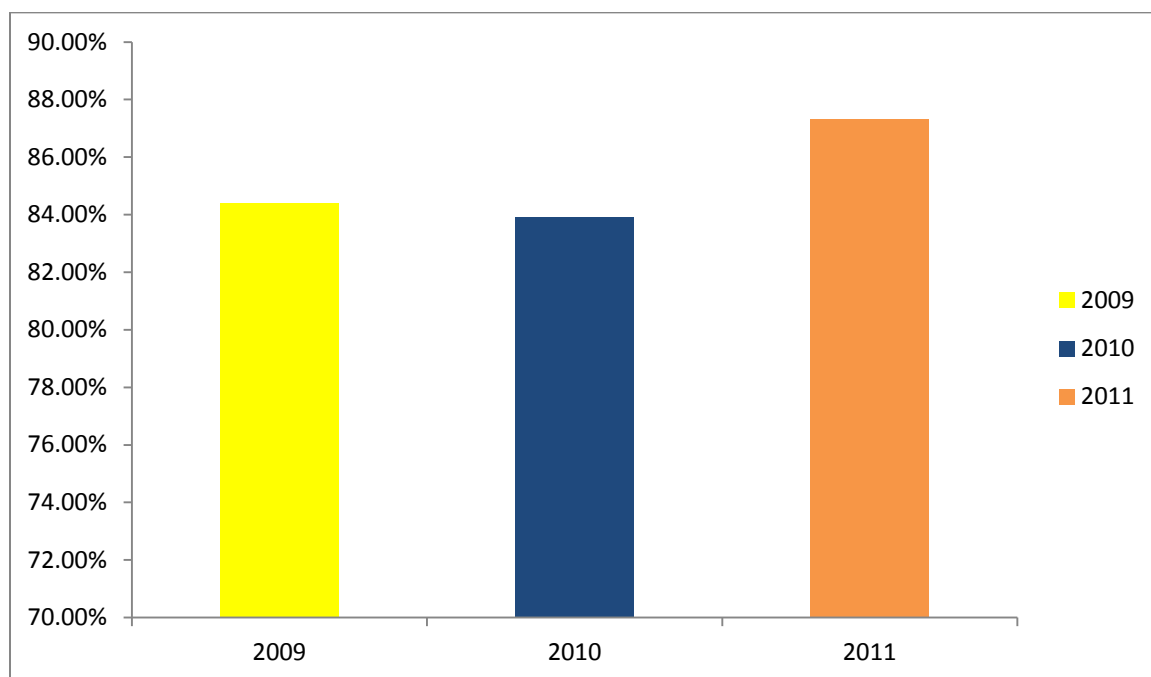
Depicted in Figure 4.16 is the trend in the 4-year completion rates across this 3-year time period for students enrolled in School B who were in the All Students category. This figure reflects an increase of 2.9% in the 4-year completion rate of all students in School B from the 2009 through the 2011 school year.

Figure 4.16. Percentages of all students who completed their degrees from School B from the 2009 through the 2011 school years.

Next, descriptive statistics were calculated for School C, with respect to continuously enrolled students. As discussed previously, School C is a high school in the district that is a career academy. As such, the data obtained from this school differs from the information presented for Schools A and B. Presented in Table 4.9 are the numbers of Full Day All Students who graduated in the 2009, 2010, and 2011 school years from School C, as well as the numbers of students who were Full Day and Transfer economically disadvantaged students who graduated. It is noted that there are more economically disadvantaged students who are Full Day and Transfer students at School C

than All Students who remain at School C all Day. More "advantaged" students stay at School C all day.

Table 4.9

Descriptive Statistics for Students Who Graduated from School C for the 2009, 2010, and 2011 School Years

School Year	Economically Disadvantaged *(Full Day and Transfer)*	All Full Day Students
2009	248	192
2010	290	210
2011	257	185

Depicted below in Figure 4.17 is that more students who were economically disadvantaged graduated from School C in the 2009 school year than did students who were not economically disadvantaged.
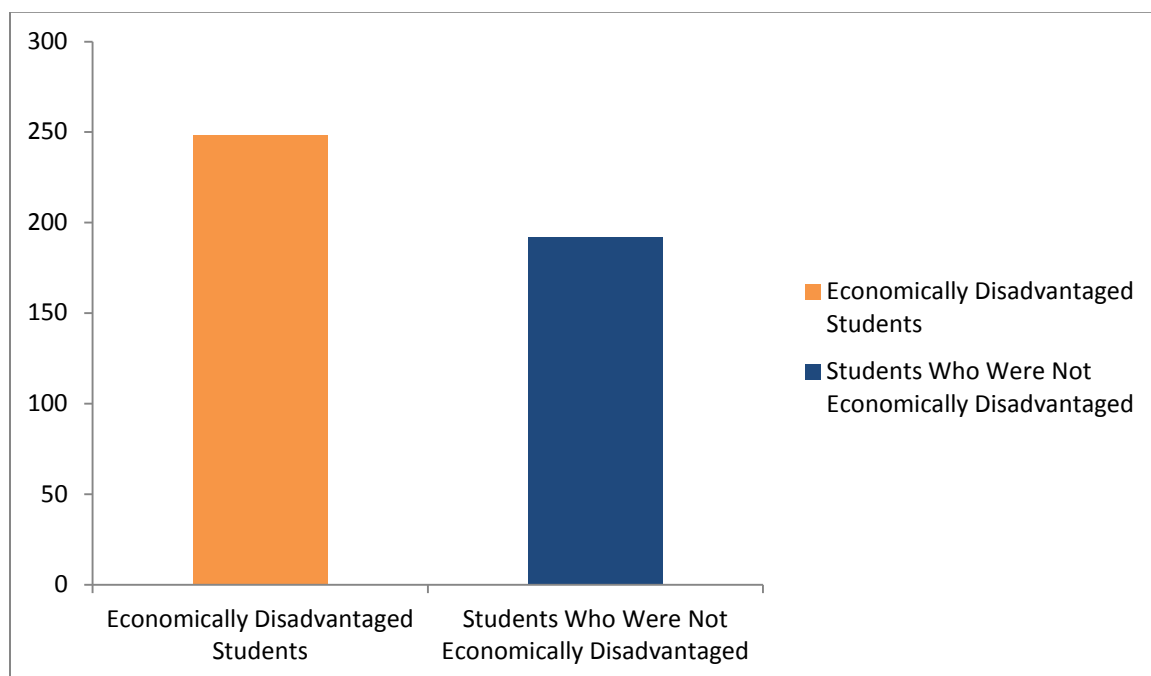
Figure 4.17. Number of students who were economically disadvantaged and who were not economically disadvantaged who graduated from School C in the 2009 school year.

Shown in Figure 4.18 below is that more students who were economically disadvantaged graduated from School C in the 2010 school year than did students who were not economically disadvantaged.
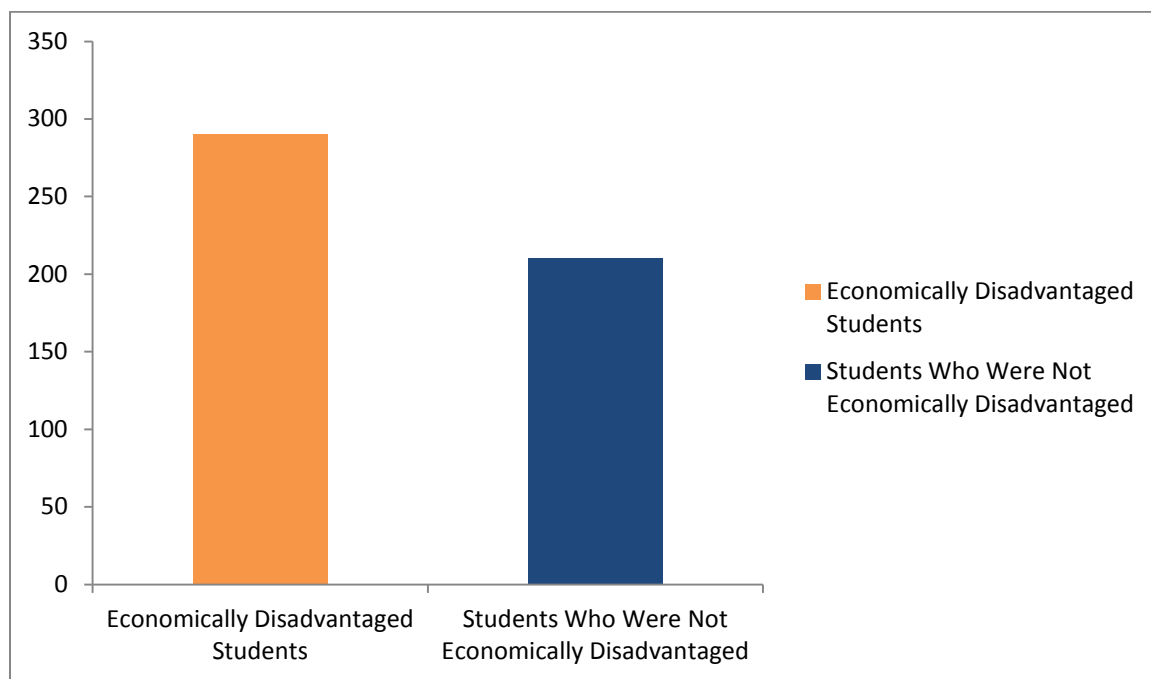
Figure 4.18. Number of students who were economically disadvantaged and who were not economically disadvantaged who graduated from School C in the 2010 school year.

Revealed in Figure 4.19 below is that more students who were economically disadvantaged graduated from School C in the 2011 school year than did students who were not economically disadvantaged. Results were congruent for School C graduates across these three school years.
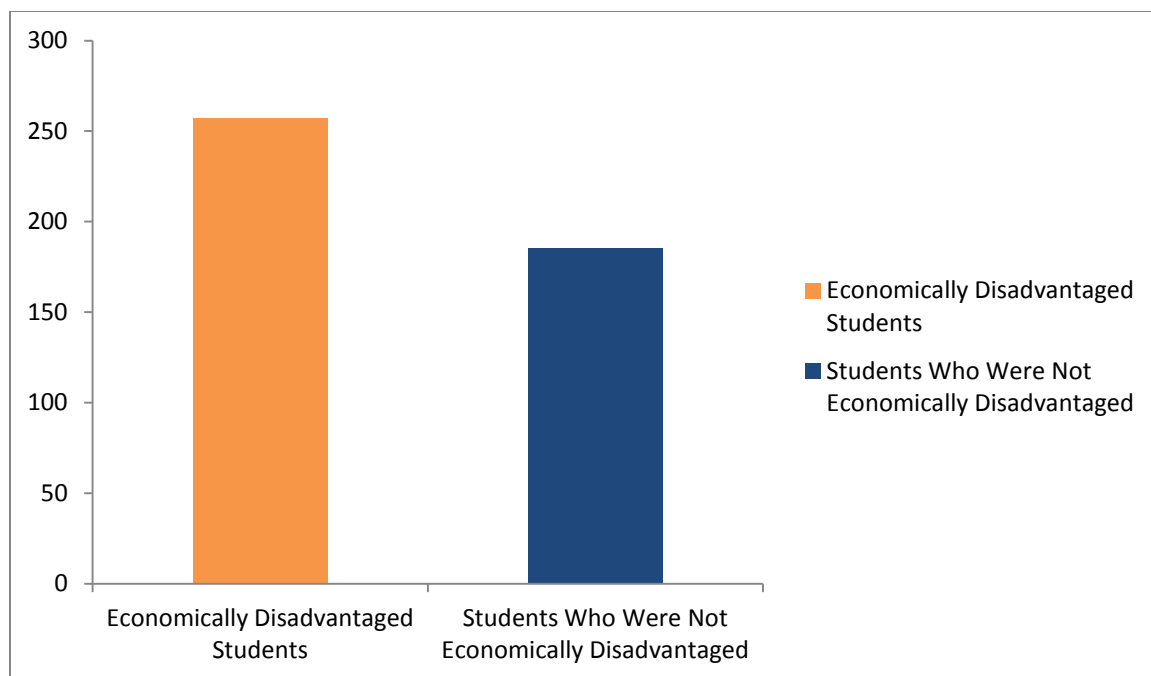
Figure 4.19. Number of students who were economically disadvantaged and who were not economically disadvantaged who graduated from School C in the 2011 school year.

Revealed in Table 4.10 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled in this school district for the 2009 school year. Percentages are provided for students who graduated; who received their GED; who continued on in school; and for students who dropped out of school.

Table 4.10

Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled in the School District for the 2009 School Year

Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	83.4%	82.8%
Received GED	0.4%	1.0%
Continuer	5.4%	5.9%
Dropped Out	10.8%	10.2%

Depicted in Figure 4.20 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from this school district in the 2009 school year. A slightly lower percentage of all students enrolled in this school district graduated in the 2009 school year in comparison to students who were economically disadvantaged.

Figure 4.20. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from this school district in the 2009 school year.

Delineated in Figure 4.21 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from this school district in the 2009 school year. A slightly higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged dropped out from this school district than did all students.

Figure 4.21. Percentages of all students and students who were economically
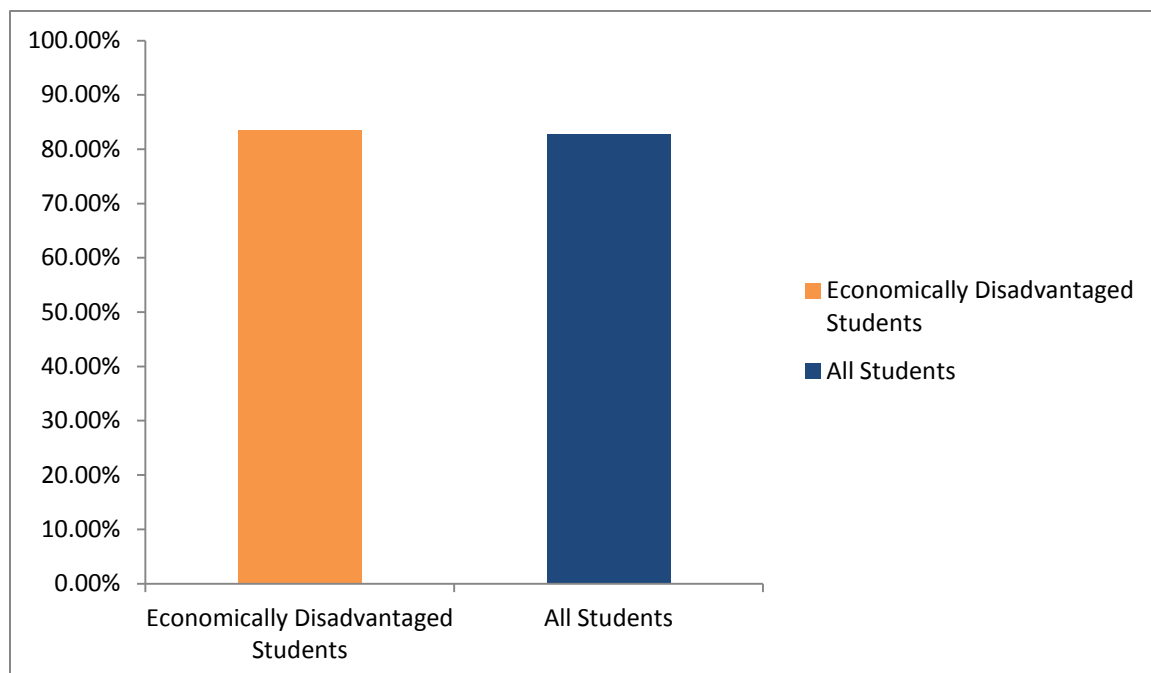
disadvantaged who dropped out in the 2009 school year.

Revealed in Table 4.11 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled

in this school district for the 2010 school year. A higher percentage of students who were

economically disadvantaged graduated from this school district in the 2010 school year as

compared to all students.

Table 4.11

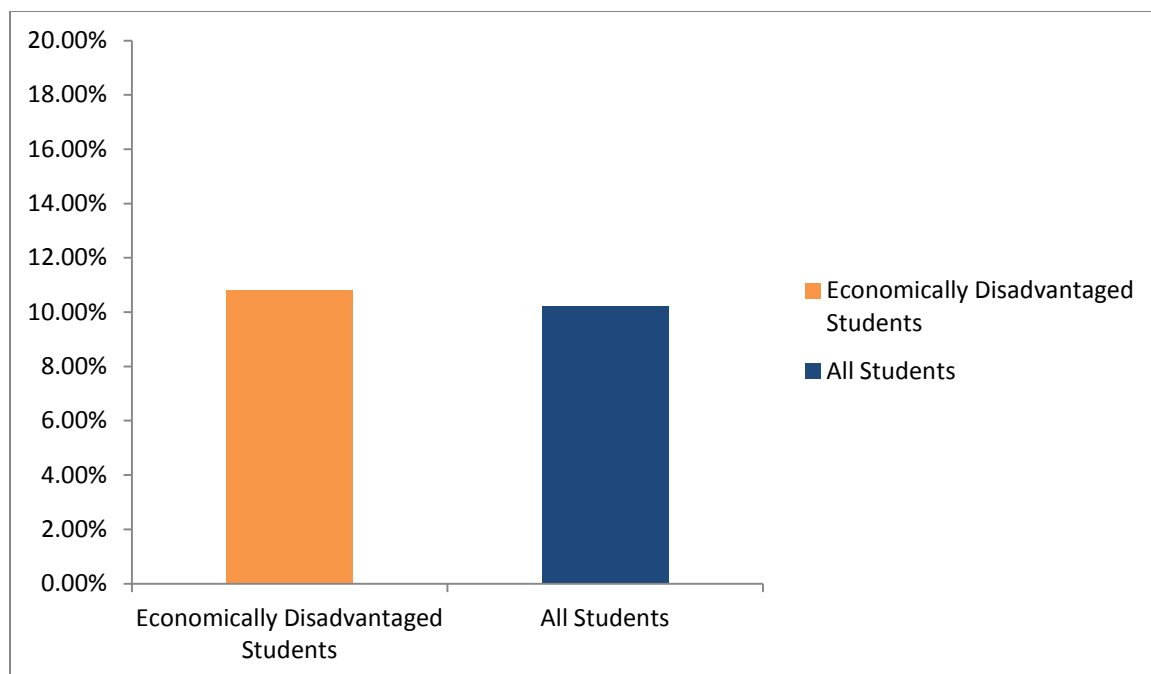*Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled in the School District for the 2010 School*

Year

Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	83.4%	81.6%
Received GED	0.6%	0.6%
Continuer	5.4%	5.6%
Dropped Out	10.6%	12.1%

Depicted in Figure 4.22 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from this school district in the 2010 school year. A higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated from this school district than did all students in the 2010 school year.

Figure 4.22. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated from this school district in the 2010 school year.

Shown in Figure 4.23 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from this school district in the 2010 school year. A lower percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged dropped out of school than did all students in this school district.

Figure 4.23. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out in the 2010 school year.

Presented in Table 4.12 are the student status characteristics for students enrolled in this school district for the 2011 school year. Similar to the 2009 and 2010 school years, a slightly higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated in this school district than did all students.

Table 4.12

Descriptive Statistics for Students Enrolled in the School District for the 2011 School Year

Student Status	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
Graduated	82.7%	82.3%
Received GED	0.2%	0.4%
Continuer	3.9%	4.4%
Dropped Out	13.2%	13.0%

Revealed in Figure 4 - 24 below are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated in this school district in the 2011 school year. A slightly higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged graduated in the 2011 school year in this school district in comparison to all students.
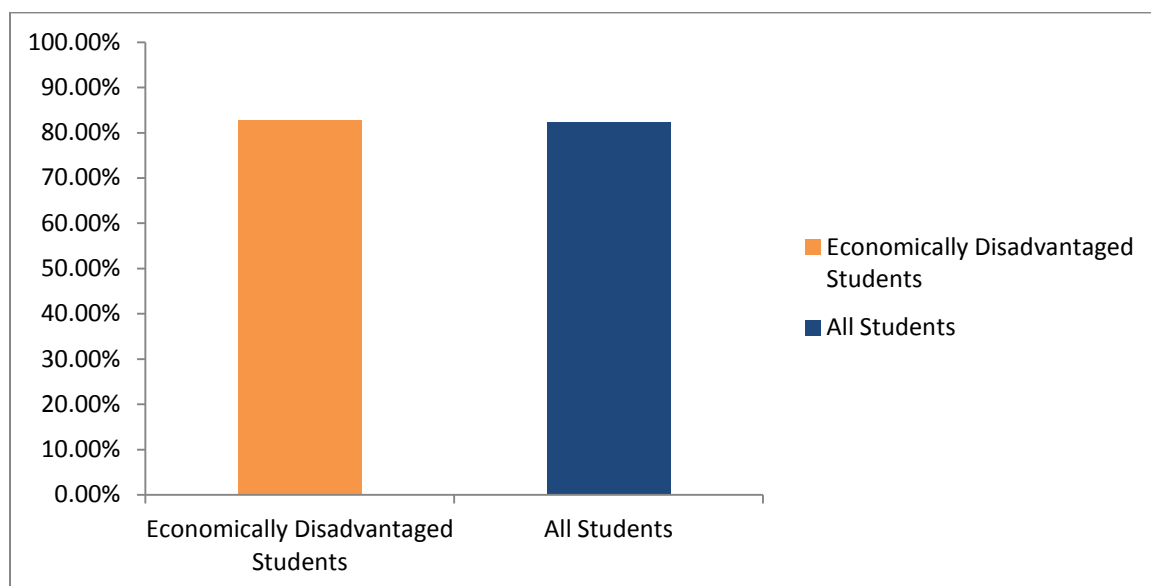
Figure 4.24. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who graduated in the 2011 school year.
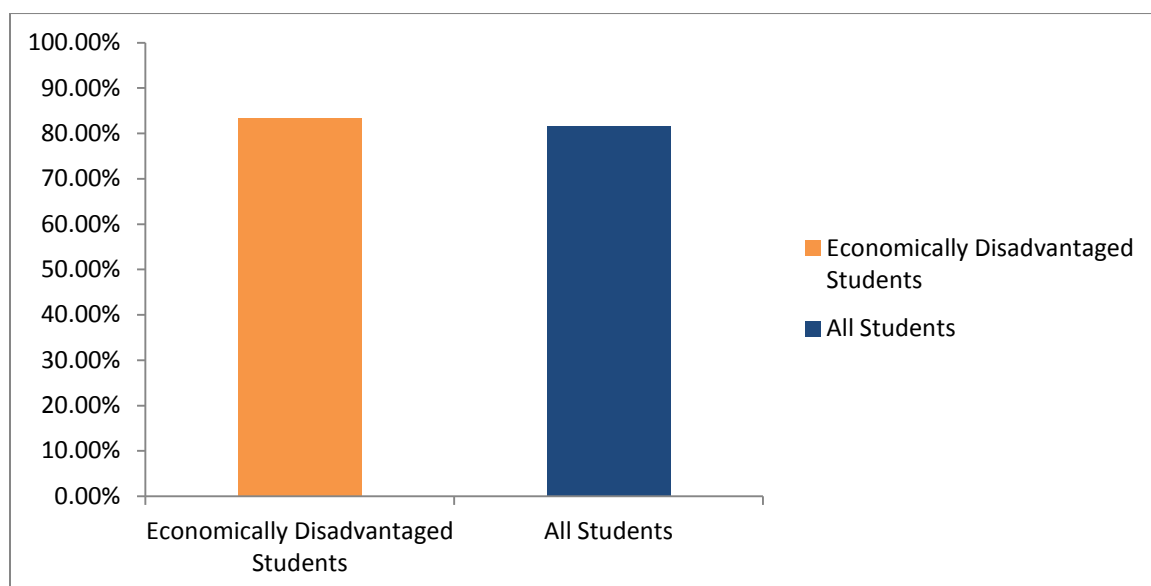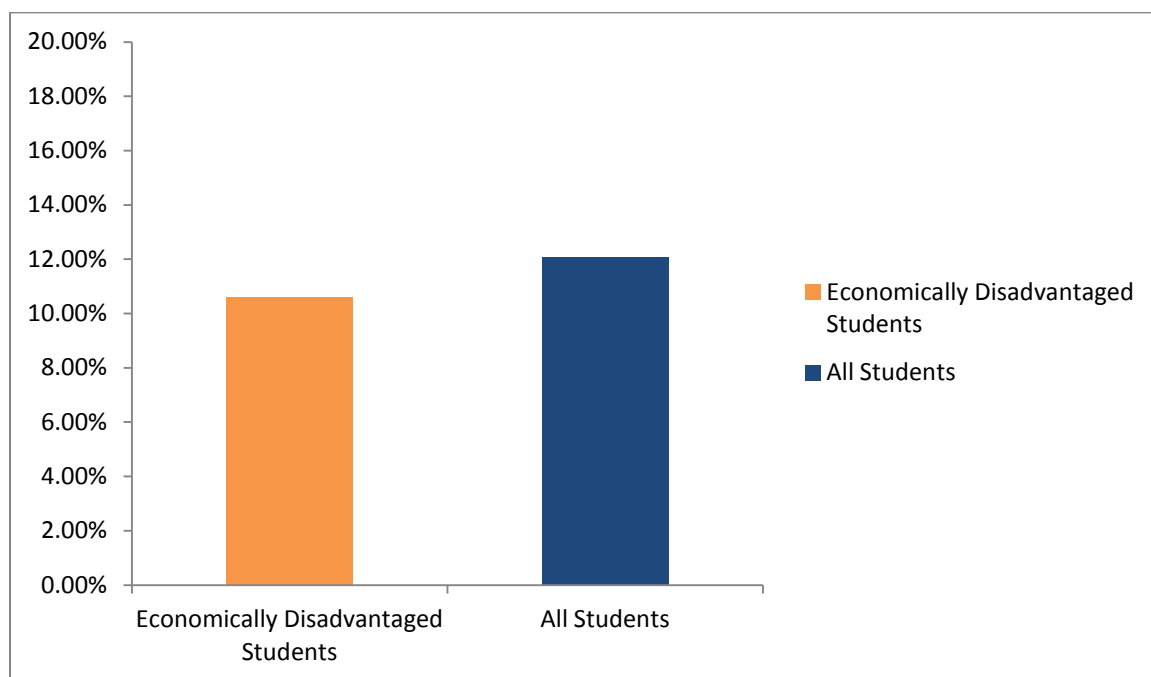
Shown in Figure 4.25 are the percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out from this school district in the 2011 school year. Similar percentages of both groups of students dropped out of school.
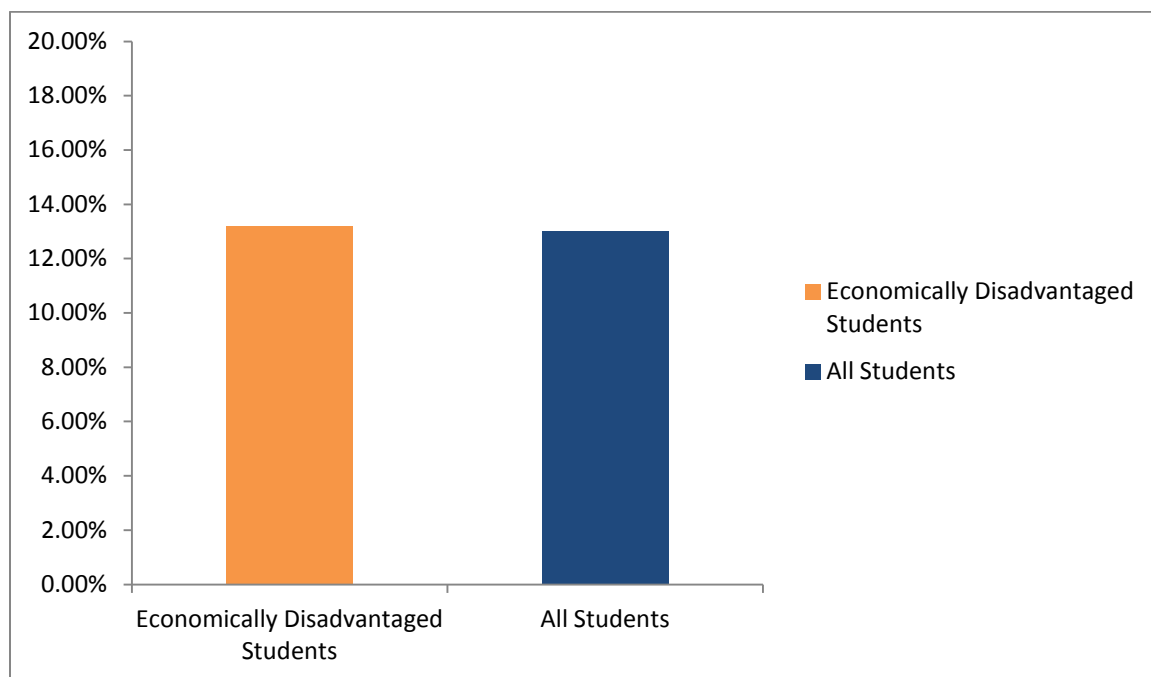
Figure 4.25. Percentages of all students and students who were economically disadvantaged who dropped out in the 2011 school year.

Delineated in Table 4.13 are the 4-year completion rates for students enrolled in this school district for the 2009, 2010, and 2011 school years. A trend was present for both groups of students in that the 4-year completion rates showed a slight decrease over this 3-year time period.

Table 4.13

Descriptive Statistics for the 4-Year Completion Rates for Students Enrolled in this

School District for the 2009 through the 2011 School Years

School Year	Economically Disadvantaged	All Students
2009	83.4%	82.8%
2010	83.4%	81.6%
2011	82.7%	82.3%

Revealed in Figure 4.26 is the trend in the 4-year completion rates across this 3-year time period for students who were economically disadvantaged. This figure reflects a slight decrease of 0.7% in the 4-year completion rate of students who were economically disadvantaged from the 2009 through the 2011 school year for this school district.
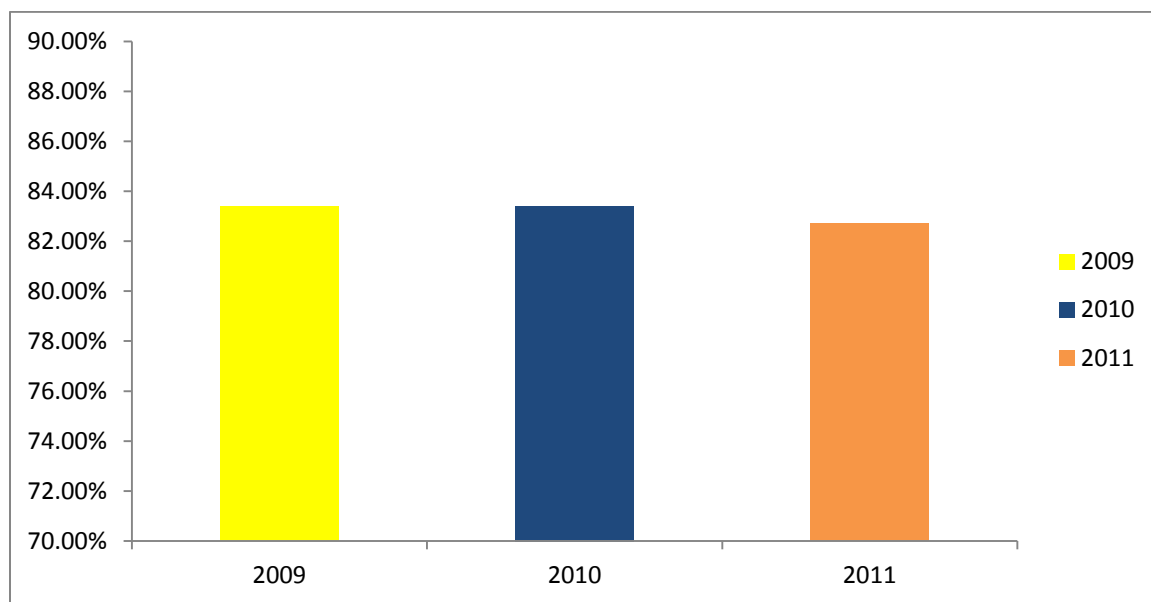
Figure 4.26. Percentages of students who were economically disadvantaged who completed their degrees in this school district from the 2009 through the 2011 school years.

Depicted in Figure 4.27 is the trend in the 4-year completion rates across this 3-year time period for students who were in the all students category. This figure reflects a slight decrease of 0.5% in the 4-year completion rate of all students in this school district from the 2009 through the 2011 school year.
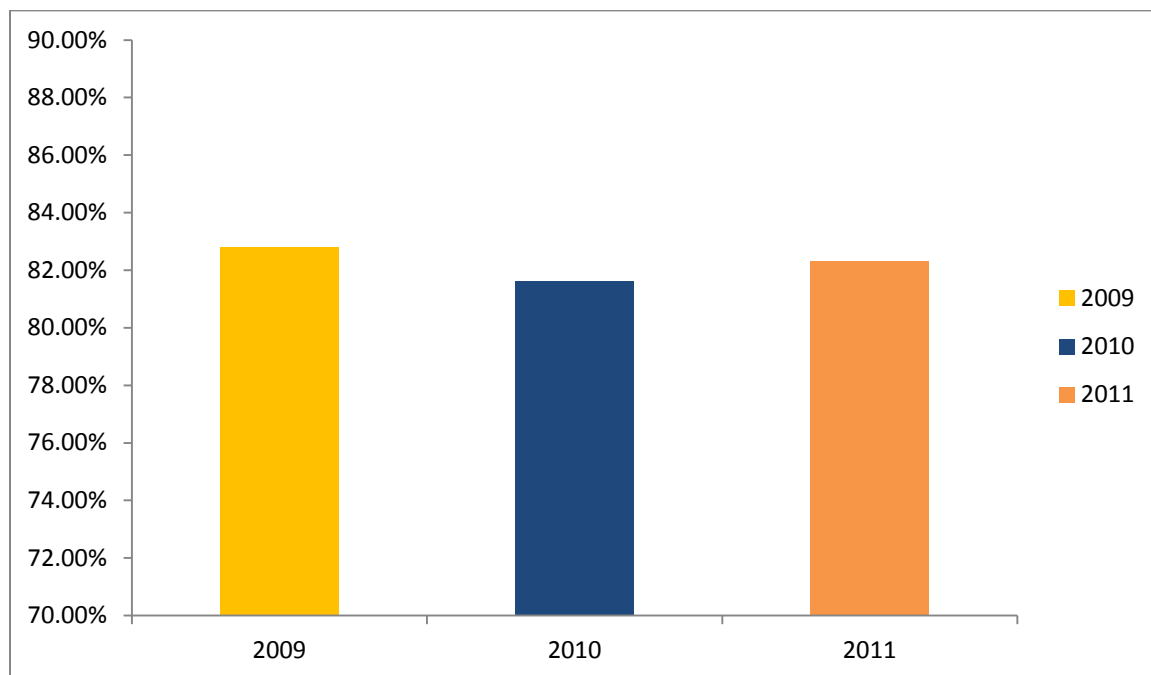
Figure 4.27. Percentages of all students who completed their degrees in this school district from the 2009 through the 2011 school years.

Next, qualitative analyses of the high school principal interviews are provided.

The interview questions correlate to the research questions of the study in the following manner:

Research Question	Corresponding Principal Interview Question
1	2
1	4
2	1
2	3
2	6
3	5
3	7

With respect to the interview question of "*What has the completion rate trend been at your campus for the last three years?*", responses were as follows for each principal:

Principal A Response

"I feel that it is pretty stable. My campus has held a steady completion rate for the last three years."

Principal B Response

"I know that my completion rate has met all state and federal standards."

Principal C Response

"I know that my completion rate is over 95% in every category. We have a high completion rate every year."

Regarding the second interview question of "*How does the completion rate for the economically disadvantaged students on your campus differ from the completion rate for the subgroups as well as All Students"?,* principals responded as follows:

Principal A Response

"I know that it is lower than my other subgroups because of the factors that we both know that exist."

Principal B Response

"I focus on the completion rate of all students and do not differentiate whether they are economically disadvantaged or not."

Principal C Response

"I feel that there is no significant difference in the completion rates of my subgroups."

Concerning the third interview question of "*What beliefs do you have as a high school principal that have influenced your practice with economically disadvantaged students?"*, principals responded in the following manner:

Principal A Response

"My concern is for all students – based upon interactions with parents, students, and teachers – I know that economically disadvantaged students have more odds to overcome – We must provide supports. We have done so on my campus.

Principal B Response

"I believe that all students can complete high school. Our campus gives several options to students who get off track. I believe all students should have the same opportunity."

Principal C Response

"My belief is all students should graduate and graduate college or career ready. We need to find out the interests of students. Building relationships does matter in helping students want to graduate and if we can help them find a career interest – it is critical to have a career focus and support systems – Economically disadvantaged students are becoming the norm."

With respect to the next interview question of "*What are the principal leadership decisions you have made regarding school institutional processes that have positively impacted the student completion rate for economically disadvantaged students at your school?*", the following statements were made by the three principals:

Principal A Response

"Creating smaller learning communities, teams and Houses are several of the main institutional processes we have implemented. We focus more on the progress of individual students through counselors, mentors, and individual teachers. We are moving to academy clusters in the coming year.

Principal B Response

"We began Houses as a smaller learning community strategy three years ago. We began with a freshman House and now the entire school is in Houses. This enables teachers to know their students well.

Principal C Response

"We began our school with a career academy focus – we have listened to alumni and what their needs are - those who go to college/world of work to help adjust what we do as a school. We make reading and writing a priority in every class and in response to that, we have developed the Capstone project (12th grade research) and Cornerstone (11th – research and Stepping Stone (10th – research) - Internships round out our school program and are especially meaningful for our economically disadvantaged students. The internships provide our students with opportunities to work in the real job market), every senior mentors a 10th grader. We have had promising results."

All three school leaders utilized the smaller learning community concept in some way either through the House or Academy approach. All three principals concurred that the personalization afforded to students through the smaller learning community approach was foundational to the success of high school completion for economically disadvantaged students.

Regarding the next interview question "*What specific strategies do you use to establish a desire for high school completion for the economically disadvantaged students on your campus?*", principals provided the following statements:

Principal A Response

"Counselors meet with the students every marking period, senior specific plans for graduation opportunities, and announcements. With credit recovery students we give weekly updates so that they can see that graduation is in sight."

Principal B Response

We really work with students and parents. We have our counselors, including our college/career counselor work with students who will be the first in their family going to college specifically. We help these students with FAFSA , applications, resumes, essays, and reference letters. We work hard to mark sure these students understand class rank and scholarship opportunities.

Principal C Response

"We keep our students looking forward academically through a career focus, guest speakers, field trips, shadowing, Virtual School, and other opportunities. Student competition, display of student work, and peer observations help our students do their best.

Concerning the next interview question, "*What are the relationships between your decisions regarding school institutional processes and the actual high school completion rate of the economically disadvantaged students on your campus?*", the following responses were given by the three high school principals:

Principal A Response

"There is a direct correlation between the strategies we use and a higher completion rate for our students. Our counselors target the neediest students and have them on an academic contract for high school completion. I feel that the decisions I have made regarding the programs on my campus have been sound decisions. My school is increasing in the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in our student population."

Principal B Response

"We choose school wide programs for all students but we do have different interventions for those who need them. I believe that you should have the same expectations for all students."

Principal C Response

"Everything we did helped in some way. Mock interviews - Counseling and business partners are key to keeping education relevant for students. Real world application allows us to keep standards high."

The three high school principals provided the following responses to this interview question: *What are the emerging leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that you feel are being or could be implemented to increase the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students at your campus? What evidence do you have?*

Principal A Response

"Our campus has had success with our students working with the local community college. The local community college tutors high school students at the college campus. This is an incentive for our economically disadvantaged students and they can see the high school/college connection. They see possibilities for themselves. 100% of the student pilot group who had an ARC Mentor graduated on time. These economically disadvantaged students were selected from the campus group."

Principal B Response

"Our campus has embraced the smaller learning community concept and we are seeing the benefits of being able to diagnose student deficiencies at the onset and create an action plan for each student. We will increase the use of online learning for credit recovery because the results have been promising."

Principal C Response

"I would like to increase high school teacher staff development effectiveness in collaboration with the local community college – alignment with college lesson design. We are looking to research possible grant and scholarship opportunities for dropout students that are 5 or less credits behind to regain those credits and start earning college credit. We will increase externship and job shadowing opportunities."

My staff utilizes the following strategies to engage students in learning
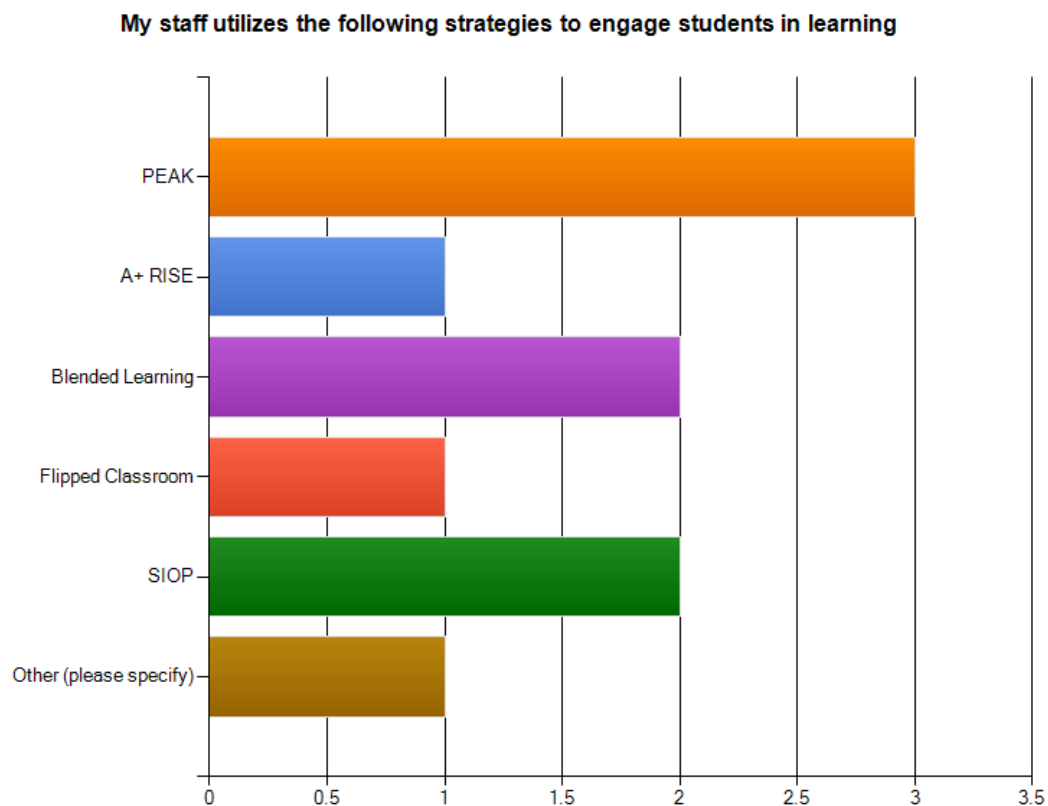
Figure 4.28. Staff strategies to engage students in learning.

Figure 4.28 above represents the different types of professional development chosen by the school leaders of study to be implemented in their schools to increase student success and support the completion rate of students.

My staff uses the following framework to personalize the learning environment
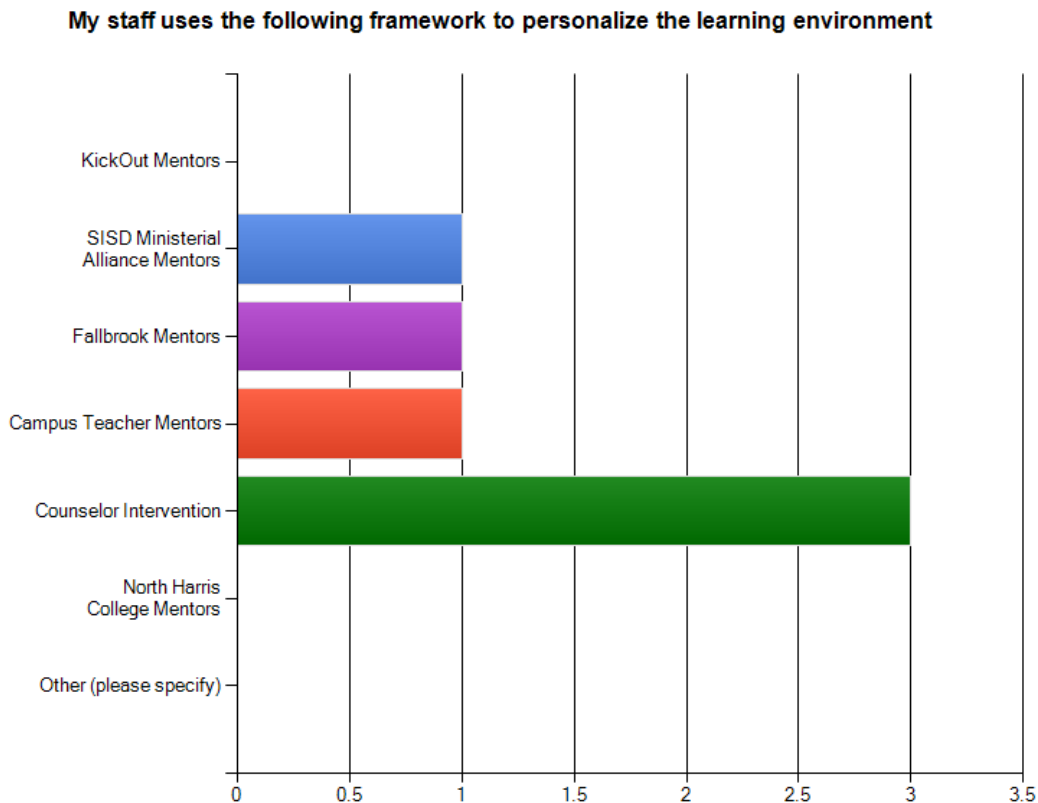
Figure 4.29. Staff framework to personalize the learning environment.

Figure 4.29 above represents the relationship building outreach programs chosen by the school leaders of study to increase the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students. Principals of the schools of study had used the Capturing Kids Hearts method in their schools at varying degrees of capacity, but all for multiple years ranging from planning for implementation to implementation to sustaining the initiative.

All three school leaders of study utilized the relationship building of the Capturing Kids Hearts Program in their schools. The principals revealed in their interviews that they saw value and results from students and staff with this program.

The study of three schools from one school district and the three principals of those high schools was completed to add to the body of knowledge regarding principal

decisions that positively impact the completion of economically disadvantaged students. The 4-year completion rate of the schools in the school district in this study were tracked from the 2008-2009 school year to the 2010-2011 school year for the 4-year completion rates of economically disadvantaged students as well as for the 4-year completion rate of All Students. Additionally, the school district 4-year completion rate during that time frame was analyzed. The data represented the archived high school completion rate data obtained from the district of study and validated online from the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System for 2009, 2010, and 2011. Qualitative principal interviews using the narrative inquiry method were also completed to provide additional insight into the research questions.

Through the research of the three high school principals and the three schools of study, it is conclusive that principal decisions do have an impact on the completion rate of all students, including economically disadvantaged students. This study's findings also show that there is a variance in the type of program or process implemented at each high school. The principal interviews revealed the depth of knowledge of each high school principal regarding the topic of study and what impact their decisions have had when compared with the completion rate of their students for a three year trend. The principal interview response rate was 100%. It should be noted that none of the principal respondents wished to be tape recorded, but the transcription of each interview was made available for review. A great deal of respect and value was paid regarding the input of the principals of study for volunteering to be a part of this dissertation study. Their input added value to the quantitative data and tells the story of the academic progress of their

students as well as their schools. While their input was different, there were themes of

similarity which are revealed in my findings in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to examine the principal leadership decisions regarding the processes and practices that positively impact the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students. Today's effective high school leader understands that students have needs that are different from the past and that many students from poverty do not learn well in the traditional structures or curricula which still exist in many high schools. The impact of principal decision- making behaviors appears easiest in the early years in schools. Research shows that principals' impact is more pronounced at the lower grades, particularly at the elementary school level, with a subsequent decreasing impact as students progress from middle school to high school (Leithwood et al., 2004; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010; The Wallace Foundation, 2012). As a result of this knowledge, it is most important that high school principal leadership decision making be examined for its positive impact on the completion rate of our fastest growing subgroup – namely, economically disadvantaged students. The relationship between the archival AEIS data of the high schools of study for a three-year period and the self-reports of the high school principals of those same three high schools through their responses to a structured interview protocol which supported the research questions was employed to add to the body of knowledge on this important topic for school leaders. A mixed-method strategy was employed to delve beyond the numbers to reveal the beliefs and practices of the current school leaders at these schools. The qualitative and quantitative data obtained provided evidence for the findings and helped draw conclusions for this study. The purpose of this chapter is to reveal and summarize the findings of the study which were

driven by the research questions and draw conclusions to help fill the gap in the research regarding principal decision making processes and practices that positively impact the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students.

Research Questions

The interview questions are correlated to the research questions of the study. This insures that each research question is addressed. The following research questions were utilized in order to guide this study:

1. What are the principal leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that positively impact student completion rates in high poverty schools?

2. What are the relationships between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty schools and high school completion rates with their cohort?

3. What are the emerging leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that increase the completion rate in high poverty high schools?

Summary of Findings

School demographic data. All three high schools of study were comprehensive high schools with student enrollments over 1500 and 40% or more of the student population eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. All three high schools have increasing percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

Principal demographic data. This study used self-reported information from the three principals of the study. The information obtained included years each school leader has served as a principal and the number of years each school leader has served as a principal of the school of study. The school leaders revealed additional information as a result of the structured interview protocol including professional development as a school leader, degrees attained and personal career focus. Even though research shows that high poverty high schools are often lead by principals young in their career, the principals of the schools of study were all experienced principals. None of the three principals were in their first year at the school of study. Only one of the three principals possessed the terminal degree. Since this study began, however, two of the three principals have moved to systems impact level positions within the district of study.

Achievement data. The purposes of this study used only the completion rate data of each school in a three-year period as the lens for the achievement data indicator. Furthermore, during the process of the study, other indicators were revealed which could be topics of further study, but were not the focus for this study. These indicators included overage students, limited English students, students who receive special services, and students who are served in alternative disciplinary settings. The focus of this study was on economically disadvantaged students who graduate on cohort, or within four years.

The first research question was correlated to the archival data of each school and the structured protocol principal interview questions # 2 and #4.

1. What are the principal leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that positively impact student completion rates in high poverty schools?

The principals of the high schools of study agreed that school leaders must develop the courage to take appropriate risks and make the necessary decisions to provide direction for the transformation of their schools to meet the needs of all children, but in particular the growing number of students living in poverty. Through review of the archival completion rate data for the high schools of study and the analysis of the responses from the principal interviews, it was revealed that principals did have a level of awareness regarding specific leadership processes that positively impact the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students. Yet, not all of the principals were keenly aware of the completion rate trend of their campus for the subgroup of economically disadvantaged students. All three principals were aware of the general state of their school's completion rate.

The principals of study were aware that they had made decisions to meet the needs of all students, specifically economically disadvantaged students. The principals acknowledged that they had the autonomy to make decisions regarding school institutional process and practices in this area. The principals of this study were able to make decisions in these primary areas:

- o School schedule
- o Master Schedule
- o Extracurricular Schedule

All three principals had the same eight period school day schedule structure. All three principals based their master schedule sections on student requests. Additionally, all three high schools assigned every student to an academic career pathway. One principal made provisions for a study hall type period for targeted students. The other

two school principals completed students' eight period schedules with electives or credit recovery type courses.

The most commonly used process for school wide structure from campus to campus was that of the smaller learning community concept. A smaller learning community is an interdisciplinary team of teachers who share a few hundred or fewer students in common for instruction, assumes responsibility for their educational progress across years of school, and exercises maximum flexibility to act on knowledge of students' needs (Oxley, 2005). While all three schools of study employed the strategy of smaller learning communities, the principals of study did not self-report any particular directive or reason for doing so. The decision to create smaller learning communities on their campus appeared to be a principal decision made from observation, professional development, and an examination of the best practices of other schools.

Two schools in the study used the smaller learning community "House" approach. One of the high schools of study implemented a separate Freshman House to support the transition of these students. The other high school used the House integrated approach for all 9th grade – 12th grade students. Even though there is little research on the sole effectiveness of the House concept on student achievement, the principals of these schools believed that the House framework provided a foundation for increased personalization at the high school level.

One school in the study used the smaller learning community "Academy" approach. This school is the Career Academy School of Choice in the district of study. The Career Academy approach to smaller learning communities has more supportive research data to substantiate its implementation than any other form of smaller learning

community approach. The higher completion rate results and the fact that there were no dropouts, continuers, or students who opted to get a General Education Diploma (GED) rather than complete high school speaks in the affirmative to the success of this approach in engaging students in this school to complete high school through the real life application of student learning. Researchers have found student engagement a robust predictor of student achievement and behavior in school, regardless of socioeconomic status. Students engaged in school are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and have lower drop-out rates. In contrast, students with low levels of engagement are at risk for a variety of long-term adverse consequences, including disruptive behavior in class, absenteeism, and dropping out of school (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Additionally, all three high school principals and all three schools utilized the Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework at some level. All three high schools had weekly scheduled professional learning time to help increase the professional expertise of staff. While there was variability seen from campus to campus regarding professional learning based on campus and individual staff need, the continuous professional development opportunity obtained through the implementation of PLCs has made a positive impact on the achievement of students of each high school of study according to their principal. Each high school of study was continuing to build capacity for the PLC framework on their campus and looking for additional opportunities for collaboration.

The second research question was correlated to the archival data of each high school and the structured protocol principal interview questions # 1, #3, and #6.

2. What are the relationships between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty schools and high school completion rates with their cohort?

The principals of study were aware of the state and national standards regarding completion rate and were also aware of their school's rate of progress in this area. The principals of the study self-reported that they held cohort graduation as a priority for their campus, but they also reported that accomplishing this was a challenge for each of them with no set solution.

Based on the findings of this study, it is acknowledged that the principals of the schools of study purposefully work to meet the needs of all students, but especially focus on meeting the needs of economically disadvantaged students. They offered specific decisions they make at the campus level which positively impact student achievement and the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students.

Identification. The principals of study stated that there are preventable ways to address many of the academic and behavioral barriers economically disadvantaged students face to high school completion. Ninth grade transitional support was perceived as a critical area of need. The principals of study recognized the need to consistently use data to make leadership decisions regarding institutional process practices in at least the following areas for all students, but revealed promising results for the economically disadvantaged student when monitored weekly:

- Student attendance
- Student behavior
- Student academic plan

- Connections to school

- Cohort completion

Rich curriculum. The principals of study all agreed that the principal was the driving force in determining the institutional processes and practices implemented at a campus. The principals acknowledged efforts at the campus level that provided consistent access to a rigorous curriculum for all students. The principals agreed that a rigorous curriculum begins with high level lesson design led by teacher teams with increasing expertise. All three principals felt it important that their teachers utilize professional development as a springboard for differentiating learning to meet the needs of students. Several instructional innovations have been implemented in the schools of study with positive results:

- STEM

- Virtual Learning

- Blended Learning

- PEAK Learning Systems

- Flipped Classrooms

- Project Based Learning

Flexible time. The principals of study concur that flexible time helps meet the needs of all students; but, specifically, economically disadvantaged students. All three high school principals had made the decision to implement a Night School to encourage students off cohort. All three high school principals had implemented a flexible day for students who were already in the workforce and also employed the strategy of early release for students who had fulfilled credit requirements before their school completion.

Regular classroom instruction. School leaders expect achievement to occur in the regular classroom. The principals of study agreed that recruiting, retaining and improving the quality of teachers was one of their most important job functions. Increasing proficiency in the recruitment and induction of staff and supporting their continuous growth was seen as a priority for success.

Progress monitoring. The principals of study stated that the continuous monitoring of individual students and frequent checks for progress lead to positive academic and behavior outcomes. Progress monitoring was used as an early warning system by all three principals of study.

Intervention. The most successful progress monitoring in this study included targeted and individualized interventions for students through a Response to Intervention (RtI) process. Student achievement through targeted intervention was seen to increase student engagement and success in school. Episodic intervention, however was not been proven to produce the best results. The highest gains were seen with targeted intervention for students including the building of their background knowledge that continued through graduation.

The third research question was correlated to the archival data and the structured protocol principal interview questions # 5 and #7.

3. What are the emerging leadership decisions and practices regarding school institutional processes that increase the completion rate in high poverty high schools?

Advocacy. Insuring that students have an adult advocate at school – more specifically, someone that knows them well and supports their success builds positive

outcomes for all students. Advocacy also was seen as creating supportive environments for students and maintaining high expectations so that students were being constantly prepared for the next level of education. Building in success mini-benchmarks while maintaining academic rigor was proven to increase success. Supporting the socio-emotional wellbeing of economically disadvantaged students was seen as a paramount process strategy by the high school principals of study.

Capturing Kids Hearts. The Capturing Kids Heart Model was an institutional process selected by two of the three campuses of study. The individual success using this process has engaged both students and staff. The principal of one of the schools of study is considering implementing this process practice because of the positive results from the other two schools of study.

As described by Carol K. Holtzapple, J. Suzy Griswold, Kathleen Cirillo, and Jim Rosebrock:

> The Capturing Kids' Hearts Campus by Design is a skill intensive, systemic process designed to develop high-performing school cultures, align organizational and individual behaviors to outcomes, and increase school connectedness. As a result of implementing this integrated approach, (1) faculty members build intentional cultures that emphasize connectedness with students and with each other, (2) negative behaviors are minimized while learning is maximized, and (3) students acquire communication and conflict resolution skills that help them succeed both in school and after graduation. (p. 57-69)

The principals of study agreed that students who are connected to school in a positive way increase their ability to complete high school on time. Students who have a sense of belonging to their school and obtain acceptance from their peers are shown to have a higher percentage rate of high school completion. Researchers have also concluded that students with a low socioeconomic status may have lower high school completion rates because they do not participate, and thus, presumably fail to fully identify with the school and classroom (Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis, & Johnson, 2002).

The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program—which supports students' social competence, academic achievement, and staff behavior and decision making—provides an increasingly research-based public health model for implementing a school-wide prevention program (Barrett, Bradshaw, & Lewis-Palmer). All three high school principals had staff who had received training in PBIS, but all three agreed that the program strategies were not being implemented at a capacity level.

Mentoring. Student engagement is supported by research literature and this study bears out its positive impact on the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students. Two types of engagement were indicated via the principal interview process. These two types of engagement include the academic and socio-emotional lives of students in school. Mentoring assists with developing the socio-emotional lives of students. The fact that a student is economically disadvantaged is not under a school leader's control, but the school response to meeting the needs of students in poverty is well within the expected and necessary supports that students need to be successful. In fact, what in effect appears to be a more accurate description than economically disadvantaged is "school dependent" student. These are the students, the majority of

those who may live in poverty, for which the school is their primary academic and socio-emotional support. Knowing this, school leaders must develop within the school community, appropriate adults to help guide the socio-emotional lives of students in partnership with the school. The principals of study have implemented the following forms of mentorships in their schools using community and higher learning resources:

- Peer to Peer

- Boys to Men

- Ministerial Alliance

- Girls Summit

- Male Summit

Needless to say, principal leadership must be nurtured and there must be clarity of thought for school leaders to be able to make decisions which positively impact students. The premises for this can be sustained through continuous leadership development. High-poverty schools, especially large high-poverty schools, need principals who have access to leadership development programs tailored to their specific needs. High-poverty high schools are difficult leadership contexts that require additional interventions and support on a continuous basis. While many whole-school reform models geared to urban and high-poverty contexts provide excellent professional development for teachers, very few provide anything that directly addresses the needs and experiences for principals in high poverty settings. As we have noted in our analysis of recent changes in state leadership, support needs to be targeted to schools that are needy, particularly schools and districts that are not meeting AYP or other accountability targets. As we strive to build up students with the confidence and resiliency to succeed, we must not forget to

continually build up the leaders of their schools. McCormick (2001) states, "Every major review of the leadership literature lists self-confidence as an essential characteristic for effective leadership" (p. 23).

According to Reardon (2011), the economically disadvantaged (1) income inequality has grown during the last forty years, meaning that the income difference between families at the 90th and 10th percentiles of the income distribution has grown; (2) family investment patterns have changed differentially during the last half-century, so that high-income families now invest relatively more time and resources in their children's cognitive development than do lower-income families; (3) income has grown more strongly correlated with other socioeconomic characteristics of families, meaning that high-income families increasingly have greater socioeconomic and social resources that may benefit their children; and, (4) increasing income segregation has led to greater differentiation in school quality and schooling opportunities between the rich and the poor. Now, more than ever, is the time that principal decisions must help transform the educational landscape for high school students so that the expectation for all students, even economically disadvantaged students is the on- time high school completion and beyond. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 20.5 million new jobs will be added to the United States economy between 2010 and 2020 and the majority of these careers require at least a high school diploma. In fact, high school completion is just the first step in the education most 21st century jobs demand. The effective high school principal cannot ignore this information and has a duty to make sure that the students they serve are prepared.

Implications for Future Study

The implications for further study include expanding this study in the number of principals and schools included as well as monitoring their development over a span of time. In order to truly understand the principal decisions making processes and practices that positively impact the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students, this study could be expanded as a comparison of completion rate trend results and principal decision making regarding processes and practices in the new era of STAAR/EOC testing. Large high schools in Texas with the highest percentage of students living in poverty had some of the lowest achievement results during the "TAKS era" and this factor was the primary reason that many economically disadvantaged students did not complete high school. Continuing this study in the new accountability frameworks will provide fresh insight to school leaders and provide opportunity for increasing effectiveness with these students.

This study can also be expanded to include the institutional processes not addressed in this study which research has shown to be successful in other high schools in the nation. A couple of these are explained below:

Check and Connect: This comprehensive intervention model for disengaged and marginalized students was founded at the University of Minnesota. The focus is on the completion rate of students through relationship building, problem solving, capacity building, and persistence. Currently, Stanford Research Institute is completing research on the student outcomes for Check and Connect in four urban high schools.

Diplomas Now: A promising data-driven dropout prevention program called Diplomas Now targets students who start to fall behind in middle school, follows them to high school and offers them nurturing, as well as mentoring relationships.

Another way that this study could be expanded is to go beyond the institutional process practices that just help students graduate, but also seek strategies that help them achieve at high enough levels to be sustained in higher learning. Data shows that even though graduation rates are improving that the ability of economically disadvantaged students to perform at the highest levels may often be depressed because of institutional frameworks and stereotyping of poor students. The National Association of Gifted Children held a National Summit on Low-Income, High Ability Learners in 2012 and revealed that the research and knowledge base needs to be expanded as to what instructional processes and practices are being proven to be successful with economically disadvantaged students and further support these students to achieve at high levels. Their report, *Unlocking Emergent Talent*, is a call to action for school leaders to create places of learning that not only build the minimum skills of students from poverty, but also identify and support high level learning for these students.

A reflection on this researcher's experience with the research process revealed a possible personal bias or assumption that all school leaders made conscious decisions regarding the topic of study. The study revealed, however, that the principals of study made more holistic decisions or made specific decisions regarding the student subgroup of study, but were not as diligent in monitoring this progress during implementation at the rate that I had perceived or as the individual campus data indicated. One school of study felt that they were making major progress in this area, when actually, based on the

archival trend data, the completion rate for their economically disadvantaged students was in fact declining. Additionally, another principal believed that their school was making tremendous strides when the data showed only slight improvement over the three-year trend comparison.

Therefore, principals must deepen their commitment to increasing achievement for students who are economically disadvantaged so that they can complete high school and be resilient in higher learning. This begins by realizing that the state of a student's poverty is not always a true indicator of a student's ability potential. School leaders need to understand that students from poverty are not just poor, but that they are actually school dependent students. These students depend on the public school to meet the majority of their needs. Educators cannot leave the engagement of these students to chance; moreover, we must now understand that what some may term as the soft skill of socio-emotional learning is at the very heart of improving the completion rate of all students, but specifically economically disadvantaged students. These students desperately need to know that someone cares if they achieve or continue the cycle of poverty.

Effective school leadership really does matters. It matters most to students from poverty because the decisions school leaders make prevents concentrations of student despair and opens possibilities for a successful future. From the school culture to academic opportunities, the school leader is directly responsible for making sure that the school meets the needs of the students in their charge. School leaders are responsible for making sure that students are taught by the highest quality teachers. Over time, high quality teaching can have more impact than socio-economic background on the

successful completion rate of high school students – especially those who are economically disadvantaged. Most importantly, school leaders must continue to transform high schools into a fountain of possibilities for success instead of the acceptance of failure supported by a deficit culture. Effective practices in school leadership continue to transform just as schools continue to do so. Effective school leadership for the novice and the veteran school leader demands continual transformation.

Some may argue that with the most recent information from the U.S. Department of Education citing that Texas had the fourth highest graduation rate in the nation that our state is well on the way to being the model for high school completion (Smith, 2012). This comparison by state is the first time all states have used a universal measure in tabulating graduation rates. Yet, if even a few students do not complete high school, it has an impact on us all. As accountability continues to increase and the world of education continues to evolve, school leaders must be skilled in developing school processes and practices which results in resilience for all students – especially economically disadvantaged students. It is this very student group that is growing exponentially and their success through on time high school completion is the first step out of the cycle of poverty.

Accountability, however, is not the driving force behind the need to equip principals with decision making expertise that will positively impact the completion rate of students. As school leaders, we have a moral obligation to insure a quality education for all students. As the economic gap continues to widen, school leaders must design school institutional structures that fill the gap for economically disadvantaged students to prepare them for the completion of high school and beyond. Implementation and impact

studies should drive principal decision making regarding institutional processes and practices that have a positive impact on all students, but especially for our school dependent students who are economically disadvantaged. Nevertheless, we have not, as a nation, solved the problem.

The growing role of class in academic success has taken experts by surprise since it follows decades of equal opportunity efforts and counters racial trends, where differences have narrowed. It adds to fears over recent evidence suggesting that low-income Americans have lower chances of upward mobility than counterparts in Canada and Western Europe (DeParle, 2012). If America is to remain the Land of Opportunity, we must begin by insuring school leaders are equipped to make sure every student – but especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds – develop the skills necessary to complete high school and become successful members of society.

High school completion must prepare students for their future of college or career. Evidence is mounting that K-12 schools are not adequately preparing students who *do* graduate from high school for college or work. Estimates of college readiness of U.S. high school graduates are disquieting (Klein, 2012). Principals must be developed to make appropriate decisions regarding institutional process practices that positively impact the completion rate of economically disadvantaged students so that the diploma they receive is a key to opportunity and not a useless piece of paper.

This study reveals that this school district as well as America must have principals who can make decisions that do not equate the economic disadvantagement of students with poor academic performance. The challenges that the schools of study and their principals experience in increasing achievement for these students are not unique to this

district. We need effective principals who have the courage and the resiliency to try and try again until those students who have historically dropped out, drop back in to be engaged in learning and complete high school. This transformation of expectations and results must begin with an effective principal in every school who can make the appropriate leadership decisions regarding institutional process practices that positively impact student achievement. The principal must have a laser focus on ensuring that our neediest students complete high school on time in order to open doors to success for themselves and their families.

> According to John Hamm in his 2011 book, *Unusually Excellent*:
>
> To lead well today is to lead with a vision and a respect for how you will be judged in time. That foresight will make you more thoughtful about the implications of even the smallest of your actions and decisions. It will force you to put yourself in the shoes of the people who will follow you. And it will teach you to value everyone with whom you work – if only because they will determine your reputation and legacy. It is hard to imagine a more powerful or useful leadership tool. And that doesn't even include its most powerful application: with time and practice, it will even enable you to look inside your own heart. (p. 3-11)

In conclusion, the principals who were agreeable to be transparent regarding the interview questions related to them by this study and to be open to a review of their completion rate data trends are to be commended. The findings show that principal leadership and in particular principal decision making skills regarding school processes and practices are key to success. We cannot have effective, transformational schools

without effective school leaders. We cannot wait for the magic to happen. We must seek

out ways that our students learn best and make decisions as school leaders that positively

impact their achievement. We must not depend on others for these answers. The answers

are within each of us. We know that school leadership decisions impact school

achievement in a profound way. We must take responsibility for those outcomes as

school leaders and not confuse a student's economic state with their achievement level.

Only effective principals can insure that this happens. Larry Lezotte said it best when he

commented on the school leadership and school achievement correlation in the

conclusion of Kathleen Cotton's Book, titled *Principals and Student Achievement – What

the Research Says*: "If you can find an effective school without an effective principal, call

me collect" (Cotton, 2003).

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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON LETTER OF APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

DIVISION OF RESEARCH

December 7, 2012

Delic Loyde
c/o Dr. Steven Busch
Dean, Education

Dear Delic Loyde,

Based upon your request for exempt status, an administrative review of your research proposal entitled "CAMPUS LEADERSHIP INSTITUTIONAL PROCESS PRACTICES THAT POSITIVELY IMPACT THE COMPLETION RATE OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS" was conducted on October 3, 2012.

At that time, your request for exemption under **Category 2** was approved pending modification of your proposed procedures/documents.

The changes you have made adequately respond to the identified contingencies. As long as you continue using procedures described in this project, you do not have to reapply for review. * Any modification of this approved protocol will require review and further approval. Please contact me to ascertain the appropriate mechanism.

If you have any questions, please contact Nettie Martinez at 713-743-9204.

Sincerely yours,

Kirstin Rochford, MPH, CIP, CPIA
Director, Research Compliance

*Approvals for exempt protocols will be valid for 5 years beyond the approval date. Approval for this project will expire **October 1, 2017.** If the project is completed prior to this date, a final report should be filed to close the protocol. If the project will continue after this date, you will need to reapply for approval if you wish to avoid an interruption of your data collection.

Protocol Number: 13052-EX

APPENDIX B

APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Spring ISD
101919

RELATIONS WITH EDUCATIONAL ENTITIES
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

EXHIBIT A

APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Name: Delic Loyde

Address: 20327 Pinefield, Humble, Texas 77338

Telephone Number: 713 – 805 - 9654

Affiliation: Researcher – Doctoral Candidate – University of Houston, employee, Spring ISD

<u>**Abstract (purpose, rationale, sample design and procedures, data collection procedures, analysis procedures, use of results):**</u>

Poverty in America is increasing in astronomical proportions. Students living in poverty make up the fastest growing subgroup in our nation's schools. Many secondary schools consistently fail to adequately meet the needs of these students and they often face multiple barriers to their success. The result is that too many students lose hope, become marginalized in the educational setting, and make the decision to drop out of high school. In fact, nationally, a student drops out of high school every seven seconds. Dropping out of high school is just the final act in confirming that the current structure of meeting the educational needs of students is not working. The student who drops out of school is often destined to repeat the very cycle of poverty that education was created to prevent. These facts impact individual welfare, family foundations, and our country at its core. Schools must change what they fundamentally do to meet the needs of today's students. School leaders must lead the transformation.

In Texas, Harris County has more students living in poverty than adults and the state is home to one of the highest concentrations of low wage jobs in the country. The imperative for school leaders is to seek solutions now. Schools must transform their institutional processes in order to meet the current needs of

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students so that they can build the resiliency needed to complete high school and successfully enter the world of higher learning or the workplace. The important milestone of high school completion opens doors of opportunity to students that can help break the cycle of poverty. Leadership makes the difference and the school principal is the critical person who must have the courage and knowledge to lead this transformation.

The schools represented in this mixed method study have student populations with increasing percentages of students who live in poverty (economically disadvantaged - 55% – 85%). Traditional classroom and remedial strategies have not consistently resulted in completion of the high school program for a significant percentage of these students. High schools must examine what they do and change processes to meet the needs of all students, especially students in poverty. The increasing accountability, financial, and political demands of the principalship demand that school leaders possess a more complex skill set of emerging competencies in order to succeed with the neediest student population in the history of our nation.

This study will use narrative inquiry interviews with the high school principals within this school district (001, 002, 003, and 018) as well as use archival district completion rate data to examine the distinct relationship between principal decisions regarding school institutional processes in high poverty high schools and the implementation of those processes with fidelity that have resulted in increased high school completion rates for this district's fastest growing subgroup - economically disadvantaged students. The completion of this study will not disrupt the regular educational process at any of the schools. The principal interviews will not occur at any campus or during school time. Validity and

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reliability are insured through the interview protocol of scripting and taping interviews. Identities of

principals will not be known in the study and privacy rights will be protected. The study is of worth to our

district specifically because of its relevance to our strategic goals and district vision. Additionally, this

approach will help initiate the critical thinking and necessary actions that will increase achievement in

this area. The findings from this study will reveal emerging principal leadership strategies that have

positive implications for future practice. The Executive Director for Planning and System Accountability

will receive a copy of the completed study.

Instrumentation (attach):

This study will use interview questions and archival district completion rate data. The interview questions
are included.

If you are conducting research as part of a graduate program, please indicate:

Degree on which working (circle one):   Masters   Doctorate

Approval of Professor or Committee (circle one):   Yes   No

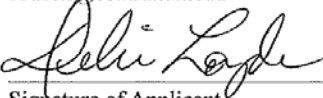**Name, address, and phone of supervising professor or advisor:**

Dr. Stephen Busch

College of Education - University of Houston

4800 Calhoun Rd.

Houston, Texas 77004

713 – 743 - 2255

sbusch@central.uh.edu

Signature of Applicant

DATE ISSUED: 4/7/2003
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APPENDIX C

SPRING INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT APPROVAL

Spring Independent School District

www. springisd.org

16717 Ella Blvd. • Houston, Texas 77090 •

Tel. 281-891-6187 •   Fax 281-891-6364

Allison Matney, Executive Director

Systems Accountability

August 16, 2012

Delic Loyde

20327 Pinefield

Humble, Texas 77338

RE: Qualitative study to examine the relationship between the decisions and

implementation strategies of SISD high school principals that have resulted in increased high

school completion rates for economically disadvantaged students.

Mrs. Loyde,

The Spring ISD Research Committee has approved your request to conduct the above

study in Spring Independent School District.

Sincerely,

Allison Matney

AM